

For All the Saints
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Ephesians 1:3-14

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Usually, when I am preparing these histories of the hymns, the story of the author tends to be front and center. This time, though, I think that the story of the composer of our tune is just as important. First, though, a few words on the author. *For All the Saints* was written by William Walsham How, who

was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1847 and was eventually elevated to a suffragan bishop.¹ For those of you a little rusty on your Anglicanese, a suffragan bishop is the assistant to the bishop of a diocese - in this case, How was a suffragan bishop in London, with his duties concentrated in the East End. Before coming to London, he served the majority of his ministry in the rural parish of Whittington, near the Welsh border.

Beginning in 1851, he served 28 years as their pastor and it was here he wrote most of his nearly sixty hymns.² During that time he was offered five bishoprics, a canonry, and three important livings but declined them all until an opportunity to work with the poor presented itself.³ Again, for your translation needs, per my Episcopal friend in town, Fr. David Simmons, an important living “means a position that provides a comfortable, scholarly life, such as a chaplain on an estate or an endowed parish.” Besides being known for his hymn-writing (we also sing How’s *O Word of God Incarnate* and *We Give Thee but Thine Own*), he was known for his work with the poor and with industrial workers;⁴ How was a great force in the movement for infusing new spiritual life into church services, especially among the poor.⁵ No doubt, his appeal to those he served had much to do with his down-to-earth ways, reflected clearly in the way in which he wrote his hymns. One biographer has said, “They are simple, unadorned, but enthusiastically practical hymns.”⁶ How, himself, put it this way: A good hymn should be like a good prayer - simple, real earnest, and reverent.⁷

In this way, the pairing with the composer, Ralph (pronounced *rafe*) Vaughan Williams, makes perfect sense. Vaughan Williams “started his career as a church organist, but later he focused on teaching, directing choirs and composing” and, after serving in World War I, “he became professor of composition at the Royal College of Music.”⁸ While very accomplished as a composer, writing “nine symphonies, five operas, film music, ballet and stage music, several song cycles, church music and works for chorus and orchestra,”⁹ his roots lay in the English countryside. Not wanting them to be lost to time, Vaughan Williams traveled throughout England recording over 800 folk songs, dating back centuries. He was “fascinated by the beauty of the music and the history of the lives of ordinary people.”¹⁰ Accordingly, “His music embraces a sense of simplicity found in the English folk tune.”¹¹

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc05/htm/v.ix.iii.htm>

² <http://www.pcgardencity.org/bulletinjuly2007.htm>

³ <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc05/htm/v.ix.iii.htm>

⁴ http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/h/o/w/how_ww.htm

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_How

⁶ http://www.hymnary.org/person/How_WW

⁷ <http://www.pcgardencity.org/bulletinjuly2007.htm>

⁸ <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/ralph-williams>

⁹ http://www.holycomforter.org/site/epage/105190_810.htm

¹⁰ <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/ralph-williams>

¹¹ http://www.holycomforter.org/site/epage/105190_810.htm

The tune for today's hymn was written while Vaughan Williams was the musical editor of *The English Hymnal*.¹² Its title, as all tunes have names which you'll find in fine print under the hymn title, is *Sine Nomine*, which is a bit tongue-in-cheek, for it means "without name." I don't know Vaughan Williams' motivation but I like to think it has something to do with the hymn itself - "for all the saints" implies not one single named person but all those who go before whose names have been forgotten across time, not unlike the authors of the English folk songs so important to him.

Coming out of a Catholic tradition, the language of saints has had a very different meaning for me. Saints are indeed named, and each has a special significance. Even without a Catholic background, I'm sure any of you who have ever had a house on the market know of at least one saint - Saint Joseph. An explanation on catholic-forum.com says,

"The tradition [of burying a statue of St. Joseph] has been traced to Saint Teresa of Avila who prayed that Saint Joseph would intercede to obtain land for Christian converts, and encouraged her Discalced Carmelite nuns to bury Saint Joseph medals as a symbol of devotion, consecrating the ground in Joseph's name. Remember, also," the author says, "that Joseph was a man who knew about moving on a moment's notice (e.g., the flight to Egypt), and providing for a home for his family. He also knows what it's like to have housing trouble (remember the manger? and being turned away from the inns?), and so is likely to be sympathetic to people with trouble getting or leaving a home."¹³

Joseph is one of many, many patron saints to whom people pray for a variety of needs and the process of being declared a saint by the Catholic Church is lengthy and rigorous. In our Presbyterian tradition, to be considered a saint means something entirely different.

The first verse of the hymn gives us a clue: For all the saints, who from their labors rest / who Thee by faith before the world confessed / Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. The saints are those believers who have left this world. Lest you think saints must only be the holiest people, remember this: to be holy means to be set apart for God. The author of the letter to the Ephesians writes, God "destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." We may not be full of praise as often as we should or could be. Neither were the people of Ephesus, yet of them the author says, "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." We all fall short, even those we call saints. Like those saints, though, we try to live out faithful lives.

We typically sing this song to recognize All Saints' Day, which falls on November 1. We sing this song for all the saints who have gone before us and we remember especially those who have been born

¹² <http://www.brittanica.com/EBchecked/topic/624150/Ralph-Vaughan-Williams>

¹³ <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stj01002.htm>

into eternal life in the previous year. This hymn was written on the inspiration of our reading from Hebrews today, which offers a rich list of those saints who have gone before. To them the second verse aptly applies: Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might; / Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight; / Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light. What we miss in our regular singing are five, if we sing the two stanzas offered as extras in our hymnal, (or seven) of the original eleven stanzas of this hymn. In some of those missing, more is said of those listed in the letter to the Hebrews. How writes of the Apostles, who bore forth the cross o'er land and sea, shaking all the mighty world. He writes of the Evangelists, "by whose blest word...the garden of the Lord / is fair and fruitful." And he writes of the Martyrs, "who with rapture kindled eye, / saw the bright crown descending from the sky, / and seeing, grasped it."¹⁴

We look to them for the inspiration of their faith yet we don't discount our own, and certainly not our own potential. Hebrews 12:1 encourages the recipients, and us, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." One day *we* will be among the saints, whether we consider ourselves worthy or not. Verse three says it this way: O blest communion, fellowship divine! / We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; / Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. And eventually, in the great by-and-by, one day all believers across time and place will be saints; as How puts it, "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, / Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host."

And, not but, *and* that time is also now. Just as we believe that God's reign is both future and present, just as we believe heaven can be here among us now and is also to be looked forward to, we are those saints in whom others find their own inspiration, those saints who are set apart for God, those saints for whom Christ is our rock, our fortress, our might...our captain in the well-fought fight...our one true light in our own darkness drear. This life is not for struggling through in hopes of getting to the other side of peace and rest and sainthood - this life is for fostering peace, for finding respite in Christ now, for behaving as ones set apart as the saints in our praise of God's glory. We are the ordinary people with a story to be told, with lives full of interest, with a faith for the ages.

Let us pray: God of our lives, grant us hope and inspiration in those who have come before and grant us strength and power to be the ones who offer hope and inspiration through you. Amen.

¹⁴ <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/f/f174.html>