

**1999 E.H. JOHNSON AWARD
THE REV. JOHN L. BELL
IONA COMMUNITY AND CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

INTRODUCTION

When it was suggested to me that I fax in advance a copy of this acceptance speech to your Church headquarters, I was a little apprehensive, for the simple reason that when I looked at the list of my distinguished precursors, I could see clearly why they were given the award, but I couldn't fathom out why I should be a recipient.

But if in any way my being here signifies the importance of worship, and more specifically hymnody in the work of Christian mission and the life of the Church, then my colleagues and I would want to applaud that truth less timorously than we accept this award.

I say WE because I do not stand here on my own right. The ministry of the church can be a fiendishly individualistic, self-conscious and uncooperative vocation. The temptation to go it alone is something I know in my bones, but the liberation of working in a collegiate relationship with those whom God has called to be lay people is what gladdens my heart and quickens my soul.

I am deeply privileged to work full time with three colleagues who question as well as encourage what I do, as I do also their work. And I am further blessed with a voluntary group of 18 people who have met in the most cramped of living rooms most Monday nights for the past 16 years. They are the people who not only first sing the songs, but who often provide the Biblical insight or gift of experience which fertilises the imagination.

I thank God for this small community of loving critics and fellow travellers when, as is the case nowadays, I receive unsolicited manuscripts from budding hymnwrights and composers in my role as Convener of the Revision Committee of the Church (of Scotland) Hymnary.

DISCERNING THE SPIRIT

I always dread when I open a letter which begins with the words,

“Dear Mr. Bell,
Last night I was given this song by the Holy Spirit.
Please feel free to use it in public worship without requiring a fee or any further permission.”

And then I look at the song and think: if the Holy Spirit had given me that last night, I would have handed it back and asked for another one.

You cannot always say that to highly sensitive and profoundly expectant writers, but you can say: was this gift given for your personal edification or for the upbuilding of Christ's body? For if it was given for your personal edification, then thank God for it and muse over it. But if it – as any spiritual gift – feels like it is intended for use in the Church, then the Church has the right to discern the Spirit.

There have been times in the history of hymnody and the history of Christian mission when this discerning of the Spirit and scrutinizing of the gift have not been exercised. And the result has been to the detriment not just of the worship of God and to the detriment of the popular understanding of the nature and mission of the Church, the full breadth of discipleship and the immeasurable greatness of God.

You see – for good or ill – what we sing is what we end up believing.

When the last word of the most rhetorically astute sermon is forgotten, people will remember
JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW
FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO.

You might call that a blessed relief, or you might call it a pain in the homilectical butt. But it's true.

What we sing, say and do in worship shapes and rehearses our theology, our Christology, our missiology.

THEOLOGY

If you want to know why people are stubbornly resistant to the prospect of change in the Church, you need go no further than the hymn Abide With Me with its doomfraught line
CHANGE AND DECAY IN ALL AROUND I SEE.

“Where else”, asked an octogenarian Presbyterian elder in the very north of the Scottish mainland, “where else do you automatically associate change with decay?”...in the doctor’s surgery, where there is more than ever access to lifesaving procedures and pain-relieving medication?...in the school room, where teaching assistants, group learning and care for dyslexic or special needs pupils improves yearly?...in the kitchen where labour-saving devices and new food brands evolve weekly?

Not there, but in the Church...where we have forged the association of change with decay through our hymnody.

Where is the God who makes all things new?
Where is the God who changes his mind because compassion requires it...
as Abraham discovered and Jonah discovered much to his chagrin??
Where is the God who changes his self descriptions from gardener to warrior,
from judge to advocate, from father to midwife in order that we may
never encapsulate our Maker in one controllable image?
Where is the God whose primary activity on all who come into contact with him
is to transform...from isolation to integration,
from sickness to health,
from persecutor to evangelist?

Three months ago, two of my colleagues, Alison and Mairi, were leading a day of Biblical reflection with a congregation in London, England, which was swithering at the prospect of moving from a cosy self-contained company of believers to embarking on a mission of outreach and friendship which would involve the complete redeployment and renovation of their premises.

All the women did was allow people to investigate some stories from the Old and New Testaments, not according to the notes the minister had from his seminary days, but in such a way as they could appropriate God’s truth for themselves. All the stories were about the transformation which God effected and expected in those called to discipleship.

Afterwards one older lady who was visibly shaken by what she had found for herself in Scripture said to Mairi,

“You know, I would never have thought on looking at the Bible to learn anything about change.”

From my work in my own country and from what I detect in North America, one of the gifts the Church urgently needs is a theology of change, which is rooted in the Biblical evidence of God’s effect on humanity and particularly centred on the resurrection where the choice God offers is either change or die.

But to appropriate such a theology and to live out a dynamic spirituality, we perhaps will have to unlearn some of the fallacies which we first learned in the old hymns...regarding change and decay.

CHRISTOLOGY

What we sing also shapes our Christology.

Why is it that so many lay people have such a limited understanding of the significance of the incarnate ministry of Christ? Look at what they are invited to sing.

I used to think that it just happened at Christmas, when we encourage all ages to praise the kind of child any mother would worry about:

THE CATTLE ARE LOWING, THE BABY AWAKES,
BUT LITTLE LORD JESUS, NO CRYING HE MAKES.

Why not? What’s wrong with him.

Things don’t get better as the infant grows.

ALL THROUGH HIS WONDROUS CHILDHOOD,
HE WOULD HONOUR AND OBEY,
WATCH AND LOVE THE LOWLY MAIDEN
IN WHOSE GENTLE ARMS HE LAY.

...rather odd behaviour, given on the one hand that ‘wondrous childhood’ meant all the way up to his bar mitzvah, and on the other that the only things we know about Christ’s boyhood years is that he ran away from his parents.

In Australia six years ago, during a Bible study I was leading on the raising of Lazarus, a troubled consultant in Dentistry wanted to take issue with me because I had read that when Jesus saw Mary weep and those around her similarly distressed, he was “indignant”. I thought that perhaps he - like me – was still a little sleepy as we were meeting at 6:15 a.m.

“That’s the word in the New English Bible,” I informed him.

“What does it mean?” he asked.

“Angry,” I replied, “in fact, very angry.”

“Oh no,” he protested. “That can’t be right. I have been a Christian all my life and I have never known Jesus Christ to be angry. What does it say in the Greek?”

I said, “My man, at this time in the morning you’re lucky I can read the English never mind the Greek. But if we had a Greek New Testament we would discover that Jesus was really angry.”

He may have been a Christian all his life, but had he read Luke’s Gospel in which there is hardly a chapter which does not have Jesus raising his voice and letting his displeasure be known?

But I knew the hymnbook on which this man had been reared. It was published in Scotland in 1929 and intended for use in Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

It had very few hymns about the life of Christ, they were mostly about his birth and death. But one which did deal with the 33 years in between supplied the heretical insight,

NO ONE MARKED AN ANGRY WORD
WHO EVER HEARD HIM SPEAK.

Why are Christians reticent to speak plainly and honestly about issues of power, politics, justice, money and market forces?

Might it be not simply because they are controversial, but also because they do not believe that such things are at the heart of the Christian faith.

But if you take any of the Gospels and blank out the words and activity of Christ to do with social justice, hospitality and exclusion,

to do with the use and misuse of capital,
to do with the power of money, malicious gossip, or religious and political office,
you will be left with a very slim volume.

What you will be left with is the icon of an anorexic Jesus beloved of so many of our stained glass and pictorial representations, totally at odds with one who was present at at least 16 meals and who was rumoured to be a glutton and drunkard – hardly the accolade one would give to a diehard ascetic.

If we want to encourage sturdy discipleship which embraces the whole of life and not just the holy bits, we have to put in our mouths words which speak of the toughness, the provocativeness, the risk-taking and gregariousness of Jesus. We should not compel ourselves to encourage others to worship a wimp.

MISSIOLOGY

And what we sing will affect our missiology, our understanding of the Church's mission.

Years ago, my Worship Group was invited to lead singing at a mission rally in Glasgow. There would be about a thousand people, and we had recently become excited by hymns and freedom songs from South Africa, Argentina and the Philippines. They were all singable in English, but there was audible and visible resistance in the audience which I had not reckoned on.

When the warm-up was over and the 'real event' began, we were enjoined to worship God using 19th Century songs about mission. The kind of songs which had stunning lines like:

THE HEATHEN IN HIS DARKNESS BOWS
BOWS DOWN TO WOOD AND STONE.

(This about India where there had been a church since 54 A.D.)

Lines such as:

O'ER HEATHEN LANDS AFAR,
THICK DARKNESS BROODETH YET.

(This despite the fact that in countries as diverse as Brazil and Tanzania church growth was in reverse proportion to church decline in Scotland).

As I looked round at the full-throated, deep-bosomed singing invoking divine salvation for those known as “God’s sun-kissed children”, I remembered that most of these people would have grown up in Sunday Schools like mine where we sang a children’s chorus:

DO YOU SEE THIS PENNY,
IT IS BROUGHT BY ME
FOR THE LITTLE CHILDREN FAR ACROSS THE SEA.
HURRY PENNY, QUICKLY
THOUGH YOU ARE SO SMALL.
HELP TO TELL THE HEATHEN JESUS LOVES THEM ALL.

And then, like me, they might have wandered to the front of the Sunday School where, on a table was the metal head of a black doll called Sambo. And we would put our penny in his hand, and twist his ear and he would swallow our money.

What did these songs and that action teach us about our brothers and sisters in Christ of other races, languages and skin-colours?

Not that in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile;
not that in the Body of Christ if one member hurts all share the pain;
not that the Holy Spirit has given to all members of the Body gifts which all others should benefit from.

Mission – according to the hymns – was about benefaction not benefitting,
about the heathen there and the enlightened here,
about a white, English-speaking deity on a throne draped in red, white and blue,
not about the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ whose favourite colour – if God has one – must be tartan.

It has been wonderful to discover after a decade of singing the songs of the world church that gradually attitudes are changing – even in that most insular of North American regions, Texas.

For there, three years ago, I was taken to a school where about 200 American school children sang some songs from a book we produced a decade ago. They sang in Shoua and in Xhosa and in Hispanic. And afterwards one of the teachers told how sometimes when news reports came from South Africa or Zimbabwe or Nicaragua, the children in their homes would begin to sing a song from that country.

“They have a far bigger understanding of the integrated nature of the world than I ever had.” she said,
“And isn’t it marvellous that it’s the church which is giving this to them.”

If the problems of global poverty, third world debt, fascism, racism, sexism and imperialism could all be solved by songs and liturgy, I would not be standing here speaking. I’d be running a music shop at the U.N.

I make no great claims for the power of words and music, except that within the worship of the church they shape what we think, what we believe, and what ultimately we do as those who follow Jesus Christ.

They therefore are worthy of our attention if our communication with our Maker has to be marked with that vulnerable honesty and breadth of compassion which was and is in Jesus.

I began with a 15th Century GLORIA from Iona. I end with a 20th Century Afro-American ALLELUIA from Detroit and with it offer my profound gratitude for the way in which you have honoured me, my colleagues and my community.

ALLELUIA