

HYMN INTERPRETATION

JOAN HALMO

"You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd"

Sylvia G. Dunstan

Sylvia G. Dunstan (1955–1993) spent much of her ministerial life serving congregations, working in prison chaplaincy, editing *Gathering*—a worship resource publication—and doing committee work for the United Church of Canada, in which she was an ordained minister. Dunstan's hymns have been published in two collections¹ and numerous hymnals; among the best known is this text, which she originally named "Christus Paradox."

The term "paradox" is defined in Webster's dictionary as a statement that is apparently self-contradictory, but that may be true in fact. For Christians, paradox is at the heart of faith, for Jesus Christ, whose life seems to have been defeated by death, ultimately triumphs in resurrection. The sign of this paradox—the cross—is the central symbol of Christianity.

In her hymn, Dunstan assembles some of the paradoxical images and messages of the scriptures. "Lamb of God" is John the Baptist's description of Jesus Christ at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 1:36), and "Lamb" is the name for the Victorious One (Rev. 5:6 ff) in the Book of Revelation. This term also recalls the suffering servant of Isaiah, the "lamb led to the slaughter-house," silent, not opening his mouth (Isaiah 53:7). Yet, the Lamb is himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18), who delights in finding a single lost sheep (Luke 15:4–7). The hymn's first line alone demonstrates how richly layered are the complexes of thought and theology within Dunstan's text. Further into stanza 1, Christ is addressed as prince, royalty of the line of David, who has inaugurated a kingdom of peace (Isaiah 9:5–6), and who at the same time has assumed the condition of a slave, emptied of self, even unto accepting death on a cross (Philippians 2:6–8). It is he who brings both peace and the sword which judges and divides humanity (Matthew 10:34–36). Christ and his challenging message remain perennially the object of scorn and of deepest aspiration and desire!

Stanza 2 juxtaposes the mountain of dazzling light and the hill of ignominious crucifixion. As the Synoptic gospels put it, Jesus is transfigured and converses with the great ancestors of faith, Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1–8, Mark: 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36); there, Jesus' closest disciples glimpse him "shining in eternal glory." Still, before the mountain's

YOU, LORD, ARE BOTH LAMB AND SHEPHERD

You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer
of the way you took and gave.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain,
stripped of might upon the cross,
shining in eternal glory,
beggared by a soldier's toss.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us,
sit in power at God's side.
You, who preach a way that's narrow,
have a love that reaches wide.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and victory.
Worthy still your peace and strife.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, who are our death and life.

—SYLVIA G. DUNSTAN

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promise can be fulfilled, there will be Calvary, where Jesus is stripped of might and dignity, and devoid of most basic needs: clothing—casually divided by the soldiers—and a little water to quench thirst. How irreconcilable seem the two dimensions of this stanza: assurance of victory, entwined with an excruciating price, one from which our human nature recoils. Gift and cost, inseparable.

An Easter gospel pericope is the backdrop for stanza 3. Alluding to the Lucan story of the stranger and Jesus' disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke

24:13–35), Dunstan depicts Jesus as a companion walking beside his people on the ordinary paths of life, day by day. She contrasts the unknown figure of the journey with the risen Christ, who is often shown in Christian art as enthroned at the right hand of God. The way preached by this same Jesus is so narrow, declares the gospel, that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a person rich in things of this world to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:25). At the same time, the love of Jesus Christ is without bounds, encompassing beyond human telling. Through all, the risen Jesus accompanies his pilgrim people, ever their way and truth (John 14:6).

The proclamation of the Book of Revelation, “Worthy is the Lamb!” is given lyrical expansion in stanza 4. Jesus, born in the flesh, became “completely like his brothers” (Hebrews 2:17), capable of feeling human weakness and “tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin” (Hebrews 4:14–15). Yet he is also the cosmic Christ, source and destination of the universe!² Dunstan’s choice of phraseology circles back to the image of the Lamb in the opening line of the hymn: now, in praise, “worthy is the Lamb!” (Rev. 5:12). The final description of him “who [is] our death and life” summarizes the fundamental paradox of the gospel: whoever surrenders life, gains it, and whoever loses his life shall find it (John 12:25).

A hymn such as this alerts us anew to the paradoxes within our own lives and relationships. All of us have lived through personal, familial or communal sorrow and tragedy that may have brought us to the brink of hopelessness. Perhaps it was a life cut short, a great love lost, a personal betrayal, an event gravely unjust, occurrences that threaten to shake the very foundation of our faith and trust and love. But it is such moments, fully embraced, which can open for us ineffable grace. It is precisely these occasions that invite us toward growth in Christ that transcends human understanding. As the gospel puts it, if the grain of wheat dies, life can arise (John 12:24).

Dunstan notes that she drafted this hymn text “on a commuter bus after a particularly bad day at the jail” where she was serving as chaplain, and that it “owes much to [her] longstanding relationship with Søren Kierkegaard.”³ The paradoxical nature of Christian faith and Christian living is important in Kierkegaard’s thought; indeed he views Christ in his person as the “absolute paradox.”⁴ In his writings, he explores other aspects that seem mutually opposed; for example, “Christianity is a Kingdom not of this World yet it wants to have a place in this world—right here is the paradox and the collision; it wants to have a place, but again not as a kingdom of this world.”⁵ Dunstan, in the hymn considered here, weaves into each stanza as a kind of refrain the terse Kierkegaardian paradox, “Everlasting instant:” Christ who is yesterday, today and forever (Rev. 1:8), is present in each nanosecond of every contemporary moment. Still, whatever Dunstan

takes from philosophical sources, it is clearly the Bible which is her primary palette for hymnic vocabulary.

Although in an early stage of her hymnwriting Dunstan composed music, she later concentrated on creating text, even while developing a commitment to the use of hymn tunes.⁶ She describes her transition “from guitar-strumming, meter-mangling self-indulgence to form-following, tradition-loving classicism” as taking place from 1981 to 1983. During this time, she remarks, “I wrote almost nothing, but read and sang through hymn books untold. In January 1984 I wrote ‘Christus Paradox.’”⁷ Dunstan usually had a tune in mind for her texts; she wanted her work to be sung, and accordingly she preferred music familiar to congregations. For “Christus Paradox,” she had thought initially of WESTMINSTER ABBEY,⁸ a tune now generally suggested in the published sources of this hymn. John R. van Maanen composed CHRISTUS PARADOX (in some sources, given simply as PARADOX) shortly after Dunstan wrote the words, providing a fresh and specific tune for this text.⁹

The metre of this hymn is 87.87.87, using the trochaic pattern of “downbeat” followed by “upbeat.” As Austin Lovelace aptly notes,¹⁰ trochaic rhythm supports the directness and excitement of a text; thus, vigor rather than gentle movement characterizes Dunstan’s hymn. A rhyme scheme of ABCBDB prevails. Only in stanzas 2 and 4 is there an “almost-rhyme” among the lines of B, where the rhyme is based on the identity of the final accented vowel: cross, toss, and cost in stanza 2; and Christ, strife, and life in stanza 4.

The General Council of the United Church selected this text as a theme hymn for its 1984 focus on the Saving Significance of Jesus Christ. In July 1990, Dunstan presented a session on her hymnody at the Annual Conference of The Hymn Society in Charleston, South Carolina, an event that led to the publication of *In Search of Hope and Grace* in which “You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd” first appeared in print.¹¹

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Notes

¹Sylvia G. Dunstan, *In Search of Hope and Grace: 40 Hymns and Gospel Songs* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1991), and *Where the Promise Shines: New Hymns* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1995).

²This concept is found in the Pauline Letters, as well as in modern writers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life* (London: Collins, 1960).

³Dunstan, *In Search of Hope and Grace*, 44.

⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 46–60. Extending this philosophical discourse on the “absolute paradox,”

Kierkegaard elsewhere applies the idea to the person of Christ. See Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 61. I am indebted to Michael Pomedli for his philosophical library and insights.

⁵Cited by Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, 369. (Italics in original.)

⁶For materials and personal recollections about Dunstan's work and thought, I am grateful to Frank and Ruth Henderson, and to Alan Barthel, Dunstan's colleague and friend, whose inspiration and help in hymnwriting she frequently acknowledged.

⁷Dunstan, *In Search of Hope and Grace*, 5.

⁸Barthel, conversation of December 19, 2001.

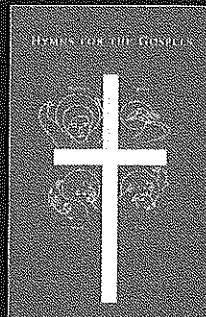
⁹John R. Van Maanen, an associate of Dunstan's in her home congregation, St. James United Church, Simcoe, Ontario, found the "Christus Paradox" text so inspiring as to be worthy of its own tune. Van Maanen, conversation of January 7, 2002.

¹⁰Austin C. Lovelace, *The Anatomy of Hymnody* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1965), 13.

¹¹Further biographical information, Dunstan's own notes and a list of her works are given in Paul Westermeyer, *With Tongues of Fire: Profiles in 20th-Century Hymn Writing* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 53-61.

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