

*Simon Rowbory writes about our new project as a church, Hymns for the Christian Year.*

For some time I have been thinking about how best to draw upon the legacy of John Keble, the man, as inspiration for a hopeful future in our church. By being firmly rooted in our heritage we can gain fresh energy to meet the challenges of the future.

John Keble has been celebrated for many reasons. One is his work as a reformer in the church, seeking to return to the practices of the early church, launching the Oxford Movement with the Assize Sermon in 1833. Another is through his personal example, as he sought to live faithfully and simply rather than follow the path of ambition within the church. However, it is through his poetry that he is probably most beloved.

The Christian Year was published by John Keble in 1827 and gives a poem for each Sunday of the year, as well as additional festivals. At the time it was unusual for offering a return to the seasonal liturgical practice which had been absent in the Church of England. These poems had great popular appeal with very high sales, and even today is ranked as one of the major works of literature in world history. Within the church, John Henry Newman described the poems as the heart and soul of the Oxford Movement itself.

At first when I thought about drawing upon John Keble's legacy I thought that we could do something based upon these poems, perhaps in the sermon section of our Sunday service. But as I began reading the poems more, this thought ran into problems. The poems are brilliant on their own terms, suffused with the romanticism of the time, very effective in creating an atmosphere and mystical feeling. Today however, the poems are more referenced than read.

The poems are brilliant on their own terms, suffused with the romanticism of the time and very effective in creating an atmosphere and a certain mystical feeling. But I was not able to find a way to use the poems themselves within our regular worship. First, they are fairly long poems, too long to fit comfortably within a Sunday service. Second, the poems themselves are not always to modern tastes, inclining towards the maudlin. Third, they reference many things that have passed beyond our common cultural understanding, and much would need to be explained to appreciate them. I concluded that we can't simply repeat the past as we look towards the future. We must find a new path forward based on the insights of the past.

So I thought about the ways that 'The Christian Year' could inspire, and I came to a conclusion. Just as John Keble wrote a poem for every Sunday of the year, so I would write a hymn for every Sunday of the year. It is certainly a big challenge, but it is a way of joining together our legacy as a church with our musical heritage in forging a new path ahead to inspire and build.

*Last month I introduced a new project in our church, Hymns for the Christian Year, to begin in Advent. Just as John Keble (the man) wrote a poem for each Sunday of the year, I have written a hymn for each Sunday of the year. This month I write with further details.*

The beliefs of the Church of England have always been contained within its worship. Our foundational document as a denomination (other than the Bible, of course!) is not a set of propositions or a systematic theology, but The Book of Common Prayer, a liturgical text. It doing this the church acts out the ancient principle: 'the law of prayer is the law of belief.' The liturgical year, which Keble's 'The Christian Year' reintroduced in its fullness, is an extension of this. Rather than adding our core doctrines as a bolt-on to regular church life, a sort of optional extra for the religiously or intellectually nerdy, the liturgical year integrates our doctrinal beliefs within the life of the church. We reflect on Christ's return in Advent; the Incarnation at Christmas; revelation in

Epiphany, sin in Lent; redemption in Holy Week; risen life through Easter; the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; creation at Harvest; remembering in the Autumn. As we combine doctrine and Biblical teaching systematically through the year, our hearts and minds are addressed and changed. We behold God more clearly and know him more closely.

This year, starting in Advent, we will be on a musical and liturgical voyage of discovery. I have written a hymn for each Sunday of the year to intensify our celebration of the truth, beauty and goodness of God. The hymns have all been written to well established tunes so that they are much easier to pick up than if they were entirely brand new. However, for the pure joy of it, many original tunes are available on our Youtube channel, for those who might like to have less continuity with the past. I have also written hymns for additional festivals and occasions, to follow closely in the pattern of John Keble, to make 65 hymns in total. Whilst this is not quite as many hymns as there are poems in 'The Christian Year' at some point I had to stop.

Whilst I have written songs for musical drama performances before I had not done anything on this scale and so it has been very much a learning experience for me. I am sure that there will be plenty of hymns that would benefit from further work. It has though been a valuable way of paying more attention to what I previously thought I knew already, and examining in more detail the familiar until it has yielded up new insights. I hope that through the year we can go on this journey together, of finding new depths and freshness within the structures of our regular worship. There is still much scope for others to contribute to this project and to open it out wider; writing new tunes and arrangements; making recordings; commenting on the hymns and of course to sing the hymns themselves!

To sing a new song every week of the year, even to established tune, would be tiring for any congregation, and so we will not be using each hymn congregationally every single week. We will be using them in a variety of ways through the year – whether printing a hymn in the service book for reflection, using it as the outline for the sermon, having it as the music during communion, having a mid-week group based on it, or indeed having an article in this very magazine based on it. In whatever way that we use the hymns, I hope that you will join with me as we connect together the legacy of Keble and our musical heritage to inspire us in our journey into the vision of God.