

The power of words and music in shaping faith

(extracts from Memories, healing and hymns: the power of words and music in shaping faith, delivered as a lecture to the 2014 conference of the Hymn Society Conference of Great Britain and Ireland)

Hymns are a physical thing, Jan Berry reminds us. Words that have been shaped shape us in turn. They shape not only our reason and intellect but our emotions as well, and our very breath. And in the end, Jan argues, they shape our faith too.



Hymns become important to people often not because of their theology, or the quality of the poetry, or the originality of the imagery; but because they are linked with certain memories and associations. The words, or the music, or more often the combination of the two, are linked in the subconscious mind with a particular occasion of strong emotion; singing, or hearing the hymn

again triggers the emotion, and so not only resonates with the intellect, or your current state of mind, but also evokes past feelings, hopes and longings.

However, memories and associations in themselves are not enough to explain why hymns embed themselves so deeply into our consciousness, and I suspect that many factors are at play.

The use of language

Hymns (the better ones anyway) are rich in their use of language; they are poetic in form, and use symbol and metaphor to convey meaning. When we use symbolic language and metaphor, we point to a range of meanings beyond the purely conscious and cerebral. Every image or metaphor that we use is “multivocal”. That is, it means different things to different people, or even different things to the same person at different points in time. This is true even of concrete language.

So, when we sing something like [And can it be that I should gain](#) (StF 345), with its imagery of blood, dungeons and chains, crowns and thrones, those images will resonate at many different levels. Of course, it is also possible that for some they will not resonate at all, because they are too far removed from day-to-day experience; metaphors can lose their power and become dead and lifeless. But when they are vivid and vital, the use of such language not only works at a cerebral level, but also appeals to our imaginations and emotions to reach the depths of heart and mind.

Rhyme and rhythm

Nor should we underestimate the power of rhyme and rhythm in enabling the words and tune to embed themselves in our memories and consciousness. It is far easier to learn words by heart if there is a set pattern, a metre and a rhyming scheme, and even more so if they are set to music.

But a further dimension is added by the way we generally use hymns. Whilst reading over the words of a familiar hymn in solitude can be helpful on occasion, for most of us hymns are sung in public, in company with others. I gather that one of the most popular events at [the Christian arts festival] Greenbelt is the singing of hymns in a beer tent!



***Rhythm and repetition -
part of a hymn's appeal***

A whole-body experience

Communal hymn singing has certain characteristics that help to give hymns their power.

First of all, it is participatory. Secondly, hymn-singing is a communal act. Hymns belong to the faith community; they often originate in a response to a biblical text, or in the context of preaching, or in an event or celebration in the life of a community.

Thirdly, in any form of singing, we are not simply using our minds; we are engaging the whole of our bodies. We hold books, or we lift our heads to look at a screen; sometimes, we may raise our hands in the air in praise, tap our feet to the rhythm, or (if we are not too inhibited) even dance. Whilst clearly in singing hymns, words are important, the use of music compels us to use our physical bodies as well as our reason and intellect. We sing with our breath and our bodies; hymn singing is an act of embodied worship. For these reasons, hymn singing lifts us from the mundane, into a realm of praise and worship.

Hymns shape theology

I would argue that the effect of words is even more profound when they are wedded to ritual action or to music; working at a level that is deeper than the conscious cerebral understanding.

Alternative forms of hymns and songs emerging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are constructing and shaping theology for a postmodern generation. In some instances this may be a conscious and intentional process, in others it may be a half-realized search for words and images that make sense of Gospel story and divine activity for a particular context or congregation; but either way, the theology is not pre-formed and

handed down, but is *emerging from the experience of searching for God in new ways of worship and prayer*. [Ed's italics]



If this is true of our liturgy generally, then I think it is particularly relevant for hymnody, as that part of the liturgy which is most often shared by the whole congregation. Changing the words of the hymns we sing is not theologically neutral; as we sing, so we come to believe, and sometimes, change our belief.

The act of joining in singing a hymn is an embodied act, whilst the language used is frequently metaphorical and symbolic. The act of singing a hymn will often bring about the state of mind that is expressed or desired, a sense of joy and wonder, or of guilt and unworthiness. This may be done with a genuine intention to inspire and encourage, to create a sense of worship; or it may be a use of words and music to manipulate the emotions and feelings of the congregation; and sometimes the line may be a little blurred.

But either way, hymns have the power to shape the faith of individuals and the community.