

Abide with me

Im sure that we all love the old hymns, one of the greatest is “Abide with me” sung at almost every occasion; sung in times of sadness and joy. Sung even at the FA Cup final and Rugby League final, a favourite of King George V and Queen Mary, who both loved the hymn and had it at their weddings. People as diverse as Doris Day and Paul McCartney to Alfred Lord Tennyson to Mahatma Gandhi. I'm proud to say the author was a Scotsman, Henry Francis Lyte, born in Kelso, Scotland, in 1793. He became an Anglican priest; his faith in Christ was to deepen when in the course of his pastoral duties, in 1820, he visited the deathbed of an older priest, Augustus le Hunte. The dying man spoke of his great regret of not having taken the letters of St Paul ‘in their plain and literal sense’ and impressed on Lyte the need to do so. Later, the dying man, in his last earthly moments, kept repeating the words, ‘Abide with me’. His words made a such deep impression on Lyte.

Lyte suffered increasingly from respiratory illnesses and, by the summer of 1847, was gravely ill from tuberculosis. At the age of 57, he preached his farewell sermon before travelling to Nice in the hope of checking the progress of the disease in a warmer climate.

He wrote ‘Abide With Me’ and gave it to his daughter, together with a melody he had composed. He died two weeks later.

It was sung in 1912, as the Titanic and its people sank to the icy depths. It was sung at the opening of the London 2012 Olympics. It remains among the most widely-sung of English hymns and it remains as popular as ever.

The opening line alludes to Luke 24:29, part of the Emmaus road story, "Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent", and the penultimate verse draws on text from 1 Corinthians 15:55, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?":

This hymn has been the source of comfort to many people down through the years.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;

The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.

When other helpers fail and comforts flee,

Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;

Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

“We're on the road to nowhere”, sang the group “Talking Heads” in the 1980s and that’s precisely how the two followers of Jesus on the Emmaus road must have felt.

Just a week earlier it had been another story; then they had made their way to Jerusalem full of hope and expectation, no doubt convinced like the rest of the disciples, that the Kingdom of God was upon them, that the man they had followed with such fervent devotion was about to take up his throne and rule among them.

But now...after his death, they are on the road to nowhere.

What could the future hold for them now? What meaning could there be in life when God had seemingly abandoned them?

They were both heartbroken. Their dreams were smashed and at their lowest moment, a stranger walks beside them, on the lonely Emmaus road, and suddenly they were in discussion with the stranger about the events of that day, the crucifixion of Jesus and the significance of it.

They were told that these things had to happen; they were recorded in their Scriptures and when they arrived home, they welcomed the stranger into their home for a meal, “abide with us” they said, and as they broke bread together, the stranger disappeared and then the penny dropped; their eyes were opened; and they both realised that the stranger had been Jesus, and they said, “didn’t our hearts burn within us when he spoke to us on the way.”

Their road to nowhere turned out to be their road to faith.

Faith begins here for us ,when we allow Jesus to abide with us; our road to nowhere turns into a road to somewhere.

At present we live in a fear filled world – a world wide pandemic, an ecological threat to the survival of the planet, followed by a critical war in Ukraine. Many may easily think that our world is at present on a road to nowhere.

The Doomsday Clock is designed to warn the public about how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making. It is a metaphor, a reminder, of the perils we must address, if we are to survive on this planet.

Every year, the Doomsday Clock is updated in late January based on world events. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists released the breaking update based on the current world situation, in which nuclear weapons have been directly referenced in recent weeks. In January of this year, the clock was moved to 100 seconds before midnight. The closest it has been to midnight since its inception in 1947.

Is our planet on a road to nowhere?

Should we be concerned by this information? Of course we should, and all attempts for dialogue and peace and reconciliation must be achieved for the future of the planet.

We live in a frightening time and we all feel apprehension and fear.

But like the two people on the Emmaus road, whose world had fallen apart, our road to nowhere can become a road to somewhere and that somewhere is found in the love and mercy of God.

That love and peace can be embraced through the grace of Jesus Christ.

By following Christ, our fear can be managed; for through Christ, we can trust in a greater power; we trust in the One who has the final say; the One who does not change, and who remains the same yesterday, today and forever. That's what our stained glass window tells us, of course it is what the Bible says.

Jesus invites us on a journey from nowhere to somewhere; he says *come and follow me; do not fear, for I am with you*. Abide in me, that's the journey of Christian faith.

Elijah and Elisha – two of Israel's great prophets, were on a journey to nowhere. They both knew that that was Elijah's last ever journey on earth; They both knew that he was going to leave them. Elisha did not want to let

Elijah go. He followed him everywhere and each time Elijah tried to go on his own, Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho, three important worship centres, where Elijah would be saying his farewells; each time he attempted to go, Elisha swore an oath, that he would not leave him. "As surely as the Lord lives and you yourself live, I will never leave you." He could easily have said abide with me.

Today we have 2 stories about 2 journeys and departures. 2 stories of disciples wanting their Lord to stay with them, to abide with them, 2 stories that reminds us that even when Jesus and Elijah departed, they left something of great value.

This where the story comes alive!

The disciples were to experience their hearts burning within them, a spiritual filling of the presence of Jesus. Jesus came to abide in them! and Elisha, well, he was given a double blessing of Elijah's spirit.

So, they both were given God's spirit to face the challenges that lay ahead. Jesus said, I will not leave you as orphans. God came to abide in them.

What about us today, with all the challenges and fears that we have, for our world, for our children, for ourselves?

Can we find hope and peace to sustain us? Yes, we can, and the answer is the answer that Henry Francis Lyte discovered when he knelt at the bed of the dying priest, "Abide with me" and that's what changed his life, when he allowed Jesus to abide with him.

This is the prayer of the Christian, "Lord abide with me", that's all we need to sustain us in life, the knowledge and experience that God abides with us.

There are more verses to Abide With Me, that are not in the hymn book, one of them is,

*Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings,
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea—
Come, Friend of sinners, and abide with me.*

George MacLeod, former leader of the Iona Community, wrote in 1955,

“The one ultimate word of truth is Yes. In Christ is Yea; He has visited and redeemed his people. But the place of his presence is not in the then but in the now.”

“His presence is not in the then but in the now.”

When you are tempted to give up – when you are fearful and hanging on - remember he abides with you! What does abide mean? -

reside · live · have one's home · have one's residence · to be settled · to be housed · lodge · He wants us to live in Him as he lives in us.

May we all say today that simple prayer, “Lord abide with us” and when we do, and mean, he will come and enter our hearts and life.

I need Thy presence every passing hour.

What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?

Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?

Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.