

## AN ANCIENT SINGER WHO GLORIFIED THE CROSS

### *A Prophetic Easter Hymn*

*Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say,  
Hell today is vanquished, heaven is won today.  
Lo, the Dead is living, God for evermore!  
Him, their true Creator, all His works adore.  
Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say.*

*Maker and Redeemer, Life and Health of all,  
Thou from heaven beholding human nature's fall,  
Thou of God the Father, true and only Son,  
Manhood to deliver, manhood didst put on.  
Hell today is vanquished; heaven is won today!*

*Thou, of life the Author, death didst undergo,  
Tread the path of darkness, saving strength to show;  
Come then, True and Faithful, now fulfil Thy word;  
'Tis Thine own third morning: rise, O buried Lord!  
Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say.*

*Loose the souls long prisoned, bound with Satan's chain;  
All that now is fallen raise to life again;  
Show Thy face in brightness, bid the nations see;  
Bring again our daylight; day returns with Thee!  
Welcome, happy morning! Heaven is won today!*

VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS (530-609 A.D.)

The joyous, rhythmical church-song introduced by Bishop Ambrose made triumphant progress through out the Western Church. For three centuries it seems to have completely dominated the worship. Its rich melodies and native freshness made a strong appeal to the human emotions, and therefore proved very popular with the people.

However, when Gregory the Great in 590 A.D. ascended the papal chair a reaction had set in. Many of the Ambrosian hymns and chants had become corrupted and secularized and therefore had lost their ecclesiastical dignity. Gregory, to whose severe, ascetic nature the bright and lively style of Ambrosian singing must have seemed almost an abomination, immediately took steps to reform the church music.

A school of music was founded in Rome where the new Gregorian liturgical style, known as "Cantus Romanus," was taught. The Gregorian music was sung in unison. It was slow, uniform and measured, without rhythm and beat, and thus it approached the old recitative method of psalm singing. While it is true that it raised the church music to a higher, nobler and more dignified level, its fatal defect lay in the fact that it could be rendered worthily only by trained choirs and singers. Congregational singing soon became a thing of the past. The common people thenceforth became silent and passive worshipers, and the congregational hymn was superseded by a clerical liturgy.

One of the last hymnists of the Ambrosian school and the most important Latin poet of the sixth century was Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers. He was born at Ceneda, near Treviso, about 530 A.D., and was converted to Christianity at an early age. While a student at Ravenna he almost became blind. Having regained his sight through what he regarded a miracle, he made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Martin at Tours, and as a result of this journey the remainder of his life was spent in Gaul.

Although all of the poetry of Fortunatus is not of the highest order, he has bequeathed some magnificent hymns to the Christian Church. No one has ever sung of the Cross with such deep pathos and sublime tenderness:

Faithful Cross! above all other,  
One and only noble tree!  
None in foliage, none in blossom,  
None in fruit thy peer may be;  
Sweetest wood and sweetest iron!  
Sweetest weight is hung on thee.

Bend thy boughs, O Tree of Glory!  
Thy relaxing sinews bend;  
For awhile the ancient rigor  
That thy birth bestowed, suspend;  
And the King of heavenly beauty  
On thy bosom gently tend!

Thou alone wast counted worthy  
This world's Ransom to uphold;  
For a shipwrecked race preparing  
Harbor, like the Ark of old ;  
With the sacred blood anointed  
From the smitten Lamb that rolled.

O Tree of beauty, Tree of Light!  
O Tree with royal purple dight!

Elect on whose triumphal breast  
Those holy limbs should find their rest:  
On whose dear arms, so widely flung,  
The weight of this world's Ransom hung:  
The price of humankind to pay,  
And spoil the spoiler of his prey.

Fortunatus' famous Passion hymn, *Pange lingua glorioso*, is also the basis for the beautiful Easter hymn:

Praise the Saviour  
Now and ever!  
Praise Him all beneath the skies!  
Prostrate lying,  
Suffering, dying,  
On the Cross, a Sacrifice;  
Victory gaining,  
Life obtaining,  
Now in glory He doth rise.

Another Easter hymn, "Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say," has a triumphant ring in its flowing lines. His odes to Ascension day and Whitsunday are similar in character.

That Fortunatus had a true evangelical conception of Christ and His atonement may be seen in his well-known hymn, *Lustra sex qui jam peregit*:

Holy Jesus, grant us grace  
In Thy sacrifice to place  
All our trust for life renewed,  
Pardoned sin and promised good.