

**To serve the present age:
Prophetic Mysticism in the hymns of Bill Wallace**

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Charles Wesley, the poet of Methodism, was deeply concerned for his present age. He followed with close attention the major political issues that shook England in the eighteenth century. His time in Georgia gave him a special interest in developments in the North American colonies. When the rebellion against British rule began, Charles was horrified. Instinctively taking the side of the Crown, he depicted in trenchant verse the rebels whom he saw flouting legitimate authority. He followed the course of the war to suppress the rebellion and was sharply critical of the British leadership, in particular General Howe. (1)

For all his condemnation of the rebellion, his detestation of the mob, his loyalty to the monarch and his patriotism, Charles is clear that he serves the present age most authentically through his writing of hymns to support the preaching of the Wesleyan evangelists. The Holy Spirit was doing a new thing in the eighteenth century and Charles wanted to testify to that. In countless hymns he celebrated the grace of God at work to transform hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, to release prisoners from their chains and to 'kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart.'

The awakening called for conversion, and went on to place before people the vision of sanctification. Charles used all of his poetic gifts to draw attention to the heart-work that the Spirit of God enabled to take place. The Spirit worked to convict hearts, to awaken hearts, to break hearts, to shake hearts, to remake hearts, to disturb hearts, to soften hearts, to free hearts, to forgive hearts, to heal hearts, to woo hearts, to fire hearts. The proclamation was radical because, irrespective of class or rank or station, the Spirit of God was active engaged in the same work. God's heart of love sought a response in all hearts to the gospel. Charles gave the message a new song, a new melody that served to entice and beckon.

Charles served his age by setting the gospel of grace in lines of unforgettable poetry. He found a language in which to sing of the joy and liberation that was experienced when people discovered that they were known and loved and found. If John the preacher touched minds, Charles the poet touched hearts. When John debated theology with Calvinists, Charles claimed the priority of devotion. Although Charles was concerned about the fate of the loyalists in the colonies, his deepest passion was to support the spiritual revolution that had been released by the Spirit of God. Methodism within the Church of England, responded to spiritual hunger and nurtured spiritual growth. In Georgian England, present age was in need of the grace of God to breath new life.

Bill Wallace, a retired New Zealand Methodist minister, served mainly in small urban parishes. A graduate in philosophy of The University of Auckland, Bill has an astute theological mind, refined over the years through debate within Methodism. By nature, Bill has an artistic temperament and the church has not always known how best to receive his gifts. He has been writing hymns since the 1960's. His first hymn was written for a city congregation when faced with celebrating harvest festival, at a distance from the rural and farming community. What might harvest festival mean for worshippers in the city?

There is no doubt that Bill Wallace has been aware of the political issues that have shaped the New Zealand reality over the last fifty years. He is convinced that it is not possible to be Christian without addressing these questions that arise from the context. He has played his part in exploring the New Zealand context. This has led him to write carols for Christmas in summer and songs for Easter in Autumn.

Christmas bathed in sunlight!
Easter with no spring !
How shall Southern Christians
Festive praises sing ?
When we glimpse the symbols
Placed before our eyes
Can we sense their meaning ?
Will new songs arise ? (2)

The hymns of Bill Wallace reflect a sensitivity to the context of Christian life in this land with its distinctive topography and climate, flora and fauna. Native plants take on symbolic meaning and speak to us in poetic ways of the Christ event.

There is also recognition in these hymns of an engagement with the cultural context. This entails probing the encounter between Maori and British settler from the nineteenth century. In 1840 Maori chiefs, encouraged by Anglican and Wesleyan missionaries, signed the Treaty of Waitangi. Designed to protect the integrity of Maori culture and land, the Treaty was soon ignored by the colonial government under pressure from migrants who wanted land. The reappropriation of the Treaty has involved calls for justice and land claims on the part of Maori. Bill Wallace has incorporated these concerns into hymns, a good example of which is 'Land of shining primal forests:

Sing two races' different stories,
Sing their hopes and sing their needs.
Let the Treaty write our story,
Frame our vows and shape our deeds.
Bid the people sit at table,
Share their joy and share their pain;
Join in covenant and banquet,
Break the bread and break the chains. (3).

The hymn explores ways in which New Zealanders of European descent might take seriously commitment to a bicultural partnership in which both cultures are honoured and respected and where each has the freedom to thrive. The poetry is refreshingly free from a dogmatism that has characterized attempts to enforce a uniformity of political option.

In recent years, Bill has developed awareness of environmental issues and his hymns have begun to reflect this. This will be drawn out later in this paper. With successive New Zealand governments from the 1980's embracing market economics Bill has offered a sharp critique of this in some hymns designed to raise issues of justice. Change and new possibilities need to have a political expression and Bill has written on this. But his concern does not remain at the political level.

Though there is this commitment to a Christian faith that expresses itself in the geographical, cultural and political context of Aotearoa New Zealand in the hymns of Bill Wallace, there is a deeper intention. At the heart of his writing is the quest to formulate a spirituality that enables people in our day to discover the presence of God. Convinced that the old dualisms that separated the spiritual world from the material world no longer speak to our experience, he conceives the unity of all experience as the starting point. He writes,

“What we are faced with is re-imagining our spirituality in ways that establish that what was formerly described as the metaphysical world is a dimension of the holistic experience of every human being. In other words, what was formerly thought of as only existing out there and which by invitation could invade our physical world, must now be viewed as something that is intrinsically within the whole cosmos but which may lie dormant in any human being until they have a spiritual awakening.” (4)

So God is to be experienced within the life of this world, within the depths of the human. Salvation is not to be found in escape to a purer world. God is to be encountered in the heart, and in the heart of this world. Not unlike Charles Wesley we see here in the work of Bill Wallace a conviction that there needs to be a rediscovery of the inner life in which the Spirit of God is at work.

Within a critique of the inherited paradigm of enlightenment thought, Bill Wallace recognises the straightjacket of rationalism. ‘In the realm of religion the attempt to catch God in a rational word cage was doomed to failure.’ (5) He wants to take advantage of new freedoms offered by postmodernism that have more open epistemologies. Knowledge from intuition and embrace of the body, from feminist perspectives and contemplation all are welcomed. Deeply influenced by contemporary cosmology with its insights from Quantum Physics, Bill sees spiritual implications in the interconnectedness of all things. “Central to this endeavour will be focusing on the issue of whether Christianity can move from an anthropocentric view of life to an eco-centric one and so relate to the growing awareness in society that if the human race is to have a future it needs to see itself as the nurturer of nature rather than its exploiter.” (6)

The new paradigm requires new images that move away from dogmatic formulations and which suggest the way in which God and world are related. Acknowledging the new scientific worldview can help because theology should always be open to truth wherever it comes from. But it is finally the poet who can evoke in fresh language this new perception of the way in which the divine and the world are related. In this respect Bill sees the world as being in God, which he speaks of as panentheism. Finding inadequate

received versions of transcendence, Bill advocates a mysticism that invites each person to become one with God. Explaining his position he writes:

Broadly speaking we can say that,
Religion is concerned with social cohesion,
Spirituality is concerned with personal transformation,
Mysticism is concerned with transpersonal enlightenment.
And that
Religion is concerned with knowing about God,
Spirituality is concerned with personally experiencing God,
Mysticism is concerned with being one with God. (7)

While the church has had hesitations about mysticism in the past, being cautious about the claims some have made, Bill Wallace sees that mysticism offers a way beyond the conflicts of reason, beyond competing images for the divine and beyond an individualized understanding of Christian faith. Indeed he sees it as providing a bridge by which people of different faiths can meet and respect one another's experience of a unity beyond difference. He finds himself in total agreement with Karl Rahner whom he quotes, "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all."

Central to a spirituality that fosters mysticism is a suspicion of images. In many cases images have served the church well. But in some cases images have become tired and no longer vivid as a new worldview is born. In other cases images, such as God as warrior continue to distort the gospel of the God of love. Images are only to be retained if they powerfully point beyond themselves to the reality they seek to evoke. Mysticism might allow us to accept that "in the final analysis all images of God are only masks of divinity." (8) One hymn by Bill Wallace expresses this in poetry.

O God how can there be one world
When there are many ways
Of morals and of politics,
Of dogma and of praise.

Must we forever judge all views
As either right or wrong
Or are there diverse ways to sing
The pilgrims wistful song?

If we but look inside our depths
We find a complex world
Where multitudes of shadows dance
And images unfold.

Beyond this space of many forms
Your mystery, God, we meet
A flame seen through a darkened glass,
A light for travellers' feet.

O wisdom far beyond the known
Your heart is tender grace,
The grace which helps us glimpse the love
Your presence in each face. (The Mystery Telling Vol 2. unpublished)

Here we encounter the priority that Bill Wallace gives to the inner life and the risk that we face of beginning the journey inward. In conversation with the author, Bill suggested that “as we begin the journey inward we encounter darkness with all its scary realities. The challenge is to go deeper, alone. The deepest level of reality is the place of mystery and nothingness. We are called to let go even of our idea of God. In this spiritual journey there is a movement from knowing to unknowing.”

This willingness to begin the interior journey allows Bill to see that the work of the Spirit of God deep with is primarily one of healing. The healing takes many forms such as forgiveness, liberation and reconciliation. It involves a healing of the deepest woundedness and alienation from our deepest selves. Healing is the dominant image of salvation in Bill’s spirituality and it is multi-faceted. In its fullest expression it is personal and communal, social and indeed cosmic.

In a letter to the author Bill outlines stages of the inner journey that have been identified. “The first stage of the journey is to acknowledge that what we accept as real is fundamentally a misconception or an illusion.” In a hymn ‘God wake us from illusion’ there is an exploration of the individualistic life we live, the separations that we assume, the dualistic distinctions that we espouse. He demonstrates that these are illusions that need to be subverted by an apprehension of a deeper unity, a more holistic vision.

God wake us from illusions, rouse us from our dream,
Free us from believing that things are as they seem.
Though everything seems solid which we can see or clutch
The quantum space between them is something we can’t touch.
(The Mystery Telling Vol 2, unpublished)

After exposing conventional ways of seeing and exploding illusions, Bill proposes that a second step in the spiritual journey is that of letting go. This step makes room for grace for it entails the willingness to let go of orchestrating our own lives and to receive what is given. Beyond the economy earning, there is an economy of grace. We open ourselves to this economy of grace by letting go and trusting that the mystery of divine love will hold us. A short hymn or chant turns its back on holding tight, of striving to achieve and control. It takes us on the journey inward, probing the depths.

In the letting go we find life
For deeper than the striving is the flowing
Deeper than the searching is the knowing
And deeper than the grieving is the mystery
In which darkness and light are one. (The Mystery Telling vol. 2 unpublished)

Such a journey cannot be expected to disclose only light. Bill is not afraid to speak of the darkness that is encountered on the journey inward. Every human heart is capable of malice and deceit. He claims that the second part of life requires one to “accept and develop the more recessive side of one’s personality – to befriend one’s darkness, to channel anger into creativity, and even to use depression as a door to that emptiness which leads to the golden lake of inner peace.” He has developed an image to speak of this. Each of us he believes, is called to acknowledge our inner Herod, that menacing, dangerous dimension within which if not embraced will express itself in violent destruction. The inner Herod is a powerful image for speaking of the bruised and hurting parts of us that lash out and seek to inflict pain.

Darkness is my mother,
Silence is my friend,
Still is my sister,
Mystery with no end.
From the darkness of the womb I draw life,
To the stillness of the dawn I belong,
In the silence of the night I am one. (9)

In speaking of the inner journey Bill Wallace wants to employ new images. But all images have their limitations and he claims that if we hold any image too fiercely then it will become an idol. We will be worshipping the notion, the idea or the image and not the reality behind. “Since God is the mystery beyond all mysteries by definition all images of God become idolatrous when we assume that they are definitive portrayals of the nature of God.” (10)

God is beyond all words
Yet all words belong in God,
For God is the centre and the circle
The weeping and the fun,
The dancing and the stillness,
The many and the one. (The Mystery Telling vol. 2 unpub.)

Idolatry is an everpresent danger and he wants to hold out the possibility of those who have reached spiritual maturity being willing to discard all images and live within the mystery that is beyond all images.

Bill Wallace is both teacher of the inner spiritual journey and poet who celebrates its beckoning. He holds together the personal and the political, the communal and the ecological. There is a science of the inner life and the life of the cosmos. In his hymn set to the traditional tune of The Twelve Days of Christmas he identifies seven stages of seeking. It reminds congregations of the dynamic work of the Spirit.

In the seventh stage of seeking,
God’s wisdom said to me,
Merge with the mystery,
Flower through each dying,
Dance in the wonder,

Let go of all things,
Live with the chaos,
Trust in your spirit,
Long to be changing,
And grow like a great oak tree. (11)

In these simple words, a whole world is opened up in which people are introduced to the open-ended journey on which they are nurtured and grow in discerning the presence of God.

What we find in this elaborated spirituality of Bill Wallace is a response to the breaking down of the categories of modernity and a reformulation that takes account of the new scientific and ecological worldview. Convinced that there are disjunctions in singing the praise of God in an ancient worldview he has sought to construct a spirituality that retains the contours and content of the tradition, but within the context of a new paradigm. Written in the tone of doxology he has created a sacramental spirituality that can be described as a prophetic mysticism. The new ecology and cosmology seem open to a sacramental disclosure of grace while the socially engaged commitment to justice seems open to seeing God in all things. In this way the spirituality of Bill Wallace finds expression in hymns that form people in a truly contemporary way. He serves the present age by offering insight into a prophetic mysticism.

It remains to point to the contours and content of the hymns of Bill Wallace which celebrate Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection, Trinity and Eucharist. In each case we see a respect for the tradition and then a reconfiguring in the light of his special concerns. He sees incarnation as a continuing process of the love of God being poured into this world. Jesus of Bethlehem is the most radiant example, but by no means the only expression of this love. The hymn *The Season of Life's Flowering* captures the spirit of this approach:

But deeper than the beauty
Of Christmas trees or flowers,
Our inner dancing Christmas child
Dwells in all its mystic powers.
To God who gives the sunlight,
To God who gives us warmth,
We raise our joyful summer praise
At the noon-tide of the year. (12)

Often in the hymns there is a linking of the mystery of Bethlehem with the mystery of Calvary; the love of God within this world is not always welcome and is rejected. But the Cross reveals the depth of God's pain and the cost of redemption. The final verse of the hymn *Through the Rivers of our Tears*

God you show us in Christ's Cross,
You are sharing all our pain,
Help us find, beyond our loss,
Love that celebrates again. (13)

Here Bill Wallace rejects the impassibility of God and embraces the God whose suffering love in the cross serves to transform situations of hopelessness and despair.

The power of resurrection is at work throughout creation. It is central in the spirituality and hymns of Bill Wallace. There is space only to draw attention to compelling hymn We are an Easter People. The melody and words are in harmony.

We are an Easter people
Ours is an Easter faith,
Our tears are freed to flow and heal
Our shattered hopes and hearts –
Christ is risen,
Christ is risen,
Risen in our lives. (14)

Trinity in Christian theology speaks of depth of meaning beyond comprehension. Trinity safeguards mystery and calls for humility before the ineffable. Trinity is present in many of these hymns. Bill Wallace writes that “we should reaffirm what the Athanasian creed says, namely that all the members of the Trinity are consubstantial and coeternal, i.e. sharing an eternal oneness... In my opinion it is better to think of the Trinity as three aspects of the divine life-force which pervades the universe.” (15) In what may be his finest hymn Bill celebrates the life of the Trinity within our lives.

O three-fold God of tender unity,
Life’s great unknown that binds and sets us free:
Felt in our loving, greater than our thought,
You are the mystery found, the mystery sought.

O blaze of radiance, source of light that blinds,
The fiery splendour of prophetic minds,
You live in mystery, yet within us dwell;
Life springs from you as from a living well. (16)

Finally the many strands of this rich spirituality are brought together in the Eucharist which holds together the ecological and cosmic dimensions with the prophetic mysticism. Mass of the Universe was written to demonstrate the coherence of this spirituality. The poetry and the music proclaim in doxological exaltation the presence of the incarnate God whose costly engagement in the world.

Footnotes

- (1) see the Historical Introduction by Philip O. Beale in *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley* Volume 1, edited by St. Kimbrough and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, Nashville, Kingswood Books, 1998.
- (2) Bill Wallace, *Singing the Circle – Sacred Earth, Holy Darkness*, Book 1 p. 31 Christchurch, Methodist Communications, 1990
- (3) Bill Wallace *ibid* p. 9, verse 2
- (4) Bill Wallace in personal letter to the author.
- (5) Bill Wallace, “When is an hymn contemporary?” *Music in the Air*
- (6) Bill Wallace, “Re-imagining worship” unpublished manuscript, p. 1.
- (7) Bill Wallace, “Christian worship in an world of dying and emerging images of God,” unpublished manuscript, p. 1
- (8) Bill Wallace *ibid*, p. 10
- (9) Bill Wallace, *The Mystery Telling*, Kingston, NY Selah Publishing, 2001, hymn 43
- (10) Bill Wallace, in
- (11) Bill Wallace, *The Mystery Telling*, Kingston, NY Selah Publishing, 2001 hymn 7.
- (12) Bill Wallace, *The Mystery Telling*, Kingston, NY Selah Publishing, 2001 Hymn 19
- (13) Bill Wallace, *Singing the Circle, Darkness and Light*, p. 42 verse five
- (14) Bill Wallace, *The Mystery Telling*, Kingston, NY Selah Publishing, 2001, hymn 11
- (15) Bill Wallace, *Christian worship in a world of dying and emerging images of God* p. 9.
- (16) Bill Wallace, in *Alleluia Aotearoa*, Christchurch, New Zealand Hymn Book Trust Inc, 1992, hymn 110.