

## The Story and Characteristic Marks of Good Hymnody

At first sight it might appear that there is little mention of music or of singing in the Ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. To some extent this is perfectly true. In later times the great high points of Christian history were marked by expressions of songs of gratitude, faith and joy. For example under the liberating ministry of Savonarola the people of Florence sang hymns of praise. Martin Luther it is sometimes said, by his great hymns, sang the people of Germany into Protestantism. In our own country the armies of Cromwell sang the Psalms of David as they went into battle, as did the Scottish Covenanters as they made their brave stand for Gospel truth. The Wesleys, it was said, preached the all-embracing, all-conquering love of God in a perfect rapture of praise.

There was nothing quite like this in the Ministry of our Lord, but certainly the seeds of it were present. For example when the Children of Jerusalem, on that memorable day welcomed him with palms and glad Hosannas. Or later that same week when the shadow of the cross hung dark over Him, He and the disciples before going out onto the Mount of Olives, '*sang an hymn*'. Neither have we any reason to doubt that on the many occasions when He visited the synagogues He joined in the singing of the Hebrew Psalms. There was certainly poetry in the soul of the Perfect Man. His words are marked by a sense of the beauty of the rhythm and sound of words. We can find several examples of this, for instance:

*Be ye not called Rabbi;  
For one is your Rabbi;  
and all ye are brethren.*

*Call ye no one Father;  
For one is your Father;  
He which is in heaven.*

*Be not ye called Master;  
For one is your Master;  
The greatest among you is your servant.*

Here it is known that our Lord put His teaching into a poetic form, called the Gnostic form, which had been used for centuries by teachers to impart gems of wisdom and knowledge.

Others have also maintained that such prominent sayings as the Lord's Prayer, the

Beatitudes and the Parable of the Good Shepherd, in their Galilaean and Aramaic rendering, exhibit both rhythm and rhyme. Other examples could be given, but sufficient to say, as F. J. Gillman comments, '*words of grace proceeded out of His mouth, because His life was full of it*'.

## **The Hymn Book of the Early Church**

The Hymn book of the early church was undoubtedly the Book of Psalms. Beyond the Psalter, the infant Church had no special hymn book of its own: in the nature of things that was inevitable. One had to be created, and the need of it was quickly felt. The first reference to a hymn in the New Testament is in Mark's Gospel ch 14:26, (alluded to above) where our Lord and His disciples are recorded as having *sung an hymn* together. This was one of the Passover Psalms. Psalm 114 has for many centuries been believed to be the one used on that supreme occasion.

In Luke's Gospel we see the beginning of a distinctly Christian hymnody. First of all comes '*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill towards all-men*' -the song of the angels at Bethlehem who announced our Lord's birth. Then follows *the Magnificat, the Benedictus* and *the Nunc Dimittis*.

Some passages in Paul's Epistles suggest that new Christian hymns soon began to be produced. Paul gives quotations from these hymns, such as the passage in I Tim 3:16 which we could set out as follows:

*Manifested in the flesh,  
Justified in the Spirit,  
Seen of Angels;  
Preached unto the Gentiles,  
Believed on in the world,  
Received up into glory:*

the theme being our Lord's Incarnation and Triumph.

Other evidence is available, besides that already referred to, to show that the Christians at an early date began to write original Psalms and hymns. In his famous History, Eusebius, the third century Bishop of Caesarea, says, '*How many Psalms and hymns, written by the faithful brethren from the beginning, celebrate Christ the Word of God, speaking of Him as Divine?*'

We may also refer to an earlier witness than Eusebius, that is Pliny the Younger, who was the Roman governor of Bithynia in the opening decades of the Second Century. In the course of his official duties Pliny reported to the Emperor Trajan the proceedings of the Christians at their morning services, and asked for instructions how to deal with them, feeling himself in perplexity about it. His report gives the interesting information

that the Christians sang hymns, antiphonally to Christ as God.

The record of the Acts (2: 46-47) shows the disciples not only breaking bread at home and meeting daily in the Temple, but also praising God. Again, however, there is nothing to tell us the nature of their praises: nor do we know what the hymns or Psalms were which the prisoners heard Paul and Silas singing at midnight in Philippi. It is conjectured that, as far as public worship was concerned, the Psalms and New Testament hymns remained practically the only source of praise until the Fourth Century, except perhaps at Antioch. In Antioch we seem to have an early collection of hymns known as the *Odes of Solomon*. A manuscript containing these hymns is said to have been discovered by Dr Rendel Harris in the library of The Quaker Centre, Selly Oak Birmingham in 1909.

*I poured out praise to the Lord;  
For I am his:  
And I will speak his holy song,  
For my heart is with him.  
For my harp is in my hands,  
And the odes of his rest shall not be silent.  
I will cry unto him from my whole heart;  
I will praise and exalt him with all my members.  
For from the East and even to the West  
Is his praise:  
And from the south and even to the North  
Is his confession:  
And from the top of the hills to their utmost bound  
Is his perfection.*

Or in the form of a latter metrical version:

*Fountain – head of endless bliss,  
He is mine and I am his;  
Let me music's call obey,  
Rise and tune a heavenly lay.*

*In my hands is wholly lyre,  
On my lives his sacred fire,  
Music heavenly in my breast,  
Songs of peace and songs of rest.*

*Heaven to earth for music calls;  
Sing his praise ,ye ransomed thralls;*

*Rescued from the galling chain,  
Sing his praise and sing again.*

*Sound it forth from east to West,  
Sing again the songs of rest;  
South is warbling to the north,  
Warble thou his work, his worth.*

### **Ambrose of Milan (b 340)**

Ambrose clearly made a massive contribution to the establishment of hymn singing in the churches. It was said that to the church of Milan, the Church in the West generally looked for guidance in liturgical affairs at that time.

*'He had not been in office many years when he found himself in conflict with the young Emperor Valentinian II. The Emperor, prompted by his mother, demanded the use of the principal Church in Milan for Arian worship, and sent soldiers to place hangings on the walls to mark out the building as Imperial property. The whole issue of the relation of Church and State was focused in that incident. Ambrose refused the Royal demand. 'The Emperor,' he said, 'Has his palaces; let him leave the churches to the Bishops.' His supporters, angered by the interference of the soldiers, set up on the Arians, and street fighting began. Ambrose, who had no faith in violence, offered his own neck if that would prevent bloodshed; and his actions so deeply impressed the soldiers that some of them joined the Christians, saying they would rather pray than fight. Ambrose and his followers, among whom was Monica, the mother of Augustine, locked themselves inside the church, and while siege was laid to it he encouraged them to sing hymns.*

*From that time forward Ambrose developed hymn singing amongst his people. He wrote hymns for their use, and rejoiced -- as he says in one of his sermons, 'to hear them singing strains of praise and confession to the Holy Trinity. Each eager to rival his fellows in confessing, in sacred verse, his faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He also taught them plain and simple tunes, which all could easily learn. He encouraged the whole congregation, probably including the women, to take part in the singing'.*

An example of one of Ambrose's hymns:

*Infinite God to Thee we raise  
Our hearts in solemn songs of praise;  
By all Thy works on earth adored,  
We worship Thee, the common Lord;  
The everlasting Father own,  
And bow our souls before Thy throne.*

This hymn, based on the *Te Deum* was translated by Charles Wesley. Ambrose gives us

one long hymn based on this theme. Charles Wesley divided it up into three hymns giving us the substance of the whole of the Te Deum. These three hymns are now included in the new 'Christian Worship' hymn book shortly to be published.

## Early English Hymns

There is no doubt that Christian hymns were in use in Britain before Augustine of Canterbury and his monks landed in Kent and brought with them the Latin hymns of Gregory and Ambrose, in the year 597 A.D.

the first hymn writer of whom we have any record, in the British Isles, was St. Patrick, the patron St. of Ireland. He was born in 372, most probably near Dumbarton Scotland, under the age of 16 he was carried off as a slave to Ireland. They stayed for six years, doing very menial tasks, some say he was called upon to feed pigs, and in his lonely isolation and situation of despair remembered the Gospel he had heard in his own home and repented and called on Christ to be his Saviour. He finally escaped and went back to his parents, but in later life he felt the call of God to be a missionary to the heathen Irish. The story of his teaching the people the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by the use of the Shamrock leaf is well known.

St. Patrick's Irish hymn is very well known and included in many hymn books . The details of its composition are probably mixed with legend. It is said that he was on the plains of Tara, where a heathen festival was being held on Easter Sunday, Patrick, raised his staff, called on the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great idol which stood there fell, broken to pieces, and the King and his people were converted and baptized. It was at the point Patrick is said to have composed his hymn which in turn became the means of spreading the faith far and wide.

It is called *The Breastplate of St. Patrick*, and in the seventh century was ordered to be sung in all the churches and monasteries throughout the whole of Ireland. Mrs. Alexander wrote a version of it which was sung on St. Patrick's Day, throughout Ireland in 1889. It was later sung at the enthronement of the Archbishop of York, again on St. Patrick's Day in 1891.

*I find bind today,  
The strong Name of the Trinity,  
By invocation of the same,  
The Three in One and One in Three*

*I bind myself to-day,  
The power of God to hold and lead,  
His eye to watch, His might to stay  
His ear to hearken to my need,  
The wisdom of my God to teach,*

*His hand to guide, His shield to ward,  
The Word of God to give me speech,  
His heavenly host to be my guard.*

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in all the hearts that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend or stranger.etc.*

A hymn was written in honour of St. Patrick by Sechnall, his nephew, about the year 458, which was said to be a coat of mail to all who repeated it; and other hymns of the ancient Irish church have been found. Music was largely used in worship in this branch of the Christian church, and was very probably in the Eastern style, for the Celtic church is said to be of Eastern origin. We read of the hymn which was sung after the prayer in the communion service. Its opening lines translated are:

*Draw nigh and take the body of the Lord,  
And drink his holy Blood for you outpoured:*

One of the old legends relates how acquired of Angels was heard in the church of St. Sechnall, in Ireland, chanting this hymn.

Over on the west coast of Scotland he find that St. Columba, the missionary on the lonely island of Iona, besides his translation of the Psalms wrote a hymn called *Altus proator*, containing the substance of the Creeds in 150 lines; and it is said that his voice was so powerful that he could be heard chanting a mile off.

In Wales, another centre of early Christianity in Britain, the historian Gildas spoke of "*the musical voices of the young, sweetly singing the praises of God.*"

There is a very old Saxon hymn *To the Holy Trinity*, of which it is said that hymn, *All hail, adored Trinity*, (Hymn158 in Hymns Ancient and Modern, old version) is taken.

*All hail, Adored Trinity;  
All hail, Eternal Unity;  
O God the Father, God the Son,  
And God the Spirit, ever One.*

*Behold to Thee, this festal day,  
We meekly pour out thankful lay;*

*O let our work accepted be,  
The sweetest work of praising Thee.*

*Three Persons praise we ever-more,  
One only God our hearts adore;  
In Thy sure mercy ever kind  
May we our true protection find.*

*O Trinity! O Unity!  
Be present as we worship Thee;  
And with the songs that Angels sing  
Unite the hymns of praise we bring.*

In the ancient Anglo-Saxon church it is said that the apostles Creed was sung to the accompaniment of the harp. It begins:

*Father of unchanging might,  
Set above the welkin's height  
Thro' the unsullied tracts of air,  
Didst in their own space prepare,  
And the solid earth as fast,  
With its deep fountain cast. etc.*

Caedmon, the swine herd of Whitby, wrote a wonderful sacred hymn, beginning with the creation of the world, and going on to the Redemption of the world. Aldhelm, the Abbot of Malmesbury, who could be heard sitting on the bridge over the Avon, singing David Psalms, with harp in hand.

Dr. Porter, in his *Lives of the Saints* uses a description of this:

*, In King Elfred time many of St Aldhelme's hymns were sung in England. One thing related of this purpose by King Elfred is as follows: "the people of that time being yet rude rustics and very negligent in the divine service, seem to come to church but for fashions sake, where they made no long stay, but as soon as the ministry of the mass was done, they flocked homeward without any more ado. Our prudent Aldhelm, perceived the small devotion in the people, placed himself on the bridge over which they were to pass from church to their villages, were, when the hasty multitude of people came (whose minds were already on their beef pots at home), he began to put forth his voice with all the musical art he could, and charmed their ears with his songs. For which, when he grew to be grateful and plausible to that rustic people, and perceived that his songs flowed into their ears and minds, and the great pleasure and contentment of both, he began by little and little to mingle his songs with more serious and holy matters, taken out of the Holy Scriptures, and by that means brought them in time to a feeling of devotion and to spend their Sunday and holy days with far greater profit to their own souls."*

Another picture, this, of the great power and value of hymn – singing.

Aldhelm died in the year 709 and about the time of his death another St., still most celebrated and learned, was writing hymns far away in the extreme north of England, at Jarrow on the Tyne. This was the Venerable Bede, born about 673, at Wearmouth, and when seven years old given into the care of Benedict Biscop, to be brought up in the monastery. He was ordained Deacon at the age of 19, and after this, priest, and spent his life in the religious houses Jarrow, becoming the most cultivated man of his age and country at that time. He was able to write in prose or verse, in Anglo-Saxon or elected, and on an immense variety of subjects. He was called the fall the English learning; but, unlike so many clever man, his faith in, and love of God made him wonderfully humble. This is the prayer with which he ends the story of his labours and of the 45 books he had written-

*O good Jesu, who has deigned to refresh my soul with the sweet stream of knowledge, grant to me that I may one day mount to Thee, who art the source of all wisdom, and remain forever in Thy Divine Presence.*

Among his many writings was, *A Book of Hymns, and several sorts of meter and rhyme.* These were written in Latin, but he also composed of an Anglo-Saxon. One of them is translated in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 415.

*The great forerunner of the morn,  
The Herald of the Word, is born:  
And faithful hearts shall never fail  
With thanks and praise his light to hail.*

*With heavenly message Gabriel came,  
That John should be that heralds name,  
And with prophetic utterance told  
His actions great and manifold*

*John, still unborn, yet gave aright  
His witness to the coming Light;  
And Christ, the sun of all the earth,  
Fulfilled that witness at his Birth.*

*Of woman – born shall never be  
A greater Prophet than was he,  
Whose mighty deeds exalt his fame  
To greater than a Prophets name.*

*But why should mortal accents raise  
The hymn of John the Baptist's praise?*

*Of whom, or e'er his course was run,  
Thus spake the Father to the Son:*

*"Behold My Herald, who shall go  
Before Thy Face Thy way to show,  
And shine, as with the day – star's gleam,  
Before Thine own eternal beam."*

*All praise to God the Father be,  
All praise, Eternal Son, to Thee,  
Whom with the Spirit we adore  
For ever and for evermore. Amen*

The account of Bede's death is most beautiful and is told by one of his monks, an eyewitness-

Nearly a fortnight before Easter he was seized with an extreme weakness, in consequence of his difficulty of breathing, but without pain. He continued thus until Ascension Day, always joyous and happy, giving thanks to God day and night. He gave us our lessons daily, and employed the rest of his time and chanting Psalms, and passed every night, after a short sleep, in joy and thanksgiving, but without closing his eyes. He resumed his prayers and praises to God, with his arms in the form of a cross. He also sang anthems... At this time he was finishing a translation of the gospel of St. John into our English tongue, for the use of the Church. On the eve of the Feast of Ascension, at the first dawn of morning, he decided that what had been commenced should be quickly finished. In the evening the young secretary said to him, "Beloved Master, there remains only one verse which is not written." "Write it then, quickly," he said. And the young man cried, "It is finished." "You said truly, "It is finished," said he. "Support my head in thine arms, for I desire to sit in the holy place where I am accustomed to pray, but sitting there, I may call upon my Father." Thus, lying on the floor of his cell, he sang for the last time, "Glory be to the Father, and to the, and to the Holy Spirit"; and with these last words on his lips, – a fitting close to one who had sung God's praises in his life – He gave up the ghost."

The last early English and hymn writer that we shall mention is King Alfred himself, who, amongst his other writings, is said to have composed Latin hymns. A translation of one of them, for the morning, said, though without proof, to be by him, is given in the Sarum Hymnal –

*As the sun doth daily rise,  
Brightening all the morning skies,  
So to Thee, with one accord,*

*Lift we of up our hearts, O Lord.*

*Day by day provide us food,  
For from Thee, come things good;  
Strength unborn our souls afford,  
From Thy Living Bread, O Lord.*

*The our Guard in sin and strife,  
Be the Leader of our life,  
Lest like sheep we stray abroad,  
Stay our wayward feet, Lord, etc*

### **Psalms in Verse**

We have heard already of Aldhelm, the good Saxon Abbott, who, harp in hand, taught the people to sing, on the bridge over the Avon. It is supposed that he made a metrical version of most of the Psalms, for the Saxon version was found in an old French monastery; the first fifty in prose, the rest in verse, and the metrical part, at any rate, is said to be by Aldhelm. He very wisely tried to suit the meaning of the Psalms to the customs of his day, and the homely imagery suited the people. For instance, he spoke of the peace – stool, or stone seat, placed near the communion table in English churches, as a place of refuge, where culprits might be free for seven days. "*God is the place of peace to the poor*" (Psalm 114:22). The heart – songs, as the metrical versions were called, were not only simple, but really poetical and devotional. The following are examples:

Psalm 116:15

*As the beacon fire by night,  
That the host of Israel led,  
Such the glory fair and bright  
Round the good man's dying bed;  
'Tis a beacon, bright and fair,  
Telling that the Lord is there.*

Psalm 84:1,2

*Lord, to me Thy ministers are  
Courts of honour, passing fair,  
And my spirit deems it well  
There to be in there to dwell,  
Heart and flesh would soon be there  
Lord, Thy life, Thy love, to share.*  
Quoted from Churton's, Early English Church

This section adapted from Hymns and their Stores by A. E. C. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge London 1914

## **Bernard of Cluny (Born Morlaix Abbott of Cluny)**

Many other hymns were written over the following centuries but few have survived. Venantius Fortunatus was a sixth century hymn writer but his work is not very well known today. It is not until we come into the twelfth century that we find ourselves coming into the mainstream of hymn writing again. Bernard of Cluny the son of English parents but born in Morlaix, in Brittany, wrote 3000 Latin poems on the glories of the heavenly country.

*'Distressed by the evils he witnessed in the world around him, Bernard, who lived in Brittany, retreated to a monastery, but soon discovered that even there the wickedness of the human heart found plenty of opportunity for expression. His mind turned with longing to the world, where sin is banished forever.'*

John Mason Neale in the 19th-century translated some verses from these poems which we would recognise as the hymns, *Jerusalem the Golden*, *Brief Life is here our Portion*.

## **Bernard of Clairvaux**

Bernard of Clairvaux was contemporary with Bernard of Cluny. He was a French monk and a man of outstanding ability. He was a very renowned preacher in his day whose main theme was the love and beauties of Christ. He was much admired by Martin Luther in later years because as Luther said, *'he preaches Christ so excellently.'*

He is attributed as author of the 48 verse poem *Jesu dulcis memoria*. In the nineteenth century Edward Caswall (1814 -1878) took part of this poem and translated it into English giving us;

*Jesus the very thought of Thee  
With sweetness fills my breast;  
But sweeter far Thy face to see,  
And in Thy presence rest.*

Two other portions of the poem have found their way into our hymnbooks, *Jesu Thou joy of loving hearts*, and *O Jesus, King most wonderful*.

## **Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)**

Martin Luther has been called the *Ambrose of German hymnody*, he was quick to recognise the importance of the participation of people in the services of worship and power of hymn, to lift the spirits, inspire the heart and instruct the minds of Christian men and women. *'The hymns of Luther'*, said one who was deeply opposed to the truths of the Reformation, *'have killed more souls than his sermon.'*

*'The 16<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, may be regarded as the turning point in the history of Christian hymnody. Not the least service rendered by Luther and Calvin to the cause of personal religion was the re-establishment of vernacular congregational singing. The fact that the singing, for centuries before the great crisis, had been almost exclusively reserved for priests and trained songmen, and that the hymns were written in the Latin tongue, was a symptom of the almost mortal disease that had overtaken organised religion. With Luther, hymnody came once for all out of its monastic prison, and lifted its glad, free carol in every town and hamlet of the Fatherland.'*

The Evolution of the English Hymn p 126

## **English Hymns of the 16th and 17th centuries**

Hardly any of the hymns written at this time have come into congregational use in modern times, for they were much more suitable for private than for public worship. It seems strange that while the Reformation in Germany and other European countries produced a large number of hymns, in England it seemed rather to banish them.

At the time of Edward VI, all the Latin hymns were taken out of the services, though Archbishop Cranmer had wished to keep them. After this hardly any hymns were used in public worship at about 300 years, except the metrical Psalms and the six hymns appended to the Old Version of the Book of Common Prayer. A national hymn was written by Christopher Barker in 1578, and appended to the Accession Service of Queen Elizabeth's reign to be sung after evening prayers at all times-

*As for Thy gifts, we render praise.*

William Hunnis, a gentleman of the Chapel Royal, under Edward VI, and Master of the Children under Elizabeth I, wrote hymns. At this time also Samuel Rowlands wrote a sacred poem called, *The Highway to Mount Calvarie*.

*Up to Mount Calvarie,*

*If thou desire to goe,  
Then take the by crosse and follow Christ,  
Thou canst not misse so.*

A hymn written on the glories of the New Jerusalem was written during the 16th century by an unknown author who was at that time the prisoner in the Tower of London.

Some have attributed it to a Roman Catholic prisoner, as the manuscript is signed F.B.P., which some have suggested stands for Francis Baker, Priest. Whether this is the case, reprov'd. The hymn however is based on a passage from St. Augustine's writings and begins:

*Jerusalem, my happy home,  
When shall I come to thee?  
When shall my sorrows have an end?  
Thy joys when shall I see?*

This hymn in several modified versions of it have found their way into several modern hymnbooks. A similar hymn was published in 1585 by a W. Prid . This hymn contains 44 verses and again states that it is an adaptation of verses from St. Augustine.

What appears to be a combination and adaptation of these two hymns was made by Scottish minister, David Dixon (1583 - 1663), known today for his commentary on the Psalms which has been reprinted. This hymn which seems to combine the two mentioned above runs to 240 lines, it begins with the stanzas:

*O mother dear, Jerusalem,  
When shall I come to thee?*

The popular him today, *Jerusalem, my happy home*, by Joseph Bromehead (1748 - 1826) hymn number 650 Methodist hymnbook 1933 is a short epitome of them all.

Samuel Crossman (1624 - 1683) who was a Prebendary of Bristol Cathedral also wrote on the same theme:

*Jerusalem on high,  
My song and city is.*

Hymns Ancient and Modern (Old Version) 233.

The earliest attempt at an English hymn book was George Withers *Hymns and Songs of the Church*. He obtained a patent from the King, in 1623, that this should be bound up with every copy of the metrical Psalms, but this only brought in persecution and loss. The book contains paraphrases of Scripture, hymns for the festivals and for all sorts of occasions; but with the exception of one or two, these did not survive. The sunset hymn is still used -

*Behold the sun, that seemed but now  
Enthroned overhead.  
Beginneth to decline below  
The global whereon we tread;  
And he, whom yet we look upon  
With comfort and delight,  
And leave us to the night.*

*Thus time, unheeded, steals away  
The life which nature gave;  
Thus are our bodies every day  
Declining to the grave;  
Thus from us all our pleasures fly  
Whereon we set our heart;  
And when the night of death draws nigh,  
Thus will they all depart.  
LORD! though the sun forsake our sight,  
And mortal hopes are vain;  
Let still thine everlasting light  
Within our souls remain;  
And in the nights of our distress  
Vouchsafed those rays Divine,  
Which from the Sun of Righteousness  
Forever brightly shine.*

With us note to this hymn is – *"the singing or meditating to such purposes as are intimated in this hymn when we see the sun declining, does perhaps expel unprofitable musings, and arm against the terrors of approaching darkness."*

Another volume by Wither contains 233 hymns for all possible occasions, such as...

A hymn while we are washing.  
A hymn for a housewarming.  
A hymn for one whose beauty is to be praised.

Many of the verses are very quaint. One of his hymns, to be sung during holy communion, was of 200 lines, and in defence of it he says that it was "to meet the custom amongst us that during the time of administering the Holy Sacrament of the Lord Supper, there is some hymn or Psalm sung, the better to keep the thoughts of the communicants from wandering." Apparently the custom of singing this hymn this hymn, at communion, while sitting, continued till about 1840.

Ben Jonson poet wrote a Christmas Carol and also a hymn of devotion to God the

Father beginning..

*Hear me, O God,  
A broken heart  
Is my best part.*

Well might we say, "O rare Ben Jonson,"

In the next century we have a longer list of sacred poets, but still no real hymn writers. Among this list might be mentioned, Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, George Herrick, who was a minister in the Church of England; Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, and the great poet John Milton, all wrote sacred verses, invaluable for private reading and study, but not really suitable for singing in church.

To give an example of some of these lines Dr. John Donne wrote the following words at a time of painful illness.

*Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begin,  
Which was my sin, though it were done before;  
Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run,  
And do run still, though still I do deplore.  
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,  
For I have done more.*

Richard Baxter the Puritan also wrote a hymn for the sick room, written for his wife.

*Lord it belongs not to my care  
Whether I die or live.*

He also wrote another well-known hymn.

*Ye holy Angels bright.*

Herrick's *Litany to the Holy Spirit* is the only one of his sacred poems which is come down into our hymn books in a modified form. The original is very quaint, and it begins -

*In the hour of my distress,  
When temptations me Oppress,  
And when I my sins confess,  
Sweet Spirit, comfort me.*

George Herbert also wrote hymns and signed them to his viol, but fewer suitable for public worship. One however is well known.

*Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King.*

Nicholas Ferrar, his friend who lived in retirement at Little Gidding, wrote hymns to be sung that his services, but they are all lost.

Jeremy Taylor, the poet – preacher, as he was called, was born of humble parents and 1630. He was very clever, and had a most successful career at college; he was ordained, and afterwards made chaplain to the Earl of Carbery, at Golden Grove, Carmarthenshire, from which his book is named. He was made Bishop of Down and Conner, and died in 1667. There are some festival hymns in the *Golden Grove*—one of these found a place with a few alterations in the Sarum Hymnal.

Draw nigh to Thy Jerusalem, O Lord,  
Thy faithful people cry, with one accord;  
Ride on triumphantly! Behold, we lay  
Out passions, lusts, and proud wills in Thy way.

Another hymn of this period is to be found still in Hymns Ancient and Modern (old version) 213, was written by the Rev. J. Mason, Rector of Water Stratford, Buckinghamshire, who died in 1694

*A living stream, as crystal clear,  
Welling from out the throne  
Of God and of the Lamb on high,  
The LORD to man hath shown*

*This stream doth water Paradise,  
It makes the Angels sing:  
One precious drop within the heart  
Is of all joy the spring:*

*Joy past all speech, of glory full,  
But stored where non-may know,  
As manna hid in dewy heaven,  
As opposed in ocean low.  
Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard,  
Nor to man heart hath come  
What for those loving Thee in truth  
Thou hast in loves own home. etc.*

Bishop Ken is sometimes referred to as a hero as well as a hymn writer. He was born in Little Berkhamstead, in Hampstead, in Hertfordshire, in 1637, and went to school in Winchester. There, as in afterlife, he was noted for his early rising; and even on the coldest winter mornings would be up long before the other boys. At Oxford, we hear of him as a "student, poet, and musician." He wrote a manual for the Winchester scholars, containing some beautiful prayers, and another well-known book, *The Practice of Divine Love*. His famous hymns were written while at Winchester for his own use, and he would sing them in his own musical voice, accompanying himself on the lute - 40 played lute, viol, and all can with great proficiency. He was made Rector of Brightstone on the Isle of Wight, in 1667. We are told that such was the purity of Ken's mind that those who knew him called him "*seraphicus*," and "*spiritualis*." He published four volumes of hymns and poems, but none of these have lived except the well-known morning, evening, and midnight hymns.

*Awake, my soul, and with the sun.*

*Glory to Thee, my God, this night.*

And for midnight -

*My God, now I from sleep awake,  
The sole possession of me take;  
From midnight terrors me secure,  
And guard my heart from thoughts impure.*

*Bless'd angels, while we silent lie,  
Your Hallelujahs sing on high,  
Your joyful hymn the ever blessed,  
Before the throne, and never rest. etc.*

In 1683, Ken was made Bishop of Bath and Wells, and then began the terrible time of anxiety for the Church. He spent three days and nights at the deathbed of Charles II., For the King respected him, and used to say he would go one here can "tell him of his faults." Then, James II's reign, followed the Trial of the Seven Bishops, of whom Ken was one, who were imprisoned in the tower of London, for refusing to read the Declaration of Indulgence, which James II was seeking to implement, as a subtle plot to destroy the Church of England and reintroduce Roman Catholicism as our national religion. After this he was deprived of his bishopric. He retired into the country, and his last days are said to read of. For some time he had suffered from painful disease, and is

said to have cavity shroud about with him in his portmanteau. He died in 1711, of the age of 73, and by his own desire was better the sunrise, under the East window of the church at Frome.

## The Eighteenth Century

Time fails me to tell all that could be said of Watts and Wesley, and of Doddridge and Newton,

Of Isaac Watts it has been said:

*'It is not correct to speak of him as the inventor of the English hymn, nor even as the first of our great hymn-writers. He did perfectly what most of his predecessors had done indifferently, and only a few well. But, what is far more remarkable, he not only excelled all who went before him, but all who have come since. Charles Wesley alone can challenge with him the right to be called the greatest of English hymn writers.'*

Ibid p 204

Of Wesley's hymns it has been said:

*'It is impossible to fully appreciate Charles Wesley's hymns unless they are related to the events which called them forth. The Wesley hymnbooks constitute an extraordinarily interesting human document, palpitating with real life. Every event of those wonderful years, every experience, public or private, through which the singers past, is mirrored in some sweet song. But there is more in them than that. They are a Pilgrim's Progress in verse. They trace the religious life of every man as he travels from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. They unfold the spiritual drama of the soul of man: his hopes and fears, his aspirations and affections, his failures and victories; each chequered experience trembles into song, and scarcely a note is missing.'*

Ibid p 219

Watts and Wesley are generally accepted as together the greatest hymn writers in the English language. As benefits one who came out of the Calvinistic tradition, the main strength of Watts lies in reverent adoration of the power, and wisdom, and the goodness of the majestic God of creation.

He sings:

*And will this sovereign King  
Of glory condescend?  
And will he write his name  
My Father and my Friend?*

This is the indispensable foundation of the Christian system, for the full marvel of the redeeming love of God is apprehended only if it is seen not as the partial and indulgent love of some small private god, but as the love of the great sovereign King of Glory.

The Wesley's built upon this foundation. As benefits those who by surprising divine grace had come to a deeper personal grasp of the experience of the heart '*strangely warmed*', their chief strength is in celebrating the historic redeeming work of that great God, in the wonderful Birth, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Divine Son made man, and the continuing work of his Spirit in the hearts of believers.

Another great benefit of these hymns is their Scriptural character. Christian worshippers today sometimes lack a wide knowledge of the Bible which was pre-supposed in those who would first have used these hymns. However this does not argue for their neglect but rather for their greater use. A great heritage of Christian understanding is in danger of being lost, most certainly with regard to the Old Testament if these hymns are neglected.

The historical critical approach to the Old Testament as practiced by modern liberals and now by some evangelicals relegates the study of the Old Testament to trying to find out what (the liberals think) was in the minds of the original writers, and the study of the intellectual, social, and political background of the ancient near East.

To do this is to cut off modern Christianity from its roots. It is to lose sight of the splendid continuity of God's redeeming work in history, down through the centuries from the Patriarchal times, through Christ to our own day - a sad impoverishment of our heritage of Christian faith and devotion. The hymns of Watts and Wesley and others interpret the Old Testament in the Christian manner, as the story of the preparation of the world for the coming of Christ, and the New Testament as the definitive witness to the accomplishment in Christ of what was prepared. The Old Testament therefore corresponds to the New Testament by way of promise, and the same writers do not hesitate to look for Christian truth in every part of the Bible. They find spiritually valuable texts in parts which are often passed over and neglected by the moderns.

Moreover these hymns are of tremendous theological depth and set out for us not only the Reformation doctrine of Scripture as we have just noted but also the Reformation doctrines of grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

Further they are deeply impregnated with the spirit of the Reformation. For example Dr Watts, born in 1674, was descended through his mother, from a Huguenot family driven from France by the persecutions in the early part of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Philip Doddridge, in his childhood, when his mother had finished the Bible lesson from

the pictured Dutch tiles in the fireplace, would often tell the story of her father, Dr John Baumann's flight from Bohemia, with his little store of money bound up in his belt, and Luther's German Bible an even greater treasure.

Dr Watts' mother also had tales of her son's own infancy, when his father lay in prison for his convictions, and she had sat on the stones by his prison door with her firstborn in her arms.

He would know one of the reasons why his own Puritan forebears had had no hymns was that they had to choose the places of their meeting in secluded corners, to set watches outside the door, a lead their prayers and praises be soft, so that no enemy might hear and betray them.

The Wesley's also had an impeccable Puritan pedigree and as we noted above, their hymns reflected their own persecutions and trials of faith, the same kind of trials that their forefathers had experienced.

These great hymns came out of a time of heightened spiritual experience certainly in the case of the Wesley's, Doddridge and others. We may speak of a certain congeniality of spiritual climate. This climate may not be universal in the periods we describe but a climate which certainly affected significant numbers and key individuals.

We may see it in the period which produced the great cathedrals.  
We may discern it in the prayers and collects of Thomas Cranmer.  
We certainly see it evident in the masterpiece of the Authorised Version  
No other age could have produced these wonders. The great masterpieces of hymnology that we possess are products in the main of such periods.

In regard to the language of these hymns and the demands that they make upon us, Bernard Lord Manning's comments are helpful:

*'A hymn's business is to strengthen the faith of today, not to preserve an historical record of the faith of the day before yesterday. That is not to say that hymns should express only the sentiment and aspirations of the moment; they should educate and purify faith, as well as record it; they should be better than the singer. It is not, therefore, a sufficient reason for scrapping a hymn that it is not written in the language which the butcher, the baker, or the candlestick maker, or the undergraduates would use today; its object is to make these people speak and think differently. But to do this, though removed from their vocabulary it must not be too far removed.'*

The Hymns of Watts and Wesley p 117

Or this comment from Erik Routley:

*'In the present situation, the glory of our hymnody is in its power of converting unbelief,*

*strengthening faith, and binding together the Christian community in that disciplined charity of which singing together is a symbol. The shame of our hymnody is in unreality, complacency, and spiritual slovenliness. We do wrong, at this time of day, to make the Christian challenge seem awesomely easy; therefore it is wrong for an educated congregation to sing unworthy hymns. We do wrong to make the faith appear less than intellectually respectable; therefore hymns that discredit Christian doctrines are out of place. We do wrong to reach too low, to identify the Faith with a party or a social programme; we do wrong to take refuge in hymn-singing from the exactions of the world.'*

Hymns and Human Life p 307

## **Why do we not appreciate the great hymns of the past as we should?**

When, for instance, the early Methodists sang hymns they gave expression to the faith that was in their hearts. Their hearts were indeed *'Full of Christ, and longed their glorious matter to declare.'* As soon as Charles Wesley found peace with God he began to write a hymn about it *'Where shall my wondering soul begin?'*

Nowadays our singing does not suggest that our hearts are full of Christ in the way that our forefathers experienced that reality. We have to face the fact that oftentimes our faith is not strong enough or fervent enough to demand such an outlet.

Many of the great hymns of penitence have past almost out of use. We would rather not be asked to sing hymns about the Judgment, or the Second Coming of Christ. *'Forth in Thy name O Lord I go'* is an outstanding hymn of Christian service but do we really believe it possible to offer *'all our works to the Lord.'*

A.S. Gregory wrote:

*'On the whole, it is true that our singing lacks that 'believing' quality which belonged to the time of the great revivals. What can be done to restore it? No one will doubt that deep religious experience and fervent song have more than an accidental connection. Granted that the present state of hymn singing is some evidence of a less urgent faith, it may also be true, conversely, that our faith itself has suffered from our neglect of a powerful means of grace. If John Wesley's friend could advise him to preach faith until he had it, may we not say to our souls, sing these hymns until you believe them? There is no need to fear self – delusion here: we read Paul in order to share his discovery- we should sing great hymns for the same purpose. It is right, and not wrong, that we should sing beyond our present experience.'*

Hymns and the Faith p 4

## **What then is to be the purpose and character of our Hymns?**

1. Hymns must express not only Faith (experience) but the Faith (objective Christian

truth)

The distinction is an important one. Hymns must express our subjective Christian experience. They must help us to give voice to what we feel in our hearts.

*My God I am Thine  
What a comfort divine  
What a pleasure to know that Christ Jesus is mine  
In the heavenly Lamb  
Thrice happy I am  
And my heart it doth dance at the sound of his Name.*

Faith and 'the faith' are not the same thing. The first is an individual's living trust in Christ. The second is the sum of what Christians believe, the body of doctrine which they subscribe to, the creed of the Christian, the great central doctrines that we are bound to believe in as Christian men and women.

Hymns therefore must express this great body of truth as well as give expression to the personal trust and hope in Christ of the individual believer.

## 2. Hymns must teach us what God is like and enable us to worship Him with holy awe and joyful praise

Hymns should teach us what God is like, and enable us to express our worship before Him with reverence and holy awe and joyful thanksgiving and love.

Augustine gave the following definition of a hymn:

*'Hymns are praise of God with singing. If there be praise and not praise of God, it is not a hymn. If there be praise, and praise of God, and it is not sung, it is not a hymn. It is necessary, therefore, if it be a hymn, that it have these three things: of praise, and praise of God, and that it be sung.'*

The Hymn Book of the Modern Church A.B. Gregory p 6

For an example of how hymns enable us to worship, the preacher may begin the service by saying, 'Let us worship God', then very appropriately announce the hymn.

*'Lo, God is here let us adore,  
And own how holy is this place.'*

We then come before God with a sense of awe and wonder and a consciousness of our own sin and need of His pardoning grace.

*'O how shall I, whose native sphere*

*Is dark, whose mind is dim,  
Before the Ineffable appear  
And on my naked spirit bear  
The uncreated beam?*

*There is a way for man to rise  
To that sublime abode:  
An offering and a sacrifice  
A Holy Spirit's energies,  
An advocate with God.*

Or take that tremendous hymn, *O God, thou bottomless abyss.*

Gregory comments:

*'Here we are remembering God's otherness, His transcendence; countless, unfathomable, without beginning, unchangeable, unbounded, unspeakable; words like these mean nothing that our minds can hold; that is their only virtue; they bring us back to our own littleness, describing to God greatness that is un-exhausted even by His acts of creating and saving our short lived world. It is well that such a hymn as this should be wedded to great music; and there is nothing little about the tune which Luther wrote and Bach harmonised.'*

Hymns and The Faith p. 9

### 3. Hymns must teach us Christian doctrine

The Apostle Paul associates the purpose of hymns with *'teaching and admonishing one another'*. Christopher Wordsworth said:

*'Christian poetry ought to be a medium for the conveyance of Christian doctrine...a Church which forgoes the use of hymns in her office of teaching neglects one of the most efficaciously instruments for correcting error, and for disseminating truth, as well as for ministering comfort and edification.'*

ibid p 15

John Wesley prided himself upon having given in his hymn book, *'a little body of experimental and practical divinity.'*

### 4. A hymn can serve the function of being a means of calling sinners to Christ

We have many examples of this, *Come ye sinners poor and wretched, Art thou weary, art*

*thou languid, art thou sore distressed?, Sinners Jesus will receive, to name but a few.*

## **Moving from the purpose of hymns to the character of hymns...**

### **1. Sincerity**

We can say that there must be in our hymns, true sincerity. Fitness for divine service depends not on beauty or form, though this has a place, but upon sincerity of thought.

*'The fineness which a hymn or psalm of affords  
Is when the soul into the line accords'.*

Herbert's, A True Hymn, quoted *ibid* p 16

*'Sincerity requires that the thoughts expressed should be real to the singer as well as the poet. They may not be such as would have occurred to him, and the expression may be altogether beyond his powers of origination, but they must be such as he can think in his best moments or maybe helped to enter into at the hour of prayer. Sincerity does not require that all our hymns should be on the lowest level common to a general congregation, but that the sentiments expressed, the emotion presupposed or to be excited, is suited to the heart of man in the presence of his Father in heaven.'*

*ibid* p 17

It perhaps goes without saying that sincerity also requires that the writer of a hymn should not be unworthy of a place in a Christian book of worship. Happily this question rarely arises. The author's name is offered an aid to devotion as well as interest.

### **2. Reverence**

*'God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth: therefore let thy words be few,'* even so profound a hymn writer as Isaac Watts felt that there are times when it is best to leave unsaid what the heart most desires to tell.

*'A solemn reverence checks our songs,  
And praise sits silent on our tongues.'*

### **3. Dignity**

Closely allied to reverence is dignity; the worship of God requires a certain elevation of thought and of language. There are situations in life when the dignity of a situation causes us choose our words carefully and thoughtfully. This should always be the case

in the worship of God. Dignity is not necessarily obscure or pompous. It is appropriate when our thoughts are being engaged on the highest of all themes the worship of God.

*'The intrusion into the most sacred moments of what is mean or vulgar in sound or association is a grievous offence.'*

Gregory p 22

#### 4. Simplicity but not banality

We may say of great hymns, as Tennyson said of great men - they are: *'in their simplicity sublime'*.

Heavy words are generally speaking, fatal to a good hymn. Charles Wesley was prone to this but generally got away with it; sometimes however he didn't, when for example he used such words as 'consentaneous' and 'implunged.'

The best hymns are made up of short words, and have a large preponderance of monosyllables. The words, too, should be such as we use in our more serious conversations in daily life. It goes without saying that colloquialisms and words with mean associations are not fit for the sanctuary. The finest hymns are often those which the plain man recognises as written in his own tongue.

#### 5. Fervour

Some hymn are so wooden and banal that they certainly do not, *'Teach our faint desires to rise and bring all heaven before our eye'*.

There should be in a good hymn an unrestrained fervour, a reverend rapture true enabling to lift the hearts to God.

#### 6. Truth of Doctrine

This has already been described above. Here we can note that it is often true that a congregation learns a great deal of doctrine from its hymns, far more than it learns from the pulpit. A church's hymn book should reflect the churches doctrinal position.

#### 7. Scriptural Language

It is certainly a virtue of a good hymn-book that scriptural language is used. Our greatest prose writers have found in the English Bible the most effective, forceful, impressive words; and the hymn writer has the advantage not only of its pure, strong

diction, but also of the hollowed associations which the words of Holy Scripture preserve for all the people of God.

Examples of scriptural language used in Hymns can be found in John Lawton's *A Thousand Tongues* (Paternoster Press)

For example:

<i>Jesu, Lover of my soul,</i>	Cant. 2:10
<i>Let me to thy bosom fly,</i>	Isa. 40:11; Jn. 13:23
<i>While the nearer waters roll,</i>	Ps. 69:1; Isa. 43:2
<i>While the tempest still is high:</i>	Isa. 32:2; Jonah 1:4
<i>Hide me O my Saviour hide,</i>	Ps.27:5; 32:7; Lk. 2:11
<i>Till the storm of life be past:</i>	Matt. 14:32
<i>Safe into the haven guide;</i>	Ps. 107:30; Jn. 6:21
<i>O receive my soul at last.</i>	Acts 7:59

<i>Other refuge have I none,</i>	Ps. 57:1; 90:1 (B.C.P); Jn. 6:68
<i>Hangs my helpless soul on Thee:</i>	Ps. 46:1; 60:11
<i>Leave, Ah! leave me not alone,</i>	Ps. 27: 9; 141:8
<i>Still support and comfort me,</i>	Ps. 23: 4; Isa. 40: 1-2
<i>All my trust on Thee is stayed;</i>	Ps. 56:4; 141:8; 2 Tim. 1:12
<i>All my help from Thee I bring:</i>	Ps. 121: 1-2
<i>Cover my defenceless head</i>	Ps. 140:7
<i>With the shadow of thy wing.</i>	Ps. 17:8; 57:1

*'May He who inhabitest the praises of His people,  
He who inspires our psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,  
Enable us to make music in our hearts,  
And sing with grace to Him who made us and died to save us.'*

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost,  
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.**