

21st April 2021

Rest

“Rest in soft peace.”

Ben Jonson, On My First Son (1616)

The adjective, “languid”, isn’t commonly used nowadays. The dictionary tells us that when it refers to a person it means, “showing a disinclination for physical exertion or effort.” To me, that smacks of laziness. But when it relates to a period of time, the meaning comes out differently. It indicates that the moments were “relaxed and peaceful” – *much* more positive.

When the 19th century poet, John Mason Neale, translated a hymn by St Stephen the Sabaite from the 8th century, the opening verse became:

*Art thou weary, art thou languid,
Art thou sore distress’d?
“Come to me,” saith One, “and coming
Be at rest!”*

Neale wrote this while he was Warden of Sackville College in Sussex during a period of personal illness and distress. This institution was little more than an alms house for the poor and aged. But, despite Neale’s literary capabilities, he spent the final 20 years of his life in Sackville, dedicating himself to the needs of those less fortunate than himself. But, as a balance to the rigours of his daily life, he gave his “leisure time” to the riches of Oriental hymnology, including the poetry of Stephen the Sabaite, penning the hymn, “Art thou weary, art thou languid”, in 1862.

Neale knew the times when we are languid because circumstances cause us weariness and distress. But might it not be appropriate to *choose* to be languid in your faith – not lazy, and certainly not showing any disinclination, but relaxed and peaceful in the embrace of a loving Lord? Perhaps, then, when he translated Stephen the Sabaite’s text, Neale was thinking of Jesus’ words, for himself and the unfortunate people in Sackville:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

“Rest in soft peace”, Ben Jonson suggests. Well, if that means I can be languid today, then being languid will suit me just fine.

A prayer for today

Lord, let me be languid today, as I rest in you. Amen