

The song of the sea, once melodious, is dying

Andrew Pratt (1948 -)

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Tune: STREETS OF LAREDO – Anonymous American
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The song of the sea, once melodious, is dying,
that song is essential, the calling of home;
Great God, we lament, yet the sound of our crying
is quieter than breakers, the wash of the foam.

What work must we do to restore what is broken,
how can we encourage the choir of the sea?
The spirit is moving, the waters are wounded,
the oceans are anguished for life to be free.

You enter our suffering and love in our grieving,
you join us in weakness, when frailty is near,
God hold us, enfold us when hell overcomes us,
stand near to the tomb of our folly and fear.

You promise a covenant, both gift and promise.
Creation is groaning, still coming to birth.
Bring newness, renewal, a hope that is living,
from suff'ring bring joy for the whole of the earth.

We treasure the symphony, yet we are grieving,
we long for the chorus, the song of the sea,
bring light in the darkness and sound in the silence,
Great God, co-creator let all life be free.

Reflection: Andrew Pratt

I am fascinated by the way other hymn poets write their texts. In the early 1990s I was a member of a panel editing the book *Story Song*. The late Alan Luff and Don Pickard led the group. We already had some submitted material but at tea-time on the first day Alan and Don listed themes which were not covered. They asked for our submissions by breakfast the following morning. I wrote three, which were subsequently published and had discovered my gift of writing quickly.

This is a mixed blessing! What is written can be more rough than ready. Writing swiftly doesn't give you time to assemble ideas logically or work things out. There is a tendency to draw on disparate images and sources of knowledge, which may have been forgotten. I never know for sure what images will emerge.

Recently I was asked to be 'hymn writer in residence' for a series of seminars drawing together scientists and Christian faith. The task was to attend each seminar alongside other participants and in the twenty to thirty minutes after a presentation, while discussion was taking place, to write a hymn for the concluding worship.

Dr Tim Gordon is a Marine Biologist from Exeter University who has done work on the Great Barrier Reef. The reef has been bleached as a consequence of global warming. What was once a lively community of corals and fish is dying. Two decades ago the reef was not only a scene of movement, but also a source of sound. It had become silent. This was significant. Fish would come to the reef to lay eggs and the young would then move into the open sea away from, what was for them, a dangerous environment. The sound of the reef, the 'song of the sea' would guide them back when they were ready to spawn. The first verse began to form from the words of the lecture:

The song of the sea, once melodious, is dying,
that song is essential, the calling of home;
Great God, we lament, yet the sound of our crying
is quieter than breakers, the wash of the foam.

The image of the sea permeates Hebrew scripture as an image of danger and chaos, yet it is also the locus where life is born, 'the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters'. (Genesis 1:2). Ultimately we are placed as stewards of this creation. Psalm 8: 8 references the fish and the seas, while Proverbs 8:22 cites wisdom as being 'created [...] at the beginning of [God's] work...' With wisdom comes responsibility. Here, seeking knowledge is intrinsic to human stewardship, scientific endeavour and rather than being counter to faith, is a necessary component:

... my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it. (Proverbs 8:32-33)

Subconsciously I began to weave together different strands from long forgotten sources:

What work must we do to restore what is broken,
how can we encourage the choir of the sea?
The spirit is moving, the waters are wounded,
the oceans are anguished for life to be free.

Tim has become immersed in such a work of wisdom. As he and his colleagues look and listen it seems the wounded waters are crying out. Scientists, seeing themselves as seeking to be objective, find themselves empathising with creation, grown people weeping. Psalm 42: 7-8 echoes these images. There is lament, but also a sense of the presence of God's love.

You enter our suffering and love in our grieving,
you join us in weakness, when frailty is near,
God hold us, enfold us when hell overcomes us,
stand near to the tomb of our folly and fear.

There is reassurance yet, also a challenge to act. Proverbs 8:22 holds within it the understanding of God and wisdom being hand in hand, a precursor to the idea of humanity being co-creators with God. The scientists are gaining wisdom, critiquing what they find and acting to enable renewal. They sought to mimic the 'song of the sea' with speakers, like those used by synchronised swimmers under water, to draw the fish back. Disparate scriptures come to mind and are woven into one in the penultimate verse:

You promise a covenant, both gift and promise. (Jeremiah 31:31)
Creation is groaning, still coming to birth. (Romans 8:22)
Bring newness, renewal, a hope that is living, (1Peter:1:3)
from suff'ring bring joy for the whole of the earth.

This culminates a final stanza, an expression of hope, in the midst of grief, in the face of the destruction that humanity has brought about:

We treasure the symphony, yet we are grieving,
we long for the chorus, the song of the sea,
bring light in the darkness and sound in the silence,
Great God, co-creator let all life be free.

The chosen tune, STREETS OF LAREDO, being a setting of a ballad about a young cowboy 'clothed in white linen' heading for his grave matches the whiteness of bleached coral, its gentle rhythm that of the sea.

Prayer: God, open our senses to the cries of creation, enabling us to feel the pain of its disruption. Then, sharing that pain, may we seek to alleviate its suffering, partnering Christ in the sacrifice of cosmic salvation. Amen