

Homily for John Mason Neale, Priest, 1866

August 7, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

2 Chronicles 20:20–21; Psalm 106:1–5; Matthew 13:44–52

The only thing I can remember about music in my grandparents' Roman Catholic Church is, at some point while visiting them and going to Mass with my grandmother, I found "A mighty fortress is our God" in a missalette. I confess I wish I had kept a copy. No credit was given to Martin Luther. Instead, it credited a cardinal with the arrangement.

Thanks to secondhand booksellers, I have copies of the two Baptist hymnals I grew up with, *The Broadman Hymnal* (1940) and *The Baptist Hymnal* (1956). The earlier hymnal has no index of authors and translators, only of tunes and first lines—and I might add, no copyright notices. Looking at *The Baptist Hymnal*, I discovered that I grew up knowing a few of John Mason Neale's translations of Latin and Greek hymns: "Good Christian men, rejoice," "Come, ye faithful, raise the strain," "All glory, laud, and honor," "The day of resurrection" (to a different tune), and "Jerusalem, the golden." One of his texts that I don't remember singing, "Art thou weary" was in *The Baptist*

Hymnal. It was also in *The Hymnal 1940*, but not included in *The Hymnal 1982*,

A total of twenty-seven of Neale's translations from Latin and Greek and one of his own hymns are in the present hymnal. *The Hymnal 1940 Companion* says about his work as a translator: "His translations and paraphrases are distinguished for the genuine merit as English verse, as well as their portrayal of the spirit of the original."¹

Neale was born in 1818, the son of an Evangelical priest of the Church of England. He studied at Cambridge, where he was one of the Camden Society's undergraduate founders, later known as the Ecclesiological Society. It was established to promote "the study of Gothic Architecture, and of Ecclesiastical Antiquities."² Their work was not without controversy in its day. One of my favorite books is *Churches the Victorians Forgot*. Much damage was done to real medieval gothic buildings beyond the

¹ *The Hymnal 1940 Companion*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1951), 512–13.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Camden_Society, (accessed 7 August 2020).

destruction that happened at the Reformation and under the Commonwealth Civil War.³

Neale was ordained priest in 1842. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* mentions nothing about him being inhibited for fourteen years by his bishop⁴—but it does note that “he gave active support to the Oxford Movement in its revival of medieval liturgical forms.⁵ Online, one can find photographs of him wearing chasubles and Roman-style cassocks.⁶

In 1846, he became warden of Sackville College—an almshouse where twelve men lived. He founded the Sisterhood of Saint Margaret—the American branch’s motherhouse is in Duxbury, Massachusetts, with branches in Dorchester in Boston, here in the city at Trinity Church Wall Street, and in Haiti. Saint Vincent’s for Children with Disabilities was founded by the sisters in 1945, and it still does remarkable work. The sisters’ ministry there now centers on a

³ Mark Chatfield, *Church the Victorians Forgot* (Ashbourne, Derbyshire, UK: Moorland Publishing, 1979), 7–9.

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https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/john_mason_neale.htm, (accessed 7 August 2020).

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<https://duckduckgo.com/?t=ffnt&q=John+mason+Neale&iax=images&ia=images>, (accessed 7 August 2020).

home for older women whose families cannot take care of them.

Neale died on August 6, 1866, the Feast of the Transfiguration, at the age of forty-six—from a lung condition. So, his commemoration falls on August 7. As an Anglican Christian, I can't imagine Advent without "Creator of the stars of night," Christmas without "Of the Father's love begotten," the last Sunday before Lent without "Alleluia, song of gladness, voice of joy that cannot die," Palm Sunday without "All glory, laud, and honor," Good Friday without "Sing, my tongue the glorious battle," Easter without "The day of resurrection," and any day of the year without being able to sing if need to be, "Christ is made the sure foundation."

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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