

There was a time when it was liturgically popular to increase the palatability of the psalms by removing the, shall we say, more 'human' parts of these ancient liturgical songs. The parts most regularly excised are the results of those times- of which there are alas many- when the psalm writers' imaginations became a little more vengeful than might nowadays be considered entirely polite and he or she (but almost certainly he) wandered into the realms of extreme violence. Because of this liturgical pruning, a generation of us grew up without realising that the attitude of the psalmists to their enemies could be summed up in the phrase 'the bloodier the end the better' or that, say, the culmination of the much loved psalm 137 'By the rivers of Babylon' was an exhortation to murdering the babies of the Babylonians. Less innocent disco hit than blood and guts and gore and Boney M-mess. The same period which produced the censored psalter- I guess the 1970s- also saw our hymnbooks hacked and attacked with brio by the sub-editor's biro.

Now this is nothing new. The faith we proclaim in 2018 has been arrived at by a 3000+ year process of pruning, excision, addition, honing, confusing, misunderstanding, rediscovering, imagining and inventing. When people talk about the 'deposit of faith' think less something under lock and key in a bank vault and more layers of silt gently laid on the bottom of ancient oceans eventually turning into stone. Less poetically, snipping bits out and sticking other bits in is nothing new. And it's no bad thing. Children- and adults, probably more so come to think about it- can be repulsed by the sheer unremitting violence of much biblical imagery. Yes, we shouldn't pretend it isn't there, it may need confronting and acknowledging, but then, there's no need to sing it from the rooftops. The beauty of a choral evensong Anglican chant setting of a psalm can sit uncomfortable and incongruous when its subject matter is prurient, sadistic revenge and might actually be improved by removing the line about wounding hairy scalps. It's not just violence: much Victorian hymnody (which is the type that has received most revision) was written in the certain knowledge that Jesus was an upper-middle class white Englishman. I can certainly remember at school singing a version, now thankfully lost in the dusts of time, of Hills of the North Rejoice which was incapable of distinguishing between the coming Kingdom of God and the British Empire: I doubt the imperial subjects were quite suffering the same confusion as the hymnwriter.

Even the most apparently innocuous and sugary of popular Victorian hymn writers, Mrs Alexander- wife of the Bishop of Derry and author of such evergreen and ever

popular ditties as *Once in Royal David's City*, *There is a Green Hill Far Away* and *Jesus Calls Us* has not been immune from the well meant attentions of twentieth-century editors. Sometimes, I have to say, this seems entirely inexplicable- what is wrong I ask, with the line 'Christian children all should be; mild, obedient good as he'? Can anyone truly disagree with such a robustly sensible sentiment? Nobody who has been to a Christingle service in the last twenty years certainly.

It was Mrs Alexander's best loved hymn - sung week in week out at a wedding near you- '*All Things Bright and Beautiful*' which has undergone the most famous and possibly the first of all such excisions, losing not too long after its publication an entire verse which notoriously read:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
He made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

Now of course Mrs Alexander may have been being amazingly ironically subversive in this verse. After all, she had probably read her Bible and if the New Testament is clear about anything, it's that God loves the poor and he *hates* it when people are rich. But of course Mrs Alexander wasn't some sort of early-adopter of liberation theology. Instead, we've got just the sort of thing you might expect a Victorian Anglican bishop's wife to say. Not quite pretty little birds and fluffy kittens now eh? 'Know your place', this verse proudly proclaims, 'God put you there'. Despite our propensity to lap up *Downton Abbey* posh-titillation and fawn politically over ex public-school boys- when will we ever learn- the 'know your place' sentiment will seem to us of a more enlightened- or at least more equal- age simply flabbergasting. It was to many of Cecil Alexander's contemporaries too and it wasn't long before the offending verse was dropped from almost all hymn books. It's not, though, terribly difficult to see where, with a bit of selective Bible reading and viewed through the strong prism of cultural bias, this sort of world view could easily appear as unremarkable an expression of Christian belief as the rest of Mrs Alexander's sentimental hymns.

Prime suspect for the source of this misapprehension, as so often in such matters, is the letters of St Paul. Given the propensity of his future readers to read all sorts of repressive unpleasantness into his words, you do wish sometimes he'd just left a few

inane postcards and his shopping lists to posterity. However, he didn't: he left us a handful of letters and his followers pseudonymously added a few more and it's not difficult to find support for social conservatism should you wish in, say, the letters to Timothy and Titus or the need for submission to authorities in the letter to the Romans where Paul is blunt:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

To which in 21st century England we might add, really? What was he thinking?

Elsewhere in his letters St Paul, argues more than once a long, extended metaphor of the church being the body of Christ, that as each member has its place in the body, so each member has his or her place in the church; divinely ordered and positioned thus by God.

And so it's only one or two slippery steps from this to God put us here, God put you there and then on to such repellent and typically Victorian concepts as the undeserving poor, immutable social classes and social Darwinism, which sounds scientific but is basically a way for bullies to excuse their depredations.

These are top-down views, views that look at the tip and think that *that's* the purpose of the pyramid, that the top of the heap is there by virtue of superiority to the bottom (rather than as it almost always is by historical accident and /or a lack of anything resembling a conscience): that what the knickerbocker glory is all really there for, is so that the cherry can sit on the top.

Hierarchies are not necessarily bad: sometimes they are the only way we have of getting things done, sometimes a pyramid is the only shape that will fit: but generally it is not logic but our world-view that privileges the tip of the pyramid, that reasons that the entire edifice exists only for the sake of the communications mast on the top, or that the icing really is the best bit on the cake.

What is truly offensive about the missing verse of All things Bright and Beautiful is not the notion of divine ordering of difference between humans; we are created wonderfully, beautifully different and God delighted to make us that way. No, what is truly offensive is the notion that the differences between us can and should be graded into high and lowly, more and less valuable, of greater and lesser esteem.

When St Paul dictated his letters what he was praising was not hierarchy but interdependence; not superiority but mutuality; not individual glory but relationship.

In her *'Dialogues'* the mediaeval mystic St Catherine of Siena reported that God said to her 'I could well have made human beings in such a way that they each had everything, but I preferred to give different gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other'.

This is very simply a reiteration of St Paul's argument. God, he says has given the church apostles, prophets, teachers... a whole list of impressive gifts, but these gifts are impressive not because of the person who wields them, but because of the person who gave them; the gifts given to the individual are given so they can benefit the whole community, the whole body of Christ.

Earlier I posed the question of St Paul, 'What was he thinking?' It wasn't entirely a rhetorical question, because although we cannot ever get into St Paul's mind, by paying close attention to context we can get near enough to have a pretty good go at getting behind what was on his mind. And what he was thinking was, the world's about to end. Any day now. Some time really soon the trumpet's gonna sound, Jesus will descend on the clouds of glory, and none of this will matter any more. So don't bother about changing the world, because it's gonna change beyond anything any of us will recognise soon anyway. Concentrate on being as holy as you can right now for the little time that's left.

Unless we're going to start making some rather lame excuses about how 'soon' actually means 'thousands of years', we have to say that Paul's prediction that the end is nigh was as wrong as everybody else's before or since. And clinging doggedly to advice somebody gave two thousand years ago when they believed that the end of the world was imminent is plain wrong too.

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
He made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

No. God didn't make some of us rich and most of us poor. We, humanity, did. That some have plenty while others are starving is not God's plan for the world, quite the opposite.

Christians should try to be respectful, courteous, gentle and law abiding. Those are incalculable virtues. But we must never let ourselves believe that the world is the way it is- cruel, greedy, unfair, uncaring and unjust - because God made it that way and the best thing we can do is go along with it. That's not the way he planned it and the best thing we can do, is try to change it.