

Tell Out My Soul

By Timothy Dudley-Smith

Timothy Dudley-Smith is one of our very best modern hymn-writers, with a great gift for verse which is biblical and deeply spiritual.

Tell Out, My Soul is probably his most popular piece. Ironically, it doesn't display his hymn-writing talents to the full; it is not much more than a versification of a Bible passage (Luke 1:46-55). But even in this, there is very considerable skill.

He has thought deeply about the passage, and using many of the original expressions in the text he has brought its themes together in a traditional verse form. Each stanza is a call to 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness' – of the Lord, his Name, his Might and his Word, and the hymn reaches a soaring climax as we sing, 'Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord/ To children's children and forevermore!' Sung either at the beginning or the end of worship, it is a wonderful expression of praise.

It is, though, more than that, as the author knew very well. Mary's song, the Magnificat (from the first word in Latin) is a song of revolution. God is on the side of the poor and powerless. 'He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent empty away.'

At different times and in different places in the life of God's people, this has been a dangerous song to sing, and Christians have suffered for it. We should not sing it today without realising what it means, and being honest about our own situations.

We may need to realise that we are the rich and powerful of the world, compared with those who have nothing.

But we may need to be comforted if we're facing injustice ourselves, at work or in the home, perhaps. Knowing that God is for us helps us face whatever life can throw at us.

There are other themes here, too: confidence in God's grace, and awareness of weakness and sin, but these are all held together by the same call to 'tell out the greatness' of God and what he has done. Mary's song, and our hymn, are profound expressions of faith in God, who never abandons us, and in whom there is always a future and a hope.

Timothy Dudley-Smith was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1951 and retired as Bishop of Thetford in 1992.

Tell Out, My Soul is often sung to Woodlands, by Walter Greatorex. He was music master at Gresham's School in Holt, Norfolk, England, from 1911 to 1949.

Mark Woods