

ON BECOMING A HYMN

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"What would you like to be remembered for?" is one of those penetrating invitations to self-scrutinizing introspection, invitations that should be more intriguing as one approaches the moment when one is transformed from being a presence to being a memory....the moment Loree as a Hospice chaplain daily helps patients face.

As I approach my 75th, what this question usually surfaces in me is, "I'd like to be remembered for a hymn." Highly improbable: while off & on I've written hymns for 60 years, my hymn-writing gift if any is small; & I'm more awed than encouraged when I read the lives of the hymn-greats such as Reginald Heber, who didn't have to become a hymn, who was a hymn from birth, who thought-spoke-wrote-lived noble, singable poetry. The year after his death at 43, his widow published (1827) his HYMNS WRITTEN AND ADAPTED TO THE WEEKLY CHURCH SERVICE, which the HISTORICAL EDITION OF HYMNS ANCIENT AND MODERN says entitles him to be called "the creator of the modern Church hymnbook." His "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty" is hymn #1 in scores of hymnals. For his father-in-law, who was to preach a sermon on missions, he went into a corner & twenty minutes later emerged with "From Greenland's Icy Mountains"! Check his name in the authors' index of your favorite hymnal. You are apt to find, in addition to the two hymns I've already mentioned, "Bread of the world in mercy broken," "God that madest earth and heaven," "Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,"....Me, I Don't seem to be able to do better than my latest, which is p.2 of this Thinksheet.

But I would like to share with you a few musings:

1 This Thinksheet's title is derivative from something Rabbi Chaim Stern said at my surprise 60th birthday party: "The point is to *be* Torah." I've known some folk --haven't you?--who are walking hymns. You think hymns can't walk? You must have missed today's "Peanuts," in which Snoopy is a Santa/Christ figure walking a Christmas carol right out onto the street. (The cartoonist jerks you from audio to video, then unites the two in a familiar scene that says "Christmas is giving.")



2 To become a hymn is a metaphor & metonym for becoming a Christian. Why? Because hymn-singing is the central visible sign of the invisible heart praising & praying "without ceasing." The earliest pagan comment on Christian worship is that we "sing hymns to Christ as to a god." So much is this a direct continuation of Hebrew-Jewish psalm-singing that throughout most of Christian history, "to hymn" ("to praise God in song" [Augustine's definition]) was a synonym for "to psalm" (to sing from the Psalms, the Psalter). A common Protestant devotional praxis was to "versify" the Psalms, ie to turn them into verses, metrical lines & thus lyrics singable to simple tunes ("hymn tunes"). (Among Isaac Watts' 6,000 hymns were 900 Psalm versifications, ie the Psalms versified six times!). The Psalms are more than the model of Christian hymnody; they are the prototype of Christian praise & prayer, or to use the current jargon, Christian "spirituality." (I suggested that the title of the new United Church of Christ hymnal be DAVID'S HARP.)

3 Asked how he could draw such nice pictures, a small boy said "I take a think & draw around it." A good hymn does that. And a good life.

PROCESSIONAL HYMN by Willis Elliott

-- with music, 2724

1992

Salzburg 777D

Bach harmony

as UCC HYMNAL 308

or

St. George's Windsor

Geo. J. Elvey, 1858

Let Us All Rejoice and Sing

Let us all rejoice and sing / praises to our heavenly King!*

Praise befits our grateful hearts / after we have been apart.

Lord of power, peace, and grace, / welcome us to your embrace;

Lift us from last week's distress, / free us from our sins confessed.

Father, present in the Son, / present in the Spirit, one,

Gladly now may we adore / Love victorious evermore;

Love abounding for our needs, / calling us away from greed,

Guiding us in truth and right / through your word that gives us light.

Motherlike you tend and teach / love of earth that gave us birth,

Creature-joys new-born each morn, / evening praises, neighbor worth.

Hope arises in our praise, / prayers, and deeds in mercy done;

Faith and trust in you grow strong / as we sing, Your kingdom come!

*Alternative line:

Christians, let us rise and sing / hallelujahs to our King!

Not all processional hymns are **doxologies**, but this one is. The first line cues you into this tone by the word "praises" or (in the alternative line) "hallelujahs."

A doxology is inherently **inclusive**, for the doxological heart is expansive: "Praise God from whom ALL blessings flow, / Praise him ALL creatures here below...." A formal-structural way to achieve this is **balance**, such as (in this hymn) masculine/feminine, humanity/earth, old/new metaphors, traditional/contemporary ("distress...greed...neighbor worth"), week/Sunday, gratitude/petition, praise-prayers/deeds, present/future, joy/hope.

The **tune** is great, great enough for Bach to consider worthy of his harmonizing. (He was seven years old when it was published, for a stately hymn beginning "All men [Menschen] must die.") Why named after the Austrian city where Mozart was born? Don't know. But as Loree & I stood in the room where M. was born, I remembered Barth's saying that always in M. the tuned ear can hear the mingling of joy & sorrow, a mingling "Salzburg" is patient of: my hymn requires it to be sung briskly, in the spirit of grateful-joyful praise.Salzburg-town's history mingles joy & sorrow. The same day we stood in Mozart's birthroom, we stood also in the rebuilt church where one American bomb had killed 1,000 Salzburgers who'd gathered there (you guessed it) to be safe from that WWII bombing raid. The rebuilt church, as you enter, says "Joy!"