

# HYMN INTERPRETATION

HERMAN G. STUEMPFLE

## “Christian, Dost Thou See Them?”

Andrew of Crete, cir. 660-732  
Tr. John Mason Neale, 1818-66

A recent reading of Leon Litvak’s fine study of John Mason Neale (1818-66)\* carried me back more than half a century to Lenten observance in the small Lutheran parish which was my home church. No Lent was complete without singing at least once “Christian, Dost Thou See Them?,” of which the page notes stated: “Andrew of Crete, cir. 660-732, Tr. John Mason Neale, 1818-66.” The names meant nothing to me then, but the somber text, set to John Dykes’ equally somber ST. ANDREW OF CRETE, made a deep and lasting impression. Unfortunately (in my mind), the editors of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* chose to eliminate the hymn, and Lent hasn’t seemed quite the same since.

Neale must have seemed a rather exotic figure in the nineteenth-century Church of England. Tall and gangly, brilliant but sickly, he studied at Cambridge where he excelled in the classics. While there, he was a founding member of the Cambridge Camden Society, an association with concerns somewhat parallel to those of Newman and the Tractarians. Whereas the interests of the Oxford Movement gravitated toward Roman Catholicism, those of Neale moved in the direction of Eastern Christianity. He was convinced that the Anglican branch of the Christian family had more affinities with Constantinople than with Rome. His efforts to draw the two communions into closer understanding, if not unity, resulted in a two volume *History of the Holy Eastern Church*, numerous articles, a series of novels with eastern settings and themes, and the translation of hymns.

Litvak is persuaded that some of the hymn texts that have been designated translations are in fact original compositions based on themes or images that Neale found in the prose canons and *troparia* which are such important elements of the Eastern liturgies. “Christian, Dost Thou See Them?,” along with another of Neale’s Lenten texts, “Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid?,” appears to be one of them.

The 6 5 6 5 D meter Neale chose gives the hymn a sturdy marching beat. Dykes’ tune, in which the first two lines are sung on the same note, contributes a sense that something menacing is afoot. Indeed, this is

part of Neale’s intent. The unnamed “them” at the end of the first phrase of each of the first three verses conjures the image of legions of demons who “compass [us] around,” “striving, tempting, luring into sin.”

Structurally, the text is unified by the use of a common first line for verses 1-3. Only the verb changes. The “powers of darkness” assault the eyes, ears and heart of the beleaguered believer. As with St. Anthony in the desert, temptation takes the form of a horde of leering, insinuating devils determined to take us captive. Whatever starting points Neale found in his Greek sources, certain Scripture passages clearly underlie his images: “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8); and, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Neale’s evocation of threatening evil is so powerful that the singer can easily forget who it is that speaks

68 Lent

ST. ANDREW OF CRETE, 6 5, 6 5, D. JOHN BACCHUS DYKES, 1823-76  
*Thoughtfully* SECOND TUNE

1. Chris-tian, dost thou see them, On the ho-ly ground,  
2. Chris-tian, dost thou feel them, How they work with-in,  
How the powers of dark-ness Com- pass thee a-round?  
Striv-ing, tempt-ing, lur-ing, Goad-ing in-to sin?

Chris-tian, up and smite them, Count-ing gain but loss;  
Chris-tian, nev-er trem-ble, Nev-er be down-cast;

Smite them by the mer-it Of the ho-ly Cross.  
Gird thee for the bat-tle, Watch and pray and fast.

3 Christian, dost thou hear them,  
How they speak thee fair:  
Always fast and vigil,  
Always watch and prayer!  
Christian, answer boldly,  
“While I breathe, I pray.”  
Peace shall follow battle,  
Night shall end in day.

4 Well I know thy trouble,  
O my servant true,  
Thou art very weary,  
I was weary too;  
But that toil shall make thee  
Some day all mine own,  
And the end of sorrow  
Shall be near my throne.

Andrew of Crete, cir. 660-732  
Tr. John Mason Neale, 1818-66

A page from the *Service Book and Hymnal*, 1958, of the Lutheran Church in America.

\*Leon Litvak, *John Mason Neale and the Quest for Sobornost* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

these ominous lines. The one who addresses the tempted soul is none other than the resurrected Christ. His purpose is certainly to warn, but even more to comfort, in the root meaning of “fortify.” Powerful as the enemies of the soul are, they are no match for him who defeated them on the cross and in the tomb. Therefore, Christians, though always on the alert, should “never tremble, never be downcast.” They have at hand a whole arsenal of weapons—prayer, fasting, “the merit of the holy Cross”—with which to “smite” the enemy.

Beyond even such weapons as these, there is the promise of the companionship of a High Priest who is “able to sympathize with our weaknesses,” one “who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). We may grow weary in the ceaseless battle, but our comrade in arms assures us, “I

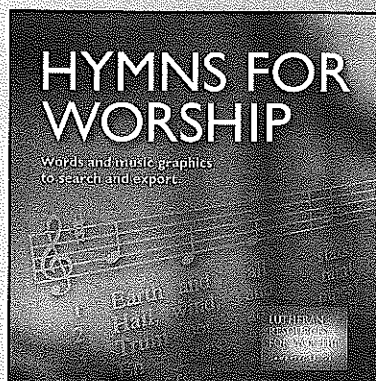
was weary too.” In Luther’s words, “the right Man is on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing.”

Contemporary singers of Neale’s hymn, if given the opportunity, may not have our heads filled with images of demons, but surely we’re familiar with demonic powers of evil—eruptions of rage, lust, and other of the “seven deadly sins,” the seductions of our consumption driven economy, subtle forces that dull our consciences and deaden our compassion. Neale’s bracing call to vigilance and his assurance that we are not alone in our struggle to be faithful are never obsolete.

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