

Hymn of the Week

Advent III

Hail to the Lord's Anointed!

Words: James Montgomery (1771-1854)

Tune: Crüger by Johann Crüger (1598-1662)

Still fighting off the relentless approach of the tinsel and jingle bells, this week we reach the Third Sunday in Advent when in traditional practice we remember John the Baptist who so dramatically proclaimed the need to repent and prepare for the coming of our Saviour – the whole purpose of Advent.

Our hymn this week is based on Psalm 72 especially in its mention of judgement, heavenly showers and the worship of kings, the latter being the reason that the hymns is also frequently used in the Epiphany Season.

James Montgomery was the son of an Irish peasant who moved to Irvine in Scotland and became a Moravian pastor. Following his birth James' parents went out as missionaries to the slave colonies of the West Indies where they both died within a few years. The young James was sent to a Moravian seminary in Yorkshire but instead of becoming a minister eventually became the editor of the Sheffield Iris, a publication which was well known for its radical views. Among the causes promoted was the teaching of writing in Sunday School which was condemned at the time as "instilling dangerous ideas into working-class youth"! Montgomery also strongly opposed slavery and the use of climbing boys by chimney sweeps, furthermore his publication of radical views both regarding the release of innocent prisoners from the Bastille and workers rights in the Sheffield Riots earned him two spells of imprisonment.

Montgomery eventually became a communicant member of the Anglican Church in Sheffield where he became a prolific hymn writer. Anglican hymn books containing works of "human composure" at this time were non-existent, singing being confined to versions of psalms and other scriptural material, and thus Montgomery incurred the wrath of the local congregation who were opposed to the learning of "new hymns" – where have we heard that before I wonder? Such was the opposition that the matter was taken to the ecclesiastical courts where an ancient law prohibiting the use of non-scriptural material was upheld and it was only as a result of the Archbishop of York achieving repeal of the law in 1821 that hymn singing became legal in the Church of England. I for one am indeed grateful to James Montgomery.

The composer of the tune to which the hymn is almost invariably set, Johann Crüger attended the Jesuit College at Olmutz and the Poets' School in Regensburg and later studied theology at the University of Wittenberg, he was then for 40 years Cantor in the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Berlin. Crüger vigorously promoted congregational singing

in the Lutheran Church so it would seem even more appropriate that his tune is set to Montgomery's words.

The hymn is sung here by the choir of Trinity College, Cambridge under the direction of the late (and much lamented) Richard Marlow in one of those achingly beautiful settings for which he was renowned.

<https://youtu.be/d71Y6vGQkRQ?list=RDd71Y6vGQkRQ>

And finally, on an entirely personal note: well over 68 years ago now, when I was a boy learning to play the organ, when practicing in church I was sometimes joined by the retired Bishop of Khartoum who lived in the next house to my parents. Bishop Llewelyn Gwynn was a Welshman who loved to sing and always encouraged me to play a hymn or two with which he could join in, Hail to the Lord's Anointed was undoubtedly our favourite.

Keith Day

9th December 2025