

Hymn Series : Be Thou My Vision, July 14, 2019

So, there's a group of us from church that go to Clearwater Grille every so often on a Thursday evening and join in playing DJ Pub Trivia there. Let me tell you, there are some surprisingly trivial people among us! Sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, most times we land somewhere between the two. We all have different narrow areas of trivial knowledge, but the pop culture questions are usually the ones that get us; probably would help if we had some team members younger than ourselves for those questions. Last time we played a pop culture category called One Hit Wonders appeared, and we were to name the group that had sung the one hit wonder. The song was Breakfast at Tiffany's. Remember? The song came out in 1995, and they played it for us, and we all remembered it, some of us quite well. It still plays occasionally on KS95, the radio station I listen to on the way to work. The song is sung by a man trying to persuade a woman to give their romance another chance. She says they have nothing in common, and he comes back by telling her they both liked the movie, Breakfast at Tiffany's so they do have some common ground. The lyrics run:

And I said, "What about Breakfast at Tiffany's?" She said, "I think I remember the film

And as I recall, I think we both kinda liked it" And I said, "Well, that's the one thing we've got".

Seem familiar? So the song played, and we all racked our brains trying to remember who came out with this one hit wonder, and none of us could come up with it. Can any of you, who weren't there? Our only comfort was that none of the other 6 or 7 teams could dredge it up either. It was sung, of course, by Deep Blue Something....now do you remember? I didn't either. I mean— Deep Blue Something? Didn't even ring a bell. But, popular music and artists come and go so

quickly and there's so many of them, that not that many can make a very lasting impression.

Aside from a few classics, for example, the songs our forebears loved to play on their pianos or their Victrola's even just a hundred years ago would be all but unknown to us today.

In stark contrast to one hit wonders and songs of passing popularity, we have before us this morning, one of the most enduring hymns of any time and place, Be Thou My Vision. I selfishly picked this hymn for this July hymn series month purely and simply because I love it. It's one of my all time favorite hymns. It may well be one of yours, too. Which is remarkable, when you consider that it is based on a poem written in Ireland in the 6<sup>th</sup> C, about 1,600 years ago. It's over a millenium and a half years old! And is still one of the commonly sung and loved hymns to this day. Many of our hymns are rooted in antiquity, but few go back this far into the dawn of early Christianity in Western Europe. How remarkable is it that these words still speak our emotional and spiritual language? This hymn certainly bears a closer look.

Prior to the 6<sup>th</sup> C, Celtic religion was the primary faith in Western Europe, particularly in Ireland, Wales, and England. From around 500 BC to 500 AD, so for about 1000 years, this spirituality flourished. Many today are drawn towards aspects of Celtic spirituality, and no wonder. The cross on our bulletin is a Celtic cross. It's a Christian symbol, but the circle around the cross and the curving, intertwining lines are reflective of the Celtic background, in which all creation was seen as united, like a circle, and as woven together, like the interweaving lines. The reverence for nature and the sense of underlying unity between all creation are aspects of this religion that appeal to this day. Of course, before we get too romantic about the celts, we might also want to keep in mind that human sacrifice was a frequent practice, as was head hunting.

Dark practices and superstitions abounded. But Christianity came relatively soon to this area, St. Patrick living in 300s AD and bringing Christianity to Ireland, quite some ways from its origins in tiny Israel of the Middle East. The fusion of some of the best of Celtic religiosity along with Christianity produced some deep and beautiful spiritual expressions, including this hymn, Be Thou My Vision.

Tradition suggests the hymn is based on a poem by the 6<sup>th</sup> C. Irish poet and saint, Dallan Forgaill. St. Dallan was born in what is now Ballyconnell in County Cavan in Ireland. He was a poet and scholar who wrote a famed poem about St. Columba, an Irish bishop and abbot who spread Christianity in what is now Scotland. That poem is considered by scholars to be one of the most important works left from the early medieval Gallic world. That may well be, of course, but his most lasting legacy has to be the poem which served as the foundation of our hymn today. The intriguing thing about St. Dallan, is that his name indicated blindness; “Dallan” means “little blind one.” The story is that he lost his sight due to intensive studying. “Be Thou My Vision” takes on a whole different meaning when we realize it was written by one who had no vision. I just reread some of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books from the Little House on the Prairie stories. If you read them or saw these stories on TV, you may recall that Laura’s sister, Mary, went blind, and Laura quite intentionally acted as Mary’s eyes for her, describing things as vividly as she could for her, and guiding her steps on the walks they shared. For St. Dallan, it was God who acted as Dallan’s eyes; God who provided vision for this man who was blind. Many of the stories of ancient saints are both fascinating and puzzling, steeped in legend, and it is surely difficult to sort out the history from the myth. For what it’s worth, some believed that Dallan regained his sight after writing his great poem. Others claimed that those who recited it

with devotion would be preserved from blindness and receive the gift of a happy death. St. Dallan was reportedly beheaded while visiting a friend on an island monastery, where he was then laid to rest. Again, a rather unlikely sounding legend suggests that God reattached his head after his martyrdom so that he was buried whole, but I guess that's neither here nor there. He lived in violent times, and this poem reflects that reality.

Scholars classify this poem as a *lorica*, a prayer for protection. People living in times and places where death is a frequent visitor through violence would very naturally speak and sing such prayers. I wouldn't have described our times as being like that, and yet prayers for protection very naturally spring from my heart, as I pray for people in harm's way, or for my children, or for what peril I may face, even if those perils are extremely tame compared to the times of St. Dallan. How many of your prayers, I wonder, might also be classified as prayers for protection? Somehow all times and places have their share of fears and perils. But Dallan prays for more than protection from harm; he also prays that God will be his eyes for him, his vision. And that God will be his mind for him, his wisdom.

“Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of my Heart. Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.”, he begins. In other words, “Let me see the world through your eyes, Lord. Without You, nothing else matters.” What would it mean to see the world through God's eyes? How can we know? Here's how—we learn how the world looked through the eyes of Christ, the eyes of God incarnate. Look at today's Gospel lesson, the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. “Who is my neighbor?” was the question asked of Jesus. And he replies with this beloved parable. The eyes of the world are represented by the priest and Levite, let's say a Pastor and a lawyer. Not bad

folks, just people who never stepped outside the lines and saw the world as most of those around them did. They saw a victim of violence; bloody, perhaps dead or near dead. And like so many, they decided to avoid involvement. Particularly, since blood and death were considered ritually unclean, and if they were to touch this man, they would become unclean and require ritualistic purification. Our pastor and lawyer probably worried about possible contagion factors or legal ramifications. What did these good people see through their worldly eyes? They saw a scary victim, someone outside their comfort zone, someone who maybe deserved their fate for traveling alone on dangerous roads, someone to be passed hurriedly by. And what, instead, did the Samaritan see? The Samaritan, who was looked down upon by the Jews, by the priest and the Levite, for not being as truly good and purely Jewish like they were? The Samaritan saw a neighbor in need and responded at no small inconvenience and cost to himself. The Samaritan is the one whom Jesus holds up as modeling how we ought to live. When Christ looks around, does he see, as we do, people divided up into ethnic, racial, religious, socioeconomic groups? Or does he see neighbors in need, all of us equally flawed and redeemed and in need of saving? That's what it means to see through God's eyes. What would Jesus do, we sometimes ask. Maybe instead we might ask, "What would Jesus see?" How does God see this situation? How can I look at this situation or person through God's eyes, God's vision? Almost like putting on a pair of glasses or contacts that allow us to see through God's corrected perspective.

One way we might sharpen our Godly vision is highlighted in the second verse. "Be Thou my Wisdom and Thou my true Word, I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord." Again, a prayer, this time that God would be our wisdom, our thinking, our mind, our reflections, and that God would be ever with us and we with God. We can again look to Christ to ponder how God

thinks...and through all of Scripture to become more closely aligned with that true Word to which the saint refers. What did God incarnate in Jesus think? Jesus thought the lilies of the field were as beautiful as a king in royal splendor. Jesus thought that children mattered and should be held and blessed. Jesus thought that stories were a way to catch people's attention and he told a lot of them. Jesus thought that people on the margins, the outcasts, the sick, the rejected, should be welcomed, and he did so. Jesus thought it was great fun to share food and wine with friends. Jesus thought that living out God's will for Him was more important than His own comfort, and it led Him to the cross. That's how Jesus thought. That's the wisdom of God for which we pray, the mind of God that sees beauty, values those overlooked, sacrifices for the common good. Doesn't sound like human wisdom at all, but it's the wisdom that comes through seeing and thinking through God's eyes and mind.

Saint Dallan, like most saints of ancient times, lived a perilous and impoverished life. That gave him a different take on safety and wealth. He saw that God was his inheritance and that earthly riches were fleeting, as was the lure of earthly fame and popularity. He saw that knowing God was his true treasure, and that his safety lay in trusting in God. The third stanza states, "Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise, Thou mine inheritance, now and always. Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art." And given the brevity and uncertainty of human life in his times, he also, like so many in earlier centuries, kept heaven and eternity on his radar. Those who live with a greater sense of life's fragility are much more prone to think about death and resurrection and what happens next. The final stanza of this hymn is his prayer for eternity, and he presents such a light-filled, joyous vision that it lifts our hearts 1,600 years later. "High King of Heaven, my victory won, May I reach heaven's joys, O

bright heaven's Sun." It's easy in our era of longer lives and advanced medical options to deny the reality of death, but we're just fooling ourselves; it's still the only way we leave this world, and we all have to leave sometime. Dallan's shining vision of eternity with God still brings balm to our souls when we wrestle with our own fears of dying, and we need to put our trust in that High King of Heaven as well.

He ends his prayer as he begins it, with the simple prayer that God be his eyes, his vision. "Heart of my own heart, whatever befall; still be my Vision O Ruler of all." We could do far worse than to begin each day with this hymn as a prayer, or even with using the opening or closing line as our mantra.....Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart. Can you think of any better eyes through which to see what's around us? Amen.