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“Hymns and Peace?” - Rev Dr Andrew Pratt

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Hymns and peace? Amidst the violence, injustice and poverty of the world can hymns be dismissed as a simple irrelevance? I do not believe they can, and I will tell you why.

Step back to the days of Augustine for a moment. He said that hymns are 'the praise of God, sung' and when we sing in this way we are 'praying twice'. If you believe in the power of prayer, that may be warrant enough. But praise? In the world as we see it, in which we live? It's as well that we've not been constrained by Augustine's definition. Hymns, in practice, have come to be used for far more than just praise of God and there is a precedent for this in the Psalms of the Old Testament. Here, in the words of Calvin,¹

'..there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.'

So let that be our baseline.

Hymns and Psalms in Christian use are different, not least because of the emphasis given to Jesus. For many people hymns must have doctrinal content. What that often means is content which accords with MY Christian understanding. This can be limiting and lead to less peace rather than more. The hymns themselves become a point and source of discord. Let's examine what this might mean from an orthodox perspective (and I don't mean that denominationally). Christianity affirms God as creator, redeemer and sustainer. It places humankind in relation to God as stewards, ambassadors, the Body of Christ. God in Christ is deemed to have come into the world, fully human; 'Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man', 'hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered'. The words of the hymns affirm, underline and reinforce doctrine which becomes a model for our understanding of God's relation to the world and to humanity. Here is warrant enough for our involvement in the messy parts of human existence and a reminder that such activity is not always clean and with an apparently easy, happy ending. Yet 'Up from the grave he arose' stresses that the final sacrifice is not final and that the value placed on human love is such that it cannot be extinguished by death, but is affirmed in and through death by God. One of the planks of my pacifism is the understanding that if I ever have the courage to stand up for love in the face of death, that is not the end.

What hymns do in this situation is to remind me in a way which is memorable, like a jingle that I can't get out of my head, that there is an unimaginable height and depth in God's love from which we can never be separated.

¹ Calvin, J., *Calvin's Commentaries, Psalms* Vol. I pxxxvii

There is no moment of my life,
No place where I may go,
No action which God does not see,
No thought he does not know.....

...He keeps me, loves me, in my ways:
No lover such as he.¹

What we also find here is a challenge. If that is the love in which I am held, 'Amazing love', then what of you, my friend, or that other person who might be labelled my enemy? The grace of God is offered with 'undistinguishing regard'. A bit of a mouthful from Charles Wesley's pen, but essentially stressing that the grace of God is for all. We are not able to prevent that grace reaching all – I underline my Arminian, Methodist credentials here, but also the Calvinism that recognises that ultimate authority is way beyond the whims of humanity and rests with the same God. The challenge comes if we are to be Christ-like in having that same undistinguishing regard for neighbour and enemy alike. While people may give intellectual assent to that premise, working it out in practice has always been more difficult. A soldier challenged to give up his livelihood said 'but I must live'. Tertullian, one of the church fathers, is reputed to have responded 'must you?' The decisions are sharp and always come at personal cost, and again we return to the incarnation and the cross, finding that doctrine for the Christian is woven into all we do and say.

Yet that same doctrine becomes a problem when it is adopted as an emblem or a banner to which we gather. At worst this can be an encouragement to go war, even if the claim is made that this is 'spiritual warfare'. The words can be so easily misused. At best there is the understanding that others ought to adopt the truth as we see it. Here I think we need to learn from those least dogmatic Christians, the Unitarians, who espouse the continual seeking after truth and the assertion that anyone who thinks they have finally found it is likely to be deluded. The very nature of God and God's activity are such that they are beyond our understanding and to assert final and complete revelation is, at the very least, arrogant. Hymns can underline what we believe and, at times, shine a light on those deeds which are less than consonant with those beliefs. They remind us of where we say we stand and, because we sing them ourselves, our consciences are alerted.

They can go further and give an expression to the human condition. The Psalmist, out of an understanding of the covenant relationship of the chosen people and each 'chosen person', could cry out in lament. So we should use our hymnody to give voice to circumstance, questioning and feeling. 'How long, O Lord' is a timeless cry in the face of inhumanity and destruction. This needs to be echoed in our hymnody if we are to be true to our inherited theology which regards each one of us as 'the apple of [God's] eye'. In the face of Gaza and Bethlehem, in Darfur and Iraq, in Afghanistan and countless other places across the globe, Christians ought to be asking of each other, of the world and of God, 'How long!' There must be the honesty to recognise that as Christians we are often as much to blame as anyone else. Nearly thirty years ago it took a black African to point out to a group of white British theological students that when Britain declared war on Argentina over the Falklands, at a religious level, it was like the body of Christ shooting itself in the foot!

1. How long, O Lord, how long
must carnage blight our age?
How long before all humankind
let love disarm their rage?

2. The streets still run with blood
as dust distils the light;
while buildings clouded by the pall
of smoke are hid from sight.

3. Our children huddle, dead,
the world seems blind to wrong;
when will your people heed your word?
How long, O Lord, how long?²

All of this is to do with what is or has been.

For peacemakers there needs to be, and there always has been, a pro-active element. Peacemaking can be a lonely, painful process. Even those you count as your friends, fellow travellers on the same path, can seem to be opposed to you in the minute particular or even in relation to greater strategical issues. There are

¹ Brian Foley (1919-2000), after *Psalm 139* © 1971 Faber Music Ltd, London.

² Pratt, A.E., © 2006 Stainer & Bell Ltd., from *Reclaiming Praise*

questions as to who we can associate with while retaining our integrity. We might ask whether peace without justice is an option, or whether that in itself is a contradiction; whether the integrity of creation is beyond the remit of those seeking to bring peace between people.

Sooner or later like-minded people gather with each other for support and songs of common protest or human bonding help to maintain a cause. Listen to the chanting at a football match to realise how well singing together can provide a sense of unity that intellectual assent to a proposition could never achieve. Think back to well remembered singing of 'We shall overcome' in the sixties. There is no doctrine here, though there is a simple statement of shared belief. What will be overcome need not be told explicitly. To those who sing it is understood, though it might be argued that there is sufficient ambiguity to allow for many interpretations. We can argue as to whether that is helpful, or a hindrance to a particular cause. What is sure is that we have added another justification to our argument for singing. Not only do we reinforce belief but we bind those of like mind, through song, in a harmony of action. The sung text gets inside us, can influence us. We carry internalised hymns with us like a library, touchstones of comfort and influence. Music brings familiarity. Words evoke conscience and commitment. We do well to treat hymns with respect. They can be powerfully subversive.

The final thread in this argument is, for me, the most powerful, the most persuasive. My justification for this reflection has to be attributed to the many writings of Walter Brueggemann on Old Testament Psalmody and prophecy. His thesis is that poets have the capacity to think laterally. Thinking logically, within our normal frame of reference, limits us while the poet takes flights of fancy: 'The lion will lie down with the lamb', dry bones will gain flesh again, will walk and dance. This opens a new dimension offering a fresh perspective and a novel answer to a problem. Poetic thought is often lyrical and intended to be sung. Another theologian, Don Saliers, claims that singing enables us to believe those things we thought beyond belief until we sang them..¹

As the exiles in Babylon sang of the dry bones they began to grasp a vision of new life, of hope, of Jerusalem re-built. And as we sang with Sydney Carter, 'and the creed and the colour and the name won't matter', we were impelled to build bridges and forge impossible relationships, or make hypocrites of ourselves in the singing.

So what should we sing now? Of the unity of Christian, Jew and Muslim, of a time of real sharing of resources, of the welcome that we will provide for asylum seekers in our midst? As we sing others will challenge our vision and our orthodoxy, our grasp of reality and we will smart from the criticism of xenophobes. But if we cannot sing this song in *our* strange land, who will? If we can't sing about a vision, how on earth can we hope to engage in the far more costly task of living it?

1. God still needs prophets who will rage,
against discrimination,
who speak God's words amid despair,
in this and every nation;
who reach again with nail scarred hands,
into the pain we're feeling,
to hold us when we weep at loss,
who bring a hope of healing.

2. God still needs prophets who will hold
a mirror to our blindness,
to show us, each and everyone,
how hollow is our kindness;
how empty are our words of love
when shrouded in derision,
how clever words can't justify
unloving indecision.

3. God still needs prophets who ignore
religions that confine us,
who magnify our words of love
through actions to refine us.
May we be prophets through our words
and in our hands of healing,
that others might see Christ in us.
while Christ to us revealing.²

¹ Saliers, D.E, *Music and Theology*, Abingdon, Nashville, 2007, p.6.

² Pratt, A.E., © 23/11/2008

Prophetic, poetic imagination might be the key to finding new ways of peace making, of reconciliation, of living together in the Twenty-first Century – if we dare risk it. Poets are dangerous people. Let go of our hymns, our poems and our songs and we will be impoverished, if we do not find some other means of opening the human psyche to the divine possibility of peace.

Gethin Abraham Williams tells of witnessing a Sufi dance while watching, as a tourist, camera in hand.¹ Neither he nor his friends expected more than spectacle. What they experienced was spiritual as, with reaching hands, black cloaked figures whirled and danced. Another bridge was built, another barrier broken. Muslim and Christian found a divine thread which wove them together, a dance whose steps they shared. Making this dance a reality is part of the vision, the dream that we must live from day to day. It models the respect that we need and the effort we must make in mirroring each other's steps, in making peace.

1. A human presence spun between
the heaven and the earth.
And here, surprised, we meet with God
in whom we shared one birth.

2. As memory unfolds again,
the past from which we've grown,
becomes the ground, the place of hope,
in which our faith is sown.

3. Within ourselves, beyond ourselves,
where God is found or lost,
we find our present treasure store,
the pearl of greatest cost.

4. And in this esoteric trance
we find a place to rest,
and here amid this whirling dance
we know that we are blessed.²

Andrew Pratt

PRAYER

O God we celebrate your love for all creation and every human being. As we sing of that love may it take root in our hearts so that we no longer envisage hurting our world-wide neighbours or contemplate making war against them. Fill us with the joy that comes from true peace and love.

Amen

Note from the Secretary, Rev. Maurice Wright, (01743 873 633) mhw@surfree.co.uk, 3, Cornwall Dr. Shrewsbury, SY3 0EP)

The Methodist Conference this year is in Wolverhampton and there will be details in the next P21C which should be out before Conference. Our AGM and evening meeting on Monday 6th July will concentrate on those who have benefited from the R J Barker fund. This is intended to help young people to experience and partake in studies and projects involving Reconciliation and peacemaking. See our website mpf.org.uk. Also on the website is a membership leaflet and form for joining the Methodist Peace Fellowship.

Maurice

Donation may be sent to John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

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¹ Public 'First Tuesday' lecture at Luther King House, the Partnership for Theological Education, Manchester 3rd February 2009

² Pratt, A.E., 3rd February, 2009, in response to a public 'First Tuesday' lecture given by Gethin Abraham Williams at Luther King House, the Partnership for Theological Education, Manchester 3rd February 2009.