

Proper 23/21st Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

“Your Hand, O Lord, in Days of Old” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #846)

Those three little letters — “alt.” — often found in the notes beneath a hymn text can cover a great amount of literary territory. What they are indicating is that the text has been altered in some way. It has been changed from the way it had been originally written by the author. Sometimes the alterations are quite minor, perhaps a word change or two. Other times they are quite major, with entire sections of a work being changed or even deleted. Both kinds of alterations are part of the version of “Your Hand, O Lord, in Days of Old.”

The very first line of this hymn, written by Edward H. Plumptre, a noted English clergyman who lived in the 19th century, has undergone two changes. It was originally penned as “Thine Arm, O Lord, in Days of Old.” The change from “thine” to “your” is readily understandable, in that language usage has changed since the words were first written in 1864. The change from “arm” to “hand” is more significant, and perhaps more debatable. Plumptre was writing the hymn for a specific setting. It was to be used at the King’s College Hospital in London. His choice of words suggests that he wanted to focus on the healing power of Jesus, who used his divine force to bring wellness and wholeness as part of his earthly ministry. The image of healing hands underscores compassion; the image of the mighty arm underscores limitless power. In his dealings with us, our Lord shows both. We receive blessings from his powerful arm—and renewal and restoration from his gracious hand.

The more expansive usage of “alt.” is employed when entire sections of a poem that has become a hymn are either omitted or radically changed. In *Lutheran Service Book* and in other recent Christian hymnals, the third stanza originally written by Plumptre has been removed and the hymn has been reduced from four to three stanzas. It might be suggested that the words of the eliminated third stanza are too “dated” or “Victorian” for the modern person. A phrase such as “leprous taint” is not often heard these days. Yet the writer’s choice of image still has something to say. In the current third stanza Dr. Plumptre reminds us that, although our Lord touched people directly with his hand, healing touch in our times comes through the faithful labor of scientific and medical personnel. He concludes the stanza with words of prayer to our “great deliverer” that can be part of our devotions today: “Give joy and peace where all is strife and strength, where all is faint.”



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Your hand, O Lord, in days of old was strong to heal and save;
it triumphed over ills and death, o'er darkness and the grave.
To you, they came, the blind, the mute, the palsied and the lame,
the lepers in their misery, the sick with fevered frame.

Your touch then, Lord, brought life and health, gave speech and strength and sight;
and youth renewed and frenzy calmed revealed you, Lord of light.
And now, O Lord, be near to bless, Almighty as before,
in crowded street, by beds of pain, as by Gennes'ret's shore.

O be our great deliv'rer still, the Lord of life and death;
restore and quicken, soothe and bless, with your life-giving breath.
To hands that work and eyes that see give wisdom's healing pow'r
that whole and sick and weak and strong may praise you evermore.

Text: Edward H. Plumptre, 1821-91, alt.

Tune: KINGSFOLD. English adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958.

Both text and tune are in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]