

Singing our Prayers

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Nancy Turner Jones at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, July 5, 2009.

Grace and peace to you on this 4th of July weekend, a time we celebrate our freedom and independence, with hotdogs, fireworks and flag waving. Today we see Jesus in this 6th chapter of Mark, struggling in his hometown, not having so much fun, sapped of his strength because of what – a wall of disbelief from friends and family. Or maybe it is their disbelief that incapacitated **them** - creating this un-miracle story. And so Jesus declares his own independence and turns to equip the disciples, enabling them to do what he could not accomplish at home. The gist of it is a familiar story – families, communities, or even churches that do not get along or do not appreciate their own. Our denomination covers a wide array of political and theological territory – we call ourselves a big tent church. And like our country, there are voices – calling us forward that often get lost in the noise of dissent, voices of truth drowned out. That being said, whether we are talking about our church or our nation, people of good character and principle may disagree. People of conviction and passion may reach different conclusions. I, like many of you, live in the hope that we can tone down the rhetoric and show more civility and respect in the myriad ways to express our faith, our trust in God and our patriotism.

Music has been an important voice of expression throughout our history, not just in military parades, but with fervent prayers in song. Today I would like to lift up some of those voices, voices that have brought memorial and remembrance, verses that have buoyed our spirits, and brought comfort to so many. Why, because lines of familiar hymns often leap out at us, catch us unaware, and stick in our throats. Sometimes those moments are so gripping we cannot sing, we cannot even pray. But those words move us, inspire us and they stay with us – even when other memories grow very dim. So today I invite you to open your hymnal and follow along with me – sing if you will with gusto. Add your voice to these prayers of hope in God's presence for a people, a church, and a nation.

My Country, tis of thee, (717, Stanzas 1 & 4) is one of five National Songs included in our 1982 hymnal. If you turn to page 716, you will notice that both God Bless our Native Land and the following hymn, My Country Tis of Thee are both set to the tune America. Now you might think that a tune named “America” would be an American tune, but the origin of the tune is surrounded by speculation and even myth and has a long history and claim – not just to America, but to at least 20 nations. Those of you with origins in the British Isles would recognize it as God Save the Queen and first published in honor of George II and given the title National Anthem. It has been ascribed to various English composers, including Henry Purcell. Parts of it have been found in Gregorian Chant and a 17th century Scottish carol. French critics claim its origin with Jean Baptiste Lully, where it was sung by three hundred young women to King Louis XIV, at St. Cyr, and then adapted by Handel in 1721. The hymn is also widely used in Germany and until 1833, the Russian national anthem was set to this tune. Beethoven even wrote piano variations on the melody.

The text is entitled **God Bless Our Native Land** and comes from a German patriotic song translated by a Unitarian Universalist in the early 19th century. On the following page set to the same tune, you find **My Country Tis of Thee**, which is also a translation of a German hymn by Samuel Francis Smith, a seminary student at Andover Seminary in 1831. Like so many seminary students, he was struggling to make ends meet and applied his creativity to writing hymn texts, in this case for his friend Lowell Mason. As the story goes, he wrote on scraps of paper and finished within thirty minutes a poem he titled “America”.

Eternal Father Strong to Save – (608) 579 - 4 verses

In the century and a half since “eternal father strong to save” was first composed, it has come into widespread use by both Britain's Royal Navy and the US Navy; hence the name Royal Navy Hymn in England and Navy Hymn in the US. William Whiting of England composed the poem in 1860 for a student of his who was soon to sail to America – still a very treacherous journey. The tune was composed in 1861 by another Englishman, Rev.

John Baccus Dykes, an Anglican clergyman, giving it the name "Melita". "Melita" is an archaic term for Malta, an ancient seafaring nation and the site of a shipwreck involving the Apostle Paul mentioned in Acts of the Apostles (chapters 27-28). And so both the text and the tune were written in prayer of God's keeping of those in peril on the seas.

Because of the popularity and meaning of this hymn for this who travel far from home not only in the navy, but in the various branches of service, the 1940 Episcopal hymnal altered three verses of the hymn to include travel on the land in the second verse and in the air in the third verse. Finally, with the publication of the 1982 hymnal, and because space travel had become a reality, the final verse includes praise from space, air, land, and sea. (579)

Abide With Me – 662 – Stanzas 1,4

Our next hymn was inspired by the words of the two disciples met by Jesus on the road to Emmaus; Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. It is said the author, an English clergyman Henry Francis Lyte composed the text after a visit he paid to an old friend, who was in his last illness. The dying man kept repeating the phrase, Abide with Me and the words so impressed the young pastor that he constructed a set of verses around them and then completed the final verses shortly before his own death from tuberculosis. Abide with me, is popular across many denominations and was said to be a favorite of King George V and Mahatma Gandhi. In addition to being commonly sung at Christian funerals it was sung at both the wedding of King George VI and that of his daughter, Queen Elizabeth II.

Surprisingly, it is an important English national hymn, always sung before the kick-off of both the Rugby League Challenge and "The Cup" the Football Association Cup Final – the English soccer equivalent to our American Super bowl. One commentator wrote of the goosebumps he felt with 100,000 people singing this hymn. This hymn is often used internationally for natural disaster memorials and other tragedies. I have always been drawn to the fourth stanza which carries such hope for God's presence in our life and our death. Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies; Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The Battle Hymn of the Republic LEVAS #226 – stanzas 1 and 4 only

At the conclusion of the memorable service of prayer and remembrance at the National Cathedral in Washington DC on Friday, September 14, 2001 the congregation stood to sing Julia Ward Howe's defiant hymn, The Battle Hymn of the Republic. This hymn first appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in 1862, during the Civil War. Howe and her husband Samuel, prominent Boston abolitionists, were invited to Washington by President Lincoln. The Howes visited a Union Army camp in Virginia, just across the Potomac. There they heard the men singing a ditty, a tune picked by both the North and South – one in admiration of John Brown, one in celebration of his death "John Brown's body lies a 'mouldering in his grave.'" (John Brown had been hanged in 1859 for leading an attempted slave insurrection at Harper's Ferry). A clergyman at the camp, aware that occasionally Julia Howe wrote poetry, suggested that she craft new verses more appropriate to the Civil War effort to the same rousing tune. Staying at the Willard Hotel in Washington the night of November 18, 1861, Howe awoke with the words of the song in her mind and in near darkness, so as not to wake her children, she penned the verses. Howe's Battle Hymn of the Republic was first published on the front page of The Atlantic Monthly of February 1862 which paid her a fee of four dollars. The verses quickly caught on as the rallying anthem of the Union troops and sung frequently throughout the rest of the Civil War.

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make all free,
While God is marching on.*