

This is a sermon preached by liturgist Rev. Paul Gibson at a service of celebration marking the publication of Common Praise.

BY PAUL GIBSON

THERE IS A STORY that Beethoven once played a newly composed sonata for a friend. When he had finished, the friend asked, "What does it mean?" Beethoven sat down at the piano and played the sonata all over again.

I feel something of Beethoven's implied disapproval as I stand here trying to talk about hymns. Talking implies reason, logic, thinking — everything we associate with the left side of the brain. Although they include words, hymns are firmly anchored by music to the affective and intuitive dimensions of experience, to the realm of the pre-rational. I don't mean that they are necessarily irrational, although some of them certainly are, but pre-rational, belonging to that shadowy but vital realm of thought that stands behind our logical constructions. Hymns cannot exist without music — can you imagine a liturgy in which we solemnly recited five hymn texts in spoken voice? Nor do they succeed without metaphor, alliteration, rhythm and all the apparatus of language we call poetry. As constructs of music and poetry, whether profoundly simple or highly exalted, they defy the kind of analysis we imply by the question: "What does it mean?"

Hymns are actually ritual events.

THEOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE

Why we publish hymn books

They do not really exist in hymn books. They do not consist of paper and ink. Hymn books are only containers for the tradition. Hymns exist when people sing, whether a congregation on Sunday morning, a solitary performer in a Sikh Gurdwara, or myself alone in the shower. A hymn is there for as long as the singing goes on, providing like all rituals do, a bridge of passage from one moment to another, a bridge of passage that is illuminated by the combination of words and poetry to give expression to the significance of the moment. The passage of the moment may be only from one part of the liturgy to another, but it may also be from one state of mind to another — from cynicism to rejoicing, from indifference to repentance, from forgetting to remembering (as on Remembrance Day) from raw grief to healing lament. Hymns grasp the moment and open the way to opportunity beyond it.

Some of the oldest collections of hymns are from the Indian subcontinent. They are called the Vedas. Some of them are hymns of praise, but others are actually ritual formulas to be recited by a priest who is offering sacrifice. Some of the psalms of our tradition are not dissimilar. The earliest description of Christian worship by a non-Christian, the letter of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan, may imply a parallel understanding of the Eucharist prayer. He said it was the custom of Christians to gather before dawn on a fixed day and to sing a hymn, a carmen, to Christ, as if to a god. Whatever Pliny had been able to discover about the fabric of our worship, the ritual nature of hymns was

secured at an early date in our history. *Phos hilaron*, the hymn to Christ at light, was sung to mark the passage from day to night, and even some of the hymns in the New Testament may have a similar use.

Of course our oldest hymn book is the psalter, which came to us with the rest of the Jewish Bible. If one sifts out some of the wisdom and history psalms, the rest of the collection is about two-thirds praise and one-third lament. I haven't done a detailed count in *Common Praise*, but I suspect our collection is similar, that roughly two-thirds of our hymns are praise and thanksgiving and one-third are expressions of longing and lament. I think this is a healthy pattern. We are most ourselves, most open to grace when we go beyond ourselves in praise and thanksgiving. This is fundamental to our faith tradition. Our primary act of worship is called Thanksgiving albeit in Greek. On the other hand, there is much to lament — our personal failures, our social hardness of heart, our destruction of the environment, the homelessness of people in our streets and parks. It is appropriate that our hymns capture this dark side of our human condition as well. However, it is also appropriate that, like the psalms of lament, they bend back to praise. The purpose of lament is not self-flagellation but repentance and conversion, and the purpose of conversion is transfiguration. This is one of the passages our hymns invoke.

One of the greatest strengths of hymns as we know them is that they are popular — they belong to the people. When Guru Nanak wanted to promote a religious synthesis beyond

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the conflicts of Hinduism and Islam and beyond the isolating violence of caste, he led people out into the forest to sit in a circle and sing hymns.

Singing hymns on the eve of the Sabbath is an important feature of Hasidic spirituality. Hymns mobilized the Wesleyan revival, providing people with gut-level access to theology. This popular dimension of hymnody has a dynamic two-way aspect. Hymns are not just an instrument to put ideas into the heads of the unsophisticated. They are a way in which the church as a living community can try out new ideas, new trends and at a popular level.

For example, prayer for the dead almost vanished among Anglicans after the Reformation because of the excesses and superstition of medieval piety. However, after the First World War many people felt a need to express in prayer their continuing love for those they had lost. Long before it would have been possible to insert prayers for those who had died in any Prayer Book, they were tried out, almost experimentally, in hymn collections. I believe it was the presence of such hymns in our 1938 Hymn Book that made it possible to include modest prayers for the dead in our 1962 Prayer Book.

Similarly, Canadian Anglicans were content to sing *And now, O Father*, mindful of the love, with its "setting forth" of the sacrifice of Christ, long before they could have contemplated similar words, what we call amnesia in their Eucharist prayer. It is in this spirit that *Common Praise* reflects a broader and more inclusive use of images of God, a sharpened sense of justice and responsibility, a deeper

commitment to the equality of the human family, a recognition that the kingdom is truly already even if not yet.

It is when we mention justice and responsibility that we have to remember that hymns, however sensitive, are not ends in themselves. The warning of the prophet Amos must not be forgotten. "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harp. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream."

Paul said much the same thing when he told the Corinthians that the tongues of mortals and angels without love are only noisy gongs and clanging cymbals — whatever the marks of good hymnody. Hymnody that masks our vocation to kindness, compassion and responsibility is an abomination, or what the liberation theologians would call an ideology. We may, if we are careful, take Amos' stern words as hyperbole, so long as we take them seriously.

In this vein, I note that probably the most poignant reference to a hymn in the whole Bible is a little verse that appears almost unnoticed in Matthew's and Mark's account of the last supper. "When they had sung the hymn," it reads, "they went out to the Mount of Olives." The hymn in question is presumably the Hallel, Psalms 113-118, which still concludes the Passover

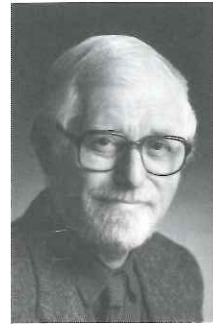


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meal. It is deeply moving to realize that we probably have the text of the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang immediately before he went out to the desperation of the garden, to betrayal, to Jim Crow trial and to death. That hymn is full of praise, and trust and blessing.

"The dead do not praise the Lord, nor all those who go down into silence; but we will bless the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore.... The Lord watches over the innocent; I was brought very low and he helped me.... How shall I repay the Lord for all the good things he has done for me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.... I will give thanks to you, for you answered me and have become my salvation....

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the Lord.... Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures forever."

Between the fellowship of that last meal, itself an activity so characteristic of Jesus and his ministry, and his final engagement with the oppressive powers of religion and state, there is this final gesture and ritual of passage, this pause between resolution and action, which gives focus and definition to all that stands before and after. Ultimately, that is why we sing hymns and, to maintain the living tradition, why we publish hymn books.