

### Isaac Watts, Hymn Writer, 1748

*“Let the Holy Spirit fill you: speak to one another in psalms, hymns and songs; sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord.” Ephesians 5, 19.*

St Paul’s words seem appropriate to a spaced congregation able only to make music in their hearts as they hear a recorded piece of music during this outbreak of Covid-19, or in a complete ‘lockdown’ confined to their own homes. I have chosen this verse as an alternative to the readings set for today and to celebrate one of the two Lesser Festivals of 25<sup>th</sup> November – that of ISAAC WATTS, Hymn Writer.

Isaac Watts was born in 1674 and died in 1748, ten years after the ‘conversion’ of John and Charles Wesley. Until the seventeenth century, Christians had been limited largely to what St Paul offered in the letter to the Ephesians 5,19. The Book of Common Prayer, for example, offered little more than the Old Testament Psalter plus a small selection of early Christian canticles. Additions from newly printed hymn books appeared only in the nineteenth century. Hymns Ancient and Modern appeared in 1861 and included 11 of Watt’s hymns, compared with 64 in the Wesleyan Hymn Book of that period. It’s interesting to note that Hymns Ancient and Modern (New Standard) 1983 gives 19 Watt hymns, while 39 appear in Hymns and Psalms, published by the Methodist Publishing House, also in 1983.

As far as the Psalms were concerned, Isaac Watts entitled his hymnbook of 1719

*“The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of The New Testament, and Apply’d to the Christian State and Worship”.*

He wrote: “ ‘tis necessary to divest David and Asaph of every other Character but that of a Psalmist and a Saint, and to make them always speak the Common Sense and Language of a Christian”. In a word, the Psalms should be ‘Christianized’. Watts would not have been happy to include in Christian praise the recurring pleas in the Psalms for retribution to be visited on enemies, such as in the last verse of Psalm 137 – “Happy is he who shall seize your children and dash them against the rock”.

This approach was not typical among his contemporaries in the Calvinist tradition. A book of sermons by the Puritan Ralph Venning, published in 1669, was entitled *“The Plague of Plagues”*. A copy had sat on my bookshelves for too long but looked to be a possible aid to devotion in a 21<sup>st</sup> century pandemic. I didn’t get beyond page 92. His commentary on Proverbs 1, verses 25 and 26 is this : ‘In Hell, God will not know you nor hear your cry, but will laugh at your calamity and mock you in the midst of your torments.’

We can be thankful for a better approach to the Psalms by Isaac Watts. As he himself explained :

*“Where the Psalmist describes Religion by the Fear of God, I have often joined Faith and Love to it.... Where he talks of sacrificing Goats or Bulls, I rather chose to mention the Sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. Where he attends the Ark with Shouting in Zion, I sing the Ascension of my Saviour into Heaven, or his Presence with his Church on Earth”.*