

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *Although not exactly new to the Christian faith, I have only recently become more involved. I find some of the words in our hymns difficult to understand and somehow emotionally inappropriate- more like a love song than a hymn. What can I do?*

Answer: There are many emotional levels at which the words we sing as hymns have been written.

They have been written in several different centuries by men and women in very contrasting situations. They have been written by those experiencing various levels of emotional stress and commitment. They have been written in times of doubt and sorrow and in times of certainty and joy. They have been written in times of defeat and fear as well as times of triumph and confidence.



We have to remember that many of these words were originally written as private expressions of love and faith, or written for specific communities and particular occasions. Undoubtedly, some of the authors would be very surprised indeed to find their intimate expressions of Christian love, doubt and faith being sung lustily by total strangers in churches round the world in future centuries and in conditions almost unimaginable at the time of writing!

In addition, we must remember that of the 1000 or so poems available to us in our hymnals, many will have been written without even the faintest anticipation that as poetry, they would ever be set to music and become hymns as we understand them today.

And don't forget that the work of editors may have significantly transformed some of the words so that they are more appropriate for singing in churches. Editorial changes are often necessary both to reduce the length of the original poetry and to bring the words more

into line with contemporary thinking. The classic example of this is Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander (pictured). A verse from Mrs Alexander's famous poem "All things bright and beautiful" appears to regard social inequalities and divisions as God-given and so gave the impression that they were inappropriate to change.

"The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; God made them high or lowly, and ordered their estate."

First included in a supplement to Hymns Ancient and Modern in 1889, this verse is edited out of modern hymnals, although it is still there in Hymns Ancient and Modern published in 1924. The rise of the Labour Party made its inclusion increasingly difficult to defend.

Then there is the gender issue which has exercised editors for the past 20 years. A current example of this is the changing of many hymns to remove words like "man" when the author, seen in context, clearly mean the whole human race.

So, we are left with a body of words for singing which present a huge range from National or Public occasions, to those themed for Christian festivals and seasons to those written for special occasions and those written in the privacy of personal faith where flights of love have demanded words which might otherwise be offered to people who are the objects of our love because of the deep intimacy which faith in God and love of Jesus can create in some people.

What can you do? Well, try and understand where these words are coming from and then perhaps regard them as a pointer to the possible development in your own life of a deepening relationship with God in which love is offered and received. Like all loving, this is one of the high points of the human experience.

Enjoy it.