

## **A sermon on four popular harvest hymns**

### **Come thou thankful people come**

Before becoming Dean of Canterbury,  
Henry Alford had been vicar of rural Wymeswold  
in Leicestershire, for 18 years,  
enabling him to have a strong insight into country life.

Three out of his four verses mention  
the key phrase,

Harvest Home,

making the singers lick their lips in anticipation  
for the traditional feast following their harvest toil.

The hymn Christianises traditional  
and even pagan harvest festivities,  
drawing on the harvest as a metaphor for Christian life.

Verse three, with its severe warning about what will happen  
to fruit which misses its mark

is omitted in many liberal hymn books,  
which never mention hell to ears polite.

And the original sharp beginning of verse four,

‘Even so, Lord, quickly come,  
Bring thy final harvest home,’

is blunted by being adapted to

‘Then thy Church triumphant come,  
Raise the song of harvest home.’

The hymn includes obvious allusions  
to the parable of the wheat and the tares

from Matthew 13:24-30,

as well as the harvest parables from Mark 4,  
almost lifting verbatim,

First the blade and then the ear  
then the full corn shall appear  
from verse 28.

The tune,  
St George's Windsor,  
was written by Sir George Elvy,  
organist at this Royal Peculiar from 1835-1882.

It was originally set to another hymn,  
Hark the Song of Jubilee,  
in 1858,  
but when Hymns Ancient and Modern was published in  
1861,  
the tune was attached to Come ye thankful people come.

## Let us with a gladsome mind.

This was first published

in John Milton's 1645 edition of his poems,

a paraphrase of Psalm 136,

described as

done by the author at 15 years old.

The original 24 verses serve a double purpose,

giving glory to God

but also charting God's mighty and often very peculiar acts

in the history of Israel.

Some of the phrases are timeless and brilliant

and typically Milton,

such as 'let us blaze his name abroad,'

let's set the world on fire with his Gospel,

and his description of the stars as the moon's

'spangled sisters bright'

veritable diamonds in the night sky.

Other verses catch the eagerness if not the immaturity of

youth,

and are beautifully quaint,

such as the description of the Exodus:

'The floods stood like walls of glass,

while the Hebrew bands did pass.'

or the conquest of the Promised Land:

'And large-limbed Og he did subdue,

With all his over-hardy crew.'

The poem brilliantly takes up the Renaissance motif

where classical deities are subordinated to the Christian

God.

The horned moon and her spangled sisters

is a clear reference to the goddess Diana and her maidens,  
with the golden tressed sun alluding to Apollo.

The tune is called Monkland,  
the village in Hereford

whose squire and vicar,

Henry Baker,

paraphrased

Milton's magnificent poem

with his rather jejune

*Praise, O praise our God and King,*

which according the hymn writer Percy Dearmer,

'reduced it to the libretto level.'

Baker used tune first composed by John Antes,

a Moravian minister,

which was then arranged by John Wilkes,

Monkland's organist.

Milton's irregular versification

makes it difficult to sing,

in hymn books the metre is marked as 7.7.7.7 (peculiar),

a problem Milton himself maybe acknowledges

in his penultimate verse:

'Let us, therefore, warble forth,

his mighty majesty and worth!'

## **We plough the fields and scatter.**

This German harvest hymn was first published in a portrait of country life, called Paul Endmanns' Feast, in Der Wandsbecker Bote in 1782, Hanover's equivalent to our Malton Gazette & Herald! Paul Endmann's neighbours cheerily sing a peasant song consisting of 4-line verses at his harvest party: verse 3 begins with "Wir Plugen"

The present version of the hymn combines verses 3/5, 7/9, 10/13 into eight line verses with a refrain and was translated into English in 1861,

embracing a strong rhythm and boldness of speech.

Elizabeth Gaskell's 1862 novel,

'Six Weeks at Heppenheim'

features a lovely scene

where villagers gather around the local pastor

to sing the hymn bare-headed at the grape harvest.

The sheer hard slog of harvest's manual labour,

prior to welcome mechanisation

is injected with a religious significance,

especially with the lovely refrain,

'All good gifts around us

are sent from heaven above,

so thank the Lord, O thank the Lord,

for all his love.'

This refrain forms a happy moment

in the musical Godspel,

where the disciples gather around Jesus

like happy harvesters gathering around their master

in a rural Galilee.

Normally though, it's not the Godspel tune we use,

but the popular and somewhat boisterous Wir Plugen.

## **For the beauty of the earth**

First published in 1864,  
the composer Folliot Pierpoint  
is supposed to have been inspired  
by the panoramic view of a hill  
above his native bath  
to pen this sensual hymn of praise and thanks  
for the created world.  
Pierpoint beautifully links heaven and earth,  
the physical and the spiritual,  
flowers of earth which are veritable buds of heaven,  
glories pending an even greater splendour in the life  
beyond.

The refrain,

‘Christ our God to thee we raise

this our sacrifice of praise’

obviously draws on the post-communion prayer

in the 1662 Prayer Book,

which originally formed the latter part

of the prayer of consecration:

‘We thy humble servants entirely desire thy fatherly

goodness

mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and

thanksgiving...’

‘Christ our God to thee we raise

this our sacrifice of praise’

Virtually every recent hymnal features

a different version of this refrain,

toning down both its Christology

and Eucharistic significance.

Yet Pierpoint intended the hymn to be one which combined both praise of creation and praise of communion.

All worship is either Eucharistic or a preface or a footnote to it.

Eucharist in Greek simply means thanksgiving, and as we give thanks to God for all his gifts inevitably we focus on his greatest gift to us in Jesus his son.

The Eucharist takes our harvest, wheat made into bread, grapes made into wine, all our hard labour and graft on the land

and offers it to God.

God gives that offering back to us transformed into the life force of his son, the bread becomes his broken body, the wine becomes his blood, a veritable transfusion of Christ to enthuse us as his disciples. Hence the prayer the priest prays before the great celebration, 'Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation. For of your goodness we have this bread to offer, food from the earth and work of human hands. May it become for us the bread of heaven, the body of Christ.' Harvest Home indeed,

with heaven's barns

our harvest destination and goal.