

A Season of Song
A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 24 January 2021

*In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

John Oxenham (1852-1941)
(*Singing the Faith*, 685)

This hymn deserves to be in any Epiphany selection with its central theme of 'all one in Christ'. It can be thought of as the outcome of the return journey of the Magi. Those travellers from the East began the unravelling of who Jesus truly is. They acknowledged him as their destiny. They went back to their homeland having discovered the one who had met their longings. He is their Epiphany.

John O'Donohue writing in *Eternal Echoes* could have been thinking of these wise men and all search for Truth wherever it may be:

*Blessed be the longing that brought you here
and quickens your soul with wonder.
May you have courage to befriend your eternal longing.
May a secret providence guide your thought and shelter your feelings.
May your mind inhabit your life with the same sureness with which your body belongs to
the world.
May the sense of something absent enlarge your life.
May your soul be as free as the ever-new waves of the sea.
May you succumb to the danger of growth.
May you live in the neighbourhood of wonder.
May you ever be embraced in the kind circle of God.*

The hymn describes what it means to be part of that 'circle of God'.

William J Dunkerly originally from Manchester had travelled widely. He wrote his hymns and poems under the name of John Oxenham who was an Elizabethan explorer. He originally composed this hymn as part of a libretto to be sung at an exhibition for the London Missionary Society with the theme 'The Orient in London' in 1908.

It challenges the assertion of Rudyard Kipling's famous lines "Oh, the East is east and West is West and never the twain shall meet", which was popular at the time. For Kipling it would be the judgement seat of God which would reduce our distinctiveness to nothing; that or a fight between

two strong men from any background! But Dunkerly had a very different world-view. There is a wonderful breadth of vision in his hymn.

This Sunday concludes the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**. This hymn emphasises that to be 'in Christ' is to discover the unity of all peoples. 'All Christ-like souls are one in him' and 'all the human race' are called to see in each other 'children of God'.

Those distinctions that count for so much in this world such as 'east and west' and to quote Paul "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28) are no longer the defining principals of identity for "all are one in Christ" so:

*In Christ now meet both east and west,
In him meet south and north.*

The author has thought deeply about what it means to have this oneness and realises it challenges and removes the significance of all the ways in which we turn our distinctiveness into difference and then too often make the short step into prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

*In him shall true hearts everywhere
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord
close-binding humankind.*

Dunkerly certainly didn't use the word 'humankind' and spoke of 'brothers of the faith' in the first line. These are alterations born out of contemporary insight. In his original version he was writing as a man of his time. But, like Paul, he was embracing a vision of human oneness whose implications had to be worked out in the daily encounters with cultural and political choices and as a result language changes. A hundred years later we guard against words that are either sexist or racist.

The vision of being One which came down at Christmas for such a brief time has to be born again as much now as in the first decade of the last century or the last decades of the first Elizabethan era. John Oxenham was a privateer who raided Spanish strongholds in Central America and was executed by the Spanish in 1580!

A strange choice for a 'hymn-writer'. Perhaps Dunkerly just liked travel!

Prayer:

God of all peoples;
Remove from us all that
breeds the fear of diversity
and help us welcome
the gifts of others who would be strangers
were they not our sisters and brothers in Christ.
Amen.