

Hymn of the Week

Lent I

“Christian, dost thou see them?”

Words: John Mason Neale (1818-1866)

Tune: St Andrew of Crete – John Bacchus Dykes (1823-1876)

The hymn I have chosen this week was, in my youth and for many years after, alongside “Forty Days and forty nights” one of the standard components of Anglican services during Lent but, for reasons that largely escape me it has fallen into disuse to the extent that it no longer is present in the latest edition of “Hymns Ancient & Modern”; fortunately the compilers of the more Anglo-Catholic “Revised English Hymnal” have shown greater wisdom.

I can only suppose that the robust nature of the first lines of the hymn together with the somewhat militant nature of the following verses have caused some congregations and clergy of a nervous disposition to have an attack of the vapours and issue a “trigger warning” but this really is a great shame as a closer perusal of the text will reveal how totally suitable and encouraging it is for a penitential and preparatory season. To me the unequivocal assurances of the triumph of good over evil and that God, through our Saviour is beside in our trials and tribulations are the greatest possible comfort and I hope they may be so to you as well.

The text of the hymn, although arranged in current form by J M Neale, are of far older origin having been written by St Andrew of Crete (660-732) who was appointed Archbishop of Crete in 712 in contentious circumstances and unrest in the church. He later repented of his involvement and became a great writer of religious books and poetry. By curious coincidence J M Neale was a man of some contrasts having been born into an evangelical family, he soon became attracted to the Oxford movement as a consequence, although ordained as an Anglican priest he was deemed unsuitable for parish ministry – he was a talented poet being awarded the Seatonian prize for religious poetry eleven times while a student at Trinity College, Cambridge.

The Midianites mentioned in the hymn, although descended from Abraham and his second wife, are the undoubted “bad guys” of Northwestern Arabia terrorising the people of Israel who, in the time of Joshua were beginning to permanently settle in the Promised Land. They were eventually pretty savagely and decisively seen off by Gideon – if you want to read the full story start at Judges chapter 6.

The hymn is enthusiastically sung here by the Lux Aeterna Chorale, All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi to Dykes' simply magnificent tune.

<https://youtu.be/isTNJY4vNyg?list=RDisTNJY4vNyg>