

SERMON - IN HONOUR OF HYMNS – DEAR LORD AND FATHER OF MANKIND

Let me begin with a question. When you think of your favourite worship songs, the ones that will stand the test of time... what are the qualities in the song that makes it resonate so strongly for you.

As Hayley said, over the next few weeks, we're going to do something a little different and pay homage to the Hymn. The worship song. Because as we heard in our scripture passage from St Paul ...singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God, with thankful hearts, is an essential expression of what it means to be a worshipping community in Christ.

Because Paul knew that coming together as one voice to sing songs of worship, infused with the great truths of scripture, help to shape and nourish our spiritual formation. Probably more than we realise at times.

Now picking a favourite hymn or worship song is a near impossible task, but today I've chosen a particular hymn because not only is it a very beautiful melody, but the lyrics for me, are sheer poetry. And anyone who has tried to write a song will know that putting poetry to music is no easy task.

But when you get a truly beautiful melody combined with profound poetic words, then you really do have a song that will stand the test of time.

Such is the hymn I've chose to honour today '**Dear Lord and Father of Mankind**'. The words of this song were gifted to us in 1872 by American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier and then a few years later the words were set to music composed by Hubert Parry.

And as we will see, it's this inspirational matching of words and music, that gives the song its powerful resonance. Both the melody and words, exude the Spirit of God's deep peace promised to us by Christ in today's Gospel passage.

But before I explore these exquisite words let's just pause on the melody itself. I've asked Natalie to record a solo violin version. A musical note of interest. The tune of this is what is known as a 'long melody'. A short melody would be something like All to Jesus. After the first 4 bars it then repeats same set of notes. Dear Lord and father takes us on quite a journey. It doesn't repeat the same shape of notes throughout the whole verse which is 12 bars long and I can tell you that not many songs do this. So just take a few moments to bask in the beauty of this melody.

NATALIE PLAYS

So let's have the privilege of journeying through these deeply profound words, and being poetry, this is very much my own personal reflection on the words.

So let's start with the first verse.

Dear Lord and Father of man-kind. Forgive our foolish ways; Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence praise. As a songwriter myself, I'm always aware of the importance of the opening line, because you're trying to set the tone of what's to follow. And straightaway we know we are on a journey of prayerful

intimacy. **Dear Lord and Father.** As if we are writing a personal letter of prayer to God. And by using the expressions 'Lord and Father' we have the transcendent God (Lord of ALL) and the immanent and personal Father. Echoes of the Lord's prayer where Jesus stunned his early listeners by declaring the great Yahweh, as Abba/Father. Opening the doors for all of us to a close and intimate relationship with the God who is all in all.

The next line takes us into posture of humility. A confession. **Dear God, forgive our foolish ways.** I've always loved this particular expression of our confession. Because yes humanity is well capable monstrous malevolence but for the most part, most of us get it wrong because we are foolish. It's our human folly. As Jesus calls it in Matthew 7:26 ***"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and doesn't act on them, is like a foolish person building their house on sand."***

And then after our confession, a prayer for help and guidance. **Reclothe us in our rightful mind dear God, so that we may live purer lives in service of Your ways.** Words inspired of course, by scripture **and the words of Paul.**

As God's holy and dearly loved people, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. The fruit of the Spirit. 14 Above all, re-clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

I love the way the first verse sings of where our hearts truly desire to be. Clothed in the beautiful qualities of the Spirit, so we can be closer to the rightful mind of Christ. And in so doing we are living in a spirit of reverence praise.

**The second verse sings of a truly momentous moment for the history of humanity.
The beginnings of Christ's ministry on earth.**

"In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian sea, the gracious calling of the Lord, let us, like them, without a word, rise up and follow thee".

Words that evoke the history changing moment when the first disciples knew deep in their bones that there was something deeply compelling about this young man from Nazareth. And as scripture tells us over and over, many more people were so amazed, inspired and convicted by the wisdom and authority of this young Rabbi's words - this word of God made flesh, that they too, without a word, rose up from whatever they were doing, to follow this 'gracious calling' of Christ.

I wonder what words resonate for you in this verse?

The line that really speaks to me, especially for these uncertain and unsettling times are the words ... **"in simple trust"**. In the end, following Jesus is a simple trust. It's not a naïve trust or a gullible trust, as some people may think. It's a simple trust based on the total conviction that in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ we are hearing a way, a truth, a wisdom, that gives us the deep bass notes of what it means to be truly human.

Which brings us to verse 3 and now the composer takes us into the profound territory of the prayer life of Jesus Christ Himself

**3 O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee ... the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love ... interpreted by love!**

You won't find too many songs that sing about the sacred times of solitude, where Jesus cultivated and forged the deep bond of relationship between Father and Son. And what about this for a line ... **"Where Jesus knelt to share with thee ... the silence of eternity,** Now this is poetry so take your own interpretation of this beautiful phrase... but for the writer the silence of eternity is **"interpreted by LOVE"**. Only three things last **into eternity** said St Paul... faith hope and love, and the greatest of these is LOVE. I guess I hear these words as once again, total affirmation... that all we aspire to BE' as human beings, should be interpreted, translated and expressed through the spirit of LOVE. And what a different world we would live in, if we lived this truth.

And so to verse 4. A truly stunning verse where every word exudes the spirit and sense of God's peace and tranquillity. And I've personally used these words for my own prayer times these past few weeks.

If ever there were words that speak into the relentless, hurried, harried, anxious and agitated world we now inhabit ... its these words. We had a Pastoral Care Team Zoom meeting in the week talking about God's peace. And Peter Allfrey said **"It's when we don't have God's tranquillity that we need to take tranquilisers"**

But before you hear these words, just pause where you are, and think about what is most causing you to be anxious at this time. Where in your body can you physically sense the effects of agitation. Now just let these words wash over you.

**Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.**

I felt calmer just saying those words.

But just note the skill of the composer. These words are carefully chosen and ordered to produce a calming rhythmic sound. Listen to the amount of S sounding words, that help this effect. **Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;**

**take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.**

This is where the genius of lyric and melody combination really carries power. The lyrics enhance the melody, and the melody enhances the lyrics.

WHICH BRINGS US to the final verse, with words evoking a well-known passage of scripture.

The moment when the O/T prophet Elijah realises that God doesn't always have to appear in the dramatic earthquake, wind and fire of our lives. If we stay still long enough and if we adopt the **posture of attentive listening**... then God's Spirit and wisdom can be found as a gentle whisper. Whispering words of wisdom as Paul McCartney once sang in his own classic song, Let It Be.

So let's just savour these final words together.

**Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;**

**Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm ... O still, small voice of calm.**

I'll finish with these final thoughts to take away.

All of us will be feeling the ripples and waves of anxiety at this time. There is such a potent cocktail of triggers happening all around us nationally and globally.

- Spend time, each morning this week with one verse from this exquisite hymn and cultivate a non-anxious presence.
- Cultivate making time to hear God's still small voice of calm for whatever agitates or vexes your soul.
- Cultivate a simple trust in the promise of Jesus Christ from the gospel of John. Chapter 14 verse 27.

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and peace of heart.

And the peace I give, is a gift the world cannot give.

So do not be troubled and do not be afraid.

Don't let the spirit of fear get a grip on our hearts and lives said Jesus.

Be diligent, be wise but don't be afraid.