

**Timothy Dudley-Smith**

**Doctor of Divinity**

**Durham Cathedral, 2 July 2009**

Mr Chancellor, our honorary graduand has written, with a mixture of amusement and exasperation, of the widespread assumption that all hymn-writers are dead. This impression was confirmed when he found himself in a hymn book with a misprint of 'd' (for died) instead of 'b' (for born), as 'Timothy Dudley-Smith, d. 1926'. His presence here today suggests that there was something wrong about this; for he is still, thanks be to God, very much alive, and still writing hymns.

The implication of the mistake, however, is more serious. It suggests that in the eyes of many people, the practice of hymn writing, like the writing of poetry, has little relevance to the contemporary world. It is a superficial assumption, and Timothy Dudley-Smith has, throughout his life, worked to correct it. His hymns are constantly setting the Christian faith into the context of our current civilization: in one hymn he has described our human spirits as 'oppressed by pleasure, wealth, and care', and who would dare to disagree with this in the face of our present discontents? He has crossed that boundary between religion and popular culture, by writing hymns that are known and loved throughout the world, not just by committed believers but by those who used to be called, in the days before political correctness and the women's movement, as 'the man in the street'.

He had written occasional verse in his early years. Hymn writing came almost by accident, when he was reading a review copy of the New English Bible: New Testament in 1961. The translators had begun the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary in St Luke's Gospel, with 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord'. To Dudley-Smith's ear this line fell into a rhythm that he instinctively felt: he saw it as the opening line of some verses that he continued, he says, almost 'just for fun'. The result was a hymn that rang round the world, and has continued to do so for

almost fifty years. During that half-century, he has become, almost certainly, the best known hymn writer in the English-speaking world.

That hymn changed the hymnological landscape. Before, there had been earnest attempts to write contemporary hymns, but this one showed that a hymn could convince, and resonate, and inspire as the greatest hymns of the past had done. It was all the more remarkable because Dudley-Smith, as he has always freely admitted, has no ear for music, and he thought that hymn-writing would never be possible for that reason. At Tonbridge School, and at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and then at Ridley Hall, where he trained for ordination, he soon found that he was not destined for the chapel choir (he would describe that as something of an understatement). After ordination he served as a curate in Kent, and in other posts, until he was appointed Archdeacon of Norwich in 1973. He was consecrated Bishop of Thetford in 1981. During these years, encouraged by the reception of his first hymn, he continued to write hymns, often during his summer breaks in Cornwall; requests and commissions began to arrive for commemorations and anniversaries. One of these led to one of his much-loved hymns, 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided'; another to 'Eternal God, before whose face we stand', a magnificent hymn for Remembrance Sunday which I first heard sung in this cathedral. Soon he had enough to publish a small book, *Lift Every Heart*, and then another, and another. He collected almost three hundred of them in *A House of Praise* (2003), followed by a further book, *A Door for the Word* (2006). It is a great joy to know that the materials behind these books, the drafts and letters and manuscripts, will be coming to the Pratt Green hymnology collection in the University Library at a time of the author's choosing, where they will be rich resource for future scholars of hymnody.

Perhaps because he is a man of words and not of music, he has always taken great care with the properties of words – their pronunciation, their quantity, their rhymes, the rhythm of lines, the construction of verses. The result has been that

these hymns, like well-made furniture, have stood up well to the wear and tear of church worship. What is even more important about these hymns is that they have provided a Christian response to the difficulties of belief in the present age and to what sometimes seems to be the waiting-for-Godot-like pointlessness of the world. One of our distinguished former Honorary Graduates, George Steiner, has written of the poet as someone who dares to break silence in the face of such things; it is difficult for any writer to do this, and even more difficult for the believing writer. But Dudley-Smith's hymns are true to human nature and respond to human need: they take our psychological anxieties, our imperfections and failures, and speak to us of forgiveness and hope.

The new Poet Laureate, Caroline Ann Duffy, spoke recently of the poet's duty to 'keep the flame alive'. Our Honorary Graduate has spent a lifetime keeping the flame alive, and for that we honour him today.

Mr Chancellor, I present to you Timothy Dudley-Smith to receive the degree of Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*.

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