**Bishop Mike Harrison writes…**

Well weddings are back with the lifting of Covid and with them come all the old favourite requests for songs. One which seems to never lose its appeal is *All things bright and beautiful*.

Just in case you’ve forgotten the words to the first verse (unlikely I know) here it is

All things bright and beautiful

All creatures great and small

All things wise and wonderful

The Lord God made them all.

I remember as a vicar the church choir would sometimes mildly protest about such predictable hymn choices. “Not again!” “Surely there are other hymns to choose?” “Why is it always the same song?”

That along with *Give me joy in my heart* could elicit a few unenthusiastic responses from choristers.

Well I would protest, couples get to choose their own songs, and *All things bright*… was pretty close to being Top of the Pops hymn-wise.

Memories of school assemblies, a tune everyone knows, bright and breezy, one can understand it’s popularity. But then again one can understand why one might get a little fed up of singing it for the fifteenth wedding in the summer.

But I wonder whether, despite the familiarity of the hymn, people singing it come anywhere close to hearing it’s message and putting it into practice in our own lives.

For instance do we take it’s hint to pause to consider how gazing upon our world can change the quality of our experience, our consciousness, our outlook?

I am looking out of the window in a hassled and anxious state of mind, blind to my surroundings, brooding on too much to do or some other burden (imagine one for yourself, a sore throat, a wound to one’s prestige, whatever).

Then suddenly I observe the colours of the confetti on the grass outside, lit by the fading sunlight of dusk, in a moment everything is altered.

The brooding self with all it’s burden disappears for a time. There is nothing now but that array of colour and atmosphere.

And when I drag myself back to my preoccupation they seem somehow less important. And of course they are less important.

This is something we can do deliberately; give attention to creation in order to clear our minds of self-obsessed cares.

But it seems even more purifying when it just happens, when we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the strange and beautiful existence of that which is around us. It can be transfiguring.

And what we pay attention to shapes us more than we usually think.

The findings of a large-scale study on stress published and flagged by the BBC a while back suggested that brooding too much on negative events is the biggest predictor of depression and anxiety, and determines the level of stress people experience.

The research even suggests a person's psychological response is a more important factor, than what has actually happened to them.

Equally well then, the effects of being taken out of ourselves by that which is lovely can be transformative positively.

Odd when you think about it, but many of us have had the experience. Iris Murdoch the novelist suggested that this experience may not be the most important point of moral change, but that perhaps it was the most accessible one.

We don’t just sing *All things bright and beautiful* at weddings of course, we’ll be singing it pretty frequently at Harvest Thanksgiving too, the time of the year when we really pause to pay attention to the world around us and in particular to pay attention to the immediate world which provides for us.

And sometimes I wonder if we have too narrow a sense of harvest thanksgiving, as only being to do with food and drink, giving thanks for that which keeps us physically alive and remembering those who are lacking in such basic provisions.

Surely our thanksgiving needs to be much wider than this, as some of the great mystics have pointed out.

Take the Anglican priest Thomas Traherne who, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, argued;

“you never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars; and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world: and more then so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs, as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world”.

We don’t stay very long in our thinking or gazing but perhaps this exposure to beauty and the otherness and grandeur of creation is what we need.

We move rather quickly back from the glance at the confetti on the ground to the set of problems we need to address when maybe it’s precisely by looking past, round and over our problems that we will find them placed in proper perspective by the awesome grandeur of that which is present to us even now.

In relation to this, the one verse of the Bible which consistently comes up as top of the internet charts for downloads and most quoted verse each year is Philippians 4.8.

It runs as follows: “Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable. Whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”.

Sound advice, indeed you could say ‘bright and beautiful’.

*The Rt Rev Dr Mike Harrison, Bishop of Dunwich, is writing this month’s column for Bishop Martin Seeley while his colleague is on annual summer leave.*