

Letter from the Minister December 2011/January 2012

Dear Friends,

One of the Hymn Writers who attended my Birthday Festival of Hymns made me a generous gift of his copy of *Lyra Germanica*, (a two-volume works of the 19th century translator of hymns from German into English, Catherine Winkworth). Among her many hymn translations, we have her to thank for *Now thank we all our God*. (R&S 72) and *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation* (R&S 74).

Amongst the many hymns which Catherine Winkworth translated, is a fifteen verse *Carol for Christmas Eve*, written by Martin Luther which, according to the postscript, was 'for his little son Hans 1540'. The carol is headed by a text from Luke 2:10

Behold I bring you tidings of great joy that shall be to all people

Until I looked it up I did not realise that eight of the fifteen verses appear in *Rejoice & Sing* though somewhat amended; one of the following verses (which below are in Catherine Winkworth's original), has been omitted from R&S.

Here is a flavour of it:

Ah, Lord, who hast created all,
how hast thou made thee weak and small,
that thou must choose thy infant bed
where ass and ox but lately fed!

Were earth a thousand times as fair,
beset with gold and jewels rare,
she yet were far too poor to be
a narrow cradle, Lord, for thee.

My heart for very joy doth leap,
my lips no more can silence keep;
I too must sing with joyful tongue
that sweetest ancient cradle-song –

Glory to God in highest Heaven,
who unto us his Son hath given!
while angels sing with pious mirth
a glad New Year to all the earth.

(c.p. R&S 154 v.5,7 & 8)

Thinking of words, some 'so ancient and so new' (R&S 101 v.1), which have either been amended or have fallen into disuse, it struck me, firstly, that there is a wealth of hidden treasure which still has much to say to us about our faith and, secondly, there are particular verses, (they will, doubtless, be different for all of us), which speak with particular eloquence and encapsulate what we believe and want to express about our faith. This is surely true of the songs we sing at Christmas.

Here are some of the verses which, to my mind, speak to us with a potency of the condition of our world, and the means and meaning which is at the heart of Christmas.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long,
beneath the angel-strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong:
and we at bitter war, hear not
the love-song which they bring:
O hush the noise and end the strife,
to hear the angels sing.

(R&S 144 v.3)

The 19th century author of those words was Edward H. Sears, an American and Unitarian.

From Austria (1649), the authorship is uncertain, we have these words:

O Jesus, dearest Babe of all,
and dearest Babe of mine,
thy love is great, thy limbs are small,
O flood this heart of mine
with overflow from thine!

(R&S 148 v.4)

From the hand of the 19th century High Church Anglican turned Roman Catholic, Edward Caswall we have:

Sacred Infant, all Divine,
what a tender love was thine,
thus to come from highest bliss
down to such a world as this! (R&S 157 v.5)

From Thomas Pestel an Anglican who suffered at the hands of the Westminster Assembly in the English Civil War:

Hark, hark, the wise Eternal Word
like a weak infant cries!
See in a servant's form the Lord
as God in cradle lies. (R&S 171 v.2)

And from the troubled but genius mind of the poet, Christopher Smart (1722-71):

O the magnitude of meekness,
worth from worth immortal sprung:
O the strength of infant weakness,
if eternal is so young. (R&S 174 v.3)

Why not think about your own memorable Christmas verses and share them? And, who knows, we may give Martin Luther's neglected carol an airing this Christmas!

May God Bless you all this Advent, Christmas and in the coming New Year,

Robert A. Canham