

17th January 2021

Privileges

“Well! It is now public, and you will stand for the privileges we know.”

John Heming and Henry Condell

From the Preface of the ‘First Folio Shakespeare’,
of which they were joint editors, in 1623

My reflections on friendship recently brought me to the great hymn of faith by Joseph Medlicott Scruven: “What a Friend we have in Jesus”.

Scruven was born in Co. Down, Ireland, in 1819. On the eve of his marriage in 1844 his fiancé was tragically drowned, and he decided to seek a fresh start in Canada where he worked for nine years as a teacher in Ontario and became known for his evangelistic work and compassion for those in need. He was described as “the man who saws wood and carries water for sick people and widows unable to pay”. He fell in love again, but his new fiancé, Eliza, succumbed to illness, and, following years under Scruven’s care, she sadly died. It was then that Scruven wrote these words:

*What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit; O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

Scruven never intended the poem to be published. But, thirty years later, when he was seriously ill, his caring neighbour, James Sackville, discovered it among Scruven’s papers. “Who wrote this?” Sackville asked. “The Lord and I wrote it between us,” Scruven replied. Shortly after his death in 1866, the poem appeared in a local newspaper. Some pages from the paper were used as wrapping for a parcel sent to New York, and the recipient arranged for the poem to be published. In time, it came to the notice of the German-American composer, Charles Converse, who set it to music, giving the tune his own surname. The rest, as they say, is history.

It was a privilege for Scruven to have such a deep friendship with his Lord, and a profound privilege to have that friendship confirmed in prayer. And for us? We can surely give thanks as we “stand for the privileges we know” and be strengthened in our faith by Scruven’s remarkable testimony.

A prayer for today

“In His arms he’ll take and shield thee; thou will find a solace there.” Thank God!

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