

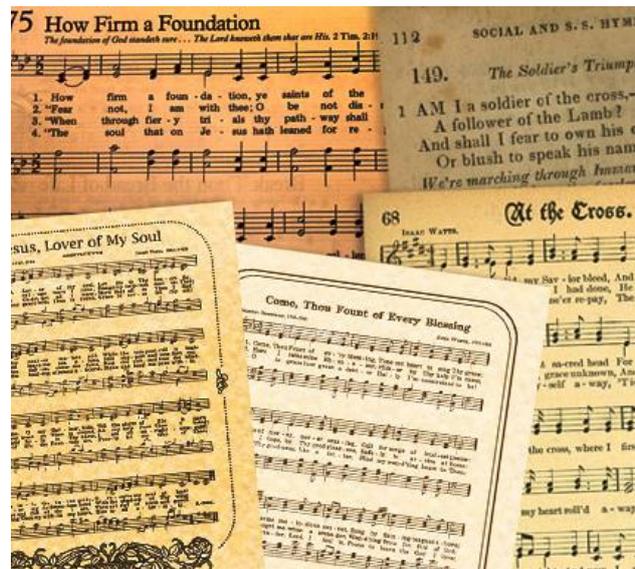
Christ Church Freemantle

Sunday 9th August – 9th Sunday after Trinity

Our God, our Help in ages past

Choosing hymns week on week, year after year can be a challenge after a while, especially sometimes without the liturgical guidance of a priest. I am lucky that the Royal School of Church Music publishes a magazine called Sunday by Sunday which gives suggestions for all types of music referring the daily lectionary, readings and seasons.

In recent months I have become interested in the history of hymnody and how in many hymnbooks so many changes can be made to a hymn and in a lot of cases verses are left out. Putting verses back can really help tell a different story and bring about a whole different feeling during worship. It's important, I think, to always question the intention behind such moves. Indeed, we have lived through a recent period where many historical figures and literary, even musical heritage seem to be being judged by modern standards than of their time.



Unfortunately, it seems that 'the church' has been making this judgement for hundreds of years too and simply adapting verses and prose to suit the current standard. Right or wrong? Well, it is a tricky one. If you have ever created something that is personal to you and there was a reason for that creation, would you like it to be torn apart and reorganised? It was only when we changed hymn book I discovered how using two books had almost been dividing our worship.

On a Mission Praise Sunday we may have sung Christ is made the sure foundation, and on a A&M Sunday; Blessed City, heavenly Salem, (both to the same tune). Some parishioners rightly or wrongly avoided some Sundays if a certain book was to be used pre-judging what might appear in music may reflect the overall pitch of worship. When we replaced our hymnbook to what we have now, a big hint to what to expect was in the subtitle; Hymns and Songs for refreshing worship. To my surprise and possible ignorance, the two above hymns were actually from the same prose, making a total of 8 verses and the Doxology.

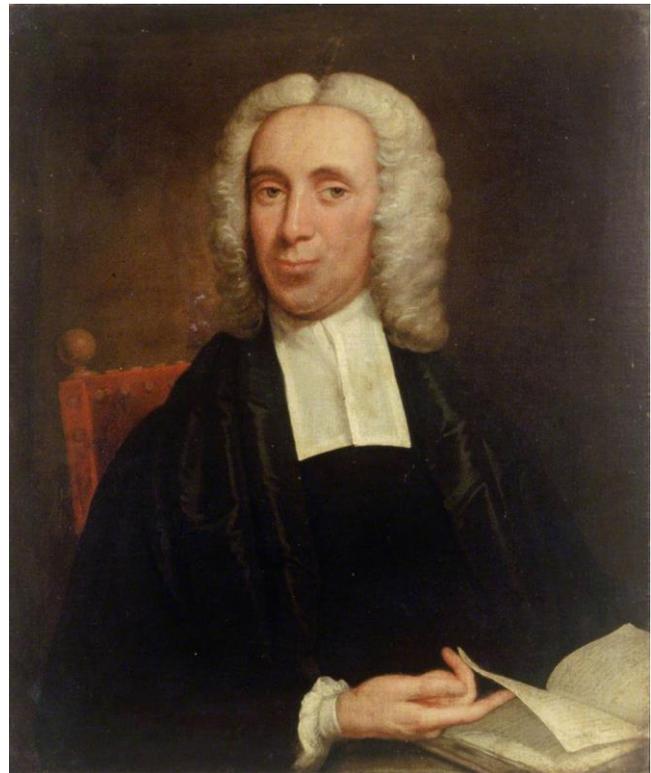
In my view, the first few verses of Blessed City...deal with the church building; biting sculpture polished well those stones elect, etc and God as the heavenly architect. Verse 5 pivots the view (and is the beginning of the Mission Praise hymn), to Christ being the Foundation stone, and goes on to speak of taking comfort in Him, rather than maybe the physical building.

Seeing these two together it is easy to see why the collaborators of Mission Praise may have chosen to ignore the first verses. My impression is the Ancient and Modern was seen more as Ancient than Modern, and by omitting these verses talking about the splendour of the church building and analogies between God and architect may well justify those trying to build a different church focussing on mission, community, outreach, than spending time and energy on large money consuming buildings, relics of the past.

For me, both views are valid, but the story, the continuity is in the whole prose. God is the architect/creator. In 1 Kings there is an accurate description for Solomon on how to build the temple with God promising not to abandon his people if it was realised and his commandments obeyed.

Other than the instructions on building places to worship, there are far more examples of how to live, love, treat one another throughout scripture and many of Mission Praise songs/hymns pick up on this. However, for me, all parts of the Bible and scripture are valid and contain useful bits. In trying to allow the church to move forward I believe editors of hymnals need to err on the side of caution when choosing what to include and not just as we (Organists, Vicars, Laity) choose what verses to sing and not. For instance, when I suggest leaving out verses it is not always because of the length! I would much rather everyone see the full text and choose which bits to sing, rather than seemingly censor or redact verses for the sake of appeasing or not offending people.

I always cite the unfortunate northern Cathedral which tried to neuter music and liturgy to meet their mission statement of being "a place for all people". Anything to do with Man, Mankind, gender specific, hierarchical etc etc was changed. It was not universally received, and many hymns in particular ended up nonsensical, un-singable and un-poetic offerings.



As the title of this piece may have hinted at, I was going to use Isaac Watts' Hymn O God our help in ages past as the basis for the 'article' so will try and bring it back round to that! Widely considered a superior exercise in the art of paraphrase of psalmody, the hymn written just before the death of Queen Anne of England (1714) saw the country in much turmoil. The text and feeling are strong. However, for whatever reason, 24 years later John Wesley republished it making one change; Our God became O God.

So why? It certainly makes it sound more lamenting? Could this be why it has become associated with national/civic services. Does this one word change your view on it? So many

questions! What we should be sure though when we read or sing this text is that God is ours, and our help; past, present and future. But there is no shame in us singing Our God is there? We want Him to be ours? Live in Him and Him in us? Consider this, would you change it to Your God or Everyone's God.....!?! The latter with multiple syllables would need a more swung, jazzy tune and would that demean the nature and feeling for you?

Watts 1714 original	Wesley 1738 and most common printed verses
Our GOD, our Help in Ages past, Our Hope for Years to come, Our Shelter from the stormy Blast, And our Eternal Home.	O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home;
Under the Shadow of thy Throne Thy Saints have dwelt secure; Sufficient is thine Arm alone, And our Defence is sure.	Under the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure; sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defence is sure.
Before the Hills in Order stood, Or Earth receiv'd her Frame, From Everlasting thou art GOD, To endless Years the same.	Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same.
Thy Word commands our Flesh to Dust, Return, ye Sons of Men: All Nations rose from Earth at first, And turn to Earth again.	
A thousand Ages, in thy Sight Are like an Ev'ning gone; Short as the Watch that ends the Night Before the rising Sun.	A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone, short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.
The busy Tribes of Flesh and Blood, With all their Lives and Cares, Are carried downwards by the Flood, And lost in following Years.	
Time, like an ever-rolling Stream, Bears all its Sons away; They fly, forgotten, as a Dream Dies at the op'ning Day.	Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.
Like flow'ry Fields the Nations stand Pleas'd with the Morning-Light; The Flow'rs beneath the Mower's Hand Lie with'ring e'er 'tis Night.	
Our GOD, our Help in Ages past, Our Hope for Years to come, Be thou our Guard while Troubles last, And our Eternal Home.	O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.

Craig Lawton