

A Season of Song

A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 31 January 2021

*Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free,
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.*

by James Montgomery (1812)
(*Singing the Faith*, 228)

The son of Moravian missionaries brought up in Yorkshire, James Montgomery knew his bible and this hymn is an extended re-interpretation of Psalm 72, with echoes of Isaiah and the inaugural speech of Jesus in Nazareth (Luke 4).

Today we come to the end of this series. It seems a long while since we were welcoming the beginning of Advent 2020 with:

*O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.*

Now as Epiphany 2021 makes way for another season of prayer we celebrate the life of the Immanuel and hail him as the Messiah, the Lord's Special One. Jesus is a revelation. He lifts the veil on the nature of God. He discloses the Alpha and Omega; the One who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow:

*He comes, with succour speedy,
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;*

This is the God whom we worship each Sunday morning. Not a God of our personal choices but a God who steps out into life as it is and inspires other voices:

*Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom.
Freedom is coming, Oh yes I know...*

*Oh justice, Oh justice, Oh justice.
Justice is coming, Oh yes I know...
Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus.
Jesus is coming, Oh yes I know.*

(A traditional South African song, *Singing the Faith*, 697)

For now, and for all, Jesus is our Epiphany. He discloses what is deepest in the life of all things. He can bring kings to their knees and bring the earth alive with a touch of spring. He is the bringer of delight and kindness.

*Love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth.*

But how do we sing this Lord's song in such times as we are living through? That is the question that is always asked of God's people (Psalm 137:4). Are we the fools that realists must turn their backs on? Or does the Lord of Epiphany reveal what is the true reality? God is working his purpose out, and we are called to believe that in every season of human experience and act accordingly.

James Montgomery was not a fantasist. He was a radical newspaper man and spoke out against slavery, the ill-treatment of children in Victorian Britain, and the oppression meted out by the privileged. For that he was put in prison twice. Yet at the end of his life the Wesleyan chapel in Nether Edge Sheffield was named after him and the parish church had a stained-glass window made to his memory.

And in that place of prayer this hymn would be sung:

*to him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend,
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.*

For, without prayer the Christian cannot abide in that kingdom or see its coming, as Montgomery wrote a few years later in one of his most thoughtful hymns:

*Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
uttered or unexpressed...
The burden of sigh...
The falling of a tear...
The upward glancing of the eye
when none but God is near.*

(James Montgomery, *Singing the Faith*, 529)

As Andy wrote recently to us all:

*'Sometimes prayer is little more than an intention,
as part of a life lived with God -
where God is present in every moment –
like a familiar friend where sometimes words are unnecessary.
Even our feelings that we 'should be praying more'
are part of our relationship with God.
The voice of prayer is never silent'.*

(Andy Murphy, Pastoral letter, 13th Jan 2021)

Such prayer does not remove from us the responsibility of action. It transforms how we look at the world, and becomes the cause of any action we do in the name of David's Greater Son.

Prayer:

God of all prayer,
expand our hearts and minds
by a vision of your Son,
the Epiphany Christ,
so that we may serve him in your world
with confidence and joy.
Amen.

John Rackley, January 2021