

“When I survey the wondrous cross” - a study for Lent.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the Tree
Then I am dead to all the Globe,
And all the Globe is dead to me

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Sermon from Sunday 18 March 2018. Tixover and Morcott.

Isaac Watts, the 18th century hymn writer, was brought up a Congregationalist. At the age of 16 he subjected to the dull hymns that were sung in church. His father told him to write his own. And he did – a whole hymnal full! He broke with tradition in two ways. Firstly, he abandoned the bleak metrical psalms and secondly he made his hymns identifiable with humanity. He introduced the personal pronoun, “I”, which we find in the first line of this hymn. So passion and feeling were introduced to our devotions.

Verse 1: Lent is an appropriate time to reflect upon the place of the cross in our lives and in the pattern of our faith.. Watts talks about the ‘wondrous ‘cross. How are we saved by Christ on the cross? Is it through a cosmic deal with the devil or by the example of Christ’s dedication, discipline and joy? Or is it a combination of these ways? I rather hope it is by example. That is given by God but we have to take up the challenge ourselves. It is a partnership but it is still ‘wondrous’, a mystery. It is a mystery seen in the lives of so many folk past and present as they break through that painful barrier of selfishness into a greater freedom and joy.

Verse 2: Boasting is a very human pastime! We all do it! Power, popularity and possessions are three great human boasts which Christ rejected in the wilderness, (St. Matthew chapter 4). We have to put them in their rightful place as we order our lives, whether we be followers of Christ or some lesser god.

The Jewish Tradition valued tithing: giving to the Temple a tenth of ones disposable income. That tradition has been valued too by The Christian Church. Today, the Church of England's General Synod encourages us to give 5% of our disposable income to and through the church and 5% to other causes. Our churches would be so different if that were to happen but that is what we must aspire to! I still aspire to it and the effort brings us so much joy and freedom! As one of my previous colleagues used to say from the pulpit, *'Shrouds don't have pockets!'*

Verse 3: The wounds of Christ are inescapable. They compare to our own aches, pains and frustrations perhaps caused by abuse, service or sacrifice. The sorrow of Christ comes through in this verse, as it did in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. Here is human sorrow but in this verse it is mingled with something else: divine love. Divine love is not supposed to count the cost. But does it? Does God suffer with Christ on the cross? It's a contentious point in theological circles.

Remembrance Sunday gives us a shadow of that costly love and service, as does the example of the police officer in Salisbury last week, poisoned as he attended to the stricken Russian ex-spy and his daughter.

Verse 4: The Humanity of the thorns and the fading colour in the dying body of Jesus hits us in this verse. This was too much for the Victorians who regularly dropped this verse from their devotions. Yet Christianity is the most physical of all religions! How then do we conduct ourselves as Christians? How do we 'die to the world' as St. Paul wrote in Galatians 6.14 – the verse which has inspired the writing of this hymn? We die to the world in the waters of our baptism and rise to Christ as we are drawn out of the waters. How do we exhibit signs of this new life in Christ?

Verse 5: Demanding Love is what God does not do. Rather, he invites us to participate in his life through the example of his generosity and the activity of his Son. If I had all the possessions in the world, they couldn't repay the generosity of God in Christ.

William Temple, the Archbishop of York was a much valued missionary in the 1930's. In his own diocese of Manchester he used to spend the summer conducting beach missions in Blackpool. In 1931 he led the Oxford University Mission. He chose this hymn by Isaac Watts as the climax of the final night. Over 2000 students were crammed into the University church of St. Mary. This hymn was 'roared out'. Before the last verse Temple stopped the singing and asked the congregation to read the words before they sang it

“If you mean them with all your hearts, sing them as loud as you can.

If you don’t mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little,

***and want to mean them more, sing them very softly.”* (Iremonger, ‘William Temple’, p. 378)**

They were whispered.

(I once met an RC Bishop who was present on that evening as a student. It was a moment which changed his life.) May it change yours too.

Amen.