

## Prayer

As descendants of the Church of England, Episcopalians have inherited some of humankind's most meaningful religious music. Nearly every Sunday, we lift our voices in lyrics and music composed by some of England's most creative and devoted artists—people to whom we owe our gratitude. They've given us visions of God's glory and grace—but, also, visions of God's faithful and perfectly paternal love.

Our hymnal contains melodies and poetic lyrics that move us from the myopia of our individual lives and carry us, and our praise, to God. In a very real sense, that hymnal in the rack in front of you is an amazing collection of transcendent praise, even hope-filled prayers.

A single book, however, simply can't include every masterpiece of faithful, artistic devotion. A hymnal that contained EVERY hymn and anthem of praise that Christians have found meaningful wouldn't fit so neatly in those racks. Difficult decisions had to be made, and some were omitted—maybe even some beloved favorites.

That's certainly been true for me. One of my all-time favorites was completely overlooked—didn't make the cut. Composed by two of the most world-renowned British artists of their day, the words and melody have become so familiar to us that I can't imagine a greater blunder than leaving it out of our American hymnal.

The melody is haunting, and, as if written by the Bard—by Shakespeare—himself, the pureness of its poetry is as beautiful as that lilting tune. I can't do the actual music justice, but, even simply spoken, the timeless words remain unforgettable. Listen:

When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me,

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be. (Pause)

And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me,

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Are those familiar words? Do you remember singing them in church? Maybe, not.

Our own, uniquely-American composers—like Lady Gaga, Rob Zombie, or Miley Cyrus—will likely never be mentioned in the same breath with Paul McCartney and John Lennon (much less every make it into any other sermon I'll ever preach).

In fact, “Let it Be” seems to have consumed the last drops of McCartney’s hymn-writing ability. Since then, no other composition he’s written has even been remotely considered for inclusion in our next hymnal, and I’m confident that, in the future, the rest of his life will prove to have been anti-climactic. When it comes to hymn-writing, Sir Paul McCartney has peaked.

Truthfully, I doubt McCartney ever claimed to be a hymn-writer, or even a Christian. After “Let it Be,” when others pointed to his lyrics as suggesting at least a spiritual awareness, McCartney quickly insisted those words had other meanings. And, yet, there’s something still vaguely familiar about “Mother Mary” coming to us, “speaking words of wisdom: Let it be.”

“Let it be”—these are words of wisdom, spoken by a virgin mother, a woman-still-a-girl and without any reasonable hope. There’s something genuinely admirable and appealing in the “Stoic” resolve of those words of wisdom—a courageous detachment, Mary’s fearless obedience to God’s plan for her life. I’m drawn to that kind of bravery, that kind of emotional liberation. Mary seems to possess such a perfect ability to subdue her anxiety—at least, the kind of anxiety I would have, if I were a young girl standing in front of an angel whose just told me I was going to give birth to God’s Son (even though I had no husband and would likely be stoned to death for obvious moral impurity even before the child was delivered).

The Beatles’ song, “Let it Be,” has achieved a lofty position among popular music, and some part of that is intimately connected to that Stoic resolve. Regardless of whether or not Paul McCartney intended “Mother Mary” to represent the Blessed Virgin, there’s real wisdom in a person subduing his or her own will in the face of the inevitable circumstances of life. Almost any human would recognize that unflappable calm as appealing and admirable—as recognizable wisdom, given the chaos and unpredictability of the world in which we live.

Here’s the thing, though. If that’s all that Mary does—simply that she becomes emotionally passive, obediently empties herself of her will or her will to live—then, that might make her an unusually courageous, and even wise, person. If Christians hear Mary’s words as simply demonstrating her passive, selfless obedience, we minimize the truly dynamic and apocalyptic power of her story—of her role and her place in our ancestry. If Mary’s only virtue is a willingness to be used by God—to be God’s passive receptacle—she may not really matter.

On the other hand, if Mary's "Let it be" is more than mere Stoic resolve, then her words may still have something to say to us. You see, I've become convinced that "Let it be" is actually nothing less than Mary's most audacious and humanly-irrational desire to be an active participant in God's Incarnation—in the moment God when becomes one of us!

"Let it be" is so much more than Mary's passive obedience. "Let it be" is the moment Mary asserts her own hope—hope of being part of God's most creative event. In a very real sense, "Let it be," is Mary's way of saying, "Yes. I want to be part of this totally new thing God is doing. I **WANT** to be actively involved in God's plan of RESTORATION!"

Whew! Think about that! "Let it be" is **the** moment in human history when God invites one of us, Mary, into the very middle of God's plan—God's plan to bring hope into the world! Mary isn't being asked to simply comply with God's strategic plan. She isn't being asked to be a passive vessel for God's purely divine Son. God is inviting Mary to intimately open her very body as a home for God's Son—to nurture Him with her own life-blood, to fill her lungs with oxygen that passes through her body and into the blood she shares with Him. God is asking Mary to contribute **HER** humanity—IN ORDER THAT **ALL OF HUMANITY**, including every one of us, IN ORDER THAT **ALL OF HUMANITY MIGHT BE REDEEMED AND RESTORED!!!**

As much as I appreciate anyone's courage to remain unaffected by the tumultuous storms of life, what moves me even more is Mary's IRRATIONAL COURAGE—the courage to throw every fiber of her being into a seemingly preposterous invitation! What moves me is the strength of Mary's faith, Mary's trust, and Mary's holy will—a grace-filled yearning to be part of God's RESTORATION, God's REDEMPTION, God's INCARNATION!

In Mary's "Let it be," the human part of me—the part that appreciates Stoic resolve—is magnetically drawn toward her, toward the God she trusts and loves. In me, Mary's "Let it be" awakens my own yearning to accept God's invitation into the work and hope of His Son. Mary's will pulls mine—pulls my hope into being actively involved in bringing God into the world. Can you **FEEL** it? Can you feel the pull of the truly active "**Let it be**"?

The Beatles' song continues:

And when the brokenhearted people – living in the world agree

There will be an answer, let it be

For though they may be parted – there is still a chance that they will see

There will be an answer, let it be

Regardless of what the artist intended, listen to the very real truth of those words. “When the brokenhearted people living in the world agree, there will be an answer.” “There is still a chance that they will see. Let it be.”

Mother Mary is still speaking—both, herself, being invited and, in turn, still inviting us. God’s invitation to Mary—the invitation to give God a home, the invitation to give Jesus a human body—that invitation passes through Mary’s “Let it be” and straight to you and to me.

The world is waiting, waiting to encounter God’s very real flesh-and-blood Son, and, just like to Mary, God offers us the chance to be more than passive receptacles in His birth. God offers us the chance to contribute our human bodies—our active human bodies—to God’s plan for RESTORATION.

There are only a very few days remaining until all the celebrations of Christmas. Celebrations that fail to include “Let it be”—Mary’s active response to God’s invitation—celebrations, and a world, separated from that precious commitment will be empty. Christians who settle only for Mary’s Stoic resignation of may, themselves, miss the precious opportunity to INCARNATE God’s Son.

This week, you and I will meet a nearly infinite number of people who desperately need to see God INCARNATED—to see God in human flesh and blood, breathing the same air, bringing hope and grace. When we meet them, we’ll be faced with a choice. We may choose to passively maintain our Stoic resolve—to remain emotionally and physically separated. Or, we may choose to accept Mary’s invitation to contribute our humanity—to be a part of making God physically present in this world. It’s simply a choice we’ll make—intentionally or blindly—a choice to give Jesus Christ a home, our bodies, our words, our compassion, our grace.

God is being INCARNATED—filling a human body, Mary’s body, our bodies. Let it be.