

HYMNS, THE WORD AND THE WORLD

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Methodist minister Andrew Pratt shares his personal views on hymn writing, and how a hymnwriter responds both to the 'Word' and the 'world'.

Writing hymns is a creative process which can involve many different layers of activity. Inspiration is clearly necessary, but an ability to work with language in rhythmic and literate ways is also essential. At best this is the work of a poet. Added to this is the need to examine, rework and revise a text and not simply to rely on it being 'inspired'.

Clearly not all writers will work in the same way. In addition to inspiration there can be a different balance of intellectual and emotional engagement, whether this be with a text or an event. For some there will be a degree of objective detachment, but I would argue that this can never be total. Even if subconsciously, we bring with us our past experiences which mould the way we view things and write about them. As I write, I find that this balance swings. Finally, every text needs revisiting and editing.

STARTING WITH SCRIPTURE

Historically, hymns have been used to reinforce doctrine, with faith statements offering the starting point. When a hymn text begins with scripture, translation of a sort takes place with sung words clarifying or exploring the underlying Hebrew or Greek. Sometimes, in the process, the original can be distorted.

Starting directly from a Biblical text, my approach is hermeneutical: seeking to interpret underlying meaning, stressing one aspect or another, as a translator will make decisions in the choice of an appropriate word to match another. Yet this process is never completely detached. My life experience causes me to identify with the characters in one narrative more strongly than those in another. Through a process of imaginative reconstruction I seek to give expression to feelings and emotions in the people about whom I am writing. I hope that this does not dilute the

theological precision of my writing, but rather adds emotional depth.

Over time the hymn form has developed in subtle and nuanced ways. Scripture may provide inspiration but the process of translation moves beyond that of metrication. Martin Luther wove together different scripture passages so that one, in effect, formed a commentary on another. Charles Wesley did the same. While there is obvious value in this method of constructing a lyric poem, it compounds the possibility of manipulation or distortion of the scripture.

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Arguably the Psalms are the archetype from which hymns have developed. While the Psalms constantly referred to the human condition, Calvin and Luther both suggested in different ways that they express the whole gamut of emotion to which humans are subject, something of this was lost in the writing of Christian hymns; faith and affirmation dominated, rather than questioning and lament. This is not to deny that some Reformed hymnody catches a sense of the tension of the Psalms as well as their praise, as witnessed by such a text as 'Aus tiefer Noth schrei ich zu dir', Martin Luther's versification of Psalm 130 as translated by Catherine Winkworth:

Out of the depths I cry to thee,
Lord, hear me, I implore thee;

A more personal reflection is found in the hymns of William Cowper, who used images from nature mixed with scripture to give expression to emotion:

God of our life, to thee we call,
afflicted at thy feet we fall;
when the great water-floods prevail,
leave not our trembling hearts to fail.

Here we find that the balance is moving from what might be characterized as a calm expression of theological truth to an interplay of that truth with deeply personal experience. Images of floods and water often signify chaos and the absence of God in the Bible, but here the floods could equally be real, or metaphors for the depression to which Cowper was subject. This text is not widely known, while 'God moves in a mysterious way' is. The same mix of imagery pertains, and it is significant that the words in no way link to a specific single event. What resonates is the universal human experience of those occasions when our theology and experience disconnect.

RESPONDING TO THE WORLD

It is this sense of dislocation that has led hymn writers to reflect on events and experiences, some of which may be transient, in order to make sense of both scripture and experience by bringing them into dialogue with one another. Charles Wesley did this when writing hymns on the London earthquakes of 1750. The close relationship of these hymns with the events has meant

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that they have not found much lasting use beyond them, while another text of more general application, 'Come on my partners in distress' (*Methodist Hymn Book*, 1933), was still being published in the 20th century. From my own perspective, the process of responding to an event through the medium of a hymn has often been very rapid. Seeing, for example, the aftermath of a tsunami on the television, the image of an abandoned chair or crying children has immediately struck me in an almost physical way. Reflecting on this, I find an echo of the emotion described in Mark 1.41 where Jesus is moved with pity, or perhaps anger, at the plight of a leper. The strength of the underlying Greek has a physiological resonance; one might say in a colloquial

sense that it is gut wrenching. And this is what I am feeling, and what I then seek to put into words, that others who sing them might sense the anguish and join in the lament.

The very nature of responding to an event in the medium of a hymn is likely to result in a text which has passing significance. This is not to say that such texts are unimportant. Because of the way in which hymns enable congregational participation, they can help people to reflect theologically in a way not always enabled by, say, a sermon. Additionally, if the hymn is printed it can be taken away for thought and prayer. For these reasons, even though a hymn of the moment might be regarded as ephemeral, its writing still ought to command the same critical attention as one of wider use. This means that the dialogue between event and scripture must still be one of care and integrity.

INTERPRETING EVENTS THROUGH HYMNS

In my own writing I have tried over the years to respond to events or situations through the medium of hymns in a way which will be consonant with scripture, and sometimes to present a particular interpretation. Such writing began in the 1980s responding to Aids/HIV.

In this overly alliterative text I affirm that

When life's crippled, flawed or faulted,
filled with fear, with folly strewn;
God is here, yet never thwarted,
loving in dark sorrow's womb;

and that

God will love, not be destroyed.
(Andrew E. Pratt © 1991 Stainer & Bell Ltd)

In this hymn, the perception that people with Aids/HIV are infected as part of God's judgement was being, and in some contexts still needs to be, challenged.

Within 24 hours of the attack on the World Trade Center (2001) I had written a hymn which was intentionally polemical. I anticipated that the evangelical right, in the USA in particular, would claim that they had God on their side and so I wrote:

God's on our side, and God will grieve
at carnage, loss and death;
for Jesus wept, and we will weep,
with every grieving breath.

(Andrew E. Pratt © 2001 Stainer & Bell Ltd)

If, as I believe, God's love for humanity is universal, God must be on everybody's side and so the second stanza began, 'God's on their side, the enemy'. Understandably the text had a mixed reception. What I did not expect was publication in an American newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the continued use of the hymn in prayer manuals and commemorative services for a further 10 years after the event.

FACING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Following in Charles Wesley's footsteps, in his response to the London earthquakes, and in the wake of the Chilean earthquake of 2010, I wrote:

Is this the judgement of a God,
a God who wind and waves obey?
Where is compassion, grace and love
when earthquakes, death and fear hold sway?

In all of these instances there is a tension between event, inspiration, emotion and scripture and it is all too easy to use words that are bathetic or banal.

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The issue of theodicy, the nature of evil, continues to be addressed with each succeeding generation and I find it voiced by people within and outside the churches, 'Why will God allow such things?' Such questions demand serious, informed answers, which recognize a theological understanding that God's judgement is not meted out in a random fashion, and that our understanding of the nature of the earth and our existence should be open to scientific scrutiny. In this specific instance it is admitted that life itself is contingent on the existence of tectonic plates and earthquakes. Added to this is an affirmation of incarnation evidenced in another hymn on the same theme:

God seeks the dying, nail pierced hands
reach deep within this grief and loss.
and
Our every word or touch of love
speaks of the gift of grace and cross.

TOPICAL ISSUES AND THEOLOGY

From this it should be clear that there is a place for hymns which address topical issues and that these need not distort scripture, current knowledge or theology. Such hymns, by their nature, may well have a short lifespan, while others may surprise us by having continuing currency. Such use can be enabled if those texts arising out of specific occasions are not immutably linked to them, but have a more general, or sometimes metaphorical application, or touch our common humanity. Occasionally such hymnic theological reflection may serve to challenge, refocus or even re-form our theology.

THE FOLLOWING HYMN WAS WRITTEN IN RESPONSE TO THE FRENCH SHOOTINGS, JANUARY 2015

Hopeless to help in this violence, this crisis,
here in the focus of bloodshed and fear,
common humanity binds us together,
love at the centre, not hatred's veneer.

Jewish and Christian and Muslim together,
all the world's people, we each have a place.
Love is our purpose when those filled with hatred
break down relationships, nullify grace.

Give me your hand, then let peace grow between us,
let us rebuild what distrust might destroy.
Now in this moment we'll make a commitment,
love is the weapon we'll use and deploy.

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Tune: *Stewardship*

More of Andrew's hymn texts are available on his blog; these include his response to the Ebola crisis, last year's Taliban attack at a school in Peshawar, Pakistan, as well as the more recent events in France (see above). Hymns are available free for local use and inclusion on CCLI returns is welcome.

→ <http://hymnsandbooks.blogspot.co.uk>

Many of Andrew's hymns are also posted on the Worship Cloud website:

→ www.theworshipcloud.com