

A Hymn for our time – ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind’ by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)

This hymn, with its beautiful and memorable melody by Hubert Parry has been part of my life for a very long time. I remember hearing it on the radio, when, if my memory serves me correctly, it was used to introduce a religious programme. I remember it being sung in church quite often, and once when I could only have been four or five, the lady next to me in the congregation sang it with tears pouring down her face, it must have struck a very deep chord with her. I also remember being reprimanded for loudly bringing my Mother’s attention to the fact that my neighbour was crying. There is something about this hymn which affects people like that lady, and over the years in good times and in not so good this hymn has been my comfort, and yes, I have shed tears many times when singing it. I chose it as one of the hymns at my Profession in Life Vows, because it spoke to me of so much that pertains to the Religious Life. Why does this hymn mean so much to so many people?

*Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.*

J.G. Whittier was an American Quaker poet and member of the Anti-Slavery Movement. He campaigned against the cruel and inhuman treatment of slaves, abhorring the lack of reverence for human life. Well might he ask the Father of Mankind to forgive the foolish ways of the slave-traders; to re-clothe them in their rightful minds that they might see the error of their ways; that in purer lives they might serve the Lord with due reverence; respect and care for all his creation.

A century and a half on slavery may not be as rife as it once was in the ‘civilised’ West, although it still goes on in third-world and Middle East countries. Other forms of abuse of God’s creation have taken its place however, and the world is full of hatred, greed and violence, and human life seems to be a cheap commodity – how desperately we still need to be re-clothed in our rightful minds. The world is enslaved to a false subjectivism, an emotional affectation which in itself is a flight from the domination of reason and will. We have to be brought to our true selves by the work of the Spirit who delights in us and who, living in us, enables us to delight in God. We have to come to our true selves – our rightful mind – to the truth about who we are, and return to that truth without delay, and knowing the truth about ourselves will free us from our enslavement. Entering the Religious Life was surely a hopeful sign of repentance of past foolish ways, and by conversion of life, live a purer life praising and serving the Lord and Father of mankind with a deeper reverence.

*In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us like them, without a word
Rise up and follow thee.*

What magnetism Jesus must have had that a group of simple fishermen trusted him enough to answer his gracious call, leave their nets and follow him. And many throughout the ages have heard that same call and followed him, sometimes to martyrdom.

The calling of the Lord takes many forms; for Whittier the call came at the age of 25 when he left his employment as a journalist to become a poet-seer in the cause of the Anti-Slavery Movement. Whatever we are called to, whether to work to bring an end to slavery, or to the Religious Life it is not a command, we are free to say no. The calling of the Lord is gracious, we do not merit such graciousness, and the only answer he requires is for us to trust in him, and to follow him, wheresoever he leadeth.

*O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!*

*Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.*

These beautiful verses were penned by a man who suffered much from mob violence and political hatred because of his poems and pamphlets in the cause of liberation for slaves. Being a Quaker he was used to waiting silently on the Lord he loved so much, and no doubt withdrew to lonely and quiet places to find rest from the shouting, abuse and maybe even physical violence he suffered, and to experience the *dews of quietness* washing away the strain and stress of his life.

Who love you, find their rest in you; true rest, tranquillity, peace, the soul's very Sabbath
(The Mirror of Charity – St. Aelred of Rievaulx)

Our noisy and restless world is in dire need of the quietness, the beauty of God's peace and the *silence of eternity interpreted by love*, but sadly many people seem to be afraid of silence and have to fill it with gods of their own devising.

If you love truth be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and deliver you from the phantom of ignorance. Silence will unite you with God himself. More than all things love silence, it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe. In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent and then there is born something which draws to silence. May God give you an experience of this something which is born of silence. If only you will practise this, untold light will dawn on you as a consequence. After a while a certain sweetness is born in the heart of this exercise and the body is drawn almost by force to remain in silence.
(St. Issac of Nineveh).

*Breathe through the heats of our desires
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still small voice of calm!*

Whittier probably came to a point in his campaign against slavery when he felt that he was not making any headway, when his cause seemed lost; when he felt utterly helpless in the face of opposition. Like Elijah in his dealings with the Israelites who had turned to other gods, broken God's commandments and thrown down his altar, the situation must have seemed hopeless, and perhaps like Elijah he just wanted to give up.

How often we battle on with a hopeless situation, thinking in our arrogance we can deal with it in our own strength. But it is when we are at the lowest point, when we admit to ourselves that we can do nothing more and ask for God's help, that he will come to us in our helplessness. He will *breathe through the heats of our desire his coolness and his balm*, but only when we indeed *let sense be dumb and flesh retire*. In other words only when we let God be God will we hear that *still small voice of calm* speaking through the earthquake, wind and fire of our lives.

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