

18th September 2021

Hymns

"Sweet hymns shall be my chant and woven songs."

Judah ben Samuel the Hasid, Hymn of Glory (c1200)

What's the difference between a hymn and a song? Or, to narrow it down, what's the difference between a hymn and a spiritual song? With the plethora of new "songs" offered for private and public worship, for listening to or singing together, and with the creativity available to us from John Bell, Graham Kendrick, Stuart Townend, Ian White and others, how do we distinguish songs from hymns? And, in any event, does it matter?

According to the dictionary, a hymn is "a religious song or poem of praise to God or a god". And Wikipedia tells us, "A hymn is a type of song, usually religious, specifically written for the purpose of adoration or prayer, and typically addressed to a deity or deities". So, we have a clue: It's the *purpose* of a "song", ie directed towards something or someone in worship, that makes it a "hymn". I like that. But I want to go further.

If a hymn defines a song directed *to* some deity or another in a public or private act of praise or prayer, it must also come *from* somewhere in a spirit of reflection and devotion. It matters little what label we place on such a product of faith. What matters is the spirit and context of the composing of such a piece, its source as well as its purpose.

I've been writing hymns for many years. I'm not a composer, so my hymns are generally written to familiar melodies. But I know that the writing of such hymns is, for me, an act of devotion and prayer. Directed to my God? Well, eventually, I suppose. Used in public worship? Sometimes. Helpful to others in their devotional lives? I hope so. But an important part of my own personal life of praise and prayer? Absolutely. Are they hymns, songs, prayers, or simply poetry? It matters little.

I'll share some of these hymns with you over the next few days ... But for now, I'm happy to say with a 2nd century Hasidic mystic, Judah ben Samuel, that my chants, hymns and songs are, thankfully, woven into my spiritual life, and bring me ever close to my God.

A prayer for today

"Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,

Praise him, all creatures here below."

Thomas Ken (1637-1711)