

Wednesday Worship 25th November 2020

Isaac Watts

Introduction

On the 25th November the Church of England remembers the hymn writer Isaac Watts, known as the father of English hymn writing for his over 600 hymns. Our worship today will include hymns written by him to help us celebrate the joy of music here in our homes.

Opening prayers and lighting of a candle

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

(Psalm 95.1-5)

The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.
All **Let us rejoice and sing God's praise for ever.
Amen.**

Hymn: Awake, our souls (1709)

Prayer

You put a new song in my mouth:
a song of praise to you, my God.
I waited patiently for you, Lord;
you bent down to me and heard my cry for help.
All **You put a new song in my mouth.**
Many shall see and stand amazed,
and put their trust in you, Lord.
All **You put a new song in my mouth.**
I love to do your will, Lord God;
your law is deep in my heart.
All **You put a new song in my mouth.**

1st Reading: 2 Chronicles 5.1-4, 11-14

Thus all the work that Solomon did for the house of the Lord was finished. Solomon brought in the things that his father David had dedicated, and stored the silver, the gold, and all the vessels in the treasuries of the house of God.

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the people of Israel, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. And all the Israelites assembled before the king at the festival that is in the seventh month. And all the elders of Israel came, and the Levites carried the ark.

Now when the priests came out of the holy place (for all the priests who were present had sanctified themselves, without regard to their divisions), all the levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kindred, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with one hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters, it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord,

‘For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures for ever’,

the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.

Prayer of response

Lord, as we worship you now,
though we are apart and unable to worship together,
help us to know that your glory still surrounds us,
and open our hearts and mouths to praise you.

All **Amen.**

Psalms 71.1-6, 19-24

In you, O Lord, I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;

incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge,

a strong fortress, to save me,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,

from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

For you, O Lord, are my hope,

my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth;

it was you who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you.

You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?
You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
will revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
you will bring me up again.
You will increase my honour,
and comfort me once again.

I will also praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, O my God;
I will sing praises to you with the lyre,
O Holy One of Israel.
My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have rescued.
All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help,
for those who tried to do me harm
have been put to shame, and disgraced.

Prayer of response

Faithful Lord, living Saviour,
in youth and old age,
from the womb to the grave,
may we know your protection
and proclaim your great salvation
to the glory of God the Father.

All Amen.

2nd Reading: Colossians 3.12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Prayer of response

Lord, help us to rejoice in your care and love,
even in these times of difficulty.
Fill us with joy that we may sing to you
and draw others into your kingdom.

All Amen.

3rd Reading: Matthew 26.17-30

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples."' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Prayer of response

Dear Lord, even as your darkest hour approached,
and one of your disciples was set to betray you,
you cared for your followers
and sang with them to the Father.
Help us to follow your example in our darkest times
and give us strength to endure in love.

All **Amen.**

Hymn: When I survey the wondrous cross (1707)

Reflection

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton, in the south of England, on the 17th July 1674. In this year Charles II was on the throne, two children's skeletons were found in the Tower of London, believed at the time to be the remains of the Princes in the Tower, and the English captured the colony of New Netherland from the Dutch, renaming its capital from New Orange to New York.

Watts was an intelligent and highly educated person from a nonconformist (non-Anglican) background. He learned Latin at the age of 4, Greek at 9, French at 10, and Hebrew at 13. Watts was offered the chance of university education. However, this meant Oxford or Cambridge, both of which were Anglican institutions, so Watts opted instead to go to a non-Anglican independent institution. After leaving he worked as a private tutor before becoming a church minister, ending up as pastor of Mark Lane Chapel in London.

However, Watts had always been frail and his health began to fail at a young age. Therefore, he retired to Abney Park, Stoke Newington, in Hackney, where he lived for 36 years until his death on the 25th November 1748. He is buried at the Bunhill Fields Burial Ground in Islington, along with other notable nonconformists and radicals such as William Blake, John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe.

Watts wrote many of his hymns while at Abney Park and preached occasionally. Although he had only a limited income, he was known to give a third of his money to the poor. People were drawn to his serene and spiritual manner and his unswerving faith, which are reflected in the words of many of his hymns. As I mentioned earlier, he's known as the father of English hymns and he wrote over 600 of them. Only a few are still used regularly now, but his most famous hymns these days include 'Jesus shall reign', 'Joy to the world', 'God our help in ages past', and 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

But how did he get into hymn writing? In his youth Isaac Watts sometimes criticised the singing in his church, which consisted solely of psalms, often sung without much passion. So, one day his father challenged him to write something better for them to sing. Watts was not the first to write hymns but he did popularise them within his own church tradition. He wrote hymns based on the psalms but also more personal expressions of faith. This didn't go down well with everyone, with some objecting to singing words that weren't based on the psalms. In fact, one man complained that "Christian congregations have shut out divinely inspired Psalms and taken in Watts' flights of fancy." However, Watts wanted the church to sing about Christ, saying:

"Where the Psalmist describes religion by the fear of God, I have often joined faith and love to it. Where he speaks of the pardon of sin through the mercies of God, I rather choose to mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. Where He promises abundance of wealth, honour, and long life, I have changed some of these typical blessings for grace, glory and life eternal, which are brought to light by the gospel, and promised in the New Testament."

Watts also explained the importance of hymn-writing to him, saying:

"While we sing the praises of God in His church, we are employed in that part of worship which of all others is the nearest akin to heaven, and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon earth. That very action which should elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations doth not only flat our devotion but too often awakens our regret and touches all the springs of uneasiness within us."

And this last statement, I think, gets to the heart of the importance of hymns. Music has the power to lift our hearts and souls to God so that we join with all of creation in the song of the angels. It can comfort, disturb, inspire and soothe where words and actions may fail. For this reason, alone or together, singing ourselves or listening to others, we should not cease from singing, listening and giving thanks to God for music, for those like Isaac Watts who write it, for those who perform it, and for the goodness it brings into our lives.

Intercessions

In the quietness,
aware that we are only part of a great multitude,
on earth and in heaven,
who share in the Church's offering of worship,
let us join ourselves with them
and bring to God in prayer our own hopes and needs,

together with those of all his children.
Through silence, spoken word and music,
let us be open to the God who both listens and speaks to us.

For your holy catholic Church, seeking the renewal of her unity,
drawing men and women to Christ,
and proclaiming your love in all the world.

Lord, hear us:

All **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For all whom you inspire to compose music,
remembering especially your servant Isaac Watts,
for all to whom you give skill and devotion to perform music,
and for all your children who are enriched and renewed by it.

Lord, hear us:

All **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the nations of the world,
seeking the path to peace and justice:
for this country,
for Elizabeth our queen as she celebrates 73 years of marriage,
and for all who strive to build societies
that are Christian and free

Lord, hear us:

All **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For those who suffer in mind or body,
for those living in fear or anxiety,
for those who are tired and carrying heavy burdens,
and for those who dedicate their lives
to caring for their neighbours.

Lord, hear us:

All **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For all who have gone before us in the faith of Christ,
for those who in past generations
have enriched your Church with fine music,
and for all who serve as musicians in our parishes.

Lord, hear us:

All **Lord, graciously hear us.**

All Lord of the Church,
**hear our prayer,
and make us one in heart and mind
to serve you with joy for ever.
Amen.**

Trusting in the compassion of God,
let us pray with confidence
as our Saviour has taught us:

All **Our Father, who art in heaven...**

Hymn: Jesus shall reign (1719)

Closing prayers

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening
into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling,
but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;
in the habitations of thy glory and dominion,
world without end.

All **Amen.**

(After John Donne (1571-1631))

May the songs of the angels sustain us,
may the praises of the saints inspire us,
may the silent music of the Unseen Trinity be in our hearts,
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.

All **Amen.**

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him.

All **Amen.**