

Hymns And My Life

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By Jenny Watt



Don't worry! I'm not going to write about every hymn I've ever sung, but there are some that are special in my memory, and I'd like to tell you about those.

The first hymn I remember singing was "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild". I must have been about six, and our family had been evacuated to Arnside in Cumbria. I went to Sunday school there and happily sang "Pity mice in plicity, Suffer me to come to Thee" I thought of *plicity* as a sort of attic where mice ran round, and I thought it kind of Jesus to be concerned about them. In fact, when I realised it was "my simplicity", I didn't understand that either!

War's end and we left Arnside. It was like leaving a hymn behind, or perhaps a psalm, the broad sweep of the river estuary going across to the woods, the hills and beyond that the mountains of the Lake District. Everlasting beauty!

Flat suburban Essex was a bit of a shock, but in the end, I got used to it. We went to the Methodist church in Upminster and when I was about fifteen or sixteen, a group of us was received into church membership. We could choose our own hymn. There was no discussion, no argument, it was Charles Wesley's "And can it be", with the stirring and sincere words, "My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee"; the vigorous melody and rhythmic bass line emphasising the words.

Later, after college, five years of teaching and plenty more hymns, a friend and I went to teach in the junior department of a school in Nassau, Bahamas. The children's favourite hymn was "Yield not to temptation". In vain did we introduce them to "Jesus, friend of little children" and "Who put the colours in the rainbow?". No! They wanted to sing, "Fight manfully onwards, Dark passions subdue". Admittedly it did have a very cheerful and lively tune!

Once, during the three years we were there, we went to a Scout Jamboree in Trinidad. We were put with a group from Jamaica and one evening we had a campfire. We were joined by some of the Jamaican Scouters with their guitars. It was memorable. We sat there in the firelight while they first sang folk songs, then spirituals; the sad beauty of "Swing Low, sweet chariot", the wistful longing of "Deep River". Then later, much later, we all sang the Jamaican Prayer, "Kum ba yah, my Lord, Kum ba yah" (*Be with us, be with us*). And so, we sat there singing as the flames died down and the sparks rose ever more slowly into the starry sky. *Be with us, Lord, be with us.*

After three years, it was back home to the unusually cold and snowy winter of 1962.

Two years later, I married my friend and colleague, Dave. We later had doubts about the wedding hymn we'd chosen: "Father, hear the prayer we offer; Not for ease that prayer shall be". We felt we would have appreciated a bit more ease sometimes, with our children, sleepless nights, mumps, chicken pox, etc. But maybe we had "Grace to live our lives courageously" as the hymn says!

For nine years after we were married, we went to the local Parish Church. It was different, but we liked it. The Vicar was cheerful, lively and liked singing. I remember once singing "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" and when we got to the end he looked round then said, "Let's indulge ourselves by singing the last verse again." Which we did!

Another time, in January he said, "I don't think we sang enough carols last Christmas. We'll sing another one now." Excellent! We had "O little town of Bethlehem" in the middle of January!

Which brings me to Clare. There are no hymns that stand out for me, but many, many hymns and carols have been alongside me.

Now, though, thinking about it, two hymns are special. One is just the second verse which says, "My burden is light, and a song is in my heart As I travel on life's way"

I have to add that my burden doesn't always feel light and the song in my heart is often slightly off-key, but the verse goes on: "But Christ is my Lord and he's given me his word That by my side he'll stay", and I find comfort in that.

The other hymn is "Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here" and I think of the many occasions when that has been true for me, in churches, singing round campfires, weddings and even funerals.

Then the second verse: "Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around" and I look back to the spectacular places I've visited, the peace of the countryside, the beauty of fields and woodlands, sea and mountains.

Lastly, "Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place" and I am here in Clare with family, friends and neighbours who do so much for me, the many people on the town who extend the hand of friendship. Then there is you, who are hopefully reading this, who unknowingly during the last two years have helped me believe that, indeed, "The spirit of the Lord is moving in this place."

(Photo by [Michael Maasen](#) on [Unsplash](#))
