

HYMN INTERPRETATION

Routley: Surprised by Joy

JAMES HART BRUMM

As I move from the book review pages of THE HYMN where my assignment was quite clear, to the Hymn Interpretation page, where the task seems a bit less so, I've been searching for a direction. I am a text writer myself, so other writers' texts fascinate me. As a pastor, I have the view that most good hymns since Watts are actually metrical sermons.

But that has to do with where I am coming from, not where I am going. As a text writer, I am also a text reader. Unfortunately, I read many texts that I do not get to sing, usually because they do not find themselves attached to a tune that catches on with parishioners. I have decided to devote these next four "Hymn Interpretations" to hymns that I think need to be read, sung, and appreciated more.

I begin with a hymn by Erik Routley. It is my great fortune to count myself among his many students during those last few years before his death in 1982. He was one of the first to confirm my calling to a ministry of the Word and Sacrament, he persuaded me to stay in the Reformed Church in America, and he gave me reasons to love and spend my life studying hymns. I remember his wife, Margaret, once telling me that he considered himself a more adept composer of tunes than writer of texts. That confuses me, because I find his texts to be more congregationally accessible than his tunes.

In the summer of 1984 John Kemp led a Monday evening hymn festival at Westminster Choir College, continuing a custom begun by Routley during his tenure there. It was then and there that I first encountered Routley's text "Surprised by joy no song can tell." Less than a year later, the congregation sang it when I married my wife, Kathleen. Both times it was sung to the Percy Buck tune GONEFALON ROYAL. I still have a copy of that setting in Routley's inimitable manuscript, with interlined text typed by his famous dyslexic typewriter. I have also seen a vocal solo setting of this text using the tune O WALY WALY,¹ arranged by Dr. Routley himself.

Given these two admirable settings for this text, both by Routley's hand, I find the use of MELCOMBE for this text in *Rejoice in the Lord* (#519)² rather unfortunate and difficult to explain. Unfortunate because the tune makes the text walk rather than dance or sing. Difficult to explain because Routley used to say that Samuel Sebastian Wesley, the tune's composer, may have been a giant of his era, but that even a molehill would look like a mountain when all the surrounding landscape was a prairie. Brian Wren's "When love is found" has probably filled the role of a suitable wedding text for O WALY WALY, but another tune needs to be found for Routley's text.

"Surprised by joy" was written for a former parishioner at St. James' United Reformed Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, shortly after Routley had left that parish for the United States in 1975. It was the first hymn he wrote after beginning the North American chapter of his career, teaching at Westminster Choir College. While I know of no direct evidence that he borrowed the first line of his text from the title of C.S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography, I do know that Routley was a great admirer of Lewis. He quoted Lewis in lectures and sermons that I heard, wrote of him reverently in *Christian Hymns Observed*,³ and composed his tune KILNS for Lewis' poem "Now that night is creeping," which Routley insisted "was undoubtedly a hymn" from "(t)hat prince of hymn-haters."⁴

But why quote Lewis? What, exactly, was the point, when Lewis never writes of marriage in that book, and Routley never writes of conversion in his hymn? The point has a subtle brilliance often evident in Routley's discourse, a brilliance and subtlety to which the rest of us merely aspire: The "joy" about which Lewis writes is not an end in itself but a sign pointing to the larger reality of God at work in his life. That is the key to this hymn. The love of a new husband and wife which is celebrated in a wedding is also a sign of God's larger reality, God's love that is "beyond an angel's mind" and yet given to mortals. The wedding itself is a sign, in the fullest Johannine sense, a real and miraculous event that points to an even larger reality of God, of how our Maker wishes to work in each and every life.

The third stanza alludes quite clearly to I Corinthians 13:13 (and now faith, hope, and love abide . . .), but then makes use of Hebrews 1:3 (Christ is the exact imprint of God's being) to open up the larger meaning of the famous Corinthian passage. The love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things, "giving and forgiving all," is, in the original Greek, *agape*, the love of Christ. Having done this, Routley neatly ties the new creation and the new Adam to the original creation and the first Adam by pointing out that, as a result of Christ's living, selfless love, "two are inseparably one" ("and they become one flesh," Genesis 2:24). Routley was a great fan of Charles Wesley's ability to saturate hymns with biblical allusions and imagery,⁵ and he sought to emulate that in his own hymn writing.

The fourth and fifth stanzas do not appear in any of the published musical settings of this hymn (they are found at #139 in *Our Lives Be Praise*). The most obvious allusion here is to Jesus' appearance at the Cana wedding (John 2:1-11). Of course, an exegetical view might say that the point of this story as not being about the wedding so much as the sign of resurrection

and new Creation, occurring as it does on “the third day,” and of how abundance and new creation are present wherever Christ is present. Routley expands on that sign to include the classic mission imperative of the Resurrection, to “go and make disciples . . . I am with you always,” found in Matthew 28:20 and referenced in stanza four.

The final two stanzas draw in the famous scriptural love poetry of the Song of Solomon, first with the reference to God’s love which is “strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6) and which makes our love possible. It also opens a new world to us, showing “us, in Christ, what love can dare.” The all-encompassing nature of the marriage commitment, where “our words, our homes, our lives be praise,” is made possible when God’s “banner over us be love” (Song of Solomon 2:4). In some translations; the NRSV reads “his intention towards me was love.” God’s eternal care leads to our eternal praise; the wedding makes both eternal care and eternal praise real in our lives. I often use this final stanza as part of my wedding prayers.

Here is a hymn that glorifies the weddings we celebrate by making us aware of the larger realities of God’s love for us, love that becomes more real in the lives of those being married. It is a hymn that could enhance many of our wedding celebrations with the right tune, and the first of four hymns we shall examine that deserve more of our attention. ❧

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Notes

¹“A Wedding Song,” Hinshaw Music, Inc., 1979, catalogue number HMV-110.

²Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

³Princeton, NJ: Prestige Publications, 1982.

⁴*Our Lives Be Praise: the Hymn Tunes, Carols, and Texts of Erik Routley*, edited by Carlton R. Young, Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990, p. xxvii.

⁵See his chapter on Wesley in *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979.

Surprised by joy no song can tell,
no thought can compass, here we stand
to celebrate eternal love,
to reach for God’s almighty hand.

Beyond an angel’s mind is this,
best gift, alone to mortals given;
the love of parent, lover, friend
brings straight to earth the bliss of heaven.

Faith, hope, and love here come alive;
God’s very being is made known
when, giving and forgiving all,
two are inseparably one.

As by your presence long ago
two simple hearts were cheered and blessed,
so, as we take our hopeful vows,
come, Christ of Cana, honored Guest.

As Guest beloved, as Head revered,
bless us, Lord Christ, not here alone
but, as you promised, constantly
befriend us, hold us, lead us on.

For all this splendor, all this joy
is ours because a Father’s care,
large, generous, patient, strong as death
showed us in Christ what love can dare.

Your banner over us be love;
your grace refresh our traveling days;
your power sustain, your beauty cheer;
our words, our homes, our lives be praise!

Erik Routley, 1976

Words by Erik Routley

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