
At the Name of Jesus

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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If you are around my house, or my party, late enough, there is a good chance you will hear me playing the piano. And, there is a good chance that, sooner or later, I will be playing one of my favorite hymns, "At the Name of Jesus."

I have loved that hymn ever since I grew up with it at St. Paul's Church, Newnan, Georgia. That church was quite small in those days, and it has been renovated and added on to several times since then. Perhaps you can imagine all the various ways I have heard the tune played, from pump organ to piano to guitar. Maybe that's why I play the tune in so many various ways myself. In my piano playing, I have a straight version, a jazz version, a modal version. ... Every night might reveal a different version!

It's Hymn 435 in our present hymnal. The words themselves recall another favorite, a biblical favorite, of mine: Philippians, chapter 2. "At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow,/ ... Humbled for a season, to receive a Name/ from the lips of sinners, unto whom he came,/ faithfully he bore it spotless to the last,/ brought it back victorious, when from death he passed."

A woman named Caroline Maria Noel wrote those words originally, though they have been slightly revised since she published them in 1861. She had written poetry between the ages of 17 and 20, and then she stopped writing for 20 years. At 40 years old, she resumed writing, apparently while she entered a stage of "suffering" in her life. She was quite ill during her later years, maybe even becoming invalid. That's when she published the small collection, "Name of Jesus, and other Verses for the Sick and Lonely" in 1861.

In the Episcopal Church, we know the text today through the tune composed by that most magnificent of English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams. In fact, he wrote the tune, *King's Weston*, in 1925, exactly for these words. The tune is exquisitely Anglican, with a lyrical tune, open harmony, and almost mystical spirit.

(Here, I add one stanza of Caroline Maria Noel's work that was omitted, and what a grand stanza it is:)

"Mighty and mysterious in the highest height,
God from everlasting, very light of light:
In the Father's bosom with the spirit blest,
Love, in love eternal, rest, in perfect rest."

Isn't that majestic? Especially with that tune? How odd it is, then, that Ralph Vaughan Williams was not exactly the most faithfully religious of Anglicans. His second wife described him as "an atheist ... [who] later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism." Yet, he composed some of our truly wondrous hymn tunes, including *Sine Nomine* ("For All the Saints") and *Down Ampney* ("Come Down, O Love Divine").

Yes, I admire this hymn's power. It carries a steady beat and a strong bass line (that I enjoy pounding out on the piano);

and its tune is lyrical and even folksy, evoking even splendid Anglican mystery. The lyrics, too, though they talk about being "humbled for a season," are simply noble and powerful.

How odd it is, then, that this combination of powerful music and powerful text comes from a woman who was weak in body and a man who was weak in faith. Such, I believe, is the true Anglican spirit. We are comprehensive in so many ways. And when we are weak, we are strong. Saint Paul would have liked that (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Sam Candler signature



The Very Reverend Sam Candler

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