

## Hymn of the Month

January 2008

### PRAISE GOD FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW

Our Hymn of the Month for this January is an unlikely candidate among hymns, for it is better categorized as a response or perhaps a canticle. This “hymn” was not actually written as such and was in fact a stanza from several other hymns. Yet this is perhaps the most widely sung piece of church music in English speaking congregations, being sung in almost every Protestant church in the United States on a weekly basis. Indeed, our Hymn of the Month is the common congregational response we refer to as *The Doxology*.

Anglican bishop Thomas Ken is credited as being England’s first hymnist. Although Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley were much more prolific in their hymn writing, Ken can be considered the pioneer of modern hymnody. Born in 1637, Thomas Ken was educated at Oxford University and ordained into the Church of England. Throughout his ministry career he had the opportunity to serve in several powerful leadership positions. For a time he was chaplain at England’s embassy in the Hague and from there became the personal chaplain to King Charles II. It was Charles who consecrated him as a bishop in the Anglican Church. Although this position would later be stripped from him by King William III following an imprisonment in the Tower of London, Thomas Ken would remain a respected leader in England.

Prior to the late 1600s, the music in churches consisted primarily of psalm-singing, at least in English parishes. While Ken appreciated and upheld this position, he believed that Christians should be able to express themselves in praise in their modern language. As a result, Bishop Ken penned numerous devotional hymns, setting the stage for a new era in congregation singing, and preparing the way for Watts and Wesley to flourish. Among the devotional hymns written by Ken was a series of hymns for use at Winchester College. The “Morning Hymn,” “Evening Hymn,” and “Midnight Hymn” were intended to be sung privately by individuals upon waking, going to bed and in the middle of the night (should one be unable to sleep), respectively. The last stanza in each of these hymns consists of the four lines we know as *The Doxology*. Years later this stanza would be extracted to stand alone as a separate response of praise and would become part of Protestant tradition.

One of the most beautiful features of *The Doxology* is the call for all creation to praise God. All creatures here on earth and all the heavenly hosts above are instructed to give their praise and honor to the Lord, echoing the Psalmist that all of creation tells of God’s glory. The last line, simple in language, not only bespeaks, but declares the Trinity. Although the Arian Controversy was long over by the time Ken wrote this verse, the simple statement of praising Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is a gentle reminder of our theological heritage.

Musically *The Doxology* has been sung to several tunes, but OLD 100<sup>TH</sup> seemed to win out in the end. Originally the tune for the French version of Psalm 134, it was eventually adapted for Psalm 100 in the 1600s and later wedded to *The Doxology*, perhaps because of its popularity as a tune.

Although not as flashy as some other hymns in our tradition, *The Doxology* is one of the most important musical responses in our worship, and our use of it weekly continues a ritual established centuries ago. As we sing *The Doxology* each week, may we be reminded of the importance of constant daily praise in our lives, and may we join with all creatures here on earth and in heaven above in ascribing greatness to our King..