

## Hymn of the Month

March 2008

### O THE DEEP, DEEP LOVE OF JESUS

*O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*: one of those hymns that somehow escaped our hymnal, yet evokes such a powerful imagery of Christ's love for us that it bears some attention as our Hymn of the Month.

Samuel Trevor Francis, the writer of this hymn, was born in 1834 north of London, England, but spent his youth in Hull. The son of an artist, Francis was gifted as a poet, even at a young age, and is said to have compiled a collection of poems as a teenager. While he never pursued poetry professionally, his gifts and abilities as a poet would serve him well as an adult, both as a hymn writer and as a preacher. Interestingly, although he excelled at both, Francis was a merchant by trade, but realized that his passion for ministry could extend beyond the confines of his professional career, and it is this passion that led him to write such hymns as the one we sing this month.

Although his adult life was filled with desire for evangelism, as a young man Francis had struggled with his spirituality, and subsequently with his own purpose in life. He wrote later in life that one evening, while walking across a bridge in town, he cried out to God to have mercy on him, recognizing his own sin, and questioning his faith. Midway across the bridge, feeling the despair and distance from God, he felt the urge to jump into the water and end his life. Recoiling from the thought, he stepped back and felt the sudden assurance of his salvation in Christ. From that point forward, Francis knew of his worth in Christ and his fervor for the Gospel never waned.

While this hymn was written several years after the bridge experience, one has to wonder whether Samuel Francis recalled this moment when writing these words. The text speaks of the profundity of God's love for us, echoing these words from Ephesians:

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

These words from Scripture, and the text of the hymn, remind us that God's love for us is immeasurable and cannot be contained. It is this very love that sent Jesus to the cross as our penalty, and this love that sustains us daily through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Any good hymn text deserves a good musical accompaniment. EBENEZER, also known as TON-Y-BOTEL, was written in the 1890s by Welshman Thomas Williams. There is an apocryphal account of this being a long-lost hymn tune found in a bottle on the shores of Wales, but this fantastic story has been proven false. The meter of the music combined with the triplet figures in the vocal line help move the music along, much like the flowing of river water. The minor key evokes the sense of depth and mystery of God's love that Francis describes with his words.

In these last few weeks of Lent, and in the Holy Week to come, may we be reminded of God's great love for us. As we meditate on the cross, may we allow this love to wash over us, cleanse us, and lift us up to the One from whom it flows.