

Article

Caedmon's apprentices – listening for new songs the old way

For many of our churches, as well as much of our culture, new often means best.

We sing the newest songs; read the latest recommended book; and use twitter, podcasts and online streaming to keep up with news and thinking from churches and ministries all around the world that are experiencing a new level of breakthrough. We go to conferences looking for new insight, and attend seminars to learn new skills and techniques for every area of our Christian lives.

New is undoubtedly good – freshness, revelation and creativity are all vital. We must be inspired by different perspectives and we need to engage with things which seem to be resonating with our culture specifically.

But we must not reach a point where we forget the old. It is always a mistake to disqualify ourselves from being the ones to create, or from being true innovators, rather than those always seeking to shape our creativity to follow others' new expressions.

Looking back in anticipation

We are not the first Christians to wrestle with living out our faith – we are privileged to have been preceded by generations of faithful men and women – it would be foolish to assume they have nothing to teach us, or to somehow view our modern age as so distinct (by which we often really mean superior) that we believe their lessons are irrelevant to us.

If we are willing to look back at the old, as well as around for the emerging, and forward for the new, we will discover creativity, freshness and revelation abound in the past. And that in viewing the perspectives of past saints, and how they sought to penetrate their cultures, we will find new insights as we seek to engage with our own whilst living wholeheartedly for Christ.

I have long been fascinated by looking back at the lives of some of the remarkable Christians who have come before us. Getting past the mystery of their culture and the shifting sands of their context invariably leads to a rich and deep encounter with someone who was passionate to love God, and obedient to his call to serve him in their world.

I encountered the story of one such individual this last week when I visited the beautiful seaside town of Whitby. And I wanted to share the inspiration it provided.

Caedmon's story

Have you ever met anybody who really is tone deaf? The story goes that Caedmon was one of these people. So how did he end up with the title 'the Father of English hymnody'?

Caedmon lived and died in the seventh century and many have dismissed the miraculous elements of his story to be pure fiction, medieval superstition or simply as having a rational explanation that was not understood at the time.

But many, including the respected scholar Bede, believe the full story of Caedmon's transformation from tone deaf cowherd to esteemed song-writer and revered Christian missionary.

The story goes that one night Caedmon fled the banquet hall where everyone was sharing songs and stories, and after checking his cattle, fell asleep in the hay next to them. That night had been a crisis point – he loved music and poetry, but could not play the harp or sing in tune, and he struggled to remember the words of the songs and poems he so loved to hear others sing or recite. It had been his frustration that caused him to run out that night. He wanted the talents that others had – he wished he could match their gifts or copy their abilities.

But God wanted to do something completely new with Caedmon. That night he had a dream, and in it a man stood before him and asked him to sing. Caedmon protested he couldn't, but the figure insisted, and then when he asked what he should sing, the man instructed him to sing about the beginning of the world, and about creation.

In his dream, Caedmon sang and it was beautiful. But the miracles started when he awoke and the song was still with him! Everyone who heard the song found it beautiful and completely different from anything they had ever heard – for until that time, sung worship had not been conducted in the English language before.

From that point on every day someone was appointed to read the scriptures to Caedmon, and to translate them in to English for him – and then he would go away and write a new song in beautiful poetry which would relate these deep truths to his people in a way that they could understand.

Caedmon's school of worship

There are a host of lessons to be learnt from Caedmon's story.

But I want to focus on one strand – song-writing. He might not have anything performing highly on the CCLI song index, or have made the cut for *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, but Caedmon's legacy lives on every time someone tries to cross language barriers to translate truth; or steps beyond their comfort zones or talent to step out; or listens to the call of the new thing that God is doing – or the old thing he is resurrecting.

When John Wesley and others were inspired by God to write hymns to the tunes of popular folk tunes, they were following in his footsteps. Right through from the seventh century, to the present day, passionate worshippers have been following the call to use contemporary music and language to reach their peers.

But this article isn't another musing on writing more songs which sound a bit like Coldplay or experimenting with DJ worship – although these are good things. It's not even about looking for language which moves beyond the accepted insider Christian metaphors – although this is needed in some of our songs.

It is about listening for the new song Caedmon's way.

Answering God's specific call

The fact was that Caedmon wanted to be like everyone else, but God had something completely unique for him.

Caedmon wanted to imitate, but God wanted to create and innovate through him.

Caedmon coveted the natural abilities others had been given which he did not possess – but God wanted to give him a far greater supernatural gift which would change lives, proclaim his gospel, and demonstrate his power.

God had a specific call for Caedmon – he wanted not just to give him an instrument, but to make him one.

There's a Kevin Prosch song that says, "There's a harp in my heart, and only You can play it" – perhaps this was the reality of Caedmon's heart... he was made for something significant and specific – something set apart.

Over thirteen centuries have not been able to erase his remarkable story, and his life-long obedience to blessing God and others through the very first songs of worship to be written in the English language.

Pursuing more than new

God did do something new with Caedmon – in his great mercy he gave Caedmon more than what he wanted, and everything that was planned for him.

I think sometimes that in pursuing the new we sometimes forget to pursue the unique – channelling our creative energies into imitating the latest good thing being done somewhere else, rather than focusing on what God might want to do uniquely through us.

And so perhaps we miss the new song that is specifically orientated towards where we are, and our knowledge of, and heart for, the people we are called to. And exchange this for pursuing others – wishing our churches were more like theirs, or trying to write songs that sound like theirs.

But the new thing God wants to do through each one of us will not, I think, be found this way.

Pursuing the new simply leaves us frustrated, only able to devise plans that imitate, emulate and follow people and movements. We are in danger of losing our connection with the source – with what God is already doing, and wants to do, in our own specific situation. And what we are left creating ends up not being that new at all but merely a carbon copy of something already old because it is not authentic to our context.

As much as we need to learn from each other, we need to resist the fascination with consciously trying to impose someone else's approach on our very different setting. And as much as it is right for us to seek to be relevant and contemporary, we need to be careful about placing too much emphasis on simply trying to observe current and emerging secular trends so we can shape our creativity as purely a response, or a sub-cultural version, of what exists or is emerging.

We should be expecting that God-inspired creativity will also be a catalyst and a building block for establishing a vibrant counter-culture.

Hearing new songs the old way

I would like to suggest that sometimes we might be better off pausing the pursuit for a while, and simply falling to our knees on the humble straw of a modern-day cattle-shed. Might God then answer our prayers to sing through us with the songs he would craft?

There is a place for learning from experienced worship-leaders and song-writing mentors. There is a place for practice, and excellence, and learning how to write a really good song.

But I'd like to pose the question. What would happen if we were to stop and listen – to go away with God – and to ask him to use us as his instrument?

Would we catch a prophetic voice which provides more space for what God uniquely has to say through each individual he has called to write, sing, and lead the songs he lends us?

Would we discover a new sound which resonates with God's perfect response to today's heartbroken people and shattered situations?

At the end of the day, there is nothing and no-one more constantly creative, or endlessly relevant than him. Going direct to the source of all – the ancient of days – will always result in renewal.

How do you feel about enrolling as an apprentice at Caedmon's school of worship?

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NB If you felt inspired by Caedmon's story, you might like to find out about other Celtic and early English saints – one of my other favourite worship-related ones is Columba's experience on the Island of Hinba.