

The Welkin Rings

Nothing could be more orthodox than the singing of hymns. I confess that I look forward to hymns in public worship and that one of my favourite TV programmes is Songs of Praise. Yet a close examination of the words of hymns and the way in which the words have changed through time reveals some quite radical ideas, and so the inclusion of this lecture in a course entitled Radical Orthodoxy seems to me to be justified.

Hymns belong to us all; they are certainly an inescapable part of the culture of the West. A hymn may begin as the product of a particular church at a particular time in its history, but if it is any good other churches quickly adopt it, and then, gradually, through its use at funerals, weddings and national religious services, it becomes common property. The final mark of their progress into the nation's consciousness is its use on the football field. While, no doubt, the tunes of hymns are an integral part of their nature it is their words that I want to examine in this lecture.

Editorial changes to the words of popular hymns have something to tell us about the development of religious and political thought, especially at the level of the ordinary layperson. To begin with the most obvious example older worshippers singing the hymn "All things bright and beautiful" remember that early editions contained the third verse:

*"The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
He made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate."*

The last edition of the hymn book in which this verse appeared was in 1922. The dropping of this verse in more recent editions reflects the change in society. The idea of a society in which the classes were fixed and separate, as part of God's unalterable plan, gradually lost ground in the 20th century.

The hymn "The Kingdom come O God" contains the verse:

*"O'er heathen lands afar
Thick darkness broodeth yet:
Arise, O morning star,
Arise, and never set."*

This also expresses a Victorian view of the world, with undertones of what Kipling called the white man's burden. But it is no longer appropriate to think about this country as the home and centre of all civilized standards and values and far off lands as dwelling in heathen darkness. Later editions have changed the first line to:

"O'er lands both near and far" (A&M 1983)

Or a form used by the BBC in 1998:

"O'er this and other lands"

Another example of what we would today consider as political in-correctness is in the advent hymn "Lo, he comes with clouds descending" the second verse of which is as follows:

*Every eye shall now behold him
robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at naught and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the Tree,
deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see."*

The rise of Holocaust culture has surely made us sensitive to the implied Anti-Semitism in this verse. A number of scholars have been pointing this out. I am still looking for a new edition to the hymnbook, which I expect to change the wording to: "We who set at naught and sold him". Such a change would, of course, transform the moral sense and political correctness of the verse.

While some hymns reflect changing attitudes in political and social matters other hymns are changed simply to reflect changing taste. Take, for example, the Ascensiontide hymn:

*"Hail the day that sees him rise,
To his throne above the skies"*

In the Anglican Hymn Book of 1871 this verse reads:

*"Hail the day that sees him rise
Ravished from our wishful eyes."*

The dictionary gives an alternative meaning for the word "ravished" as "to carry off by force". In the context of this hymn this means that Christ, ascending to heaven, was wrenched away from the eyes of his adoring disciples. This meaning would not be apparent to contemporary worshippers. Another example is the advent hymn written in 1735 by Dr. P. Doddridge:

*"Hark the glad sound the Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long"*

Very few hymn books now include the original fourth verse:

*"He comes from the thick Films of Vice,
To clear the mental Ray,
And on the Eye-balls of the blind,
To pour celestial Day."*

We can understand the editors dropping this strange verse from new hymnbooks on grounds of taste. Doddridge based it on lines from the poem "Messiah" by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), and so it may have been familiar to worshippers in the 18th century. If I were an evangelical preacher anxious to draw a lesson for his flock about the wickedness of this world I would make the point that the verse means that Christ comes to open and cleanse the minds of those who have been made blind by that evil which covers the eyes like a film. He would doubtless apply it to those who need to be healed from that spiritual malaise which causes them to look for pleasure in pornography. Although it was written before the invention of the cinema the phrase "Films of Vice" carry an obvious implication. However I am not here in the role of an evangelical preacher and so I pass on quickly to my next example.

In the Christmas hymn "Hark the herald angels sing" Charles Wesley presents the whole doctrine of salvation, as he understands it, and it is from this hymn that I draw the title of this paper. Wesley's view of Christ in this hymn has a strong emphasis on his divinity. Subsequent changes made by hymn book editors have toned this down in certain ways. In the 19th century there was a fourth verse no longer used:

"Come, Desire of Nations, come,

*Fix in us thy humble home
Rise, the Woman's conqu'ring seed,
Now display Thy saving Power,
Ruined Nature now restore,
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine"*

This verse says much about the biblical knowledge and theological seriousness of the worshippers of that time. How many of today's worshippers would recognise that the term "the Woman's conqu'ring seed" is a reference to Christ? And how many would understand that the last line tells us that Christianity is about the incorporation of souls into Christ so that they may share his divinity? So the dropping of this verse is a concession both to the ignorance of contemporary worshippers, and, perhaps, to the change of focus of the theological vision of the contemporary church. When Charles Wesley published this hymn in 1743 it contained yet another verse which we no longer have in our hymn books:

"Adam's likeness Lord efface;

*Stamp Thy image in its place
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain
Then the Life, the Inner Man
O! To all Thyself impart
Form'd in each believing heart"*

It may be that modern editors feel that this verse is beyond the understanding of today's worshippers, but it should be noted that the idea of Christ as the Second Adam does find its place elsewhere in the hymnal. For example we have the second verse of Cardinal Newman's very popular hymn "Praise to the Holiest in the height".

"O loving wisdom of our God.

*When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the victory came."*

The early editions of the carol begin:

"Hark, how all the welkin rings,

Glory to the King of Kings."

This does not mean the same thing as "the herald angels sing". The welkin is an Anglo-Saxon word for the arch or vault of heaven, and refers to a sphere in the Ptolemaic cosmic system. It is the word "rings" which points us to the meaning. Wesley was familiar with the bells ringing in the tower of the parish church on Christmas morning. He tells us, in this hymn, that when Christ was born, the whole heaven was ringing in the same way. Humans and angels sing, but the welkin rings. So we

have here a very objective, even materialistic conception of heaven, which is at the heart of the pre-scientific cosmology of the mediaeval church inherited by the Protestant Reformers. The dropping of "welkin rings" and replacing it with "angels sing" indicates a weakening of this concept. The singing of angels is much more subjective, they sing in our hearts today.

Editorial boards of hymn books are composed of highly qualified and talented scholars. Their policies are outlined in the prefaces, which they write to each new edition. While holding the traditions and orthodox doctrines of the church in deep respect they are also aware that their hymn books are for the ordinary lay worshipper, and ultimately for the whole nation. For example the editors of the New Standard edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern state in their preface: "A good hymn book is necessarily an endeavour in high democracy".

As any theological student can tell us the Monophysite (from the Greek "One Nature") heresy emerged in the 5th century and it has continued to the present day. The Council of Chalcedon 451 A.D. sought to settle, once and for all, the Christological disputes of the previous centuries by defining the nature of Christ as "truly God and truly man". Monophysites were those who got the balance wrong, they were so overwhelmed by the notion of Christ as God that they could not come to terms with his humanity. Eventually the decree of Chalcedon was accepted by the Eastern and Western Church, but three Churches, including the Copts of Egypt, clung to the Monophysite doctrine of Christ.

A tendency in some hymns is to emphasise the divinity of Christ and to neglect his humanity. For example:

*"He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all"*

(Hymns Ancient & Modern New Standard No.46)

*"Come see His hands and His feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered."*

(Complete Mission Praise 1999 Hymn No. 162)

An elementary piece of research illustrates the point. In the hymn book - Complete Mission Praise 1999 - there are 37 hymns directly addressed to Jesus and having the name of Jesus as the opening word. Each one of these hymns addresses Jesus as God, not one of them refers to his humanity, here are some examples

360 "Jesus has sat down at God's right hand"

365 "Jesus is Lord of all"

366 "Jesus is King"

367 "Jesus is Lord! Creation's voice proclaims him"

375 "Jesus, name above all names"

377 "Jesus, Prince and Saviour"

This tendency to emphasise the divinity of Christ to the apparent neglect of his humanity is indicative of the situation of the contemporary church. One part is moving towards a separation from the real world, the world that has become secularised and to which Christians are called to witness. Such hymns mean nothing to secular persons.

Some years ago a visitor to our local church in Merthyr Tydfil was a Coptic Christian from Egypt. He was a highly educated and serious person, a surgeon at the local hospital. During his stay he worshipped regularly and felt quite at home at the services in our Anglican Church. The reason was not any falling away from *his* faith, but rather that the hymns, prayers and preaching in our parish church were in harmony with his faith; we were infected with the same Monophysite tendency.

There are some serious questions to be asked about this tendency. How far has it affected church government? Has there been transference of belief in the divine nature of Christ to the institutional Church? Could this explain the emergence of absolutist attitudes in Church governance and Biblical interpretation, for example?

This is not true of every hymnbook. For example in the New Standard version of Hymns Ancient and Modern 1986 we have the following Hymn 334:

"A Man there lived in Galilee

*unlike all men before,
for he alone from first to last
our flesh unsullied wore;
a perfect life of perfect deeds
once to the world was shown'
that all mankind might mark his steps
and in them plant their own."*

It is possible to present the Christian Gospel in ways that accept the godlessness of the world around, and one of the ways is to return to the understanding of the full humanity of Christ. We shall look at this idea more closely in the next lecture, but for the present let me say that I regard hymns as an important expression of such an approach to the mission of the church.