

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Who remembers taking part in those balloon debates at school in which you argue about who to throw out of the basket in order to save the rest of the passengers? It's a popular game which takes divers forms, and it's thousands of years old. Read Jonah I in the Old Testament if you don't believe me. There's a rather kinder version of it, which trainee vicars play at theological college. Who would you like to be locked up with in a church overnight? You're allowed to ask anyone, dead or alive, but s/he must be a serious contender, as you have to defend your choice. No inviting God to see if he actually turns up.

Well, high on my list of possible nocturnal companions would be John Mason Neale. He was a 19th c. theologian, a High Churchman and founder of the Camden Society, which promoted the cause of Victorian Gothic in ecclesiastical architecture. Like me, he became Master of an almshouse, in which role he gave himself to good works, devotion and scholarship, for among his many talents, he was a considerable classicist. He once visited John Keble and was briefly left alone by his host in the drawing room. While he was waiting, Neale found the manuscript of a new hymn by Keble on the table. He saw the opportunity for a practical joke, and on Keble's return accused him of plagiarism. Keble knew that the hymn was his own work, but Neale produced what purported to be a Latin original for it. Keble was mortified, protesting he had never seen it, till Neale confessed he had turned his friend's composition into medieval Latin while Keble was out of the room.

Neale himself was no mean hymn-writer. He produced over 400, including 'All glory, laud and honour', 'O come, O come, Emmanuel', 'Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle', 'Of the Father's heart begotten', 'A great and mighty wonder', 'Good King Wenceslas', and the lovely Compline hymn, 'Before the ending of the day'.

One of Neale's hymns in particular both thrilled and terrified me as a small child –

Christian, dost thou see them
On the holy ground?
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?

I loved the word *prowl*. I had no idea who the troops of Midian were, but they were definitely scary and out to get you. But then, after the sombre opening of each verse, the second half boldly confronts the foe, promising victory in the conflict –

Christian, up and smite them,
Counting gain but loss ...
Smite was another childhood favourite.
... Smite them by the merit
Of the holy cross.

The choristers among us will remember Dykes' excellent tune to the hymn, which preserves the antiphonal form of Neale's verse, beginning in a solemn C minor then breaking into the brilliant major key at the mid-point.

I was put in mind of Neale's hymn by our anthem this evening, 'O Lord the maker of all thing'. I first sang this as a choirboy in the 1950s, not long it was composed, as a matter of fact, but I was especially struck this evening by the word 'deceit' in it: 'we pray thee nowe in this evening, us to defende through Thy mercy from al deceite of our en'my.'

'Deceit'. The word comes into English from Old French and ultimately from Latin, where it means 'to trap or ensnare, take captive'. 'Defend us through thy mercy from all the traps and snares of our enemy.' If, as is claimed, the text is by Henry VIII, the reference is likely to be as much political as spiritual, but a spiritual reference the words certainly have. Those who first sang and heard them would have given substantial credence to the author of I Peter with his warning that 'our adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.' The enemy was ever at the gates.

Now our collect this evening echoes precisely this thought. This ancient prayer of the Church invokes divine protection against 'all dangers and adversities'. The original Latin begins 'deprecationem nostram' – literally, 'Our deprecation, we pray, O Lord, graciously hear.' Unfortunately, there is no good English word to render the force of 'deprecation', and Cranmer and Cosin had to admit defeat in their translation. A deprecation is a prayer against evils which threaten. The earlier petitions in the Litany are deprecations. 'From all evil and mischief; from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil; from thy wrath, and from everlasting damnation, spare us, good Lord.'

Against these things our collect bids us humbly to entreat God's 'mighty aid'. The Latin original speaks of 'supplication', which is the prayer of a bended knee. We are to pray humbly, because, tempted as we are to trust in our own strength, as we have already acknowledged in this service, 'we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves', and to pretend that we have is, as Jeremiah puts it in our first lesson, to trust 'in deceptive words to no avail, claiming we are safe.' There is King Henry's 'deceit' again, the trap and snare of the enemy, prowling around. 'From all evil and mischief; from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil, spare us, good Lord.'

Our forebears across the centuries from Saxon times who worshipped here at St John's took those words seriously, as unfortunately we too often do not. Our anthem, our collect, our scripture are a potent reminder that, actually, we are not as clever as we like to think we are. The craft and deceit of our enemy, the dangers and adversities with which we are beset, are very real. Therefore –

O Lorde the maker of al thing,
we pray thee *nowe*
in this evening,
us to defende through Thy mercy.
Amen.

Canon Michael Goater
18 June 2018