

## Ancient versus Modern- the Debate continues

Re-printed from The Guardian, Saturday March 10, 2007

The rector of St James's Piccadilly made, as Hercule Poirot used to say of the murderer, a fatal mistake at a recent Sunday service. He forewarned us: "Some of you may be unfamiliar with the hymns today." Most of the congregation muttered amen. After the service I told the organist I hadn't recognised a hymn for five years. He admitted that it had taken him 20 minutes to find the music. Favourite old hymns seem to have disappeared from the repertoire. Traditional Anglicans go to church for the King James Bible, the old hymns and the architecture. The Bible and the hymns have disappeared, which leaves only the great cathedrals. There are no doubt plans to raze St Paul's and replace it with a sports cafe. Soccer zombies will be able to watch 24-hour coverage of the new religion. Typical of the hymns currently on offer was one sung during the offertory. "Mysteries of celebrating, realise the promised state; with the desperate receiving, we in life participate." Wisely, the author of this vapid doggerel never revealed his identity to a wider world.



Old Anglican hymns are remarkable in their richness and complexity. The provenance of some is extraordinary. Abide with Me is one of the most popular, particularly with football fans at cup finals. Henry Francis Lyte finished it before he died of tuberculosis. Lyte, the vicar of Brixham, continued a 300-year-old tradition when he published a collection of psalms. Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven is a rousing version of psalm 103.

Amazing Grace was written by John Newton, a tyrannical ship's captain who transported African slaves to the West Indies. During one voyage a violent storm brought an epiphany for him. He eventually became an abolitionist. The words of the hymn reflect his own struggle. Catherine Winkworth, widely acknowledged as the greatest of all translators of German hymns, was also one of the founders of the women's movement.

There is, of course, an exception to this rule. Jerusalem is played ad nauseam, and chosen by people of limited imagination for their wedding. It remains a cliché. Top of the hymn parade for many Anglicans is My Song is Love Unknown. The words were written in the 1660s by Samuel Crossman. John Ireland, the organist at St Luke's, Chelsea, had a growing reputation as a composer when he was asked to set them to music for the Public School Hymnbook of 1919. He wrote the tune in 15 minutes on a menu card. While most modern hymns have an instantly forgettable quality, this one has the instant gulp factor. Compare the words of modern hymns with those in its second verse: "He came from his blest throne / Salvation to bestow, / But men made strange, and none / The longed-for Christ would know. / But O my friend, / my friend indeed, / who at my need, / his life did spend."

It is an act of cultural vandalism on the part of the Church of England to sideline these rich and varied hymns from the past in favour of modern ones of dubious quality. John and Charles Wesley wrote hymns to arouse the emotions of the congregation. The combination of a massed choir and an organ can be extremely stirring for people of all faiths. The Church of England operates on the top-down principle. The clergy choose the hymns. There can be little doubt that their quality would be improved if the congregation picked one or two.

by Christopher Ohlson, a writer and former City broker