

Comment: New Version of 'AT EVEN ERE THE SUN WAS SET'

'At even ere the sun was set' is, in my view, the finest hymn of Christian healing ever written – or ever likely to be.

I love it, and I love it so much that I have for decades been grieved by the way it is never sung in the morning because of its line:

*'once more 'tis eventide, and we
oppressed with various ills draw near...'*

As the years pass I know that *thee's* and *thou's* become an increasing stumbling block to new Christians, many of whom have never met such language and wonder why Christians use it for singing in Church but for nothing else.

Words, like supermarket foods, have a 'best before' date. '*Diverse pains*', '*who fain would serve thee*', '*Tis* and *woes* are now none too fresh – although they were when they were first written in the 19th. century.

'O Saviour Christ thou too art Man'.

'O' is a useful single-syllable word for a poet when he/she needs one, but is not naturally used nowadays. ['Oh!', which sounds the same, *is* used naturally when you sit on a pin, but it is a different word.]

'Man' is used here like 'dog' to represent the species – an unpopular usage nowadays.

For the above reasons, this excellent hymn has been getting marginalised, when it needs to be central and deserves to be. H. Twells, its author, died in 1900.

My revision is an attempt to extend his wonderful contribution to Christian devotion into the twenty-first century.

Printed below the hymn are my comments on the changes, which some might find helpful.

TUNES:

Because the hymn is not now widely sung, its traditional tune may not be known. There are plenty of other 'L.M.' tunes available. Those similar in style are *Tallis Canon*, *Fulda* and *Winchester New*, and it could also be sung to the more plainsong style of *Te Lucis* or *Veni Creator Spiritus*. On the other hand the new words could be sung to the 'brighter' tunes of *Truro*, or *Melcombe* - the subject of the hymn is, after all, not sickness - but healing!

New Version of 'AT EVEN ERE THE SUN WAS SET'

TUNE: Traditionally *Angelus* L.M.

1.

**Sometimes, before the sun was set,
the sick, Lord Jesus, round you lay;
with many varied needs they met –
but with what joy they went away!**

2.

**You do not change, dear Lord, so we
oppressed with various ills draw near;
although your form we cannot see,
we know, and feel, that you are here!**

3.

**Dear Saviour Christ, our fears dispel,
for some are sick, and some are sad;
and some have never loved you well
and some have lost the love they had.**

4.

**And some have found the world in vain,
afraid, they know not what to do;
and some have friends that give them pain,
yet have not found a friend in you.**

5.

**And none, O Lord, have perfect rest,
for none are wholly free from sin;
And those who aim to love you best
are conscious most of wrong within.**

6.

**Dear Saviour Christ, you were a man;
so have been tempted, troubled, tried;
but now your searching glance can scan
the very wounds our shame would hide.**

7.

**Your touch has still its ancient power;
no word from you can fruitless fall;
both hear and touch us at this hour,
and in your mercy heal us all.**

NOTES

v. 1

I added the name *Jesus*. As it was the name given because he would *save* his people, is particularly relevant at the start of a hymn on healing.

v. 2

Between verse 1 and verse 2 lie 2,000 years. Christians gather now because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Hence my words 'You do not change, dear Lord'.

v. 4

This has a line ending in *thee* (with *free* to rhyme with it). Changing it to *you*, meant that *free* could no longer be used. This accounts for my line: *Afraid, they know not what to do*.

v. 6

In its original form was:

*O Savour Christ, thou too art Man;
Thou hast been troubled, tempted, tried;
Thy kind but searching glance can scan
The very wounds that shame would hide.*

To keep the Man/scan rhyme, I retained Man but used it to indicate a male (small 'm!').

*Thou hast been troubled...*I changed to *so has been*, because becoming a man *resulted* in his experiencing the troubles, temptations and trials that beset us.

I felt there was a contrast between the time of his earthly life and his present reign in glory, and so introduced his *searching glance* with *but now*.

v. 7

No word from thee can fruitless fall in modern English becomes something like *No word of yours is said in vain*, or, *Your words bear fruit and cannot fail*, but to get a rhyme with either *vain* or *fail* would have changed the punchline of the hymn – *and in your mercy heal us all*.

To enable the hymn to be sung at any time, I removed *in this solemn evening hour*, and substituted *both hear and touch us*.