

The Language of Hymns

My mother was very proud of the fact that in our immediate family there were 8 Episcopal priests. So to paraphrase Groucho Marx, the ministry didn't run in my family—it galloped. When we were growing up there were 6 kids and there was never even a question about going to church—it was a given. But of the surviving 6 of us only one is a regular church goer, and even more indicative of our times is that not one of my parent's 14 grandchildren even think about church. (Randolph being the sole exception).

But this lack of church going in the younger generation is not surprising because we live in a such a secular age. How secular is it Bill?? Well it is so secular that when John Lennon's song *Imagine* is played and the line about "no religion too" is sung people often break out in applause.

And with that in mind it's not hard to imagine that in no time at all church going will dissolve away all together, and when that happens I wonder if all the great hymns will soon be forgotten—just swept away. What a shame that will be. Because for me hymns are so incredibly wonderful that I can't imagine life without them.

Part of growing up was being in the church choir, which at first I loathed, but after several years I grew to really love and choir became one the best features of my childhood. And what really added to the enjoyment was learning all the hymns. I grew up with the 1940 Episcopal Hymnal—which by the way is not called the Pilgrim Hymnal or the Methodist Hymnal—it is just entitled *The Hymnal*. Those pesky Episcopalians.

In our secular age where God so often seems absent I find Him best and most of all in the singing of hymns. Nietzsche once said that without music—life is a mistake—and I think hymns as much as any music prove that. The Episcopal Church has printed several editions. Sentimental tunes and words have tended to get the ax as new editions have replaced old: but other hymns are left out because the theology doesn't jive with some people's present beliefs.

That great hymn "Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide" was left out of the latest hymnal, or so rumor has it because someone felt that a nation is given more than one chance to decide. But in this age of possible nuclear annihilation and scary predictions of climate change maybe we do only get one chance. The hymn (with words by James Russell Lowell) has a wonderful verse: "New occasions teach new duties, Time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still and onward Who would keep abreast of truth." Not a comfortable concept for some of us: I want my truth immutable---an unchangeable rock, not subject to the whims of time.

My faith in God is sporadic. The idea of oblivion is daunting: that unique me will cease to be, scuttled off to eternity with all traces of moi gone, like a puff of smoke, is almost more than my fearful psyche can bear. But when I sing a hymn in church I somehow feel surrounded by an ineffable something, more I cannot really say, but it sometimes seems palpable. I want to believe it is God. Hymns are like mini-sermons which, more than almost anything else, provide me, at least, with solace and hope in an often seemingly heartless, cold and indifferent world. As the old hymn says: "There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul."

One of my favorite advent hymns is "Lo he comes with clouds descending," with words by Charles Wesley, who wrote literally thousands of hymns. The hymn has some far-out words, that sound a little like William Blake, in a mad and mystical way. This is the second verse:

Every eye shall now behold him,
Robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see.

Haunting words---that it is in the wailing, in the gnashing of teeth, those times we are really lost and feeling desperately alone is when we shall see the true Messiah. I don't like that idea. I want to see God when I am in a toga somewhere at a sumptuous Roman orgy, with some gorgeous creature feeding me grapes. That is when seeing God would be convenient. Can't we make some changes here?

Another great Wesley hymn is "O for a thousand tongues to sing" which has this:

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come;
And leap, ye lame, for joy!

Think how hymns add to the holidays. What would Christmas be without "O come O Ye Faithful" or "O little Town of Bethlehem" written by that 19th century giant, Phillips Brooks. This is a fragment of verse 4: "and faith holds wide the door, the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more."

Another Christmas Carol I love is "It came upon the midnight Clear:

"Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long: beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong; and warring humankind hears not the tidings which they bring; O hush the noise and cease your strife and hear the angels sing."

My mother loved "Praise to the Lord" that has this line "Ponder anew, what the almighty can do." My mother was enthralled with this idea and when we sang it in church she would always poke me to make me aware of it. Sometimes afterwards she would exclaim those words with great fervor, that what we had to be constantly pondering anew.

The Welsh have contributed many great hymns the foremost perhaps is "Immortal, invisible, God only wise" which ends with this unforgettable idea: "All laud we would render: O help us to see 'Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee." What an amazing idea: God is hidden only because of the piercing light surrounding him.

Great composers have contributed many hymns. One of my favorites is based on Haydn's *Creation* oratorio: "The spacious firmament on High" has this great verse by the noted poet Joseph Addison:

In reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice;
Forever singing as they shine,
'The hand that made thee is divine.

I love the words of the evening hymn: "The day thou gavest, Lord is ended" which is very quotable

"The sun that bids us rest is waking
Our brethren 'neath the western sky,
And hour by hour fresh lips are making
Thy wondrous doings heard on high."

In other words someone somewhere is praying 24/7. It's the same idea that a recording of Frank Sinatra is playing somewhere on earth right now---on second thought maybe it's not quite like that.

But that hymn has another good line:

"So be it Lord, thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away."

That won't happen to the good ol' U.S. of A. We shall never pass away. At least we used to believe that--these days not so sure.

Praise my soul the king of heaven has this: "Fatherlike he tends and spares us, well our feeble frame he knows." The older I get the more I think about my own feeble frame. Later in the same hymn: "Praise him still the same as ever, slow to chide and swift to bless." What great language, how succinctly the author sums up the Christian ideal of God.

Or how is this for conciseness from "They cast their nets in Galilee:"

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
Homeless in Patmos died,
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head-down was crucified.'

The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod.
Yet brothers, pray for but one thing---
The marvelous peace of God.

Or how about this poignant verse which could have been the tag line of the movie "Wall Street."

Where cross the crowded ways of life:
In haunts of wretchedness and need,
On shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
From paths where hide the lures of greed,
We catch the vision of thy tears.

Lures of greed: Sounds like Gordon Gekko

"Now the Day is Over" has this:

"Grant to little children,
Visions bright of thee;
Guard the sailors tossing,
On the deep, blue sea.

Comfort every sufferer
Watching late in pain;

Those who plan some evil
From their sin restrain."

Imagine actually believing that God could restrain us from doing something bad. How old-fashioned can you get? And yet when you sing this great hymn with it's gentle cadences and the relentless inevitability of the melody the power of words and music work synergistically to hopefully nudge us out of our cynicism.

The inherent faith in many hymns is so apparent"

Son of my soul"
Abide with me from morn till eve,
For without thee I cannot live;
Abide with me when night is nigh,
For without thee I dare not die."

Some hymns are dated. Kipling contributed several well-know hymns but some of his words smack of White European superiority, not PC at all; This is from "God of our fathers, known of old:"

"If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the law.

'Lesser breeds'—not good.

But Kipling being Kipling could recover nicely with his hymn entitled "Non nobis, Domine!" which has this memorable verse:

And we confess our blame,
How all too high we hold
That noise which men call fame,
That dross which men call gold.
For these we undergo

Our hot and godless days;
But in our souls we know,
Not unto us the praise"

So Kipling calls fame noise and gold dross. I just keep thinking: "Bring on the noise and bring on the dross, baby!" But seriously, powerful stuff—particularly these days where fame and wealth are the highest honors our culture can bestow.

Some hymns are not meant to comfort us but to challenge us, to make us feel uncomfortable:

As a boy I heard Walter Russell Bowie preach and his "O holy city seen of John" has this verse:

O shame to us who rest content
While lust and greed for gain
In street and shop and tenement
Wring gold from human pain,
And bitter lips in blind despair
Cry, "Christ hath died in vain!"

Another of his powerful hymns is "Lord Christ, when first thou Cam'st to men."

O wounded hands of Jesus, build
In us thy new creation:
Our pride is dust, our vaunt is stilled,
We wait thy revelation:
O love that triumphs over loss,
We bring our hearts before thy cross,
To finish thy salvation

Vaunt is a word not much used these days, it means boasting. I wonder if that is what Garbo was really saying with her immortal line; "I vaunt to be alone."

Harry Emerson Fosdick was another giant from a few generations back. My mother used to like to tell the story about a woman who met Fosdick when he was on vacation in Maine and said to him: "Mr. Fosdick—you must be the most unfortunate man in America!" Fosdick was a little taken aback and inquired why this was so and the woman replied. "Because you are the only man in America who cannot quote Harry Emerson Fosdick!"

His most famous hymn is "God of grace and God of glory" with these lines:

Cure thy children's warring madness
Bend our pride to thy control
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal."

I think of that line a lot—"rich in things and poor in soul."

Some hymns can provide really practical advice. The great British poet George Herbert wrote this hymn:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

It's kind of like that idea of making everything you do an act of worship.

Some hymns have silly lines, and have gotten the heave-ho. In the 1940 book was a hymn called 'We thank you Lord of heaven" and the second verse begins: "For swift and gallant horses, For lambs in pastures springing, For dogs with friendly faces." Dogs with friendly faces is getting a little cutesy no?

One summer many years ago I bicycled, by myself, from London to Weymouth and took the ferry over to Jersey, one of the Channel Islands.

On my way there I passed through Southhampton and heard bells playing the famous hymn: "O God our Help in Ages Past." Some boys were nearby and I asked them why were they playing that tune. One boy thought for a moment and came up with a great answer: maybe it was to remind people that they were alive. I later learned that Isaac Watts, the author of that famous hymn, was a Southhampton native, and I'm sure they played it to honor his memory. I love this verse:

Time like an ever rolling stream
Bears all its sons away.
They fly forgotten as a dream dies,
At the opening Day.

Another great Watts hymn is "Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove"

See how we trifle here below,
Fond of these earthly toys:
Our souls, how heavily they go,
To reach eternal joys.

As an inveterate and unrepentant junk collector I can tell you I am always trifling with earthy toys—vainly hoping that one day I will find that one elusive thing that will bring eternal joy. No luck so far!

When I got to the island of Jersey each night I bicycled to a park at the top of the island where a military band played every evening. The bandleader jauntily introduced his tunes and they always included this great hymn by John Henry Newman:

Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on.
The night is dark and I am far from home; Lead thou me on.

Being so far from home that hymn always got to me.

And the second verse has this phrase:

I loved to choose and see my path; but now Lead thou me on.
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, Pride ruled my will: remember not past years."

Having spent a misspent yut I echo that line. What happened in the past stays in the past!

Some hymns have such a meeting of composer and lyricist that they give Rodgers and Hammerstein a run for the money. Such is the case with "In the bleak Mid-Winter" with a fabulous melody by the great Gustav Holst and lovely words by Christina Rossetti:

Angels and archangels May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim Thronged the air;
But his mother only, In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved With a kiss.

The melodies of the early 18th century are my favorites. There is a clarity, a purity and a thrusting inevitability about them that I find compelling. The Stuggart tune to "Come thou long expected Jesus" composed in 1715 is a perfect example delivering its musical message sonderfully. It has this great verse by Charles Wesley:

"Born thy people to deliver, Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever, Now thy gracious kingdom
bring."

Some hymns make us realize how much we take our faith for granted:

Here is the second verse of Faith of our fathers

"Our fathers chained in prisons dark,
Were still in heart and conscience free.
And truly blessed would be our fate,
If we, like them, should die for thee."

Egads. I want my warm, fuzzy faith; the faith of a cozy church on a cold night singing Christmas Carols. These words invade my comfort zone, and I don't like it!!!

And of course some hymns provide that. "Dear Lord and father of Mankind" has this:

Drop thy still dews of quietness, Till all our strivings cease:
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess The beauty of thy peace.

Some phrases are so succinct to be nearly perfect. I love this from "Come ye Faithful, Raise the Strain":

Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters'
Led them with un-moistened foot Through the Red Sea waters—
Not just dry footed but un-moistened—great!

Or how about "Holy Holy Holy, Lord God Almighty" has this wonderful verse: Holy, Holy, Holy! All the saints adore thee. Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea; Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee. Which wert and art, and ever more shall be. When was the last time you said "Which wert and art?"

I remember once hearing Bishop Tutu preach and he ended his sermon by having us all sing "When I survey the Wondrous Cross": (by the great Isaac Watts) which has this "All the vain things that charm me most.." My brother Tom had that printed up and framed to remind him of all his vain things. This great hymns ends with this:

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.

There is a wonderful simple Christmas Carol--namely

Away in a manger...Think of it, whether you believe it or not, the story is so brilliant. The most powerful being in the universe chooses a poor Jewish kid 2000 years ago to be his son. He is born in a manger---the French word 'to eat' is manger--in a stall for animals.

It was the very meanness and humbleness of it that makes it so much more powerful. If it turned out that Jeff Bezos was the Messiah it just wouldn't be at all the same.

The Epiphany hymn "Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning" says it so well

Cold on his cradle the dew drops are shining,
Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
maker and monarch and Savior of all.

I mentioned John Henry Newman before and here is a quote from his sermon of 1834.

"If we insist on being as sure as is conceivable....we must be content to creep along the ground, and never soar."

Hymns, I think, can be channels to God and when we sing them—sometimes our certain cynicism about eternal life and God dissolve and we can pull ourselves out of this muddy corruptible earth and hopefully soar just high enough to catch a glimpse of God.

Amen