

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** Neil, the choice of hymns for Sundays falls to you, I know, but we seem to sing quite a small selection from the 1000 or so hymns available to us. So, do you pick only your favourites?

**Answer:** Ah, I wondered how long it would be before a hymn question came along again! Must be over three years since the last one.

Hymns are, in fact, poems which have, in the course of time, been set to music for singing by congregations or choirs. If you look at any hymn book, you will see the wide range of topics which have motivated the writers. These include aspects of the work of God, the life and teachings of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit, the lives of the Saints, the various seasons of the year, different occasions in the Christian life, school life, family life, missions and National occasions, and the different services of the Church including Holy Communion, Baptism, Marriage and funerals.

Some of these words are fine poems, deservedly admired for the quality of their writings. Others are perhaps useful, but not exactly great poems. There are also some which may come under the description of poor quality words, sometimes even dross.

There are some fairly simple considerations to be made when I am choosing hymns. This is a personal view, of course. I don't expect you to agree with everything.

1. I would like to sing words which are at least good literature, if not the best poems available. I don't like singing repeated phrases to jingle-sounding music. The emotional engagement comes from the combination of great words and good music.

2. I would prefer to sing hymns which expressed theology which I found accessible and appropriate. Some hymns offer an interpretation of Christianity which no longer seems to hold water. However, this is dangerous territory as much Christian theology is couched in the language and thought patterns of 2000 years ago, so, in fact, most hymns could be discarded under this preference! We need a balance between traditional and modern words, wherever possible.

3. I try to choose words which are appropriate to the season of the year in which we are singing. In Lent we avoid singing Alleluias because by holding back, the Alleluias we sing at Easter sound all the better for being spared an outing in Lent. I try to choose hymns with Advent themes during Advent, rather than Christmas themes. The same with Christmas and Epiphany. If we keep the themed approach, each season is lit up and made to feel that it has its own appropriate weight and importance.

4. I want to choose tunes which people will know sufficiently well that they will actually sing them. There is nothing worse than a congregation standing around looking blankly because they don't know the tune. New tunes should be introduced but after teaching and learning, perhaps led by a choir or choir leader.

5. There is a need to take cognizance of how many children may be in the congregation. Adults may have to be patient and sing words and tunes which were written for younger people to accommodate their spiritual needs and make them feel welcome.

There are many other issues, but leave it at five for now.

I found the image of a hymn board from a random search of the internet but thought it would be interesting to see what we could learn from the numbers, given that they have the same hymnal as us at Holy Cross! **223** is a hymn about John the Baptist, set to two tunes, one a Plainchant, one a German tune after J. Cruger (1598-1662) **15** is O little Town of Bethlehem, or is this a psalm? **346** is O perfect love, a special marriage hymn. **87** is Saviour when in dust to thee to the tune Aberystwyth. **109** is O thou who through this Holy Week I have never sung called Cheshire.

So, either the numbers refer to another hymnal altogether or this was a simple random selection of numbers made to look like a proper hymn board.

What fun hymn choosing can be!

Would you like to try your skill at it?

Ask Neil.

