

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --Henry van Dyke, 1852-1933

Music --Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770-1827

Tune Name --"Hymn to Joy"

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY . . ." Galatians 5:22

This hymn is generally considered by hymnologists to be one of the most joyous expressions of hymn lyrics in the English language. Its author, Henry van Dyke, was born at Germantown, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1852. During his lifetime he was recognized as one of the ablest Presbyterian preachers and leading liturgy figures in this country. In addition to achieving fame as a preacher, he served as a professor of literature at Princeton University from 1900-1923, was the moderator of his denomination, became a Navy chaplain during World War 1, and represented his country as an ambassador to Holland and Luxembourg under an appointment by President Wilson. He was a prolific writer of devotional material with many of his books being best sellers.

This is the best-known of van Dyke's hymns. He stated his purpose in writing it as follows:

"These verses are simple expressions of common Christian feelings and desires in this present time, hymns of today that may be sung together by people who know the thought of the age, and are not afraid that any truth of science will destroy their religion or that any revolution on earth will overthrow the kingdom of heaven. Therefore these are hymns of trust and hope."

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" portrays a joyful interplay between God's created world and the manifestation of this same creative spirit in the life of a believer. Such interesting similes as "hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee. . ." illustrate this interesting technique. The second verse reminds us that all of God's creation speaks of His glory and, in doing so, directs our worship to the Creator Himself. The fourth stanza concludes with an invitation for all of God's children to join the mighty chorus of joy begun at creation's dawn (Job 38:7) and, in so doing, to find the encouragement needed for any circumstance of life.

The text for this hymn was written while van Dyke was a guest preacher at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. It is said that one morning van Dyke handed the manuscript to the college president, saying, "Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains (the Berkshires) were my inspiration. It must be sung to the music of Beethoven's 'Hymn of Joy.'" It was first included in van Dyke's Book of Poems, third edition, published in 1911.

The tune, "Hymn of Joy," comes out of the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, composed from 1817-23, and published in 1826. Although Beethoven never wrote a tune specifically for a hymn text, a number have been adapted from his many famous works. This is the most widely used of these adopted hymn tunes. It was first adapted for a hymnal by Edward Hodges, an English organist who served the Trinity Church in New York City.

The Ninth or "Choral" Symphony was Beethoven's last symphony and is generally considered to be his greatest. It took him six years to complete the writing of this work. It was his supreme desire to complete one great symphony that would combine both instruments and voices in one majestic expression of sound. He was inspired for this work by a poem written by his German poet friend, Friedrich Schiller, a work entitled "Ode to Joy." It has always been a mystery to musicians to comprehend how Beethoven could conceive this work, as well as all of his great music that was composed after he was thirty years old, since at that age he became stone deaf. The account is given that when the Ninth Symphony was initially heard in Vienna, Austria, in 1824, the soloists had to come down from the stage and turn Beethoven around so that he could recognize the thunderous applause he was being given.

It is well said that the Bible contains very little humor, but it does have much to say about the importance of genuine joy in the life of each believer.

"Music is God's gift to man, the only art of heaven given to earth, the only art of earth we take to heaven."
--Walter Savage Landor