

BUILDING JERUSALEM

New Zealand hymns on social issues

My theme is the way a number of New Zealand religious poets (and composers) have created hymns that address national social issues. So many writers and so many hymns, indeed, that John Bell of the Iona Community—himself a tireless writer of hymns on similar issues—asked me last year why it was that New Zealand hymn writers were so productive in this area. What follows is an attempt to answer John's question.

But to do so within the limits of a single public lecture I will have to select just a few of our big social issues, to contextualize and illustrate what has been written over the last thirty years or so. Not wishing to turn you into a church choir or readymade congregation, I can only deal with the poets, not the composers. So relax, you who are tone deaf, or wary of raising your voices in public singing of any kind.

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The most famous English poem of social concern, endlessly repeated at Promenade concerts, in school assembly singing and among football crowds, is undoubtedly William Blake's *Jerusalem*. Carried by Parry's irresistible music, Blake's incitement to heroic action against the 'dark, satanic mills' of his time, his vision (inspired by the *Book of Revelation*) of a new utopian society built 'in England's green and pleasant land' has been thought fit and proper material to rouse noble aspirations in generations of schoolboys and schoolgirls in almost every country with a link with English culture.

But less than a year ago, a teenage boy attending one of New Zealand's most prestigious and expensive private schools, a school where *Jerusalem* is regularly sung at student assemblies, became intoxicated and drug-affected at one of the many private parties held before the annual school ball. After a confrontation with an angry parent the boy fled into the night and threw himself from an over-bridge onto the motorway below. The gap between Blake's poetic vision of a New Jerusalem and the actuality of a society bedeviled by such social problems as a widespread teenage binge-drinking and drug culture is the dark space into which I intend to look.

HYMNS ADVOCATING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The year was 1993. A new National government had come to power, committed to 'reforming' the public health system of New Zealand (code for reducing expenditure on those unable to pay for private hospital treatment). Budgets were slashed, new systems hastily introduced, staff were made redundant. In cathedrals and churches throughout New Zealand a solemn statement on Social Justice prepared by the leaders of all the major churches was read from the pulpits, without any obvious effect on those driving through the changes. (Does that sound familiar again today?)

It so happened that the annual national conference of the Community Ministries of the Baptist Church was being held in Dunedin. It was a gathering of social workers, chaplains and others within the Public Health system as it went through this period of radical reform. One of the hospital chaplains asked me if I would write a hymn for the occasion, and invited me to attend a meeting to get the feel of the group and to gather ideas for the text.

I still remember the tone and temper of that meeting. Everyone in the room was simply furious. Lay and ordained alike, they were enraged at the effect of the reforms on threatened, over-worked staff and worried, bewildered patients. Was this the public health system that had come into being after the Great Depression of the 1930s, set up by a radical Labour government with a strong social conscience, determined to improve the lot of the poor and the sick? These people felt that the soul was being ripped out of a service many of the most frail and fragile people in our society had come to rely on for generous and loving care.

They didn't want piety and calm in a hymn text, a controlled and polite expression of Christian concern. They wanted a record of their own outrage at what they perceived as manifest injustice; these good Baptists had gone beyond compassion to the verge of taking revolutionary action. For myself as writer, if there had to be a biblical tie-in it must be with that unique episode in Christ's ministry when (surely from a similar sense of anger) he drove the traders from the Jerusalem Temple, 'overturning the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the sellers of doves' (Matthew 21: 12-13).

MAY THE ANGER OF CHRIST BE MINE (F 48)

Not surprisingly, there is an even more explicit Shirley Murray hymn written in 1992 to address the same situation, 'Wounded world that cries

for healing' (it was published in 1996 in her American collection, *Every Day in your Spirit*).

WOUNDED WORLD THAT CRIES FOR HEALING

Although both these hymns identified perceived injustices, and released the pent-up feelings of those affected by them, so far as I know they changed nothing: the reforms were ruthlessly pursued to their bitter, crippling end.

I see such texts now as contemporary expressions of a theme strongly present in a much older group of hymns, the 150 songs gathered in the *Book of Psalms*. Although the Psalms are not the earliest religious poems to deal with justice and divine will, what their writers had to say about the topic has become iconic, fixed in the collective memory of the faithful by sheer repetition, and often used as models for new writing.

One of the tones found in these texts is *furious anger*, open outrage at the injustices inflicted by the rich and the powerful on the poorest and weakest members of Jewish society. For some of the Psalm writers outrage turns into a ferocious thirst for vengeance (the thought of restorative justice, in the modern sense, is simply not entertained). With a frankness and fury that any 21st century congregation might well baulk at, some of the Psalms demand revenge of a kind that might be found in the most savage episodes of ethnic cleansing or barbaric civil wars. An angry God will judge the nations and crack their skulls, leaving piles of dead, says the writer of Psalm 110. Psalm 58 assures its singers that 'Good people will be glad when they see the wicked getting what they deserve. They will *wash their feet in their enemies' blood*. And everyone will say, good people are rewarded, God does rule the earth with justice'!

It's instructive to compare this bloodthirsty side of the Psalms with a modern New Zealand justice hymn by Shirley Murray.

GOD WEEPS AT LOVE WITHHELD (F 30)

What stands out for me is its profoundly Christian concept of a God who is victimized alongside the human victims of injustice and abuse, who shares and feels the sorrows and the hurts, who—unlike the all-powerful, punitive God of some writers—waits patiently for us to understand the full implications of Christ's life and teachings.

There are other strains in the body of ancient Psalms: notably the concept of justice dealt out by a God acting as the supreme moral Judge. It's there in the first Psalm: 'Sinners will have no excuse on the day of judgement (5). 'You [God] take your seat as judge and your fair decisions prove that I was in the right' (9:4) Later generations of Christians, having absorbed the sensational visions of the *Book of Revelation*, were to develop this idea into the concept of a cataclysmic final Day of Judgement bringing the world to an end. An awful act of justice, drawing even the dead from their graves to face their doom: 'And anyone whose name was not written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire'. Such thoughts still cheer some of our own more evangelistic hymn writers.

But much in the *Book of Psalms* also honours and affirms the ancient code of social justice laid down in *Deuteronomy*: 'I am the Lord your God and I demand equal justice, both for you Israelites and for the foreigners who may live among you...If any of your people become poor and unable to support themselves, you must help them' (from chapters 24-6). In psalm after psalm God is praised as the protector of the poor, the hungry, the orphan, the widow, those helpless to improve their own lot, the homeless, the lonely, prisoners, the victims of cruel lawmakers and corrupt money lenders.

This code of social responsibility, with its insistence on equality and fairness, was endorsed and hugely extended by Jesus, and has since become a fertile theme for modern makers of hymns about justice issues, many New Zealand hymn writers among them. Why? Simply because the evils these ancient texts speak of, are present and active in New Zealand society today.

Richard Gillard's 'Brother, sister, let me serve you' (A 8) is typical of a group of New Zealand social justice hymns which—like John Bell and Graham Maule's 'A Touching Place'—appeal to natural, tender sympathies: they directly or indirectly urge us the singers to empathize with the victims of injustice and communal neglect: 'I will weep when you are weeping./ When you laugh, I'll laugh with you,/ I will share your joy and sorrow/ Till we've seen this journey through.' In one of my own hymns written for the 50th anniversary of Christian World Service, I position the singers more actively as '*Speaking up for those who cannot speak,/ Reaching out to all the poor and the weak,/ Changing systems that prison the mind./ Bringing hope and liberty,/ Putting people, putting people,/ Putting people first for a change.* (H 126).

But rather than overwhelm you with examples, I highlight two hymns which may stand for many others.

The first is Shirley Murray's American Hymn Society 2007 prize-winning text, 'The Least of These'.

LEFTOVER PEOPLE IN LEFTOVER PLACES (H 85)

The second hymn is one I know even more about since I wrote it (in 1983).

LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE A RIVER (A 85)

The thinking behind this hymn, with its call to personal action, may be usefully exposed. The refrain, of course is based on the famous passage in Amos 5: 21-4, [God says] 'I hate, I despise your festivals...Take away from me the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' But that leaves God *telling* us what to do. I wanted to challenge the singers of this hymn to take that directive themselves, to personally endorse the call to action.

But what might 'acts of justice' mean to a New Zealand congregation? The word 'justice' itself might be a mere rhetorical flourish, and even in the Amos passage the antiphonal phrase, 'and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream', begins to shift the emphasis away from righting wrongs done to others in the direction of preserving of one's own moral propriety.

So in the verses I name and identify what were then particular instances of injustice, starting with the plight of the hungry in a world of abundance (as usual, there was plenty of television coverage of starvation—even at that time in the Horn of Africa—interspersed with advertisements for every conceivable kind of western luxury food). The second verse addressed two kinds of 'homelessness': the plight of Cambodians who had fled the Pol Pot regime to be incarcerated in camps on the Thai border, and the plight of the homeless in the larger cities of this country: the urban poor, the street kids, the families crammed into sheds or a single room, wandering (so I have seen them) along streets where the skyscrapers of banks and fat-cat big businesses towered above them. In the final verse I had in mind the experience of our own Maori as well as many other indigenous people forcibly or cunningly dispossessed of the precious birthright of their land.

Tragically, those verses have all remained relevant to contemporary experience, as fresh injustices and new bitter human experiences have succeeded the originals I had in mind in 1983.

New Zealand hymn writers continue to create new social justice hymns, believing that at the very least they may sensitize a congregation to the real social justice issues in the world around them. To sing them is to set a peg in the ground, to define a congregation's sense of values. They may open up debate and challenge fixed positions. They can attract the attention of idealistic young people, with their relevance or their passion; they may serve to focus the singers' minds on a topical theme developed by a preacher. They sometimes inspire people to go into action beyond the walls of the church. They may encourage faith and hope in a more just future. And, in this hope, New Zealanders continue to set forth a vision of justice exercised in this world as it is now; a vision that does not depend on some overwhelming end-of-time event, a decisive intervention from beyond to bring an incomprehensible conclusion to the age-old struggle between good and evil.

HYMNS ABOUT WAR AND PEACE

In 2001, the World Council of Churches announced the start of a Decade to Overcome Violence. Simultaneously, the United Nations declared an International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. By way of response, in 2002 the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust brought out a collection of 'songs to overcome violence', under the title *He Came Singing Peace*. It contained twenty-seven hymns from the Trust's various hymnbooks and listed another thirty-five titles. The booklet was distributed free of charge to every secondary school in the country.

Despite the tragic failure of either of these Decades to achieve their goals, New Zealanders have continued to create a remarkable number of hymns and songs on the theme of peaceful relationships between individuals and states. At least in this case, I believe the history of the nation goes a long way towards explaining why.

New Zealand has never suffered a civil war or invasion by a foreign power—unless one counts Britain as a colonizing foreign power—but warfare on its own soil it has known.

In 1863 a group of Maori Christian entertainers were in England, giving sermons and lectures, as well as performing cultural dances. They were given an audience with Queen Victoria, who recorded that, 'they all kissed my hand and behaved extremely well'. But what none of them knew was that only three days previously a force of British soldiers, supported by settler militias, had invaded Maori territory in the central North Island, leading to sporadic armed conflicts conducted over a period of nearly thirty years—though some historians argue that the final shots were not fired until 1916, as New Zealand focused on a greater war 12,000 miles away.

The casualty rate for soldiers and civilians in these Maori Wars was relatively small. World War I was altogether different. By the end of that war, out of a population of just over a million, 100,000 New Zealanders had 'served' overseas, 17,000 had been killed and 41,000 wounded. These casualty rates per head of population were the highest in the Empire and among the highest of any country engaged in the war. Almost every hamlet in New Zealand still has its small stone cenotaph engraved with the names of the local men who died far away. The psychic shock of such slaughter was reinforced by the horrors of World War II. Out of a population of 1.6 million, nearly 12,000 New Zealand soldiers, sailors and airmen died, not to count later deaths from wounds.

Unsurprisingly, there has emerged a deep national yearning for peace, encouraged by the annual marking of Anzac Day when the survivors march in procession at dawn ceremonies and the dead are solemnly remembered. In 1973 the New Zealand government sent a lone frigate to challenge French nuclear testing in the Pacific, in the 1980s a peace flotilla of yachts successfully challenged the entry of American nuclear-powered warships to the harbour of Auckland, and in 1987 under the Nuclear free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act the country was declared a nuclear-free territory. Since that time New Zealand soldiers have principally been sent overseas on peacekeeping missions.

Our evangelical Christian writers have continued to use the old language and imagery of spiritual warfare, the crusader mentality typified in 'Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war', and when in her magnificent 'Hymn for Anzac Day' Shirley Murray dared to incorporate a verse honouring conscientious objectors there were vigorous protests from veteran soldier organizations. The hymn is now sung at Gallipoli, (but with the contentious verse excised).

HONOUR THE DEAD (H 61)

Honour the brave whose conscience was their call,
answered no bugle, went against the wall,
suffered in prisons of contempt and shame,
branded as cowards, in our country's name.

But New Zealand has produced a stream of hymns praising a peaceful Christ, celebrating the divine will for peace, and detailing the sufferings brought about by war and violence.

Weep for the places ravaged by our blood,
weep for the young bones buried in the mud,
weep for the powers of violence and greed,
weep for the deals done in the name of need.

The indexes to the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust's five publications to date list more than seventy texts as 'peace hymns' but the list could be mightily extended if it included one-line references to communal and international peace as a goal. 'Gentle God, when we are driven/
past the limits of our love,/ When our hurt would have a weapon/
and the hawk destroy the dove,/ At the cost of seeming weak,/ Help us turn the other cheek' (A 44); 'He came singing love...he came singing peace' (AA 59); 'Peace, courageous and demanding,/ binds us as we walk your way./ May our wills, at your commanding,/ turn to acts of peace today (H 52); Peace will be our way of thinking:/ Common wealth and common state:/ Gone the wounds, the words, the weapons/ That conspire to hurt and hate' (H 15)

There are peace carols too; many of them. Here is a typical one: Shirley Murray's 'Peace Child':

PEACE CHILD (A 35)

Given the world we all inhabit, where war rages in so many countries and New Zealand military forces are involved in operations as far afield as Afghanistan, the voices of New Zealand hymn writers will continue to advocate for peace, giving expression to their own faith values and the deep-seated national longing for a peaceful world.

HYMNS ADDRESSING FAMILY VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE

It is not just violence beyond our shores that concerns our writers. New Zealand society is bedeviled by domestic wars, its victims mainly women

and young children. The 1995 Domestic Violence Act sought to reduce the levels of such violence through education, counseling and protective orders, but women still flee to Refuge Centres, and appalling cases of child abuse still regularly come before the courts. Among OECD countries, New Zealand has one of the highest rates of child death from maltreatment; our children in their first year of life have the highest rates in the whole population of death from assault. Recently a Family Court Judge spoke of three generations of endemic violence in certain families. 'God bleeds,' wrote Shirley Murray, 'at anger's fist,/ At trust betrayed,/ At women battered and afraid,/ And till we change the way we win, God bleeds' (F 30).

It is no accident that in hymn after New Zealand hymn childhood is marked out for loving care and respect. 'One small child Jesus called,/ Set in the middle of the grown-ups' circle./ Welcome him, welcome her,/ And then you are welcoming me' (F52). 'O may I hear, now sharp and clear,/ the silences, the sounds,/ The quiet sobbing of a child,/ The joy where life abounds' (H25); 'Hold him tenderly, rock him gently, /For this child, so very small/ Is God's message to us all;/ Hold him tenderly, rock him gently (C59); 'When the child is at the centre, when the babe is in the stall,/ when the adult nurtures wonder, when the carols warm us all,/ Then the fragments come together, and the vision shines as one/ In each particle of being,/ in each daughter and each son' (H149).

As civil war raged in Bosnia in 1993, and with a 1944 *Life* magazine picture of a soldier tenderly holding a naked baby rescued from a cave in Saipan in front of me, I wrote a carol mourning the destruction of family life, imagining what it might have been like for Joseph and Mary had they been born in those places, at those times. Now I know the wars are closer to home: the words are true of too many of our own families and their children.

CAROL FOR A HARD WINTER (H 120)

In modern New Zealand social issues hymns, Jesus, as a baby, is more often presented as needing our compassionate love than our adoration; as an adult, Jesus is characterised as gentle peace-maker and loving protector of the weak and defenceless. These texts urge their singers to choose love, not hate; gentleness, not brutality. They inculcate respect for others. They name and shame the fundamental causes of violence. They call for confession, as in Shirley Murray's powerful Good Friday Lament 'What have we done to you?' They offer consolation to the suffering, the broken, those who have lost everything'.

GOOD FRIDAY LAMENT (F 70)

THE ISSUE OF INVISIBLE WOMEN—OR GENDER IMBALANCE

Seeking to build a New Jerusalem, the first British settlers to arrive in New Zealand brought with them Old World paradigms of male superiority and female obedience, both in the churches they founded and the secular society they created. For men the world of public affairs, for women the home; for men the priesthood, for women the plate of sandwiches. But this changed. Influenced particularly by the British Suffrage Movement and the American-based Women's Christian Temperance Movement, New Zealand women broke out from the domestic world to which they had been confined. In 1893, after a fiercely contested struggle, New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant all adult women the right to vote in parliamentary elections; by 1919 they were able to stand for election as politicians. In 1997 (Jenny Shipley) and again in 1999 (Helen Clark) women held the position of Prime Minister, our Head of State. At one point the positions of Prime Minister, Chief Justice, Attorney General, and Governor-General were all held by women. Yet a leading newspaper has described New Zealand as 'still largely in the adolescent stages of gender equality, with considerable gaps at every level of public and private administration.'

As usual, the churches follow social change at a much more glacial rate, and there are still denominations which refuse women any consecrated leadership roles at all. The first woman of any main-stream church to be ordained in New Zealand (an event that took place in 1959) was a Methodist, Dr Phyllis Guthardt, who went on to be elected the first female President of the New Zealand Methodist Conference in 1985. The New Zealand Anglican Church first ordained women priests in 1977; in 1990 English-born Dr Penelope Jamieson became the second woman Bishop and the first female Diocesan Bishop in the world.

The struggle for equality can now be traced in a hundred or more hymns by New Zealand writers. But before I single out some of the more notable ones and the strategies they adopt, let me remind you of what a silent world it once was for women in the hymns they sang Sunday by Sunday. Three years ago I undertook gender surveys of five hymnbooks used in New Zealand from the period 1890 to 1993 [*Redemption Songs: A Choice Collection of 1000 Hymns and Choruses* (1890), *The Methodist Hymnbook for use in Australia and New Zealand* (1933), *The School Hymnbook of the Methodist Church* (UK 1950), *The United Methodist*

Hymnal (USA 1989), and *Alleluia Aotearoa* (1993)]. In collections totaling just over 4000 hymns and many more thousands of lines of verse, 110 hymns yielded direct references to women or daughters, while more than 2500 hymns referred directly to men or sons. If I had excluded hymns celebrating the Virgin Mary, the 110 would have dwindled to 80—out of 4000.

Until the last decade of the twentieth century, women remained almost invisible in the singing tradition of the New Zealand church at worship. The only kind of woman who figured in the hymn texts I surveyed was the married woman, the mother of children—or the bride about to be married. These approved women were passive creatures, only busy teaching their little ones religious faith or bringing them to Jesus. They had no independent lives of their own, they didn't laugh or obviously enjoy life. Widows were there to be pitied, especially if lonely and humble—probably rating an occasional mention because the Bible teaches social responsibility for the widowed and the fatherless. There are a few sympathetic gestures towards the wife beaten by a drunken husband, or the woman driven to prostitution.

To hear of women in the fullness of their real human life, or for honourable mention of Biblical women other than Mary the mother of Jesus, the female half of New Zealand congregations had to wait until very recently indeed.

One of the reasons for so many New Zealand hymns which in one way or another attempt to redress this imbalance is the emergence of a number of talented women hymn writers: Shirley Murray, Marnie Barrell, Cecily Sheehy, Jocelyn Marshall, Joy Cowley and many more.

In their texts, laughing Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Martha, Mary of Magdala and Dorcas appear, Hildegard, Mechtilde and Julian of Norwich are given fresh voice, Teresa and Susannah are honoured. Ubiquitous male-gender language is displaced by bi-gendered phrases: 'man and woman, father and mother, sister and brother, sons and daughters', or by gender-neutral terms. These writers are informed about ancient and contemporary conceptions of the Holy Spirit as the *ruach* or *pneuma*, the feminine spirit of sanctification and creativity, and know of Sophia, the wisdom of God.

O THE SPIRIT SHE MOVES ON THE WATERS (A 109)

Their knowledge of their own real experience as women is brought to bear on their writing: for one, Christ is 'child of Mary's courage, birthed in human pain', for another, 'The pain was sharp, the shadows hard when Mary walked the cattle yard./ She took dry straw to make her bed,/ 'Come quickly, quickly, child, she said.' God's love is compared to a mother singing her child to sleep, God holds us with a tender parent's hand, God's kindness is made manifest in 'the stories I am told by my granny who's so old'. Raising children, baking fresh bread, weaving cloth, fashioning a quilt patch by patch, making a fruit salad, sweeping up, clearing the crumbs from the table: these and many other domestic images refresh and add to the universal store. In Marnie Barrell's 'This is our Faith', childbirth becomes a striking metaphor for transition into resurrection life.

THIS IS OUR FAITH (H 136)

There are a few New Zealand hymns publicly celebrating the heroic witness to the faith of ordinary women: "Out of the silent world they come, the deaconess, the mother, the artist and the missionary, the teacher and the *kuia*, and we, their children's children, give to God the praise and glory, and honour those who honoured Christ and lived the Gospel story.' But sometimes the gestures towards equality are as small as displacing the standard generic *he* with a generic *she* in baptismal and funeral hymn texts. What is certain is that as part of a general struggle for recognition as partners in New Zealand society, our country's women (and their supporters) have produced a significant body of hymns and spiritual songs demonstrating as well as claiming partnership.

PARIAH OR PRIEST?—HYMNS OF INCLUSIVENESS

I turn to another area of social dispute, the churches' differing positions on the status of gay people within their congregations and more generally in society at large. In modern New Zealand, some churches practice no discrimination in the matter of sexual orientation and allow gay men and women an equal right as full members of their congregations to become ordained clergy. In other churches, there is an absolute ban on the admission of gay men and women to their communities; gay sexual behaviour is held to be at best an unfortunate but curable illness and at worst a capital sin. As usual, the development of a non-discriminatory attitude has been led by the state, strongly supported or fiercely opposed by different church factions.

When New Zealand became part of the British Empire in 1840, it adopted British law which made male homosexuality a crime punishable by death. Lesser penalties included life imprisonment, hard labour and flogging. In both jurisdictions lesbian relationships were simply not acknowledged, so never made subject to the criminal law.

Attempts to reform the law began in 1961 but it was not till 1986 that gay behaviour was decriminalized. The full protection of the law was established in 1993 under the New Zealand Human Rights Act, and 2005 saw the institution of Civil Unions for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. At every stage these parliamentary decisions gave rise to fierce debates both in public forums and within congregations, and in many cases bitter dissension splitting church communities. Out of such sometimes agonizing turmoil arose songs dealing obliquely or directly with the religious and social issues at the heart of the matter.

First, hymns and songs proclaiming the familiar idea of the all-inclusive, unfailling love of God. A text like Shirley Murray's 'Nothing, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God' (H 102), based as it is on St Paul's famous declaration, is typical; of this group. 'Never alone, though human error,/ Turmoil or terror, shake every bone;/ Hope is our song, hope that is joyous,/ born with Christ Jesus where we belong', runs the last verse. Its address is universal, but like many other hymns on this theme it can speak directly to any lonely or frightened person, including those marginalized because of their sexual orientation.

Interesting hymns have emerged directly from the gay and lesbian Christian community itself. One such is 'Companions, let us pray together', written in 1991 by the distinguished Maori novelist Witi Ihimaera and musician David Hamilton for the first national Gay Christian Conference held in Auckland.

COMPANIONS, LET US PRAY TOGETHER (H 21)

The text might be sung by any Christian congregation: the experiences and spiritual yearnings it expresses are to a large degree universal. But it becomes poignant and particular with any knowledge of its original context. The singers, who live in what has been and often still is an oppressive condemning world, address a 'broken Christ' who 'stands among us,/ Shares our suffering and our pain', and raise their voices to a God who 'who loves us/ and accepts us as we are'

Then there are a large number of hymns which call for a communal embracing of difference of whatever kind. They proclaim general values of tolerance and acceptance. The motivation for writing such hymns may be a burning sense of injustice at the treatment of an oppressed and frequently reviled minority. It may be a principled belief in the universal love of God and the goodness of *all* creation. It may be simple empathy and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexual orientation, or a deliberate attempt to engage with and change homophobic attitudes. But such motivations seldom appear on the textual surface, which is characteristically marked by indirection and obliquity.

However, just as early Christians used code words or public symbols given a special meaning—the familiar example is the visual sign or the Greek word for 'fish', used as a coded reference to the name Jesus Christ—so these writers have created texts praising inclusiveness (with a sub-textual reference to the acceptance of gay and lesbian Christians). They make frequent use of important symbols for gay communities, such as the rainbow, with its multi-hued bow, and deploy many images of the breaking down of barriers or prison walls.

WE ARE MANY, WE ARE ONE (F 67)

My own hymn, 'We are many, we are one' was written in 1998, commissioned by the President of the Methodist Church ahead of a fiercely contested decision whether to allow gay men and women to be ordained as Methodist ministers. It is a plea for respect for each other, tolerance of difference and the preservation of unity—qualities in short supply at the time. Its imagery focuses on the metaphor of the vine and its branches found in John 15; its central theme is articulated at the beginning of verse 3:

All division is made whole
When we honour every soul,
Find the life of God in you and me.

Two weeks ago, at an Anglican church in Auckland, a poster implicitly criticizing its own national denomination's slow progress towards full inclusiveness made the headlines in the national media. This is a social and religious issue which is not yet resolved: more hymns will be written.

THE STRATEGIES OF THESE HYMNWRITERS

I have nearly come to an end, but it might be interesting to outline some of the strategies New Zealand hymn writers have adopted to address social issues.

First let me say that contemporary congregations are more openly critical, less ready to sing what they cannot in conscience or conviction believe, but old habits die hard, and many simply fall silent, change the set text under their breath, or make private mental reservations while they sing in apparent harmony with the rest of their community of faith. In such a context, some welcome honest plain dealing with social issues, others take refuge in less controversial hymns...often ignorant of the theological controversies and contested social structures out of which they were created.

Litanies of confession. More than one writer has used the traditional form of the confessional or petitionary prayer as a means of identifying social abuses and drawing social issues to the singers' attention. 'Forgive, forgive us, holy God,' writes Shirley Murray, 'Forgive the minds no longer shocked/ by homeless poor, by lives abused/ forgive us that the earth is stacked/ with weapons waiting to be used' (F 20).

The same confessional form underlies a number of hymns structured as lists. Bill Wallace lists 'our task today' in a verse that runs, 'To build a world of peace,/ A world of justice, freedom, truth./ Where kindness will increase;/ A world from hunger freed,/ A world where people share,/ Where every person is of worth/ And no-one lives in fear' (H 19). Shirley Murray has been particularly imaginative in creating a context for such sets. I think of her hymn, 'A Place at the Table': For everyone born **a place at the table**/ for everyone born clean water and bread,/ a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,/ for everyone born a star overhead./ *And God will delight when we are creators/ of justice and joy, compassion and peace,/ yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice, joy and peace* (F17).

Listening to the voice of the victim. Following the example set by Sydney Carter and others, New Zealanders have written a number of dramatic monologue hymn texts in which the voice is that of the 'other', often the victim: 'Will you offer me compassion?/ Will you walk the road with me?/ Brother, sister, will you feed me/ Ripe fruit from the Mercy Tree?' (A 160). 'I am standing waiting,/ waiting your door,/ one of hunger's children/ from a billion poor; though you cannot see me,/ though I am so small, /listen to my crying,/ crying for us all. (F 34); 'I, too, am there, with the bruise on my arm,/ there is no love for me,/ so all I learn is

the way of the street/ and the path to misery. *Open your eyes, open your ears,/ open your hearts and minds. We are the shadows on your wall, we are the blessed, so Jesus said, we are God's chosen guests; will you not see, will you not heed our call?*' (H 74)

The affective image: the snapshot picture that makes the problem real and emotive. In 'Who are these strangers?' Colin Gibson imagines an ordinary congregation assembled for communion becoming aware of a silent horde of nameless people crowding into 'the place where we belong./ Why do they haunt us with their pain, eyes that have seen so many slain?'...Nameless they stand in endless lines,/ waiting for what will not be theirs: shelter and food and peace of mind, places to rest, an end to tears. In an extraordinary carol, Shirley Murray overlays bright sharp images of abused and suffering children over a highly unusual Christ child: 'Star-child, earth-Child,/ Go-between of God,/ Love child, Christ-Child,/ Heaven's lightning rod'...Street-child, beat child,/ No place left to go,/ Hurt child, used child,/ No one wants to know' (C 40).

Question and answer texts Texts, sometimes drawing directly from biblical verses. challenging the singing congregation to think on their feet as it were, defining problems, suggesting solutions: 'What does our God require of us/ but to do justly,/ love mercy/ and humbly walk with God' (H 146); 'Who is my mother,/ Who is my brother?/ All those who gather round Jesus Christ,/ differently abled,/ differently labeled,/ widen the circle round Jesus Christ' (A 158); 'Where is the room,/ Where is the house of Christmas? (A 154); Who takes the load for the helpless and hurting,/ who drives the road when the crisis is there? (H154); 'Is there no other way than this/ When children learn to curse and kill,/ When isolation numbs the brain,/ And torture breaks another's will?/ Is there no other way than this/ From tyrant fear ourselves to save/ But eye for eye and death for death/ Till earth becomes our common grave' (A 73).

Personifications of compassion, divine and human, translating into words the statues and paintings that once crowded Christian art: Earth weeping 'tears of poisoned rain' (F 75), 'Christ of the sad face, Christ who will weep/ tears for the city, tears for the earth, how can you love us, feeling our hate, stoning the prophets, scheming your death?' (F 9); Shirley Murray's Least Child, 'There is no child so lost,/ no refugee so nameless,/that God will hold us blameless/who share no care or cost.'

Challenges and invocations. And least this list seem too insistent on pity and compassion, I should add the many hymns directly challenging their singers to effective social action and positive social values: 'Make

spaces for Spirit by changing of systems, / By opening prison, by debtors' release,/ The flaming of courage, the firing of justice,/ The Spirit of Jesus, the coming of peace (H 96). 'Come to our land, come to our hearts,/ Spirit of life, breath of new birth,/Teach us to care for water and air,/ nourish the seed and cherish the earth' (A 26). And there's Cecily Sheehy's delightful 'Litany for a spirit-filled planet': 'For all small children, *that they may find a place, come, Holy Spirit. come.* For all young people...for all men and women... for small fast insects...for large forest creatures...for crawlers and creepers...for whales and dolphins... for all Earth's dwellers (A 38). 'Sing green to the acid rain,/ to the water's poisoned flow,/ sing green when the callous kill, when the creatures die in the driftnet death below. *Sing green, and don't let the rainbow fade,/ sing green and cherish the world God made* (A 119). And Marnie Barrell's challenging text, 'We stand with Christ': 'We do not hope to ease our minds/ by simple answers, shifted blame,/ while Christ is hungry, homeless, poor, and we are rich who bear his name./ As long as justice is a dream/ and human dignity denied,/ We stand with Christ: disturb us still/ till every need is satisfied' (A 147).

Finally, language reform: the deliberate avoidance of mono-sexist language, the introduction of words and phrases from other languages, complete texts in Maori and other Pacifica languages (equipped only with non-singable paraphrases in English), the frequent use of paired gendered phrases. The replacement of generalised value and idea terms by specific, concrete language naming the abuse, the victim, the destructive behaviour, the loveless action.

TO SUM UP

But it's time to sum up, to bring together some of the answers I have found to John Bell's original question. Why is it that New Zealanders have written so many hymns addressing social issues?

- First, because New Zealand society, in common with most modern societies, has many social problems and issues.
- Then, because the Christian Church in New Zealand has faithfully transmitted to its creative writers and musicians the Old and New Testament imperatives to social action as an important expression of religious faith.

- Next, because New Zealand writers have taken heart and example from strong prophetic writing by earlier and contemporary British and American hymn writers.
- Because, in a largely secular society, in which the liturgy and the theology of the Church is rapidly being marginalized, the Church's song remains a powerful and effective instrument for inspiring reform and promoting spiritual values.
- Because in a religious landscape where many look to escape society's ills by simply being rapt to heaven, or are intent on protecting their personal vision of individual sanctity and moral cleansing, there are still those creative spirits who with John Wesley believe that they must do all the public good they can, by all the means they can, to all the people they can, for as long as ever they can. And their chosen means is religious song.
- Finally, because a committed and well-organized group of composers and religious poets has emerged and formed a network of relationships, and over a relatively short period created and published a significant body of hymns and spiritual songs directed at the social challenges of their time.

The full texts of the hymns referred to in this paper will; be found in the following publications of the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust:

Alleluia Aotearoa (1992) [A]

Carol our Christmas (1996) [C]

Faith forever Singing ((2000) [F]

Hope is our Song (2009) [H]