

Prayer of the Month • November 2012

Almighty God, Lord of the storm and of the calm, the vexed sea and the quiet haven, of day and of night, of life and of death, grant unto us so to have our hearts stayed upon your faithfulness, your unchangingness and love, that, whatsoever betide us, however black the cloud or dark the night, with quiet faith trusting in you we may look upon you with untroubled eye, and walking in lowliness towards you, and lovingness towards another, abide all storms and troubles of this mortal life, begging you that they may turn to the soul's true good. We ask it for your mercy's sake, shown in Jesus Christ our Lord.

George Dawson 1821–1876

The Lord of the storm and of the calm is the Lord over everything. We readily imagine Jesus calming the storm and bringing peace. It is not one thing or the other but both – 'the night and the day to thee are both alike' (Psalm 139.1). We are easily affected by the blackness of the cloud, but God isn't. This prayer of George Dawson counsels a more steady view of God's 'unchangingness'. As well as praying for an 'untroubled eye' towards God, the author also prays for a positive regard for his neighbour. There is a sense of resoluteness in facing the vicissitudes of life, and of seeking to do good.



Perhaps in thinking of the storms of life Dawson was drawing on his own experience. He had become a minister in the 1840s at Rickmansworth Baptist Chapel and then at Mount Zion Baptist Chapel, Graham Street, Birmingham. His preaching attracted large numbers of people (the congregation rose from 45 in 1831 to 235 under Dawson), but by 1847 his doctrines had become too liberal for the Baptists at Graham Street, so his supporters built a new church for him, the Church of the Saviour, Edward Street. He preached a civic gospel, speaking about transforming the city for the good of the people and in service to God. George Eliot went to hear him, though remained a member of the Church of England. Joseph Chamberlain, who became Mayor of Birmingham in 1873, was a member of his congregation, and a Sunday school leader.

Dawson never claimed to be a Unitarian, but this has been claimed for him. He lectured on English literature at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, and was one of the founders of the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Birmingham. He died suddenly, on 30 November 1876, at Kings Norton, and is buried at Key Hill Cemetery, a non-conformist cemetery in Birmingham, where there is a monument to him, paid for by his friends. The Church of the Saviour closed in 1965.

Colin Lunt