

Address at the launch of AHA, St Paul's Cathedral, 19 May, 2024

*"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in them the fire of your love."*

If you would allow me to begin with a brief reminiscence, and then draw on a few points from it to speak to what we are doing here today.

My first association with this cathedral space was in 1972 during what was then called the Church Unity Octave which ran between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday. The dates were 11-21 May that year, so just on 52 years ago. The Revd Albert McPherson was on the cathedral staff at that time and, for a reason about which I never quizzed him, he asked me to compose a set of five sung items to be performed in the course of the three services he had planned for the Octave. At that stage I was a recently vowed member of the Jesuits, comparatively newly arrived in Melbourne, but I was bold enough to ask a fellow Jesuit, the poet Fr Peter Steele, to compose the five texts I was to set for these ecumenical services.

Allow me to read three short stanzas from one of these poems by Peter. (I ask you to pardon the gender usage of the day.)

You have to move, you cannot learn
Standing rooted in a grave.
The timid wither, while the brave
Allow the wind to have its turn

By sea or desert, when it takes
Baggage, shelter, guarantees:
Cairns are shifted, rivers freeze:
Suddenly a man awakes.

Firebird, shifting through our dreams,
Move our spirits with our eyes,
Make us nomads. He who dies
Is quickened in the air's bright streams.

As in 1972, we have now in 2024 reached the end of this year's Easter season, and the end of the short period from the Ascension to arrive at Pentecost. A piece of scripture in each of these three feasts: Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, continues to bid us all to get moving. At Easter the disciples were told to go to Galilee, there they will see Jesus; at the Ascension the disciples were told to stop gawking at the heavens, they should look around and see what needs to be done;

at the Pentecost in John's Gospel (Jn 20:21) Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

This imperative for us to get moving has lost none of its urgency and importance.

So where do our hymns figure in the light of this Gospel imperative?

Let me point to two categories in which a developing sensitivity may be discerned over three of the publications under the Australian Hymn Association umbrella, namely, *The Australian Hymn Book* (AHB); *Sing Alleluia* (SA); and *Together in Song* (TiS). The two categories I'd point to are these:

Firstly, Sensitivity concerning some expressions in traditional use in our hymnody.

Secondly, Sensitivity about appropriate areas that are either not represented, or poorly so, in our hymnody.

Here is just a small number of examples that fall in the first category: some expressions in traditional use in our hymnody. This is not, nor can it be, a complete survey of a vast terrain.

Yahweh as a title referring to the godhead

There has been movement in attending to Jewish sensibilities about the use of the tetragrammaton Yahweh, or in English, Jehovah in our worship. An obvious and well-known example is the shift in the hymn title, *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah* as it appears in AHB 478 to its title now in TiS 569, *Guide me, O thou great Redeemer*.

thou, thee, thy and thine

Again to take a single well-known example: at AHB 303 Edmond Budry's text in Richard Hoyle's translation begins *Thine be the glory*. It now reads *Yours be the glory* at TiS 380.

There's still a host of thous, thees, thys and thines in a number of traditional hymns in TiS. I confess I have little difficulty with the continued use of these pronouns and adjectives as they are used in the texts of writers such as Charles Wesley or Isaac Watts. I am aware, of course, that other people hold a different opinion on this matter. I am, though, bewildered by the practice of some contemporary hymn-text writers who can't let go of these archaic forms. No such hymns, I venture to say, appear in TiS.

gender

This is an immensely complicated area. Let me offer just one example here. In AHB 306 the third verse of James McAuley's Easter hymn *By your kingly power* reads:

Death has lost and life has won;
every newborn soul we christen
now becomes the Father's son:
Sing Christ risen, sing Christ risen.

In TiS 386 this verse reads:

Death has lost and life has won;
every newborn soul we christen
has the Father's child become:
Sing Christ risen, sing Christ risen.

I've come across other solutions in other hymnals to this gender specific usage in the original version of McAuley's hymn. So there's movement there.

Let us turn now to the second category. Here, again, are just some examples of absent or rarely found themes that one could list. Others could well be suggested:

ecology

The six verses of James McAuley's *Sing a new song* TiS 166 traverse in a grand sweep from the inanimate world to the world of living creatures, all expressions of God's creative hand.

Shirley Murray's *Touch the earth gently* TiS 668 is a well-known hymn that has the theme of ecology at its heart. Here is verse 3:

Let there be greening,
birth from the burning,
water that blesses and air that is sweet,
health in God's garden,
hope in God's children,
regeneration that peace will complete.

women

Brian Wren's *A prophet-woman* TiS 696 speaks strongly of the place of women in the ministry of service and of proclamation. Here is verse 2:

A faithful woman left a tomb
by Love's divine commission.
She saw, she heard, she preached the Word,
arising from submission.
A faithful woman left a tomb
with resurrection gospel.
She saw, she heard, she preached the Word,
apostle to apostles.

social justice

This is an increasingly represented theme in contemporary hymnody. From the 1960s there was Sydney Carter's *When I needed a neighbour* TiS 629, and James McAuley's *The law of Christ* TiS 630. A more recent example is the text by Shirley Murray *God of freedom* SA 42. Here is verse 2:

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
you whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
you who shed the tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity
restless for the common good.

indigenous recognition

Tony Kelly's *God of peace* SA 63 is a hymn that was written for the 1986 International Year of Peace and used during the visit to Australia of Pope John Paul II. The opening words of verse 3 colour the rest of that verse:

Visions new and ancient dreaming
see the love beyond all death;
new the heavens, new the earth:
promise of the kingdom coming.
Through Christ the wounds of all this world
in God's own peace will then be healed.

A more developed expression of this theme of indigenous recognition is found in the concluding hymn of today's service, namely, Michael Thwaites' *Lord of earth* TiS 672 (text). You will find the text in your orders of service.

Lastly, there is a sensitivity to various levels of belief

Recently I've been reading the first of Jill Ker Conway's memoirs, *The road from Coorain*, and I was struck by this passage in her opening chapter about the harshness of life in the vast western plains of New South Wales in the 1930s where she was a child. She writes:

"Religion and belief in a benevolent deity were foolish because daily life demonstrated beyond doubt that the universe was hostile. The weather, the fates, the bank that held the mortgage, bushfires—disaster in some form— would get a man in the end. When disaster struck what mattered was unflinching courage and the refusal to consider despair." (p. 8)

Yes, people there went to church when they were able, and the households that had a Bible would doubtless read it, but the realities of daily life were so confronting that the images of God these people lived with were far from friendly.

You don't have to be an inhabitant in Depression-era outback Australia to have your faith seriously challenged; we are all quite familiar with the challenges to faith that life today poses for many, if not most, people.

I had to meet this challenge in 1991 when I was invited to be part of a project to commemorate the passing of the Sydney Roman Catholic parish priest, Fr F. X. Roberts, an active lover and supporter of music and the liturgy. It was decided that there would be two songs written in his memory, the first, *Love's last song* to a text by the poet Noel Rowe. This song was intended for use with a funeral congregation where the level of Christian belief is not presumed to be strong. It contains a congregational refrain where, perhaps surprisingly, the speaker is the deceased: "I come, I call on death to be my friend and take me home where love can never end."

The second song, *Fare well*, has a text commissioned from Michael Thwaites and sung to the tune FINLANDIA. It appears in TiS 695. It was intended for use with a funeral congregation where a general level of Christian belief might be presumed with its references to life after death and of Christ's love leading us to "life and joy" in his Father's house.

There is no measuring stick to determine the various levels of belief present in a given congregation, but I believe that we are called to some awareness of these levels and a sensitivity to them that combine to play a role in both the composition and the use of hymnody in our church services.

Before I conclude, and for those of you who wish to follow up any of the hymnal references I've given in this address, my text will be posted on the AHA website as soon as possible.

Let us circle back to the Pentecost service of 1972 here in St Paul's Cathedral and the song *You have to move* where we began this afternoon.

On our journey we have identified a number of areas in which we are invited to move: the names by which we address God; the sensitivity to the issue of gender; our care of creation and ecological action; recognizing and enhancing the role of women; the imperative to be active in social justice; the recognition of indigenous peoples; and an acknowledgement of the various levels of peoples' belief.

The last verse of *You have to move* calls us to journey onwards, impelled by the Spirit, and enlivened by the Spirit's breath.

Firebird, shifting through our dreams,
Move our spirits with our eyes,
Make us nomads. He who dies
Is quickened in the air's bright streams.

So may it be. Amen.

Christopher Willcock sj