Whose hymns are they anyway?

Extracts from Andrew Pratt's article, "Is there a future for hymnody?", published in The Hymn Society Bulletin (Winter 2021: Vol.23, No.1, pp.9 – 24) Reproduced with permission.

Andrew's complete article has much in it to challenge provoke, and encourage. The following extracts home in on just a few of his questions and thoughts, of value to anyone choosing hymns and music for worship, and those considering writing new hymns for today's worshipping communities.

We don't do change

Andrew identifies two particular challenges that hymn writers and worship planners need to face. The first is an inbuilt resistance to change.

Partly, he asserts, this exists because Churches generally "are not very good at swift change. Sociologically they are predicated on maintaining and promulgating the institution rather than on loving the individual." Nevertheless, Andrew says, hymns need to evolve and reflect changing societies and emerging concerns.

"For as long as I have researched hymns I have felt that if we lost them we would need to find a medium to replace them, so integral have they become to our worship and faith. But the shape of such 'hymnody' will need to evolve if hymns are to survive and continue to be helpful. This could be the first stumbling-block. J.R. Watson has stated, that 'there exists a strong sense of what a hymn is in the popular imagination' and 'hymn-writers practising the craft today have to bear this in mind'."[i]

Hymns as performance

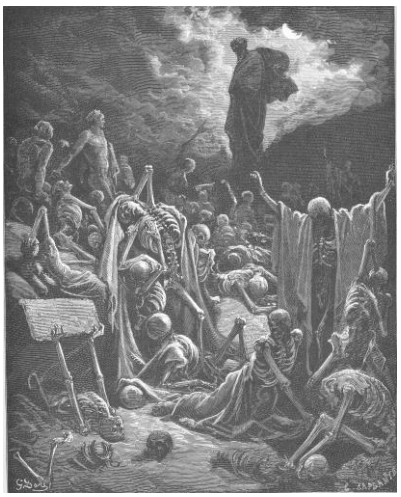
The second challenge is the strong attraction of what Andrew calls "performance worship". Either recorded or virtual, this has come to the fore, "particularly with [Covid] restrictions being put on corporate singing".

Andrew argues that hymns and worship songs associated with evangelical revivals are not designed "to develop faith beyond an initial commitment or re-affirmation" of faith:

"That is not to deny their place or effectiveness, but to acknowledge their limitations. At the same time, these media were often predicated on being led by an individual or group that would play a central role in singing. The worldwide nature of this influence is indicated by the predominance of Hillsong (pictured above), emanating from Australia. The congregation (audience) watch, listen and sometimes sing along. There is nothing novel in this as many cathedral sung services are modelled on the same principle, frequently with even less congregational participation."

The constraints on singing necessitated by online delivery of worship raise the question as to "whether hymns, or hymns as we have inherited them, are the best vehicles for worship in lockdown and beyond. . . Some Fresh Expressions have intentionally jettisoned hymns altogether. Certain contexts make this a sensible option. . . yet I feel that something more has been lost than just a good sing. Yet what can replace hymns, or how could hymns evolve to at least fulfil something of their original intentions?"

How to be prophetic



Believing that "hymns can offer access to the public space and enable expression of religious sentiment that might otherwise be unexpressed", Andrew suggests that innovation in hymn writing and singing comes from regaining a "prophetic imagination". Think of "Ezekiel's portrayal of a valley of dry bones taking on flesh (right, by Gustave Doré), suggesting that exile was not isolation from the divine, nor need it be permanent"; or William Blake writing of "'dark satanic mills', throwing a different light on things hitherto seen as productive".

From the point of view of the writer, such an imagination is enhanced by looking around us and learning from those who work in other genres – for example, poetry and popular song. Andrew instances a number of poets, from Gerard Manly Hopkins to Leonard Cohen, who use language that is "at once affective and visceral", or contemporary, or who show how "metaphor can have a powerful effect when skilfully used and unexpectedly chosen".

Reclaiming our hymns

Andrew is inspired by the folk musician and hymn writer Sydney Carter, author of I danced in the morning when the world was begun (StF 247) and One more step along the world I go (StF 476):

"Those in power within the churches have controlled what others must sing, and what they might sing has been immutable. Sydney Carter, on the other hand, grasping the truth that religious song must be of the folk, insisted that it is likely to be constantly changing from generation to generation, evolving to fit new situations and different expressions of

humanity.[ii] This applies not only to the words, but also to the music. . . It is human, from, to and for humanity. (Also see John Bell writing on StF+ about The folk-song of the Church.)

"Andrew Thomas has recently argued that the act of corporate singing can be formative in enabling people to become the Body of Christ in their own context and situation and that the act of singing together binds people corporately. His argument is that for this to happen congregations need to be able to sing together, but with the expectation that those of other cultures, and sometimes those from outside the church might also be incorporated and allowed to influence that which is sung. The hope is that this very process, which is in essence inclusive, will enable those who sing in harmony to live similarly in community.[iii]

In all of this we are not simply penning 'pretty ditties', popular songs, neither are we intent on showing of our erudition and scholarship, our literary excellence, we are seeking to enable the voice of the people to be expressed, theirs, not ours.

"The content of that which is sung will need to reflect the belief, understanding and experience of those who are singing. The music will also offer a vehicle that is similarly apt and contextual. The instrumentation for this can be varied but must be able to accommodate those members of the Body of Christ with their mixed skills, gifts and inclinations. In a real way we should be providing the hymns of the people, folk songs, that by their very nature are not elitist."

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[i] J.R. Watson, "The Language of Hymns: Some Contemporary Problems" in Jasper D. and Jasper R.C.D. (eds) *Language and the Worship of the Church* (1990: Palgrave Macmillan, London) p.174

[ii] Sydney Carter, *Rock of Doubt* (1978: Mowbray)

[iii] Andrew Thomas, *Resounding Body: Building Christlike Church Communities through Music* (2020: Sacristy Press, Durham)