

Preface

Song that Blesses Earth gathers together the hymn texts, carols, and poems I have written since *God, You Made All Things for Singing* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The one exception is that many of the hymn texts that appear in the Christmas oratorio *Angel and Star* were first published in earlier Oxford collections. I have now interwoven them with biblical passages and dramatic monologues to recount Christ's nativity in one continuous storyline. In a similar fashion, the order of new hymns in the section "Christ Suffers, Dies, and Lives" follows the traditional sequence of readings for Holy Week, starting with the Palm Sunday parade, moving through the Crucifixion, and concluding with the Resurrection. Although it is not an oratorio, the progression of texts might stir creative ideas for Holy Week services.

As in my previous collections, there are endnotes on every poem that give the meter, scriptural reference, and occasion for which it might be used. I have also provided indexes according to meter, theme and image, scripture, and first lines and titles. In creating the indexes, I have tried to be attentive to the ways we talk about the world now. Thus, for example, some of the hymns listed under the traditional theological category "creation" also appear under "ecology" and "outer space."

The third and fourth sections of hymns explore, respectively, Christ as the inspiration to song and art and Christ as the energizing source of the church's ministry.

The last two sections of the collection consider the global/cosmic, and interpersonal dimensions of Christ. Here the language is often less explicitly religious and theological than in the earlier hymns and carols. The expanded vocabulary is my way of indicating that there is an ontic reality to Christ that is larger than what our sacred speech can encompass. In the Afterword I explore these questions more fully for those who are interested in the theopoetic understandings that make me strive for a hymnic idiom that resonates with tradition while sounding fresh and new.

Although the carols and hymns, since they are written to standard meters, can be sung to well-established musical settings, I hope composers will be moved to create new music that is congruent with the contemporary poetic idiom of the texts. I also hope that the texts can inspire ministers and liturgists as they create sermons, homilies and public prayers. Above all, I hope reading, singing, and praying these texts will leave every heartbeat giving praise to God.

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Epiphany 2014

Afterword

At the conclusion of my first collection of hymn texts, prayers, and poems, I wrote an afterword explaining the varied hymnic and poetic traditions that shaped my work, and placing my efforts in the context of “the great liberating movement of a more inclusive religious idiom which is being carried on by pastors, theologians, poets, liturgists, biblical interpreters, and thoughtful Christians around the world.”¹ Although I still stand by the principles and aspirations I named in that essay, I now see ways in which I need to expand upon them in light of the hymns I have written during the last twenty years, and my experience in providing guidance to other hymn writers.

In July 2013, the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada invited me to their annual conference to lead a workshop for writers of hymn texts, some of them well seasoned and others just beginning. Prior to the workshop, participants submitted their texts to me so I could read and provide critical response to their work, and then select those texts that we would examine and discuss in class. When I sat down to respond to the hymns I found myself confronted by a number of questions that previously had shadowed my thinking in some inchoate form but that now took well-defined shape in my mind: What is the basis of my critique? Where did it come from? What assumptions does it make? What values does it carry? What theological propositions does it presuppose? What aesthetic criteria does it champion? As these questions crowded upon me, I realized that although they were awakened by the task of providing a critical response to the work of others, they had long been shaping my own creative work, as I approved or rejected what I had written. If I did not responsibly answer the questions, then whatever critique I provided to the workshop participants might be accepted or rejected as the mere vagaries of subjective taste.