

August 2016

Our worship, including our hymns, tells us much about what we believe. So it is worth while paying attention to what we sing, both in order to understand our faith better and (hymn-writers beware!) to make sure what we sing in church really does express the Christian faith.

The Anglican poet, translator and hymn writer Athelstan Riley (1858-1945) was the author of the famous hymn "Ye watchers and ye holy ones", the second verse of which is addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

*O higher than the cherubim,
More glorious than the seraphim,
Lead their praises, Alleluia!
Thou bearer of th'eternal Word,
Most gracious, magnify the Lord.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

This hymn pictures our Lady as the leader of the praises of the heavenly host. All Christians, and Walsingham pilgrims in particular, might care to reflect on the reason for this. It is summed up well in the words of another hymn (O Love how deep, how broad, how high", an English translation of a Latin hymn by another Anglican, John Mason Neale (1816-1866, a priest of Chichester diocese):

*He sent no angel to our race,
Of higher or of lower place,
But wore the robe of human frame
And he himself to this world came.*

The wonder of our faith is that God who, as God is infinitely remote and beyond our wildest imaginings, chose to share our own flesh with all its weakness and sufferings (sin alone excepted): "*tears and smiles like us he knew.*" As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it (1.5): "*To what angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee?"*"

No wonder Mary is special. No angel ever bore *The Word made flesh.*

There is something else as well. If that is true of Mary, it is true of us as well. We share the flesh in which God entered our world. Thanks to God's choice of Mary, we too are "*higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim*". From a worldly point of view we are merely one more species, the product of millennia of evolution, but God has not only created us but has more gloriously recreated us. How wonderful and how great a challenge!