

HYMN INTERPRETATION

"Tomorrow Christ is coming"

JAMES HART BRUMM

It may seem a little early for Advent and Christmas hymns, except that now is the time when those of us who choose music for worship and those of us who compose hymn tunes are thinking about that season. "Tomorrow Christ is coming," an Advent hymn by Fred Kaan, is worthy of notice in this series of underutilized hymns. The problem here might not be so much the need for a useful, singable tune. *Voices United* (United Church of Canada, 1996) uses LITTLE BADDOW by Cecil Armstrong Gibbs, which works quite nicely, as would AURELIA by Samuel Sebastian Wesley. Doreen Potter composed the tune L'AVENT for its use in the full music edition of *Pilgrim Praise* in the United Kingdom in 1972. Perhaps the right new tune could be helpful, but it isn't necessary.

No, the problem with getting this hymn into the hands and minds and hearts of worshipers is much more a planning and programming issue. The Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle is blessed with a superabundance of hymnody, especially many traditional favorites. In North America, at least, worship planners are under a great deal of pressure to include all of those old favorites in the cycle of Christmas worship (imagine what we might hear if "O come, all ye faithful," "Joy to the world," "Hark! the herald angels sing," "Silent night," or "Come, thou long-expected Jesus," to name but a few, were to be omitted from the cycle one holiday). This creates a double bind for Advent hymnody, because of the additional push in many American congregations to begin singing "Away in a manger" before the Thanksgiving turkey has even grown cold. And so, all too much of our congregational song reflects some homage to a Dickensian past that probably never truly existed—and, even if it did, these old favorites were contemporary hymns then. There are two potential solutions to this problem for worship planners: combine a heaping dose of bravery with our pastoral sensitivity, or plan to preach less and sing more in December.

Once that choice is made, this becomes an excellent piece with which to begin expanding our repertoire. Kaan is a retired minister of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. As a child in the Netherlands, he lived through Nazi occupation during World War II. He moved to England in 1952, and has served as a pastor and as a staff person for the United Reformed Church, the International Congregational Council, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In retirement, he has been freelancing as a hymn-writer, translator, and lecturer. Members of this society

are familiar with his hymns and translations, as well as his stirring keynote address, "Peacemaking through Worship," at the 2001 annual conference in Independence, Missouri (published in *THE HYMN* 53:1, January 2002).

Much of Kaan's writing picks up on the theme of the Church being present in and actively concerned about the world, what Jeremiah would call seeking "the welfare of the city" (Jeremiah 29:7). This is, of course, central to a Reformed understanding of what the Church is called to be. John Calvin was said to be concerned with every aspect of life in Geneva, up to and including the layout of the sewer system, knowing that our faith life doesn't stop at the church doors. So Kaan gives us an Advent hymn that doesn't talk about Christ coming long ago to Bethlehem or someday at the final judgment, but instead tells us that "Tomorrow Christ is coming." There is immediacy and urgency to this text, reminding us that every child merits the same concern as Mary and Joseph's child, and that, in our world, even today, every child risks the same issues of homelessness and poverty that Jesus did. While many are born into relative comfort and safety, these are accidents of circumstance as much as anything else. Even in modern, industrialized, democratic societies, there are huge numbers of children born into families with no certainty of a bed in which to sleep or food to eat. While this hymn was written nearly three decades ago, that sentiment is striking in the economic climate of the past few years, where financial security can be ephemeral at best. Kaan reminds us that "the world is full of darkness," that "the symbols of existence are stable, cross, and tomb"; our societal structures are still more comfortable with discarding, killing, and burying than with nurturing, healing, and rehabilitating. We spend far more on prisons—and do so quite happily—than we do on health care and education.

By the third stanza, Kaan makes the connection between death and birth even more explicit by insisting, "Good Friday falls on Christmas when life is sown as corn." Our Lord Jesus proclaimed the wonderful opportunity in his own death by saying "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains but a single grain" (John 12:24, NRSV), but if we do not allow what Christ did to change how we behave, are we not throwing other lives away for naught? Yet Kaan reminds us that "Jesus Christ is risen and comes again in bread"; we still have an opportunity to change how this works out, to be the Church alive, Christ incarnate in the world, making a difference to other children being born.

Then, in the fourth stanza, Kaan reminds us that this is not only a possibility for us, it is a responsibility,

what we are created for and called to do: "we must make peace on earth." This is a juxtaposition every bit as wonderful as the connection between Good Friday and Christmas or the symmetry of manger, cross, and tomb, but far more subtle. "Peace on earth" is such a common phrase in this season that our minds nearly throw it away, but it is not given here in the context of generic Christmas "comfort and joy" or even in response to wars and rumors of war, but addressing the issues of poverty and hopelessness in large segments of our society. Here again is a strongly Reformed understanding of the world: peace on earth is not possible where socio-economic disparities are allowed to fester. The *Heidelberg Catechism* reminds us that the smallest amount of envy, hatred, or vindictiveness can be the first step toward killing (Answer 105), that all greed is a pointless squandering of God's gifts (Answer 110), and that every good thing we do for one another praises and hallows God's name (Answer 122). If we are leaving some people in abject poverty, we are fostering just the sort of envy, greed, and hatred that lead to war, and we are allowing God's name to be debased, so true peace—with humanity or with God—is impossible.

The promise is that we are not alone in this, but that "we shall find Christ among us as woman, child, or man." That is a measure of hope as well as a call to responsibility. Whatever we do to the least of those around us, we do also to our Lord and Savior. Christmas isn't just a time for a lovely gift, but a time to remember that we have a higher calling, a time for us not only to receive Christ but also to bring him into the world. Ironically, many of those nineteenth-century hymns our parishioners want to sing, with their promises that "Still, through the cloven skies they come," and of bells pealing both loud and deep "God is not dead nor doth (God) sleep," or calls to "with true love and brotherhood each other now embrace," were hymns of social challenge and justice at Christmas before we made them quaint museum pieces. Fred Kaan has given us a hymn to rekindle that Victorian call to discipleship in our own day.

Tomorrow Christ is coming,
as yesterday he came;
a child is born this moment,
we do not know its name.
The world is full of darkness,
again there is no room;
the symbols of existence
are stable, cross, and tomb.

Tomorrow will be Christmas,
the feast of love divine,
but for the nameless millions
the star will never shine.
Still is the census taken
with people on the move;
new infants born in stables
are crying out for love.

There will be no tomorrows
for many a baby born.
Good Friday falls on Christmas
when life is sown as corn.
But Jesus Christ is risen
and comes again in bread
to still our deepest hunger
and raise us from the dead.

Our Lord becomes incarnate
in every human birth.
Created in his image
we must make peace on earth.
God will fulfill his purpose
and this shall be the sign:
we shall find Christ among us
as woman, child, or man.

Fred Kaan, 1966

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