

HYMN INTERPRETATION

HERMAN G. STUEMPFLE

“These Things Did Thomas Count As Real”

THOMAS H. TROEGER

These things did Thomas count as real:
the warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
the grain of wood, the heft of stone,
the last frail twitch of flesh and bone.

The vision of his skeptic mind
was keen enough to make him blind
to any unexpected act
too large for his small world of fact.

His reasoned certainties denied
that one could live when one had died,
until his fingers read like braille
the markings of the spear and nail.

May we, O God, by grace believe
and thus the risen Christ receive,
whose raw imprinted palms reached out
and beckoned Thomas from his doubt.

Text: Thomas H. Troeger (born 1945)

From *Borrowed Light*

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Thomas Troeger, in the “Afterword” to his collection, *Borrowed Light*, appeals for a recovery of the imagination in hymnody and decries drawing “a sharp distinction between hymnody and poetry.” Wherever one comes down on the question, “Are hymns poetry?” there can be no doubt that Troeger’s texts are able to stand on their own as poems. They need not be sung to be fully appreciated.

One text among many that could be chosen to demonstrate his poetic gifts is “These Things Did Thomas Count As Real.” Its point of origin is St. John’s tracing of Thomas’ journey from unbelief to faith in the post-Easter story narrated in the twentieth chapter of his Gospel. Thomas is absent when the Risen Christ first appears among the disciples and refuses to believe their witness. Only his own encounter a week later, complete with evidence for sight and touch, conquers doubt and awakens faith.

Troeger does not retell this story in his text but uses Thomas as a stand-in for the many in our post-Enlightenment, science-oriented age who find traditional belief problematic at best. Indeed, Troeger notes in the “Afterword” mentioned above that one of

the intents of his texts is “apologetic.” He hopes to reach both those who struggle with faith and those who question its possibility.

The form of the text is simple and direct—8 8 8 8 in meter and A A B B in rhyme scheme. Both meter and rhyme scheme have a forthrightness about them that is consistent with the hymn’s content. They grasp the singer/reader and carry her or him step by step from the descriptive first verse to the prayer in the final verse.

The fact that Thomas is named only in the first line of verse one and in the final line of verse four allows us to read ourselves into the situation which, with a remarkable economy of words, the text describes. The language of verse one is particularly striking. Aside from the name “Thomas,” every word is a single syllable. Of these 30 words, 11 have Anglo-Saxon roots: warmth, blood, chill, steel, grain, wood, heft, stone, twitch, flesh, bone. Without direct mention of the crucifixion, each alludes to some element in that event: the soldier’s spear point, the timber of the cross, the weighty stone that sealed the tomb, the tortured body of the victim. All of this had been devastatingly real enough for Thomas to destroy both faith and hope.


Verse two moves from the material specificity of verse one into the inner world of Thomas’ (and our) “skeptic mind.” Here Thomas becomes paradigmatic of those for whom the “world of fact” wars with the world of faith. Paradoxically, “vision” in line one is the source of the blindness named in line two. The rational perspective, indispensable in the empirical world of fact, may be so disproportionately developed that it disables us for the indeterminate realm of spirit.

Verse three, again without extended narration, places us in the Upper Room when, a week later, Thomas’ “reasoned certainties” are breached by the Risen One whom closed doors cannot bar. Even then, Thomas is unpersuaded until he “reads” Jesus wounded body like a blind man reading braille. Though this line of the text requires some stretching of the biblical account (John nowhere suggests that Thomas actually touches Jesus’ hands and side), it is significant that Christ issues an invitation that is a compassionate, carefully nuanced response to Thomas’ need for “evidence.” “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench,” (Is. 42:20) but, by a gracious word, will fan it into flame.

It is that grace for which we pray in verse four. Implicit is the truth that we cannot reason our way to belief, though reason has its proper uses and is not to be excluded from the life of faith. Yet, as Luther wrote in his *Small Catechism*, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the

Gospel. . . .” That prevenience remains as true in a post-modern world as in Luther’s medieval world or in Thomas’ biblical world. All, finally, is dependent upon the amazing and deathless grace revealed in “raw imprinted palms.”

Troeger’s text speaks to those, inside and outside the church, who struggle with doubt and, in the final

lines, leads us to the christological center where, for Christians, faith begins and ends. 

Herman G. Stuempfle lives in retirement in Gettysburg, PA, as President Emeritus of Lutheran Theological Seminary. His hymns have been published by The Hymn Society, G.I.A., Fortress Press, Chantry Press, and Stainer & Bell.

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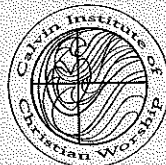
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