

Helmsley and Advent

Preached on Advent Sunday 2003

The ancient notebook, bound in dusty leather, written in longhand, had laid hidden in a paper carrier bag in my study for aeons. Until Advent 2003, when I opened its pages, the hairs brittle on the back of my neck ...

It all started innocently enough with a letter to the Editor of the Church Times about the anti-Semitic tendencies lurking in 'Lo he comes with clouds descending.' Driven to study the hymn, I realised how the deeply wailing at the true Messiah in the 2nd verse, so offensive to modern-day Jews, was an allusion to Revelation 1:7, itself highly dependent on Matthew 24:30 and Luke 23:27 & 48, where the inhabitants of Jerusalem wail and beat their breasts when they realise what they have done to their Lord.

I recalled my time in the Council of Christians and Jews, an organisation which seeks to reconcile the two faiths, how so often we came to the ultimate Catch 22 conclusion: if only we could scrap the New Testament, we Christians and Jews would get on famously. Of course, the hymn already looms somewhat here, set as it is to the tune, HELMSLEY.

From time to time I receive earnest enquiries about the connection, and during Advent lost friends make contact, flattering me that singing 'Lo he comes...' had reminded them of my existence.

However unpalatable the deep wailing of those who pierced and nailed him to the tree might be, the original was far worse, penned by Moravian minister John Cennick in 1752. This was quickly honed by Charles Wesley, who wisely omitted Cennick's excesses, including 'Countless trumpets blow before his bloody sign,' and 'Welcome, welcome, bleeding Lamb!' After all, you can't have mantras which sound more like the drunken chants performed at a Rugby victory dinner spoiling respectable hymnody.

As the words mutated, so did the tune, first appearing in 1765 in Wesley's *Select Hymns with Tunes Annexed*, where it is named OLIVERS after its composer. By 1769 a similar tune, published by Martin Madan, is called HELMSLEY. In the intervening years, a certain Richard Conyers, Vicar of Helmsley, had published *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns, from various authors: for the use of serious and devout Christians of every denomination*,

and it may well be that Conyers,
inebriated by his hymnbook's snazzy title,
forced the name change.

'Just a minute,' I thought,
as bells rang in the back of my mind
'Didn't I have a book lurking somewhere
which contained Conyers' memoirs?'
As I laboured over the arachnid handwriting
I discovered a local boy made good,
tediously good to coin Saki's phrase,
who was loved by everyone, high and low.
None other than
how-sweet-the-name-of-Jesus-sounds John Newton
described him as
perhaps the most exemplary, indefatigable
and successful parochial minister in the kingdom.
Top that!
But Conyers' golden ministry was brought up short
when Luke 6:26 suddenly hit him between the eyes,
'Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!'
This was followed by an Evangelical conversion
of Pauline proportions,
whose main consequence was that
all men no longer spoke well of this minister,
who now denied his former gospel
and encouraged all his hearers
to invest in the sacrificial blood of the Lamb
as their only route to salvation.

His bold Methodist preaching
before Archbishop Drummond of York
during his visitation at Malton in 1764

is caught by his hagiographer:

'During his discourse
the beclouded countenance of his clerical hearers
indicated that the important doctrine
of salvation by grace,
which Conyers proved and enforced,
was extremely offensive,
and when the service was concluded
they treated him with the most pointed disrespect.
As he was in the street
in conversation with several farmers,
the Archbishop advanced and accosted him as follows:
"Well, Conyers, you have given us a fine sermon!"

"I'm glad," he replied,
'That it meets the approbation of Your Grace."

"Approbation, approbation,"
the Archbishop exclaimed,
"If you go on preaching such stuff
you will drive all your parish mad.
Were you to inculcate the morality of Socrates
it would do more good than canting about the new birth."
His Grace immediately walked off
without waiting for a reply.'

But Conyers went on preaching such stuff,
and at one service
gathered a legendary 1800 communicants.
Quite a crowd for Helmsley's 300 capacity church!
When he announced
he was to leave Helmsley for Deptford in 1776,

many devoted parishioners threatened
to lay themselves along the road,
so that his carriage could only depart
over their dead bodies.

His memoirs record:

'To avoid the confusion (!)
which he apprehended might accompany his departure,
he thought it most prudent to leave the place
at the dead of night.'

When he died ten years later,

John Newton preached
a 7000 word sermon at his funeral.

People have been awarded a higher degree
for writing less!

Newton describes his friend in Christ-like terms,
unequaled and inimitable,

'Did not our hearts burn within us
when Conyers talked with us on the road?'

Yet his ministry was immensely costly.

Newton points out that
apparently martyrs on the rack
suffered less

than Conyers did at the prospect of preaching.

A stranger in the congregation,
especially one he suspected was ordained,
almost rendered him speechless.

When prevailed upon

to preach at the Archdeacon's visitation at Dartford,
for the first few minutes in the pulpit,
Conyers was driven blind with terror.

A terror I could only match

with an Advent shiver

as I realised how long ago

giants deeply wailed in Helmsley,

before whom I am a mere croaking grasshopper.

But maybe it's good to shiver in Advent

and to realise how puny we mere grasshoppers are
in the light of Christ's coming day.

And maybe it's good to realise how Christ

can come unexpectedly to one person

and a tiny verse from the Gospels

like a stick of dynamite

can devastatingly explode his complacent world.

Yea, Amen, let all adore thee,

high on thine eternal throne:

Saviour, take the power and glory,

Claim the Kingdom for thine own:

O come quickly!

Everlasting God, come down!