

Proper 19 (September 14, 2014)

“Come Down, O Love Divine” (*Lutheran Service Book* #501)

Water and fire—both prominent Christian symbols—are both notorious and famous for their negative and positive effects. Water can both flood and drown—and cleanse and quench. Fire can both burn and scorch—and warm and cook. In a game of biblical rock-paper-scissors, it may be hard to tell if water beats fire or fire beats water. Water, on one hand, plays prominently in—negatively (depending whose side you’re on, I guess)—Noah’s flood and Moses’ Red Sea and—positively—in baptism, Jesus’ walking on water, and his first miracle at Cana. All, I think we’d agree, pretty high on the biblical “Top 40.” For fire, on the other hand, we have, negatively, the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah. Positively, there’s Moses’ burning bush (evidently an equal-opportunity fire-and-water guy!), the Israelites’ pillar of fire by night, the tongues of fire at Pentecost, and—a sentimental favorite of mine—Jesus’ post-Resurrection fish-grilling. Biblical “Top 40”—or “Top 100”? Hard to say.

However... In my *personal* game of fire-and-water rock-paper-scissors, fire easily beats water. For one, I’m not much of a swimmer. I’d be thrilled never to encounter a pool, lake, river, stream, or ocean ever again. You say “swim,” I think “drown.” For another, the adage “cleanliness is next to godliness” has never made much sense to me. More often than not, I’d rather skip washing my hands and face when most would insist on it—and, despite that, have been healthier than anyone else I know. “Germaphobe” I am not. But give me the chance to light a match, cook on a (Weber!) grill, chat by a fireplace, roast a marshmallow on a bonfire, or (on the more negative side) watch a building burn, and I’m there in an instant!

Is it no wonder that the glowing hymn by Bianco da Siena (c. 1350-1434) speaks so strongly—so “fervently”—to me! Just scan the hymns in the Pentecost section of *LSB*: I dare you to find another that more fully—more “fervently”—embraces images of fire. The first two stanzas are full of them: “ardor glowing,” “kindle,” “flame,” “freely burn” (Pyromaniacs, unite!), “wordly passions,” “turn to...ashes,” “heat consuming,” “glorious light” (ok, that one’s not so fire-related).

This hymn speaks to me not only because of its fire-related imagery, but because of its *person*-related imagery. Even if you, unlike me, are more of a *water* person than a *fire* person, this hymn is still speaking to *you*. To prove my point, instead of looking for *fire* images, let’s look for *person* images. There’s “this soul of mine,” “within my heart,” “shine...on my sight,” “clothe me round,” “inner clothing,” and “[the] soul...wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.” Aren’t those wonderfully personal images! (And we criticize Christian Contemporary Music for focusing on “I” instead of “we”!)

Yes, this hymn speaks to me. But what is it saying? To me this hymn can be boiled down to *three* words: “Spirit,” “me,” and “(become) one.” Or, maybe I should say *three-times-three* words: not just “Spirit,” but “Love,” “Comforter,” and “Holy Spirit;” not just “me,” but “soul,” “heart,” and “clothing/vesture;” and not just “(become) one,” but “come down,” “seek,” and “visit”—and, to add a few more, “draw near,” “appear,” “kindle,” “shine,” and “clothe.” Or,

maybe I should say that it can be boiled down to just *one* word: “ember.” Why “ember”? Since this word doesn’t actually appear in the hymn, let me explain.

Of all my “pyro-positive” feelings and experiences, there is nothing more satisfying than watching—pondering, contemplating, meditating upon—a glowing ember. In an ember—as opposed to outright burning wood—there is much more of a unity between the fuel (the wood) and the burning process (the fire). Where exactly does the wood end and the fire begin? It is precisely that unity between (God’s) Spirit and (my) soul for which I long—and which, for me, this hymn expresses so clearly. By singing the words of this hymn, the (perhaps) most *elusive* Person of the Trinity becomes (hopefully) more *compulsively* united with my inmost being than with just any other words.

But this hymn wouldn’t be as warm—as “fire-friendly”—as it is if it weren’t for the (in my opinion) burning and glowing tune provided for it (DOWN AMPNEY), by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), having first appeared in the *The English Hymnal* of 1906, for which he was the music editor. My first experience with such warmth in a hymn tune was actually with another tune in D-major: John Ireland’s tune, LOVE UNKNOWN, written for and sung with the text “My Song Is Love Unknown.” You know what I’m talking about, right? That C-natural in Ireland’s tune is still the warmest note I have ever experienced in a hymn tune—a feeling I have since tried to exploit in my own hymn tunes. (If you think about it, these two tunes are similar enough to result in a possibly appealing mash-up.) But, after looking into the facts, I found out that Vaughan Williams’ C-natural in D-major preceded Ireland’s by a full 13 years! How was I to know that the warmth I first and most strongly felt through Ireland’s C-natural was more than likely a result of Ireland’s experience, through that popular 1906 hymnal, of the warmth of his countryman Vaughan Williams’ C-natural!

I guess this means that that C-natural, whether in Ireland’s LOVE UNKNOWN or Vaughan Williams’ DOWN AMPNEY (or, much more feebly in my DOUBLE GLORY), is a symbol of that very last burning ember in some warmth-giving fireplace or fellowship-providing campfire or, heaven forbid, some family-destroying house fire or creation-destroying forest fire, which is a symbol of the sometimes-raging but often-flickering faith that has been ignited by the Holy Spirit that makes His dwelling within me.

Please, please! Don’t pour water on that fire!

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Come down, O Love divine,
Seek Thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with Thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near;

Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn,
Till worldly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let Thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be
And lowliness become mine inner clothing—
True lowliness of heart,
Which takes the humbler part,
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the pow'r of human telling;
No soul can guess His grace
Till it become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.

Text: Written by Bianco da Siena, (c. 1350-1434), a member of the Jesuate order at Siena. This is one of the many Italian vernacular hymns (*laudi spirituali*) inspired by St. Francis of Assisi. The English translation was prepared by Richard Frederick Littledale, (1833-90), a strong proponent of the Anglican Oxford-Cambridge Movement.

Tune: DOWN AMPNEY by Ralph Vaughan Williams, (1872-1958). It is named after his birthplace. Erik Routley praised the melody as “perhaps the most beautiful hymn-tune composed since OLD HUNDREDTH.”

Both text and tune are in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music and may be downloaded and reproduced for local use.]