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Ascensiontide

by Revd John Elliott

A Hymn for Ascensiontide

- 1 REJOICE ! the Lord is King !
Your God and King adore !
Mortals give thanks and sing,
And triumph evermore !
Lift up the heart, lift up the voice,
Rejoice aloud, in Him rejoice !
- 2 Rejoice ! the Saviour reigns, -
The God of truth and love !
When He had loosed our chains,
He took His seat above.
Lift up the heart, lift up the voice,
Rejoice aloud, in Him rejoice !
- 3 The Human made Divine
Ascended up on high !
How great was that design
Which brought salvation nigh !
Lift up the heart, lift up the voice,
Rejoice aloud, in Him rejoice !

4 His kingdom cannot fail ;
 He rules o'er earth and heaven :
 The keys of death and hell
 Into His hands are given.
 Lift up the heart, lift up the voice,
 Rejoice aloud, in Him rejoice !

If the many exclamation marks, each positioned a space away from the word preceding it, it look odd to you, it is because I've tried to copy out the entire hymn as it appears in the very first compilation of hymns published by the General Conference. In that book, published in the 1820s, it stands along with some other hymns under the subject-heading *Redemption*, and in the Conference's second collection of hymns that appeared in print in 1880, it is included within a section that has a similar but longer heading. In the 1946 hymn-book the wording of its section-heading is again similar to, yet different from, the ones in its two predecessors. But none of these three compilations of hymns associates the hymn with Ascensiontide, as **Songs for Worship** 'compiled by a committee of the General Conference of the New Church' plainly does, in the *Subject Index* at the end of the book.

This most recent compilation of hymns, which congregations belonging to the General Conference have been using for 35 years now, attributes *Rejoice, the Lord is King* to Charles Wesley, the author of literally hundreds of Christian hymns. This attribution is not incorrect, but that within the 1946 hymnbook – *Based on Charles Wesley* – is surely preferable. For the first two verses and the fourth all contain alterations to Wesley's original version, while the third verse is an entirely New-Church addition. And it is this addition that makes the hymn appropriate for Ascensiontide!

The period of ten days from Ascension Day to Whit-Sunday may be the simplest way to describe what is meant by Ascensiontide. (Ascension Day itself comes 40 days after Easter Day and therefore always falls on a Thursday, this year on 13 May.) It commemorates our risen Lord's ascension, described briefly at the end of Mark's Gospel, also briefly at the end of Luke's, and then more fully in Acts 1: 6-11. And for many Christians it is a Holy or Feast Day. But I do not think our Lord's being carried up on high was in Wesley's mind when composing his hymn. Rather, his theme was one of joy and thankfulness that the risen Lord has the powers of evil under lock and key, and reigns for ever over all things. Possibly Wesley's inspiration was the apostle Paul's exhortation to certain members of the small group of Christians in Philippi – Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice (Phil 4: 4).

However, whoever that New-Church person was way back in the early 19th century who wrote the verse beginning *The Human made Divine ascended up on high* we living two hundred years later are left to provide some explanation of it.

Let me begin by repeating a quotation from The Teachings of the New Church which I included in my article regarding a hymn for Good Friday –

The Lord came into the world to save the human race, which would otherwise have perished in everlasting death. He achieved this salvation by subduing the hells, which were attacking every single person coming into and leaving the world. He did this at the same time by glorifying His humanity, for He could thus keep the hells subdued for ever. The subjugation of the hells, and at the same time the glorification of His humanity, were achieved by the temptations which were permitted to assail His humanity He inherited from His mother, and by constantly winning victories over them. His passion on the cross was the last temptation and His complete victory.

(Paragraph 293 of *The New Jerusalem and Heaven's Teaching* for it.

Translator John Chadwick. Published 1990 by the Swedenborg Society)

While the Lord was subduing the hells His humanity was simultaneously being glorified or made Divine. It was that now Divine Humanity that rose from the dead and subsequently 'ascended up on high'. After saying that He 'was taken up into heaven' Mark 16: 15 adds that He 'sat down at the right hand of God.'

These words serve to remind us that after the Resurrection the glorified or made Divine Humanity of our Lord became united to the infinite and eternal God. And as human hands are endowed with the power and ability to carry out human desires, so the right hand of God denotes His almighty power to hold hell for ever in subjection to Himself and to save human souls from selfishness and sin.

The **Book of Worship** published by the General Conference in 1971, and the **Supplement** to it, do not contain anything related to Ascensiontide, but worship-leaders in particular may find the following thanksgiving for Ascension Sunday (16 May) in the older **Liturgy for the New Church** helpful to them –

Most adorable Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the glorification of Thy Humanity, didst ascend far above all heavens, blessed and for ever blessed be Thy Holy Name. Now is the light of the moon become as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun sevenfold, as the light of seven days; for Thou, O Lord, hast bound up the breach of Thy people, and healed the stroke of their wound. Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive. Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that Thou mightest dwell among them. Ever would we honour and adore in Thee in the undivided Majesty of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and

acknowledge that Thou alone reignest, King of kings, and Lord of lords. We join in the triumphant song, and say, Lift up your head, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty; the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your head, O ye gates, even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory. Amen.

Memories of Moseley New Church Sunday School

by Rita Russell

At Moseley (Birmingham) New Church our minister, Revd Paul Vickers, started the Sunday School. At first there were only two pupils (my brother, Gordon, and myself). During the service his wife, Doris, took us out for our Sunday School lessons, presumably during the sermon. We went into the Jubilee Room which was in the building situated behind the church. The numbers grew when the Sutton family moved to Dorridge and started attending Moseley Church. Also local children swelled our numbers.

There was a service every Sunday – for many years it was held in the morning and then later it moved to an evening one with Sunday School at 3pm. Eventually there were four classes – the Primary class was led by Mrs Nora Sutton in the Jubilee Room, the Juniors were made up of two classes in the two back corners of the church building led by Mr Norman Sutton and our father, Billy Kuphal. Mr Vickers took the Senior class and they met where the choir pews were (to the left of the chancel). Little chairs and a sandbox were purchased or made for the Primary class. The room also had hanging in it a picture of Jesus surrounded by lambs and sheep. I can see that picture now in my mind's eye with Jesus looking very Scandinavian with fair skin and long blond hair. It took me a very long time to accept a Jewish-looking Jesus.

When I was proficient enough on the piano I used to go down to the youngest class and play the hymns out of 'Child Songs' and the 'Sunday School Hymnary'. 'Here the pennies dropping' was sung whilst all the children walked round the room singing and putting their money in the collection box. What a thrill it was to be entrusted with holding the box! There was a strict rota for the chosen one. I still have very fond memories of the many hymns we sang including 'God, who made the earth', 'God who made the pretty daisies',

'God, whose name is Love', 'Jesus bids us shine', 'Jesus, Friend of little children', 'Little drops of water', 'Praise Him, praise Him, all ye little children', 'See the farmer sow the seed' and 'Tell me the stories of Jesus'.

Each Christmas Mr Vickers wrote a Nativity Play which was well rehearsed and performed during one of the grown-ups services. At one particular play I was the 'king'

who carried the gold and John Sutton was one of the other 'kings' (holding the frankincense). We each had to sing a verse from 'We three kings of Orient are' which related to our gift as we walked around the church. Mr Vickers was very talented and made models to illustrate various Bible stories, including the tabernacle and the houses of Palestine.

And then, of course, there were the dreaded Sunday School exams each year with prizes awarded to those who took part and passed them successfully. They were marked and graded – Pass, Good, Excellent and Best Paper (which was awarded to only one of the candidates). All the results were published in the 'Herald' (the New Church magazine that preceded 'Lifeline') which everyone eagerly awaited or dreaded as all the candidates' names were mentioned. The Best Paper award was fiercely contested. I never reached such heights but Gordon managed it on a couple of occasions. Over the years the older pupils had to learn 'The Faith', 'The Creed', 'The Catechism' and various passages from the Bible, including the Commandments and Psalm 23.

A highlight of the year was when we were given the Sunday School exams prizes and Attendance prizes. Does anyone out there still have a book with a label stuck inside saying "Awarded to ..."?