

CHOOSING THE HYMNS (Part 1)

The first of two articles in which The Reverend Peter Moger offers guidance on the choice of hymns and songs for worship

'What we hear in church, we forget, but what we sing, we remember.' The hymns and songs we sing in worship are among the most effective influences upon our theology and spirituality. The right hymns - chosen with care and sensitivity to the flow of a service and its content - can strengthen faith and enable worship. The wrong ones can wreck both.

But how do we choose well? For many years, those who planned worship, relied on the ASB's 'Sunday Themes', using the handy lists in the back of standard hymnbooks. There were problems with this. First, it tended to encourage hymn-choice on auto-pilot: choosing the 4 or 5 most popular hymns from a list, without necessarily thinking about how they relate to the liturgy. Second, choosing to fit 'Sunday themes' enabled choices to be made without having to refer to the appointed Scripture passages. And third, it led in many cases to a severely restricted base from which choices were made. The adoption of the *Common Worship* lectionary at Advent 1997 put an end to Sunday themes and forced musicians and worship leaders to get 'back to basics' and think more carefully about hymn and song choice.

Taking the seasons seriously

Human beings are seasonal creatures. The Church recognises this and the Christian Calendar provides a helpful framework for the ordering of worship. What is crucial is that music works with the Calendar and not against it. The Calendar we follow under *Common Worship* treats most Sundays as being 'of' a season, rather than 'after' a festival, with each season being a unity. So, for example, Epiphany runs from 6 January to 2 February and is the second part of the composite 40-day period from Christmas Day to Candlemas. Theologically this season is a time for reflection on Christ's incarnation - and the significance of that, as his baptism, together with his miracles and ministry reveal God's glory in the world. Hence, hymns which explore the incarnation are in many cases suitable throughout the whole season. One of the best choices to round off the season on 2 February is *Angels from the realms of glory*, which draws together in one text references to Jesus' birth, the shepherds, the magi and the presentation.

This is just one example. Another short season which offers a challenge in the choice of music is the period from Ascension to Pentecost: less a time for reflecting on Christ's Kingship as anticipating the gift of his Spirit. If we are to take the seasons seriously, we shall have to be prepared to reassess the principles behind our choice of hymns, and to be clear about why we sing what we sing.

Taking Scripture seriously

But perhaps the biggest challenge for hymn selection is offered by the long 'green' season of Ordinary Time (principally the Sundays after Trinity until All Saints' Day, but also between Candlemas and Ash Wednesday). Here there are no clearly-defined seasonal themes, but a consecutive reading through the Scriptures. At these times, more than ever, it is vital that what we sing helps us deepen our engagement with these passages and our understanding of them. The index of *Common Praise* includes a list of hymns against Biblical passages and other books do the same (though Anglican collections have not traditionally been good in this area!). An excellent resource is *Sing God's Glory* (Canterbury Press), which suggests hymns and songs from the most commonly-used hymnals for each Sunday in the 3-year lectionary, indexed according to the passages to which they relate. The same principle is used by the RSCM in *Sunday by Sunday*, the excellent weekly liturgy planner sent to all affiliated churches. Another invaluable help in relating hymns to readings is *HymnQuest* (Stainer & Bell) - a CD-ROM database of around 9,000 hymn and song texts, comprehensively indexed according to theme and Scripture reference. (It's not cheap but it is very worthwhile).

In the next issue, Peter Moger concludes with thoughts on the liturgical placement of hymns and strategies for planning. Some of the material above appeared first in 'Hymns and the New Lectionary' in 'Introducing the New Lectionary', Grove Books 1997 © Peter Moger