

“Thine be the glory”

All of us have cause to be grateful to Edmond Budry, because he could not get that tune out of his head: that tune we have just sung.

Edmond Budry was a Swiss minister who was devastated by the death of his wife in 1896. For months afterwards he was very low; but he began to notice that, when he was not careful, Handel’s tune kept appearing unasked in his head and he would be humming it out loud. Gradually, words began to form, and as the words began to form he found his faith growing strong. His faith, his Easter faith, growing so strong that he picked up his pen and began to write. We owe the hymn “Thine be the glory” to Edmond Budry’s conviction of the power of God after the heart-break of the loss of his wife. For many it has become the hymn of choice for funerals: a hymn which almost shouts defiance in the face of the worst that death can do.

Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son.

Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won.

On this Easter Day we are going to look at Budry’s hymn, which we have just sung. But let’s be honest with ourselves as we do it. Most of us pretend that our faith in God’s triumph over death is more robust than it really is. Most of us have as many questions and doubts and fears about death and heaven and resurrection as we have convictions and confidences. We do no favours to anyone when we posture to believe more than we do. Last month Richard Holloway, Edinburgh’s favourite intellectual and mine, published his latest book “Waiting for the last bus”. In it he reflects on death and faith. He writes *The Church is in danger of becoming a club for strict believers; a club with no room for doubt, nuance or “the wistful children of unbelief”*. So as we look at Budry’s hymn, we won’t deceive ourselves: sometimes nearly all of us

struggle. But we might find that our own faith grows stronger as we are nourished by his faith growing stronger after the devastation of his wife's death.

Now, please look up Hymn 419

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son;
endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave clothes where thy body lay.
Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the vict'ry, thou o'er death hast won.*

The first verse is about yesterday. It is about history. The story of that first Easter Day. They arrived at the place where Jesus had been buried and what did they find? angels in bright raiment, folded grave-clothes. That is not quite how it is described in the Easter story we heard this morning. St Mark has a young man at the grave, but no angels. John has grave-clothes, but no angels. Matthew and Luke have angels, but no grave-clothes. The Easter morning stories in the four gospels differ quite noticeably.

Both unbelievers and believers are reassured by these discrepancies among the gospel writers about Easter morning. For those who want to be sceptical the differences prove that the stories are made up. If there was a genuine account of what actually happened at the tomb of Jesus on the Sunday then every gospel writer would tell the same story. When witnesses disagree it proves that they are lying. Believers, on the other hand, find in these discrepancies signs of authenticity. Far from indicating genuine reporting, identical accounts would be sure signs of collusion in an invented tale. No-one who was repeating a lie would leave room for difference. Forty, fifty years after the events, when the gospel writers are putting their stories down in pen and ink they are remembering what has been told down the generations by different

groups of people with different interests in different places. The details are different – as you would expect. Yet every story tells the same central story: Jesus, who was dead, is dead no more. They all say “Christ is risen: he is risen indeed”

*Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
Lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the Church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing;
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.
Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the vict'ry, thou o'er death hast won.*

The second verse is about today. It is about our own experience. Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb. Right from the start, that was what they said and what they believed. What excited them was not that the tomb might have been empty: what excited them was the belief that Jesus was alive. St Paul never mentions the empty tomb. But again and again he tells that Jesus, dead and dead no more, met him on the Damascus road.

Maybe you're not good at that kind of language. But that does not mean the experience of meeting Christ has never been yours. In the kindness of strangers; in the plea of a homeless woman; at the communion table; walking on the West Sands at St Andrews. It is a great mystery how he might come to us, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Perhaps the most famous words in theology in the last century are by the great musician and missionary Albert Schweitzer :

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

*No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of life;
life is naught without thee; aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.
Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the vict'ry, thou o'er death hast won.*

The last verse is about tomorrow. It is about commitment. It is about finding the courage we need to cope with all that will be thrown at us. Last Thursday in Greenbank Church Rev John Cameron said that we should pay more attention to dogged Christians. We ministers tend to make a fuss of Christians who have spectacular talents or spectacular energy or spectacular devotion: but we should honour more than we do those who are dogged Christians. Those who just get on with it, those who play the cards they have been dealt, those who just do not give up. It is their prayer that we sing in verse three. Give us the faith, the courage, the strength, the commitment which will bring us through the days and years ahead; and in the end bring us safe through it all to the share the risen life of the risen Jesus himself.

Edmond Budry wrote this hymn in the darkness of bereavement: and it is a hymn to strengthen the broken hearts of bereaved people. But it is a hymn for us all, for all of us will die. "Bring us safe through Jordan" is a way of saying be with us in our own hour of death. The message of the hymn is that Easter is about the death of Jesus and the rising of Jesus. It is about the death and rising of Jesus and those we love. And it is about the death and rising of Jesus and our own destiny.

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*