

The Transfiguration 2006

G.K. Chesterton

Hymn 359

1. O God of earth and altar,
bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly leaders falter,
our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us,
the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us,
but take away our pride.

2. From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord.

3. Tie in a living tether
the prince and priest and thrall,
bind all our lives together,
smite us and save us all;
in ire and exultation
afame with faith, and free,
lift up a living nation,
a single sword to thee.

A hundred years ago this hymn was published in the English Hymnal. Allowing for differences in style it might have been written yesterday. He was an inspired poet and, as such by definition something of a prophet. Consider such sayings as:

The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.

Is not this Arab and Jew?

Now to our hymn.

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our prayer

God is Lord over not just the altar, heavenly matters - the realm of the church - but also of earthly matters, or ought to be. It may be an almost childlike image of God towering over the world, bending down to listen to our plea but the Bible uses it and it speaks to the imagination through the years.

Our earthly leaders falter,

Ever heard of an earthly leader faltering, betraying the trust of the people? Perhaps just through inadequacy, perhaps through something much worse.

our people drift and die,

Leaders are there to lead. They must never lose their true bearings or they betray their trust.

The walls of gold entomb us,

The materialism that so defines our age - the gold that we seek after, thinking it will bring us freedom and joy, and yet it only brings bondage of heart and mind - Hopes of "streets of gold" in the next life lead to walls of gold that entomb in this life.

Also debt. Remember St Paul to the Romans

13:8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another

the swords of scorn divide

Mockery replacing political discourse; religious bigotry, racial and ethnic hatreds perpetuate violent divisions.

Take not your thunder from us

That is, don't cease to be a mighty God, don't become what we would make you – a God cut down to fit our dreams and our ideals, instead of a real God.

Aslan is not a tame lion.

But take away our pride.

Pride: the ridiculous idea that we alone can make it; that we have figured out God's plan – that we can go it alone in the world, that we know what is best for the rest of the world.

The source and root of all sin.

Look at verse two: Here is a list of things from which we need divine deliverance.

From all that terror teaches

Terror teaches us to fear and we have become a culture of fear;

from lies of pen and tongue.

Depending on your political point of view you can fill in for yourself what lies are being told by politicians and pundits and on radio talk shows, television news, the print media and film.

Let alone the propaganda and indoctrination of the sects.

Consideration of Islam cannot be dodged. Allah is not our God.

From all the easy speeches that soothe us in our wrong,

Easy speeches - we're really doing fine, things are getting better, yes, we have a few problems, but we're making progress, all will be well, God of course is on our side; we all just need to buy more and everything will work out in the end.

Inflation can always be measured in a new way and we are all supposed to be instantly better off.

Ironically in our time the speeches that warn us of coming terror put us to sleep too. We're being constantly warned of pending

doom, from the colour-coded terrorist alert scale. (In the USA to at least one local TV station that has a “severe weather alert” meter featured every day, even when the little arrow is pointing to “Low.”

Bird flu. Salmonella. Listeria. Yellow peril. Where are the scares of yesteryear?

From sale and profanation of honour and the sword.

Has “honour” become a commodity, to be packaged and marketed? A particular poignancy is view of the current scandals about the House of Lords.

Anyway we seem to have substituted fame – or at least celebrity – for honour.

And when is the “sword” - the use of force - sold to the highest bidder, used not for legitimate defence against aggression, but for political advantage? The legitimacy of war has become an issue as never before.

From sleep and from damnation, deliver us, O Lord!

Save us, O God, from an insensitive, uncaring detachment from the crying needs of the world, and our own spiritual anaemia too - a people in spiritual hibernation even in the midst of outward show of religion.

We can't perhaps avoid compassion fatigue in the heart but we must in the head. Compassion without action is a major vice of our age.

And from the ultimate disaster - “damnation” - that awaits a people entombed by its own wealth and chooses to go on sleeping rather than face the hard truths of the world and themselves.

*3. Tie in a living tether
the prince and priest and thrall,*

Thrall = One with no freedom. From the poorest slave – and slavery is far from a thing of the past – to the leaders of state

and church. Consider the power of the clerics of Islam and the witch doctors of deeper Africa.

*bind all our lives together,
smite us and save us all;*

There is always a tendency to try to opt out of society, to be apart and holy. Sure to be different in values and practice; sure to march to a different drum. But what about being salt and light? What about being our brother's keeper?

*in ire and exultation
afame with faith, and free,*

Let's have some colour, some passion, some guts in our religion. Jesus did not major on timid respectability.

*lift up a living nation,
a single sword to thee.*

A united people – God's people. What a perfect dream!