

Pastor and People.

FOR THE CANADA PRESBYTERIAN.

THE GREAT JUDGMENT HYMN—DIES IRÆ.

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This great hymn, originally consisting of nineteen strophes of three lines each, is the work of Thomas of Celano (a town of Italy, of some 6,000 of a population, twenty-eight miles south of Aquila). He was born 1185 and died 1255. He was the companion and biographer of Francis of Assisi, both very famous in their day, the one, as the father of itinerant preaching friars; the other, as the chief poet of his country, and whose one judgment hymn roused the slumbering choirs of Europe, and is still making the hearts of every one that hears it tingle. The earliest book in which it is found is the "Missale Romanum," printed at Pavia, 1491. It probably first saw the light early in the thirteenth century, and through all the intervening years it has been as a light and an echo from the eternal world.

Here we give a specimen of three verses:

*Dies iræ, dies illa,
Solvat sæculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sybilla.*

*Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando Juxta est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus.*

*Tuba, mirum spargens sonum
Per sepulchra regionem.
Coget omnes ante thronum.*

TRANSLATION BY GENERAL DIX.

Day of vengeance without morrow:
Earth shall end in flame and sorrow,
As from saint and seer we borrow.

Ah what terror is impending,
When the Judge is seen descending,
And each secret vail is rending!

To the throne the trumpet sounding,
Through the sepulchres resounding,
Summons all with voice astounding.

It is indeed a wonderful hymn, wonderful for its simple majesty, almost artless in its structure, the solemn grandeur of the theme, the felicity of its diction, the strength of its imagery, and the spirit of awe with which it inspires us; for it touches the imagination as well as the heart, and gives us a sense of the solemnities of the judgment to an extent far beyond anything we know of either in ancient or modern hymnology.

The testimony of those who have the best right to speak on the subject has given to it the highest place in the whole range of the ancient hymns. Daniel, in his *Thesaurus Hymnologicus*, says: "By universal consent it is regarded as the highest ornament of sacred poetry, and the most sacred treasure of the Latin Church." Similar is the testimony of Trench, Mrs. Charles, etc. Then among its admirers may be set down a long list of famous names, consisting of soldiers, statesmen, churchmen, poets, historians, musicians—musicians that have rendered no small service in wedding to it immortal song. Among those admirers are included the names of Mozart, Haydn, Goethe, Johnson, Dryden, Scott, Milman. There is no human composition that I know of has won such favour and made such an impression on the heart of Christendom. And instead of being on the wane, like many once popular hymns, it is becoming more highly esteemed with passing years, making for itself a way into all the Churches, having already secured for itself a place in more than twenty of their hymnals!

How does it come that a hymn so broadly Papistic in its origin should be received with such favour by evangelical Protestants as well as unflinching Roman Catholics—that Churches that once would not allow their ministers to put on a black gown or an organ to be used in their services, because looked upon as relics of Popery, have nearly all given it a place in their service of song? One reason is that while it is Roman Catholic in its origin, it is not Roman Catholic in its teaching. It has no smell of the cloister about it. It never betrays its origin or casts a shadow over that new and living way which has been opened to the holiest of all. It is not so with the *Stabat Mater Crucis* (a mother was standing by the cross), the hymn that ranks next to this in the polish of its verse and the solemn beauty of its theme. With all

its exquisite tenderness and perfect finish it is sadly marred with Roman Catholic error, and this must always stand in the way of its popularity and general acceptance in the Protestant Church. It is in the last two verses where those errors chiefly appear, and consist in an invocation to the Virgin:

*Never shall the mingled tide,
Flowing still from Jesus' side,
May my lips inebriate turn,
And when in the day of doom,
Lightning-like He rends the tomb;
Shield (Mary), oh shield me, lest I burn.*

*So the shadow of the tree
Where thy Jesus died for me
Still shall be my fortalice:
So when flesh and spirit sever,
Shall I live, thy love forever,
In the joys of Paradise.*

(Translated by Lord Lindsay.)

From all such invocations and errors the "Dies Iræ" is entirely free. Moreover the fact that the translations of this great hymn, "Dies Iræ," are almost innumerable, shows what a hold it has taken of the Church. Dr. Lisco, of Berlin (1843), has collected eighty-seven, nearly all German, and who can tell the number that are to be found in the French and English tongues? Who can count the dust of Jacob? I have myself seen over a dozen of those translations, including Alford's "Day of Anger, That Dread Day," Irons' "Day of Wrath, Oh Day of Mourning," etc., but by far the best is evidently that of Major-General John A. Dix, U. S. A., a gentleman who studied Latin at St. Sulpice while his father was engaged in building Notre Dame. The translation was made at Fortress Munroe in the second year of the rebellion.

It is astonishing what labour has been expended on those numerous translations—how many gifted pens have been employed on them, seeking to render the original Latin into the vernacular of their respective countries. Astonishing not only for the number but for the long patience with which they pursued their work in some cases, extending over half a lifetime—all trying to give a finer touch to some line or bring out in happier form the thought of the author. Franklin Johnson, e.g., of Cambridge, Mass., Nov. 1883, says he spent fifteen years in his version, pruning and polishing all the time, and yet at the close of his performance was far below his ideal! He speaks of the difficulty of rendering in English that which has such power and sweetness in Latin, and adds:

*The marble shows the form and face,
But who will give it vital grace?*

Time would fail me were I to attempt a narrative of the deeds of even a tithe of the writers that have given themselves to this. Mr. Murray, of the *Star*, to whom I am indebted for information that leaves little doubt as to the authorship, has investigated the long-obscurer history of this hymn, chiefly on my account, and I am free to say that his word may be regarded as the last that can be said on the subject. It is to him also I am indebted for this remarkably fine rendering of the "Dies Iræ" by Major-General Dix. Among the scores of translations, all competing for popular favour, this will probably be regarded as the chief for many a day to come.

Reference has already been made to the scriptural character of this hymn, to the fact that it rises above the creed of its author or the author's Church, and deals with the destinies of men and the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, in language pure and undefiled. Is not this a matter for thankfulness? Is it nothing to say that this great judgment hymn has been in use for 700 years witnessing for God and truth amid all the corruptions of the Papacy—lifting up its strong, clear voice, like the trumpet of the archangel summoning the dead to the bar of God? The song, as well as the sermon, is a vehicle of instruction, and in many cases better than the sermon. That is the case now in these days of greater light and privilege, but how much more must the people have been indebted to these hymns in past ages? Whatever may be said about the mummeries of Romanism and the scandals of the clergy, that Church has always had a splendid service of song, often a choral service; and if the people failed to learn anything valuable from the pulpit, they could hardly fail to learn something valuable from the choir. They were ever hearing of heaven and hell, human guilt and the tender mercy of God in Christ; the work of the Holy Spirit and the Jerusalem which is above. Such hymns as the Te

Deum, Jerusalem the Golden, Veni Creator Spiritus, Dies Iræ, and such processional hymns as the *Vexilla Regis* (the royal banners forward go), left no excuse to the people for being entirely ignorant of the great truths which, through faith, are able to make us wise unto salvation. That Church has ever been rich in hymns—hymns that were witnesses for God and truth amid all the mummeries of the ritual and the effete performances of an often perfunctory priesthood. But this hymn—the *Dies Iræ*—which rose like a flaming star in the dark night of superstition, when the bullfight was the chief amusement of the people, and the lust of temporal power the chief passion of the priesthood, must ever be regarded as the greatest and the one most frequently in use of all the ancient hymns; for, apart from the fact it must be steadily sung in the Sistine Chapel, Rome, it forms the sequence for the dead in the Roman Catholic burial service, and of course is in daily requisition the world over. It is not a hymn expressive of the higher life of faith in Christ Jesus—the glorious liberty of the children of God—but rather one of bondage, deprecating God's wrath and pleading for God's mercy at the last sad hour. It takes its colour and character from the century which gave it birth, when the vision of God had grown dim and the spiritual life of the Church was running low; but still it is a hymn which has touched many a heart with the powers of the world to come, and helped to prepare them for the great assize, and among those may be named our own Sir Walter Scott. He had in the days of his rising fame—before his eye had grown dim, or his right hand had lost its cunning,—penned the much admired Lay of the Last Minstrel, and he closes the beautiful performance with the words:

*The mass was sung, the prayers read,
The solemn requiem for the dead,
And bells tolled out the mighty peal
For the departed spirit's weal;
And ever in the office close
The hymn of intercession rose:
And far the echoing did prolong
The solemn burden of the song,
*Dies iræ, dies illa,**

*Solvat sæculum in favilla,
While the pealing organ rang
With it,—meet with sacred strain—
To close my lay so light and vain,
Thus the holy father sang:*

*That day of wrath, that dreadful day,
When heaven and earth shall pass away;
What power shall be the sinner's stay,
How shall he meet that dreadful day?*

*When, shrivelling like a parched scroll,
The flaming heavens together roll;
When louder yet, and yet more dread
Swells the high trump that wakes the dead,—*

*Oh on that day, that wrathful day,
When man to judgment wakes from clay;
Be Thou the trembling sinner's stay,
Though heaven and earth shall pass away.*

It was to these verses he turned in his last hour, or at least this hymn; and not to it alone, but the blessed Word from which it is drawn. A few days before his death, we are informed by his biographer, Mr. Lockhart, there was a lucid interval of that distressing malady for the removal of which he had travelled to London, Italy, Malta, etc. He was again in his own home; and in one of those calm moments when he was comparatively free from pain, he desired to be drawn into his library and placed beside the window that looks down upon the Tweed. "Read to me now." "From what shall I read," said Mr. Lockhart. "Can you ask? There is but one" (book). I choose, says his biographer, the fourteenth of John, and at the close of my reading he said: "Well this is a great comfort, I have followed you distinctly all through, and I feel as if I were yet to be myself again." Can we conceive of a grander testimony in favour of the Bible? "There is, but one" (book), said this great man, when standing face to face with God, that can meet the case. Not his own beautiful poems; not his own enchanting works of fiction. Miserable comforters were they all. He had come to a point where one blessed word of the Lord Jesus was regarded as better than all the wisdom of this world, when one ray of the excellent glory would bring more cheer to his soul than all the splendour of Abbotsford, where the romance of life must give place to sober truth, where the highest works of genius must pass away like the aurora borealis of northern skies, and give place to the solemn realities of the eternal world. Soon after this touching scene, the deepening shadow fell on the bright spirit that had revelled in its own creations for a quarter of a century, that had touched the lyre with such a master hand, that we can still hear the reverberations from afar, and the strong man staggered, and his feet stumbled on the dark mountains; but even then, the ruling spirit, strong in death, was running in its old channels, and those that were nearest heard amongst his fading utterances the cadence of this great hymn:

*Dies iræ, dies illa,
Solvat sæculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sybilla.*