

August 3

Hymns are powerful. The combination of music and text should never be underestimated.

The opening hymn on Jim Brown's music memo for today, "We the Lord's people", (#51), expresses an important truth: we are joyful and confident in God's promises and purpose because we are grounded in the experience of God's faithful action and nurtured in worship—which moves us to believe this "good news" is always ours to receive (whatever our situation) and confident that God means for us to live our lives in its light and power.

This hymn is for us "insiders". It is an encouraging word and a call to remember who we are and how we are to live. It is a perfect choice for a pandemic time, wouldn't you say?

But what about everyone "outside" our community at St. Giles and the church at large? What does our hymnal have for us to serve those people and fulfill our evangelistic calling, to share what our Presiding Bishop calls, "The Way of Love"? And, is there anything which speaks to a time such as our present day?

There are a number of great hymns that express missionary purpose and zeal. One of my very favorites is, "O Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling!" (#519), written by Mary Ann Thompson, (1834-1923) a transplanted English woman who lived in Philadelphia and published about 40 hymns, four of which are in our hymnal.

She wrote this hymn in two stages, and the date of composition she gave was 1868. The story she often told about the hymn's composition is that she wrote it while caring for her young son who was deathly ill with diphtheria. She once said that she remembered thinking if her son survived his illness and decided one day to become a missionary, she would "have lost him one way or the other", (missionary work then being perilous, to say the least).

An Anglican, (later Episcopalian), she reminds us by the theme she chose of the very strong commitment to missionary work (foreign and domestic) that infused the Episcopal Church until after WWI, (why that changed is another subject altogether).

By the way, do you recall that the proper, legal name of the Episcopal Church is, "The Domestic and Foreign missionary society"? We are, by definition, to

understand ourselves as a missionary church. In the words of Archbishop Temple, we are the organization that exists for the benefit of those who are not members. As we say today, evangelism is in our DNA.

As a droll sidebar, we learn that Thompson wrote the text with the intention of using one of her favorite tunes that already accompanied a popular text. The tune we have, however, “Tidings”, was composed by James Welch, and unknown to her. He wanted to compose a new tune for the text that was attached to the tune which claimed Ms Thompson’s interest! Even more remarkable, neither Welch nor Thompson knew of the other, and the union of the tune we know with the text we sing was accomplished by the editors of the Hymnal, 1892, and we have kept on singing the result—with some changes in the text—for over 125 years. We don't have to know each other to do great things together.

Humor and motherly sentiments aside, we ought to be clear that Mrs Thompson wanted congregations to proclaim out loud, with determination and high resolve, their intention to be like the congregations of St. Paul’s day, who gave their prayers, their money, and their people to the cause of spreading the gospel. Do good works, yes; be generous to the poor, yes; care for one another, yes; praise God in art and music, yes; raise up people to be faithful stewards and leaders and ministers, yes; but first, last, always and at all times, “press with vigor on” (as another fine missionary hymn puts it, #546), because “a heavenly race demands thy zeal”.

What heavenly race is it? To what mission are the people of God to give themselves— “O, Sion, haste,” says it explicitly:

“O Sion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell to all the World that God is light;”

What are we singing here? Don’t we all know that people’s spiritual lives are their own business, and polite people avoid the topic? Of course we all know this, so what’s up with saying we have a high holy mission to flat out tell people something about a subject we’ve said we won’t talk about?

The next couplet tells us everything:

“That he who made all nations is not willing
one soul should perish, lost in shades of night.”

That is, we are not raising a socially awkward topic; we are not merely being gauche: we are messengers, sent by our creator with a life-changing word. God sees our human confusion, terrible missteps and mistakes and outright sins--our suffering, anguish, confusion, even despair as a result--and is not willing to let us destroy ourselves without a fight for who and what we are—beloved children. How can we withhold that God/good news?

And further on:

“Proclaim to every people, tongue, and nation
that God, in whom they live and move, is love:
tell how he stooped to save his lost creation,
and died on earth that we might live above.”

He gave his Son for us, and his Son chose to die for us, not to condemn us for killing him, but that by following him we can turn and live--not just bear up--actually rejoice in all things.

How do we do this?

“Give of your own to bear the message glorious,
Give of your wealth to speed them on their way;
pour out your soul for them in prayer victorious;
O Sion, haste, to bring the brighter day.”

What if we're reluctant, have objections to doing this, simply do it badly, or worse, refuse to do it at all. What then?

“Tis thine to save from peril of perdition
The souls for whom the Lord his life laid down:
Beware lest, slothful to fulfill thy mission,
Thou lose one jewel that should deck his crown.”

Well. It seems the answer to our questions and resistance is, by not doing our work we are condemning people to life without knowing God in Christ. Whatever strength, joy, comfort, hope, help, self-worth, and purpose and meaning we get from being Christians that we fail to show forth in our lives and invite others to see is precisely what we are holding back from others who need to know Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Wow.

The missionary secret, I think, is this: People have the right to know the gospel, winsomely and faithfully presented, taught, exemplified, and organized. Not to follow through on this great commission ought to be unthinkable.

Well now. We're in a pandemic, and a lot of us are old, frail, homebound, and dealing with stringent rules about even walking out our doors. Some of us are newly unemployed. There may be children to consider. And, of course, the virus stalks us daily, "seeking whom it may devour" to quote I Peter 5:8. This is hardly a missionary time—right? We have so little to work with just now.

But, here's a story about a dime and what it accomplished in the faith and determination of a woman who never went to college but in the end founded Berry College in Georgia. I found it in Margaret T. Applegarth's book, *Twelve Baskets Full*, Harper Press, 1957, pp. 124-25.

Martha Berry while still a young person herself got a bee in her bonnet about children who were academically able but too poor to go to school. She founded a school on her family property in a one-room shed. When the school needed to expand to include girls, she had the boys build another shed. These sheds served as dormitories as well as class rooms because the young people had too far to walk daily.

In time, Ms Berry started fund-raising to expand and improve the school. When an opportunity came along to meet Henry Ford, the eccentric auto builder, in person, she asked him for a million dollars to expand the school, (being no shrinking violet nor small-dreaming person). Ford opened his change purse and gave her...a dime. Ten cents. One tenth of a dollar. One ten millionth of what she asked for. It was a gesture that was too small to rise to the level of an insult, and a challenge too big to ignore.

She did not cry or rage or fall into a decline. Instead, she bought a bag of peanuts and had her boys plant and eventually harvest them, re-plant all the second crop, and the third. In time, the harvest was enough to split in two: half to plant, half to sell. The dimes began to mount up. Ms Berry kept a record of every penny of that first dime and all the subsequent coins. Eventually, she accumulated enough peanut money to buy a piano for the school. She sent an accounting to Henry Ford in all seriousness, reminding him of his donation and her subsequent use thereof. Ford was impressed. So impressed that he brought her north to Detroit, and gave her a million dollars...as a second donation, which he followed with others. As did many other wealthy donors.

The school continued to enlarge and expand, and Berry College operates still in Rome, Georgia, see more at www.berry.edu.

The issue is not how much time, money, freedom, mobility, do we have, but how are we using what we have for the sake of the gospel. Believe me when I say that I am not criticizing anyone because I know how little I have done myself.

So why bring this up if I'm such a poor example myself? Why point out a target I haven't hit, much less even aimed at very often? Not to embarrass or annoy anyone, but because we mustn't forget our high calling, even during such hard days as these.

We have a role to play in God's great work, and we do well to do what we can, even here and now. God bless you all.