

Lines that gave us each day our daily bread

Prayers and hymns learnt in childhood are a spiritual resource that lasts a lifetime

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What comes into your head when you hear the word “pilgrim” – not, admittedly, a frequent occurrence these days? For some it may be the Pilgrim Fathers and the Mayflower, but for many it must be: “Hobgoblin nor foul fiend/Shall him dispirit”, or some other lines from John Bunyan’s great hymn – “Who would true valour see/Let him come hither...”, which actually has an alternative first line, “He who would valiant be...” Anyone brought up in one of our Protestant churches will have sung that hymn, To Be a Pilgrim. As a child I always used to belt out the hobgoblin and foul fiend line, albeit tunelessly. Even today it’s a favourite, and sometimes appropriate, funeral hymn.

Now, a group in the Church of England is so concerned about the seeping away of our inherited Christian culture that, alarmed by the discovery that even the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments are unfamiliar to many, it is offering parishes what it calls “the Pilgrim Course” to teach “the basic tenets of Christianity”. “Give us each day our daily bread”, as you might say.

This seems an excellent idea, whether you are a believer and practising Christian or not. The fact is that the Bible, in the Authorised or King James version, the Book of Common Prayer, Hymns Ancient and Modern and the Church of Scotland's Church Hymnary with the metrical Psalms and Paraphrases, are as much a part of our culture as Shakespeare's plays, the novels of Scott, Austen and Dickens, the poetry of Milton, Burns, Wordsworth and Tennyson, or, for me and many other Scots, the Border ballads. All represent a rich treasury on which we draw, often unthinkingly, without premeditation or conscious search.

These days I would usually describe myself as an ageing agnostic who is no longer a churchgoer, but one whose head, on account of family upbringing, school chapel and years of church attendance long ago, is so stocked with the words, phrases and sentences of Christian literature that they come unbidden to mind.

In the occasional moments of self-reproach, which may disturb even the most complacent of us, I find myself muttering the words of the General Confession: "We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep... We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done," and (if I remember rightly) "there is no health in us"; or the opening line of the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word." They offer a strange sort of comfort, even though one may have no desire at all to depart. This is partly, I think, because we know that these words connect us not only to our own youth, but to the generations that have gone before us.

Modern culture often seems to be horizontal. By this I mean that in the multitudinous Babel – or babble – of the world today, so copious in information, with our ears battered by sound and our eyes dazzled by computer screens, we may be ignorant of so much that has gone before. This is a form of provincialism. To be confined to one's own time is like being confined to one's own street. There is doubtless much of interest in that street, but there is more beyond it, too.

A true culture is vertical; it reaches back into the past. Our inherited culture is Christian, and, even if you cannot accept the message of Christianity, or its fundamental premise that God created and orders the world, knowledge of our Christian heritage and literature is an enrichment of experience that may free us from the provinciality of the merely modern.

There is an exchange in James Elroy Flecker's play *Hassan* that makes the same point in another way. The Caliph says to the poet: "If there should ever arise a nation whose people have forgotten poetry, or whose poets have forgotten the people, though they send their ships round Taprobane and their armies across the hills of Hindustan, though their city be greater than Babylon of old, though they mine a league into earth or mount to the stars on wings – what of them?" To which the poet replies: "They will be a dark patch on the earth."

Well, today we do indeed mount to the stars on wings and mine a league into the earth or deep into the oceans. We know much that even the best informed of our ancestors never knew, or even supposed might be known. Yet, if we cut ourselves off from our inherited culture, and are ignorant of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the hymns, psalms and paraphrases, we are diminished. We may indeed be that "dark patch on the earth". The 121st Psalm says: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." The hills we see, range behind range, lead us into the past, and the words of

the past, coming unbidden to the mind, bring comfort and reassurance.

Daily Telegraph - Allan Massie