The beautiful passage from the letter to the Colossians that we heard as our second reading has conventionally been identified as a hymn and is often compared with the Christological hymn in the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Scholars have generally assumed that these Christ-hymns probably existed independently in some form before they were adapted for inclusion in these epistles. But who might originally have composed them, and whether they really had a liturgical function as songs of praise sung to God as part of acts of worship, remains contested.

Those of you who attend the Cathedral regularly may recall that over the past year I have preached several times about aspects of liturgy, reflecting most recently on the exhortation in the letter to the Hebrews to offer ‘acceptable worship’ to God. As part of what is clearly becoming a series, I should like to use this opportunity to think about hymnody, and particularly its relation to the passage from Colossians that we heard this morning. Why do we sing hymns? Why do we persist in singing hymns at these services of Matins throughout the summer, even though we have no choir to lead us (and when, although not today, the Diocesan Canon Precentor sometimes selects hymns that few of us know)?

The word hymn comes from the Greek, hymnos, which means a song sung in praise of gods or heroes. The taking of sacred poetry, setting it to music, and singing it in the course of formal acts of worship goes right back to the establishment of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. In this way, the disciples followed traditions of Jewish worship, in which hymns and psalms also played an important role. Mark tells us in his gospel that after Jesus and the disciples had eaten the Last Supper together on the first day of Passover, they sang a hymn before they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mk 14: 26). A
third-century writer quoted by the historian of the early Church, Eusebius, referred to ‘psalms and odes such as from the beginning were written by believers, hymns to Christ, the word of God, calling him God.’ (Eusebius, HE, V. 28. 5). Specifically-Christian hymns that remain part of our liturgy, such as Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis at Evensong, and Benedictus (the song of Zechariah which we said this morning) date from the earliest days of the Church, giving us direct continuity in our worship with that of the apostles.

This morning, Canon Bayliss chose three hymns to punctuate our worship. The first was a morning hymn, inviting us to begin our day by asking God to lift our hearts in praise, to walk in the Spirit’s way, directing our paths such that all might be glorified in Christ. The author, Timothy Dudley Smith, retired bishop of Thetford in the Norwich diocese, is a prolific contemporary hymn writer. Here he has cleverly drawn on a range of scriptural passages to construct his text, starting with psalm 5: 3: ‘Early in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee’; and including references to 1 Corinthians 10: 31 (‘Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God’); to Galatians, Ephesians, and later portions of the letter to the Colossians: 3: 2: ‘Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth’; and 3: 16: ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.’

‘Lord of beauty, thine the splendour’, our second hymn by the early twentieth-century cleric and educationalist, Cyril Ailton, invited us to reflect on our first reading from Genesis about the six days of creation. As God looked at all he had made and saw that it was very good, so we pray that like the blind man of Bethsaida, or the once-blinded Paul, our eyes might be touched that we might see (Mark 8: 25; Acts 9: 12). Granted clarity of vision, we sing that hymn in order to articulate our praise and thanksgiving for the beauty of all that God has made, and to share with the whole creation in offering our worship to his glory.

Our final hymn, ‘Thou whose almighty word, chaos and darkness heard’, also refers to the act of creation, the making of earth from the formless void and creation of light out of darkness. Its author John Marriott (a one-time Student of Christ Church), draws on a wide range of scriptural passages and allusions, including references to Christ’s miracles of healing (health to the sick in mind; sight to the inly blind), to the power of the Spirit, and to the dove sent out from Noah’s ark to search for dry land after the flood. And it affirms our faith in the three persons of the Trinity. Each verse returns, however, to the
central image of God as light, reminding us of the exhortation of the letter to the Ephesians (Eph 5: 8-9): ‘For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.’ The hymn as a whole also recalls the first epistle of John: ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another’. (1 John 1: 5-7).

One obvious answer to the question ‘why do we sing hymns?’ is that we do so in order to praise God. As the psalmist declared, ‘from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised’ (Ps 113: 3). We are, indeed, created to praise God. In the prophecy of Isaiah, God speaks of ‘the people whom I formed for myself, so that they might declare my praise (Is 43: 21). If we follow the greatest commandment, to love God with all our being, then this causes us to worship, praise, rejoice, be thankful, and glorify the Almighty. How better to do so than through hymns? As we declare that praise, so we assert and affirm our beliefs, expressing again, and thus taking individual ownership of, the ideas and concepts articulated in our readings. A clever and sensitive selection of hymns such as that which Grant made for us this morning helps to reinforce and underpin the messages of Scripture. If asked later today by someone who had not been here, ‘What was Matins about this morning?’, our answer would be: Creation, and shared joy in God’s work and our outpouring of praise for his gifts.

Yet that is not exactly what our second reading was about. Yes, it referred to Creation, to Christ, the image of God, as the firstborn of all Creation, the one in whom all things in heaven and on earth were made, but the whole message of the passage lies in its final verse, which makes clear that the reconciliation of the whole created universe occurred not at the moment that it was made, but at that of Christ’s death, when he made ‘peace through the blood of the cross.’ If this were once a free-standing liturgical hymn, perhaps one used in Jewish worship – and I say this tentatively, knowing that my friend and colleague, the New Testament scholar Jennifer Strawbridge, is highly sceptical over whether this were ever a text used in liturgy – then the author of the letter to the Colossians must have added that final line to his base text. The earlier verse describing Christ as the head of the body, the Church, would also seem to be an addition. The cosmos was often compared with a body in the ancient world and God’s reign was associated with headship of the cosmos in Hellenistic Jewish literature (for example in the writings of Philo of Alexandria).
But for the author of the letter to the Colossians to make that body of which Christ is head into the church, ecclesia, is to go further than any putative Jewish or Gnostic hymn. As a whole, the text sets out a clear exposition of the person of Jesus Christ and his relationship to the church; the author tells the people of Colossae that they can, and should, hold fast to the gospel because its claims of reconciliation with God are rooted securely in Christ’s sovereignty over all time and creation.

In the early history of Christianity, this would prove a controversial scriptural passage. During the debates about the persons of the Trinity which raged in the fourth century and were discussed at ecumenical councils at Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, followers of Arius (who denied the divinity of Christ), used the assertion that Christ was the firstborn of all Creation to support their contention that Christ was a created being, not himself part of the Godhead. Yet, as we learn from the rest of the passage, Christ, as the image of God, is not separate from God, but is rather an embodied manifestation of God’s power and being. So Christ’s creative and redemptive powers, and his sovereignty over all creation, are all unequivocally part of the work of God. Not only is everything created in Christ (v 16) but everything in the created order is held together in him; all powers, earthly, angelic or demonic, live within Christ’s lordship.

These crucial Christological statements at the start of the letter to the Colossians thus set up the argument of the rest of the epistle, and its assertions about the foolishness of worshipping anyone (or thing) other than Christ. Creation needs Christ for nourishment, for it is he who sustains all existence. Presenting Christ in this fashion, this hymn (if hymn it be) subtly shifts understanding of the structure of the universe as articulated in Hellenistic and Jewish wisdom literature from an independent, divine law to Jesus Christ, a person who is the law (Matthew Flemming, Feasting the Word, Year C, vol 3, 258). Its purpose if sung in liturgy would thus be to affirm these fundamental theological truths, truths that would in time, following the ecumenical councils, be articulated in the creeds that we still say today.

So why do we sing hymns? We do so for all the reasons that past generations did, following the example of Christ with his disciples, and that of the earliest gatherings of Christians in worship. We sing hymns as a way of articulating in music as well as in word our faith in God, the truths we believe about Christ, our gratitude for the work of the spirit in our midst, our joy in creation. Bless, O Lord, us thy servants, who worship in thy temple. Grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and
what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.