

## They're Singing Our Song

St John, Lepton

Second Before Lent, Sunday 15 February 2009

It was about 8 in the evening – we were living in Lincoln at the time. The doorbell rang and it was ‘Avon calling’ as they used to say. It was unusually a middle-aged *man* selling Avon cosmetics. We asked him in and a fascinating conversation unravelled. His name was Jim Allison and it transpired that he was one of the duo that sang the number one hit song in the 1960s *Are You Sure?* We still have the 60s collection with the cartoons he drew that evening – and also his autograph. Actually it was a little sad to hear his tale after his fall from fame.

But he and his brother had been up there with the stars. They’d even been in the Eurovision Song Contest. Being English they probably scored ‘Nil points!’ Songs, however, can touch a generation. It was, after all, Abba winning the Eurovision contest with *Waterloo* that turned them into a phenomenon whose fame survives. Something similar can be said of hymns. Every clergyman will tell you of people leaving church saying: ‘I love that last hymn, but why did we have the wrong tune?’ My vicar, when I was a curate, was priceless. One woman came out with just that line: ‘Nice hymn, wrong tune.’ Bob, my vicar overheard this and muttered ‘Nothing to do with hymns – her marriage is in trouble.’ Now that’s amateur psychology gone mad!

Hymns do matter, however. The growth of Methodism is rooted in hymns. Charles Wesley wrote 6,000 and we still sing a select number. They are among the best hymns we sing. Their significance in the growth of Methodism is that within first-rate poetry they captured Christian belief. So, ‘O thou who camest from above’ is sung at countless ordinations because it encapsulates something essential about priesthood:

‘Still let me guard the holy fire,  
And still stir up thy gift in me.’

Or there’s ‘love divine’ – undoubtedly the all-time favourite for weddings. It captures God’s love for us at a moment when human love is maturing:

‘Changed from glory into glory,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!’

Hymns, then, have a remarkable power within the Christian life. This is nothing new and it is perfectly – perhaps uniquely captured in the two readings we have heard today. Were there a Eurovision Hymn Contest for the first century world, those two hymns – and that is what those two passages really are – would be in the top three or four. Look for example, at the passage from Colossians:

‘He is the image of the invisible God  
The first born of all creation;  
For in him all things were created,  
in heaven  
and on earth  
visible  
and invisible.’

And so it goes on. There's a second verse:  
'He is the beginning,  
The first born from the dead.'

In our office books now for morning and evening prayer, these lines have re-appeared. They were used as a canticle, like the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis or the Te Deum. It has been rediscovered as a hymn.

Then, of course, we heard the prologue from St John's Gospel. It is immortalised for the whole world (not just churchgoers) in the *Nine Lessons and Carols* from King's Cambridge each year. It used to be read at the end of every Mass/Eucharist/Communion Service as the last Gospel. It is, once again, rooted and grounded in a poetic mood. It is once again an antique hymn. Listen to a couple of lines:

'All things were made through him,  
and without him was not anything made.  
That which has been made was life in him,  
and the life was the light of men (humanity).'

The poetry of the first lines tell us it's a hymn:

'In the beginning was the word,  
and the word was with God,  
And the word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.'

These two hymns take us into the very heart of our faith. Why were they written? I suppose, to answer the question: 'Who is this man? What did God do in Jesus?' St Anselm asked the question even more tersely a thousand years later, 'Why the God-man?' These two hymns answer the question with great subtlety and power. And they answer the question by inviting us to *worship*. The only way to answer these questions is by entering into relationship with Christ. So, the hymns demonstrate why we are here today worshipping. They tell us why we celebrate the Eucharist. Such hymns were almost indistinguishable from creeds. Creeds too began as anthems capturing our faith, not as a set of propositions.

Now you may think we've come a long way from Eurovision, *nil points* and the wrong hymn tunes. We have. We began with a celebrity whom we have probably mostly forgotten. We have arrived at Jesus Christ, in whom God lives and fashions us still. Hymns matter for they can shape and even animate, give life to our faith. That is a sobering thought as we put together our worship still. The old romantic line in film was 'They're singing our song.' Are we still singing our song – our two readings are a great challenge.

Amen

#### READINGS

Colossians 1:15-20

John 1:1-14