

OUR HYMNS FOR NOVEMBER 25, 2007

The Sunday Next Before Advent

Opening Hymn, 279, "Praise to the Lord," Text, Neander, German, trnsl. Catherine Winkworth; Tune, German song, 1665, *Lobe den Herren*

Based on psalms 103 and 150, "Lobe den Herren" has become one of our greatest hymns of praise.

We all know the phrase, "...has had a hard life.." Well, this hymn has had a hard life!

The tune originated in a German song, c. 1665, trnsl. "Haste to me, that I may see your face."

Joachim Neander set it, with considerable variation, to a hymn in 1680.

Catherine Winkworth wrote a translation of Neander's hymn for her *Chorale Book for England*, 1863.

Sydney Nicholson, one of the founders of the Royal School of Church Music, included it in the Second Supplement to 'A.&M' in 1916.

For the next thirty years, various hymnal editors made trivial changes to its harmonies and rhythm.

The Translations Committee of the JCRH composed our version of it for the *Hymnal*.

Other versions of it appeared in American hymnals from, and after, 1939, and the hymn moved into the status of being a popular processional hymn for very special Church occasions.

Sermon Hymn, 551. "A mighty fortress is our God." Text, Martin Luther, 1529. Chorale, *Ein' Feste Burg*, arr. by Martin Luther, 1529.

A few months ago I have wrote at length about this great hymn. Both the tune and the words of this "Battle Hymn of the Reformation," were written by Martin Luther himself, the words being a paraphrase of Psalm 46.

In his monumental, "Dictionary of Hymnology," Dr. Julian recorded that by 1900, over 80 renderings in 53 languages had been published, but there was then, and is now, no unanimity in the English version. The first lines of some of the better known versions are:

"Oure God is a defence and towre"

"A mighty fortress is our God,"

"A mountain fortress is our God,"

"A safe stronghold our God is still,"

A tower of strength our God doth stand,"

Our present version is from the translation by Frederic Henry Hedge in 1852. It was included in *Hymns for the Church of Christ*, 1853, and in the *Hymnal* 1916. It is a chorale, of course, and therefore it should not be hurried, but should be sung at a steady majestic pace.

Communion Hymn, 376, "Come down, O Love Divine." Text, Bianco da Siena, d. 1434, trnsl. Revd Richard F. Littledale (1833-1890). Tune, *Down Ampney*, Ralph Vaughan Williams, (1872-1953)

This is one of the four hymns that Ralph Vaughan Williams, (1872-1958) composed as Music Editor for the brand new *English Hymnal* in 1906. The other three are, "God be with you till we meet again," "For all the saints," and the four settings of "Hail thee, festival day." He named it, "Down

Ampney," after his birthplace in Gloucestershire. A "down" is an open pasture of undulating land, each down being designated by an individual name. In contemporary English, it would be called, "Ampney Down."

Years after the hymn was published, Vaughan Williams tried several times to have the hymn withdrawn as he disliked it. O.U.P. persisted in declining Vaughan Williams' requests, so the hymn remains. If you are wondering why he disliked it, think about the many style changes in hymns, the Modal hymns, the Plainsong hymns, the Chorales, the Reformation Hymns, the English Hymns, the Victorian hymns, the Evangelical hymns, the Modern hymns, and the dangerous batch we call, "Contemporary Hymns." R.V.W. was in his early thirties when he wrote it, and later saw it as being clearly in Victorian style. one that he should not have used.

The text is a translation of a 14th century Italian hymn by Bianco da Siena. It was translated by Richard Littledale, curate, later of St. Mary's Church, Soho, London. Littledale was a Tractarian (Oxford Movement) who, although an extreme 'High Churchman' constantly persuaded Anglicans to remain apart from the Roman Catholic Church.

Closing Hymn, We end the Trinity season as we began it: 266, Holy, Holy, Holy. Text, the Revd. (later Bishop) Reginald Heber, Tune "Nicaea," Revd. John B. Dykes.

The text is one of the hymns Heber* (1783-1826) wrote when he was Vicar of Hodnet, Shropshire. He wrote a hymn for every 'special' day and every Sunday in the Church of England's calendar, our 266 being, of course, for Trinity Sunday. **The famous Victorian Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, described this hymn as the greatest ever written in the English language.** The text is based on Revelation 4:8-11. I have a lifelong collection of hymnals and I know of only one that does not include this hymn. **The Father of the Victorian Hymn, the Revd. John B. Dykes,** wrote the tune "Nicaea," so-named in commemoration of the first Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, which produced the **Nicene Creed** as a clear belief in the doctrine of the **Trinity** against the heresy of Arianism.

The origin of the tune, recorded by Dykes himself, is probably the most fascinating of all hymn tunes, but in the light of truth being stranger than fiction, you no doubt would find it very hard to accept. This is a wonderful hymn. Beethoven always said that Handel's genius lay in his ability to make the simple great; the same could be said of Dykes. The harmony is very straightforward, but almost tongue-in-cheek so. Few experienced organists can resist the temptation to play free harmony for the last verse. Dykes was a Yorkshireman who had been an organist from childhood. It is easy to imagine that on this farewell to the Trinity season of 2007, he might well look down with a smile as he hears the music he has inspired.

NEXT SUNDAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT, THE 'NEW YEAR'S DAY' OF OUR ECCLESIASTICAL YEAR. IN CELEBRATION OF THAT OCCASION, WE SHALL END THE 10:30 AM MASS AS WE DID ON EASTER DAY, WITH THE SINGING OF OUR GREAT ANCIENT PSALM OF THANKSGIVING. A VERSION FOR REVIEW IS GIVEN ON THE REVERSE SIDE

- John Riley