



Walking by Faith

Treasure No 57: Walking by Faith by Alan Luff: An article from Bulletin 187

An exploration of the devotional context in which the hymn and the worship-song are used.

Three parables

1. Many will have read of the small group who settled in a barren spot in Scotland and made a garden of it. They did nothing except what came to them through a very direct experience of being guided. Their vegetables grew to a huge size, quite beyond the belief of the local people. Their cabbages are now a more normal size. They have found a less newsworthy ministry in receiving people in need of counselling.
2. When water flows from a dam it is at first violent, full of froth and foam. Some way downstream the flow is quiet and deep, but no less powerful.
3. Setting out on a long sponsored walk there are at first flags and cheers surrounding the participants. It is when these are left behind that the real walk begins.

The common experience

In our discussions in hymn circles of the place of song in Christian worship there is one element that has not received enough emphasis. We have talked a great deal about standards and quality; this has been necessary. We have given little space to consideration of what is well-known and even commonplace in the discussion of prayer and of the spiritual life: that there are stages of growth and that there are experiences that are common to many Christians. Each of these stages and experiences needs a different kind of care and different devotional practices and materials.

It must be said at once that such generalizations as can be made are by no means rigid. The only great generalization that can be made is that God deals with each person according to that person's needs, knowing us all for the persons we are and the stage we have reached on our own individual pilgrimages. Yet we are also quite similar to one another, and we do share experiences.

In general it can be said that in the early stages of the Christian life, or as a new, important stage upon the way begins, the Christian's experiences of worship and prayer can be extremely vivid and charged with great warmth of emotion. It is not too much to say that there is great pleasure in all these things and in all living. A quite common experience is to find everything in the world more vivid, in particular that all colours are brighter. Not all Christians have had such an experience. Many who have been brought up from birth as Christians seem to experience a number of relatively small steps forward, sometimes with and sometimes without a vivid experience at the time.

When experience is at its strongest there is a very genuine need for means of expression that can be spontaneous, emotional, and as highly coloured as the world is seen to be. This has been expressed in different ways in our Christian traditions, but strong emotional singing has been commonplace, together with physical expressions of what is being felt such as the raising of arms, swaying and jumping. When the emotional pressure is as strong as this there needs to be alongside it a strong exposition of the reason for all this joy. Over and over again in Christian terms there will need to be expressed an overwhelming sense of God's love, the recognition of that love as it has been revealed in creation, in the incarnation, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and in the coming of the Holy Spirit by whose presence alone all these great acts of God are known. Many taking part in such worship will be feeling a great release, whether from guilt or from doubt. For some it is the joyful end of a long period of fighting against God. It is absolutely necessary that such feelings are expressed; it would be unhealthy both spiritually and simply at the level of human emotions for them not to be.

But once the Christian is stabilized, whether in new-found faith or in the new stage of Christian discipleship, it seems that the need for the emotional experience ceases. It is the witness of very many Christians and of spiritual counsellors of many Christian traditions, that the next stage is likely to be quite different. The excitement is over, the pleasurable experiences recede, and the way becomes dark. Prayer then seems a one-sided conversation. There is little sense of guidance or of the presence of God. Listening to God may mean hearing him speaking more through other Christians and through the circumstances of life than by the clear experience of the voice within. Receiving communion may seem a formality. Worship with others can seem less attractive.

There are three classic descriptions of this. One is from St John of the Cross, who speaks of 'the dark night of the soul'. He is often thought by this to be referring to the experience of mystics far advanced along the way of prayer. He is emphatic that he is not; this is the common experience of the Christian. Isaiah speaks of the God who hides himself and there is a strong tradition of discussion of this 'Deus absconditus' (Hidden God) theme, both as it concerns individuals and as it concerns our experience of the whole world as a place where we are left to manage our own affairs and make our own mistakes. But the most complete expression is St. Paul's 'we walk by faith not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7, which must be read together with the passage on faith in Hebrews 11), and the most complete picture is that of Elijah on the mountain finding that God is no longer in storm or earthquake but in the barest whisper ('the daughter of the voice').

Life on the way

There are some very important things to be said about this stage of the Christian life. It is easy for the Christian to lose heart as this part of the pilgrimage begins. This is not necessary since there are encouragements on the way. These are not spiritual titbits given as 'consolations', but something much firmer and more important. First, no one is, or should be, alone: this can be best experienced in an honest sharing with other Christians. The wisest Christian evangelists have always known this and have built up under different names small groups of Christians in which there can be teaching and sharing of experiences. Second, there should be signs of growth: this will not be so clear while it is happening: but, on looking back, it should be clear that some of the fruits of the Spirit are beginning to appear. Third, the Christian should be able to take heart that the real journey has begun. It is all too easy to feel guilty, particularly in the company of those whose experiences are still vivid. That is not necessary: it is clear that God trusts many of us to go forward without such easy encouragements. Fourth, following from that, the Christian should not hanker for the more heady earlier experiences. That is to look back and not forward. As a Presbyterian pastor once said to me, 'Some Christians keep telling me what it was like to get over the wall. What I really want to hear is what the garden is like on the other side'. Fifth, in many Christian traditions there is the sacramental life where the

‘outward and visible sign’ is given us as an assurance that ‘the inward and spiritual grace’ is also given, whatever our feelings at the moment; and all Christians may share in a sacramental experience of the world, where God speaks to us through things and people he has created.

This kind of ‘darkness’ should be distinguished from two apparently similar experiences. There seems to be a stage of utter darkness and desolation, to be compared only with whatever Jesus experienced on the cross when he cried ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ There seem to have been some saints who have come near this. It is a sharing in the mind of Christ that is for very few. Then, quite different from this, there is the darkness that is linked with clinical depression, a well-known and all too common illness. This is a heavy greyness spread over all of life. The ‘walking by faith’ kind of darkness is ‘light’ as opposed to ‘heavy’, in the same way that being alone can be oppressive or refreshing, and keeping silence sometimes a burden, sometimes a blessing.

Worship for the wayfarer

What are the implications of this general pattern of Christian growth for worship, and, in this particular context, for the kind of things that Christians might sing at any point on their pilgrimage?

It seems quite clear that at the stage of vivid experience especially for the really new Christian coming for the first time to Christian worship—simple, joyful expression of new-found faith is most appropriate. The idiom for this must be immediate. There is nothing in Christianity to suggest that human beings need to enter into a new culture to express their Christian faith. St Paul argued this out against the more conservative part of the early Church in terms of circumcision: it was not and is not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. In our terms it has to be insisted that it is not necessary for the worshipper to develop an appreciation of 16th-century liturgy, 17th-century prose, 18th-century lyrics or 19th-century art in order to appreciate the worship of the Church and to take part in it. The worship-song is usually in an idiom that makes it eligible for use at this point in the Christian life. It is not avant-garde rock: it is not particularly up-to-date pop. It has been described as being of the Eurovision Song Competition idiom and that is probably a friendly level for the large majority of people. Its roots are in the great period of the American songsmiths—Gershwin, Berlin, Cole Porter, Kern—and many people will bear witness to the fact that the great songs of that school can still express genuine emotions.

The invocation of those great names of secular song should make it clear that it should be far from true that ‘anything goes’ in what is provided for the new Christian to sing. There was good and bad in these songs, and this is true of the worship-song. On the whole the main criticism of this kind of song has to be levelled at the words. All too often songs that are in any case going to be repeated many times in one act of worship are themselves intensely repetitive. Phrases of scripture, often weighty and difficult ones, are repeated over and over again with no attempt to bring out their meaning: predictable phrases of scripture are strung together: assertions are made that are either untrue or true only in some limited, unexplained sense, particularly concerning the Lordship of Christ. I have already tried to set out the syllabus of praise for the new Christian; it is the mighty acts of God. not present feelings or ill-founded assertions. There is no reason either for the words to be ill-crafted. With some honourable exceptions, the words are poor in this respect too. There are many songs that do not hang together grammatically: a look at the great secular lyricists will show their sometimes outrageous skill with words—it makes them memorable.

These song-writers may provide one final lead into what next needs to be said. Their songs have allowed many people to express sincere emotions. But how deep are they? Do they go beyond the ‘happy ever after’ stage of the final scene of the musical for which they were written? I would suggest that they do not. This suggests therefore that almost every Christian will need to move on to

stronger material, more fully worked out doctrine, a stronger devotional life, in order to be ready to 'walk by faith, not by sight', when what is important is growing in the likeness of Christ. I suggest that the idiom of the worship-song is not well suited for containing the 'stronger meat' that the New Testament requires us to be giving the Christian at this stage.

In any case, there is another task to be undertaken at this point by new Christians, and indeed by all Christians continually. They must learn their story, that is the story of which they have become part by virtue of becoming Christians. Bible reading and study are the first essentials. Then there is the story of the Church. Part of these is an entering into a heritage of praise, from the psalms through all the history of the Christian hymn, up to and including the present. This has always been a very selective process, if only because of the sheer quantity of the material. Only such hymns and spiritual songs should be retained as can be of the present as well as of the past—a good general definition of anything that is a 'classic'.

As Christians grow and as their experience of the immediacy of God's presence lessens (as the way, in the terms of St John of the Cross, grows darker) so they will need the stronger material, usually the more objective praise, and that which contains realistic prayer for the Church and for the community around. Worship-songs sung at an earlier stage will still have their attraction, but a realistic appraisal will often show that they are expressing emotions no longer felt—and it is worth saying again that it would be wrong to feel guilty that these emotions are no longer present. Some few of these songs may remain of value for special uses, when easily memorized, spontaneous praise is needed, in a prayer group for example, or at any open-air gathering, when hymn-books would be a nuisance.

Ministering to those on the way

All honour is due to those Christians who have broken new ground for the faith and from tiny beginnings have built up congregations of new Christians, who feel it proper to be singing a new song to the Lord. Honour is due to those who have provided that song. But the really hard grind of ministry, both for the ordained minister and the musician, is to those congregations whose members are in the darkness—God's darkness worshipping a hidden God, walking by faith not by sight, it is possible for such a congregation to slip into mere formality in worship, to be shutting out strangers, to have few signs of the fruits of the Spirit, to be full of the more subtle and outwardly respectable works of the flesh. It is most unusual for any congregation to have degenerated that far. Much more likely is it that they have not realized their true place on the pilgrim way and that having looked for the wrong kind of encouragement they have lost a good deal of heart. They need the ministry and worship proper for a mature congregation. It does not have to be either dry or frenetic: it can be warm and supportive, and needs to have a strong content that is understood by the worshippers and that they look to find in what is both spoken and sung. Almost the worst thing that can happen to such a congregation is for an insensitive minister to arrive who will complain that there is 'no life' in the place and try to inject life by introducing worship-songs.

Such a minister needs to recognize three things. First, such songs will not be either accepted or rejected for clear-cut good or bad reasons. Some may welcome them who would have come under the criticisms of St Paul and the writer of Hebrews who rounded on congregations who wanted 'milk and not solid food' (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12). In some people these songs will arouse a genuine sense of anger, some of which will be rational at being treated like spiritual infants, but some irrational, though none the less strong and important. Second, since many of these songs are 'spiritual milk', it is stronger not weaker nourishment that congregations need on the dark part of the pilgrim way. Third, many of the songs most commonly introduced are poor of their kind and not honest to the Christian experience of many people at any time, let alone that of a mature congregation; they will

serve to give some people a happy feeling, make some feel guilty, and fail to build up the people of God. It is important to ask whether it is enough that people should leave an act of worship simply feeling happy.

More often than not such congregations need to realize the newness of the old songs they have been singing, especially the psalms. When they truly encounter their own tradition they will be more ready to appreciate the new, in particular the strong new hymns in their own tradition.

But this is to assume that such a congregation is static. It should not be nor is it likely to be. Even in the worst situation children of members will be entering adult worship and adults who move into the district will be being received into the congregation if only in a trickle. A live, mature congregation will contain people of all ages and at all stages of spiritual growth.

Here the pastoral skills of both minister and musician are really stretched. It would be good to hear more of the experience of those congregations that started from nothing or very little some years ago and who have retained members into the stage where, if they are honest, the immediate conversion experience has died away for most of them and they are walking by faith not sight.

Some churches have answered this problem by expecting a regular cycle of revivals. In the main these churches have, despite some heroic Christians among them, failed to answer the question of what happens when revival ceases, as in most cases it does. Even with recurring revival there is the problem of those who are in danger of continually being asked to go back to the beginning; when this happens in any congregation many are being prevented from reaching their full stature as Christians.

More common should be the mature congregation, which will be a mixture of mature Christians who are well set upon the way, of children of members, and of new members brought to faith by the ministry of the whole congregation, people whom we must make provision for more and more as we enter the decade of evangelism. The school may give us the best model here. The mixed-ability class needs to work in groups, and individuals at all levels need time given to them. This is to describe what many churches know, the value of small groups, some of which minister to each other's needs while some have the leadership of more mature members of the congregation. Such groups may each have their own kind of song.

When all gather for the Sunday worship of the congregation there should then quite naturally be a mixture of praise styles. Some of the praise proper to the Church is in any case beyond all its members and draws them along the way—the Te Deum for example, some of the psalms, some great hymns. Some of the praise could be that commended by the groups of mature Christians, who would thus be saying 'try some of the things that help us'; some would be the choice of the new Christians under instruction, both children and adults, who would be saying 'look what expresses where we are'.

So there would ideally be a mixture of praise styles in any mature congregation. But there is a point beyond even that. Certainly in my own tradition I would wish to say that the climax comes when all fall silent and all that any of us can bring is empty hands to receive the outward sign of God present with us, recognized or hidden.

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