

Views from the Pews - Songs for the Dark Times

Anglicans of a certain age will recognize the expression “A’n’M”, which is of course short for ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’.

Although ‘Modern’ is relative – the 1950 version features but one hymn tune by the young upstart Ralph Vaughan Williams, and of course there is no sign of Britten, Rutter, Chilcott or any other hymn composers of the post WW2 era.

Nevertheless, many gems remain, many of which we still sing.

At random, we might try Number 266, set to the tune (amazingly in today’s climate) ‘Moscow’. The tune is over 300 years old, but the words will offer comfort .

“ Thou whose almighty word, chaos and darkness heard, and took their flight”; etc.

Every verse ends with an emphatic ‘Let there be Light’.

Although there’s a slight whiff of imperialism, the theme is the spreading of the Gospel throughout the world.

But it’s those first three lines which commend themselves particularly after we have watched the evening news. God’s Word is the only thing that can dispel Chaos and Darkness. They flee away, shunning the light.

However the words of Hymn 266 place Christians as passive onlookers, receivers of both Word and Light, mere spectators. Is it sufficient simply to watch on as God dispels Chaos and Darkness single-handedly? Possibly, but the challenge today is to recognize that we possess agency of our own, not independent of God, but as His representatives on earth.

We can and should spread the Word ourselves. We can and should shine with the Light .

But in the meantime, it is perfectly acceptable to seek reassurance from these ancient phrases. Chaos and Darkness are all around us – don’t hesitate to reach for the comfort they bring.

And “Moscow” is an incredibly good tune. Long live A’n’M.

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