

## GRUNDTVIG, THE POET OF WHIT SUNTIDE

*Holy Spirit, come with light,  
Break the dark and gloomly night  
With Thy day unending;  
Help us with a joyful lay  
Greet the Lord's triumphant day  
Now with might ascending.*

*Comforter, so wondrous kind,  
Noble Guest of heart and mind,  
Fix in us Thy dwelling.  
Give us peace in storm and strife,  
Fill each weary heart and life  
With Thy joy excelling.*

*Make salvation clear to us,  
Who, despite our sin and cross,  
Are in Thee confiding.  
Lest our life be void and vain,  
With Thy light and love remain  
Aye in us abiding.*

*Raise or bow us with Thine arm,  
Break temptation's evil charm,  
Clear our clouded vision.  
Fill our hearts with longings new,  
Cleanse us with Thy morning dew,  
Tears of deep contrition.*

*Thou who givest life and breath,  
Let our hope in sight of death  
Blossom bright and vernal;  
And above the silent tomb  
Let the Easter lilies bloom,  
Signs of life eternal.*

NIKOLAI GRUNDTVIG (1783-1872).

Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig was the last and greatest of the celebrated triumvirate of Danish hymn-writers. As Kingo was the bright star of the 17th century and Brorson of the 18th century, so Grundtvig shone with a luster all his own in the 19th century. The "poet of Easter" and the "poet of Christmas" were succeeded by the "poet of Whitsuntide."

The appellation given to Grundtvig was not without reason, for it was he, above all others, who strove mightily in Denmark against the deadening spirit of rationalism which had dried up the streams of spirituality in the Church. No one as he labored with such amazing courage and zeal to bring about the dawn of a new day.

Nor did Grundtvig strive in vain. Before his life-work was ended, fresh Pentecostal breezes began to blow, the dry bones began to stir, and the Church, moved by the Spirit of God, experienced a new spiritual birth.

The spirit of rationalism had worked havoc with the most sacred truths of the Christian religion. As some one has said, "It converted the banner of the Lamb into a bluestriped handkerchief, the Christian religion into a philosophy of happiness, and the temple dome into a parasol."

Under the influence of the "new theology," ministers of the gospel had prostituted the church worship into lectures on science and domestic economy. It is said that one minister in preaching on the theme of the Christ-child and the manger developed it into a lecture on the proper care of stables, and another, moved by the story of the coming of the holy women to the sepulcher on the first Easter morning, delivered a peroration on the advantages of getting up early! God was referred to as "Providence" or "the Deity," Christ as "the founder of Christianity," sin as "error," salvation as "happiness," and the essence of the Christian life as "morality."

Grundtvig's father was one of the few Lutheran pastors in Denmark who had remained faithful to evangelical truth. The future poet, who was born in Udby, September 8, 1783, had the advantage, therefore, of being brought up in a household where the spirit of true Christian piety reigned. It was not long, however, before young Grundtvig, as a student, came under the influence of the "new theology." Although he planned to become a minister, he lost all interest in religion during his final year at school, and finished his academic career "without spirit and without faith."

A number of circumstances, however, began to open his eyes to the spiritual poverty of the people. Morality was at a low ebb, and a spirit of indifference and frivolity banished all serious thoughts from their minds. It was a rude shock to his sensitive and patriotic nature to observe, in 1807, how the population of Copenhagen laughed and danced while the Danish fleet was being destroyed by English war ships and the capital city itself was being bombarded by the enemy.

In 1810 he preached his famous probation sermon on the striking theme, "Why has the Word of God departed from His house?" The sermon produced a sensation, and from this time Grundtvig came to be known as a mystic and fanatic. His career as a pastor was checkered, but throughout his life he exerted a powerful influence by his literary activity as well as by his preaching. His poetry and hymns attracted so much attention that it was said that "Kingo's harp has been strung afresh."

Grundtvig's strongest hymns are those that deal with the Church and the sacraments. The divine character of the Church is continually stressed, for Christ not only founded it, but, as the Living Word, He is present in it and in the sacraments unto the end of time. "Built on the Rock, the Church doth stand" is probably his most famous hymn. Grundtvig was more concerned about the thought he was trying to convey than the mode of expression; therefore his hymns are often characterized by strength rather than poetic beauty. They are also so deeply tinged by national spirit and feeling that they lose much of the color and fragrance of their native heath when translated. That Grundtvig could rise to lyrical heights is revealed especially in his festival hymns. There is a charming freshness in the sweet Christmas hymn:

Chime, happy Christmas bells, once more!  
The heavenly Guest is at the door,  
The blessed words the shepherds thrill,  
The joyous tidings, "Peace, good will."

O let us go with quiet mind,  
The gentle Babe with shepherds find,  
To gaze on Him who gladdens them,  
The loveliest flower of Jesse's stem.

Come, Jesus, glorious heavenly Guest,  
Keep Thine own Christmas in our breast,  
Then David's harp-strings, hushed so long,  
Shall swell our jubilee of song.

The Danish hymnologist Brandt has pointed out the distinctive characteristics of his country's three great hymnists by calling attention to their favorite symbols. That of Kingo was the sun, Brorson's the rose, and Grundtvig's the bird. Kingo extols Christ as the risen, victorious Saviour -- the Sun that breaks through the dark shades of sin and death. Brorson glorifies Christ as the Friend of the spiritually poor and needy. They learn to know Him in the secret prayer chamber as the Rose that spreads its quiet fragrance. Grundtvig's hymns are primarily hymns of the Spirit. They laud the Holy Spirit, the Giver and Renewer of life, who bears us up on mighty wings toward the mansions of light.

Among Danes and Norwegians there are few hymns more popular than Grundtvig's hymn on the Church. The first stanza reads:

Built on the Rock the Church doth stand,  
Even when steeples are falling;  
Crumbled have spires in every land,  
Bells still are chiming and calling;  
Calling the young and old to rest,  
But above all the soul distressed,  
Longing for rest everlasting.

Other noted hymns by Grundtvig include "Love, the fount of light from heaven," "As the rose shall blossom here," "The Lord to thee appealeth," "Splendid are the heavens high," "A Babe is born in Bethlehem," "From the grave remove dark crosses," "O let Thy Spirit with us tarry," "Fair beyond telling," "This is the day that our Father hath given," "Hast to the plow thou put thy hand," "The peace of God protects our hearts," "O wondrous kingdom here on earth," "With gladness we hail this blessed day," "He who has helped me hitherto," and "Peace to soothe our bitter woes."

Because of his intensive efforts to bring about reforms in the educational methods of his day, Grundtvig became known as "the father of the public high school in Scandinavia."

In 1861, when he celebrated his golden jubilee as pastor, Grundtvig was given the title of bishop. The good old man passed away peacefully on September 2, 1872, at the age of eighty-nine years. He preached his last sermon on the day before his death.