



A service led by Revd. Nigel Uden on 21th July 2024, marking the 350th anniversary of the birth of Isaac Watts

Trinity VIII

In the service, readings from scripture, with commentary and reflection by Nigel Uden on the centrality of scripture in Isaac Watts' hymns, were woven together with some of those hymns. An anthem, written for the service by Mark Dawes and Ian de Massini, drew on Watts text, 'in Anthem this world's wild maze ... give me thy counsel for my guide'. The absence of just one 15-20 minute address creates the opportunity to include here some extracts from the whole service.

Some words from St Paul, as we come to worship this morning.

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.

Isaac Watts was a fine hymn writer, whose work still shapes how the word of Christ can dwell richly within us. This morning, we mark the 350 years since Watts was born, in July 1674

This service has modest intentions. It is not an account of Isaac Watts life and ministry, save for a few salient points. He wasn't the sort of person who wanted to draw attention to himself.

Nor is it a detailed or systematic account of his hymns, his thinking, or his theology.

Rather, it is an act of worship, our Sunday service shaped by his writing. We are simply invited to reflect upon God via some of Watts's hymns and the scriptures that inspired them.

This brief note draws upon the thoughts of Bernard Lord Manning,¹ a church historian and eventually senior tutor of Jesus College, Cambridge, who died here aged 48 in 1941. His Congregational Manse upbringing gave him a well-recorded heart for that tradition, and not least for Isaac Watts as one of Congregationalism's finest and most enduring legacies.

Although from a naval family that left Isaac with a real patriotism, Watts was firmly of the Dissenting wing of the Church, arguing for a Church and nation that were free from what he called Popery, and that were tolerant of Protestant Dissenters – those who eschewed the marriage of church and state. As you might tell, he had very particular ideas, which often set him apart from others – hence 'dissent', from the Latin for 'disagree'. That said, living when he did, Watts found that some of his ideas were in the ascendent. I quote Manning: at that time 'the Constitution was saved from Divine Right. Protestantism was saved from France and Popery. Dissent was saved from Toryism and persecution. Watts, then,' Manning concludes, 'was one of those fortunate persons whose life coincides with the increasing triumph of his own cause.'

Isaac Watts was intellectually gifted from an early age, as is demonstrated by that poem he wrote aged seven about being 'a vile polluted lump of earth'. He was educated within the Dissenting tradition, refusing to become an Anglican in order to be eligible for Oxford or Cambridge. Schooled at an academy for dissenters, he had a very broad education – what Manning describes as 'an encyclopaedic sort of scholarship' (79), 'less polished' than an Oxford graduate, but vastly wider in scope and more liberal in tendency'. (80) His career was a combination of Christian ministry and of teaching, not least private tutoring, all emerging from a deep faith in the providence and grace of 'the almighty three': 'God is a name my soul adores', as one of his hymns has it.²

From early on, he argued for an improvement in the relatively new style of worship that included hymns. His own contribution to the genre has led to him being regarded as 'the Godfather of English

¹ Manning, Bernard Lord 1942 *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts; five informal papers* London: Epworth Press pages 78ff

² from *Horae Lyricae*, 1706RS 31

hymnody', prized by many other exponents of the art. Indeed, he and Charles Wesley were mutual admirers, with Watts saying that Wesley's hymn *Wrestling Jacob*³ was 'worth all that he had ever written' and Wesley saying that he would gladly sacrifice all his thousands of texts had he been able to write *When I survey the wondrous cross*.

Rooted in the real world, as Watts was, with political views that some here would be grateful for and others would not agree with, he did not use hymnody as a vehicle for social analysis or political manifesto. As a teacher he was something of a polymath, but in his hymns he was not given to stressing the rational or the ethical.⁴ He worshipped God 'who made heaven and earth'. As one renowned hymnologist has it, 'His chief emotions are of gratitude for salvation and praise for creation.'⁵ And in the hymns he has bequeathed to us, he would have us to likewise.⁶ His foci consistently included providence and grace, creation and the cross, the Hebrews' psalms and the Christians' Gospel, his hymns offering an unparalleled Christian interpretation of those Hebrew songs. Crucially, Isaac Watts was a pioneer, showing us today that responding to the mores of each changing generation, and listening to the voice of young people was and remains essential to us being the living Body of the living Christ here and now. Marking the 350th anniversary of his birth is not dwelling in the past; it is about allowing this pioneer from then to help us learn for the future.

Reading Galatians 6.11-16

¹⁴May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

That passage prompted one of Isaac Watts' – indeed all hymnody's - most enduring texts. The only thing in which we as Christians are to boast is the cross – not in our own achievements or status or wealth, 'the 'vain things that charm me most' – but in the cross, where 'his dying crimson, like a robe, spreads o'er his body on the tree'. And why should we boast of that? Because there 'sorrow and love flowed mingled down'. It's that mix of a suffering Son and a compassionate God which sums up the Christian gospel, such that it gives the Prince of glory a crown, and nourishes our faith, stirring our response – 'my soul, my life, my all'.

As we sing the hymn, perhaps we will be struck by one of Watts' hallmarks, understatement. He refuses to draw attention to himself with clever creativity, or extravagant language, but rather to point to the God he knows in Jesus Christ. Thinking about other great English hymn writers, J. R. Watson notes Watts' 'refusal to be dramatic like Crossman, witty like Herbert, or rapturous like Baxter'.⁷

Reading I Corinthians 1.18-25

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The cross is, and ought to be, a mystery – foolishness to many but the very wisdom of God. In his book, *Windows on the Cross*, Tom Smail highlights the importance of Isaac Watts 'surveying' the wondrous cross, rather than 'regarding' or 'beholding' it. 'It is his way of telling us that the cross of Christ is so gloriously stupendous in its significance that it fills and dominates the whole Christian landscape. Like an architect faced with a skyscraper we can only set up the theodolites of faith at its foot and try as best we can to come to take the measure of what it means for ourselves and the world.'⁸ In the cross we find everything about God that we need to know – even more than mere nature can

³ Wesley, Charles 1707-88, the hymn *Come, O Thou traveller unknown*, reflecting upon Jacob at Peniel, (Genesis 32.24ff) Congregational Praise 495

⁴ Watson, J. R. 1997 *The English Hymn: a Critical and Historical Study* Oxford: Clarendon page 170

⁵ *ibid* page 149

⁶ Psalm 121.2

⁷ Watson page 166

⁸ Smail, Tom 1996, 2004 *Windows on the Cross* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publications page 1

reveal. It's just that we cannot tell whether the cross best tells of God's power, of God's wisdom, or God's love. Well, in this day and age, when even devout Christians are perplexed about what the good news is for our fractious and fragmented society, maybe we need a new epiphany of all three: the wisdom, power and love. As Small urges: we survey the cross 'so that we can find our bearings and our confidence again in the way that God deals with the confusion and destruction of the world ...'⁹ In the words of Martin Luther, *crux probat omnia*: everything is put to the test of the cross. Isaac Watts encourages us to do that ourselves that, too.

Writing of his work on the Psalms, Watts said one of his aims was to inject and inform the Psalms with New Testament theology, as "David would have done, had he lived in the days of Christianity." So his allusion in the first verse to feeding beside a "living stream" maybe evokes the living water Jesus offered to the woman at the well (John 4:7–15) and Chris Fenner observes how the original "paths of righteousness" (Ps. 23:3) have become a longer journey of wandering and being lead back by truth and grace.¹⁰ And I so treasure the last verse. 'Whereas the Psalm says we will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever," Watts offered some clarification, saying our stay in that place will no more be as a "stranger or a guest, but like a child at home." This calls to mind the promise of John 1:12, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Just as for the 'certain ruler', that's the supplying of our ultimate need, too.

Psalm 23 My Shepherd will supply my need

My Shepherd will supply my need;
Jehovah is His Name;
in pastures fresh He makes me feed
beside the living stream.

He brings my wand'ring spirit back
when I forsake His ways,
and leads me, for His mercy's sake,
in paths of truth and grace.

When I walk thru the shades of death,
thy presence is my stay;
a word of Thy supporting breath
drives all my fears away.

Thy hand, in sight of all my foes,

doth still my table spread;
my cup with blessings overflows;
thine oil anoints my head.

The sure provisions of my God
attend me all my days;
O may Thy house be mine abode,
and all my work be praise!

There would I find a settled rest
(while others go and come),
no more a stranger or a guest,
but like a child at home.

Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament (1719)

Reading Hebrews 11.1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Isaac Watts saw things clearly. He was a person of faith and of trust in God, and he wanted others to share that joy with him. So he wrote not to impress, but to offer clarity, and its child, hope.

Arguably, that longing for clarity is rarely more true than as we face the death of a loved one, or the inevitability of our own demise. But we have never been beyond the grave. Our approach to it – as even the most devout of people – is a matter of faith - that 'assurance of things hoped for'. With that ruler who lacked one thing, we, too, sooner or later, ask about eternal life, knowing with St Paul that, 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the human heart, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.'¹¹

⁹ *ibid* page 2

¹⁰ Fenner, Chris 2018, 2022 in a *Hymnology Archive* article, *My Shepherd will supply my need*, available at <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/my-shepherd-will-supply>, accessed 21st July 2024

¹¹ I Corinthians 2.9 (AV)

So, Watts wants to help the scales of unknowing fall from our eyes, that we might have ‘the wings of faith to rise within the veil, and see the saints above, how great their joys, how bright their glories be’. He suggests their joy can be ascribed to the Lamb, their triumph to his death. Well, we live knowing that we will die; Christ died that we might live. As we sing our final hymn in this tribute to Isaac Watts, born three hundred and fifty years ago this week, maybe we are with the followers who were closest to Jesus, and as he taught them said, ‘Lord, increase our faith!’¹² May it be so.

Hymn Give me the wings of faith

Give me the wings of faith to rise
within the veil, and see
the saints above, how great their joys,
how bright their glories be.

Once they were mourning here below,
their faces wet with tears;
they wrestled hard, as we do now,
with sins and doubts and fears.

I ask them whence their victory came;
they, with united breath,
ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,
their triumph to his death.

They marked the footsteps that he trod;
his zeal inspired their breast;
and, following their incarnate God,
possess the promised rest.

Our glorious leader claims our praise
for his own pattern given;
while the long cloud of witnesses
show the same path to heaven

¹² Luke 17.5