

## Some Hymns Can Speak with Truth and Power

Some great hymns of the Church can speak surprisingly eloquently to our circumstances. I'll not forget the funeral service for the Ohio pastor with whom I had come to serve as an Intern shortly after my wife and I were married in 1971. He had died unexpectedly on a Friday, the service was on Monday, and the preceding day the church boiler had exploded, killing four young people and their teacher. I've never heard nor myself sung *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* with greater poignancy and power.

For our wedding, I planned a service that included congregational singing. One of the hymns was a life-long favorite, Harry Emerson Fosdick's *God of Grace and God of Glory*. The refrain is a prayer that never loses currency (though the gendered language needs updating): "*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage . . . for the facing of this hour . . . for the living of these days . . . lest we miss Thy kingdom's goal . . . that we fail not man nor Thee . . . serving Thee whom we adore.*"

One hymn that speaks most profoundly to our contemporary situation was written by G. K. Chesterton and dates from 1906, *O God of Earth and Altar*. I'm not fond of the last line, as its imagery seems to evoke a rather militant and triumphal nationalism, but this otherwise remains a prayer hymn that should give us pause:

*O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,  
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;  
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide,  
take not thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.*

*From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,  
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men,  
from sale and profanation of honor, and the sword,  
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!*

*Tie in a living tether the prince and priest and thrall,  
bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;  
in ire and exultation aflame with faith, and free,  
lift up a living nation, a single sword to thee.*

William W. Reid, Jr., has written a same-metered hymn, *O God of Every Nation*, words from which I'd like to substitute for Chesterton's last half-stanza:

*Where hate and fear divide us and bitter threats are hurled,  
in love and mercy guide us and heal our strife-torn world.*

Let all the people say, "AMEN"!

*Copyright 2008 by Byron C. Bangert*