

The Parish Church of Saint George

PARISH MAGAZINE

An open door in the heart of the City



JUNE 2020

From the Rector's Desk



Dear Friends in Christ,

First of all may I wish you a happy Pentecost or Whit Sunday which this year has fallen on Sunday 31st May. Pentecost is one of the great festivals of the Church's year and marks the completion of the Easter Season, the great 50 days since Easter Day, and the coming of the Holy Spirit which Jesus had promised to his disciples. Many Christians regard Pentecost, as described in Acts chapter 2, as the birthday of the Church. So in a sense we can wish each other as members of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, a happy birthday and, God-willing, many more.

Easter, Ascension and Pentecost have certainly been very different this year from what we normally experience and expect. Whilst the church buildings may be closed the Church is still functioning in the faith, worship and service of its members. This is as true of St George's as it is of every parish and congregation. I'm starting to think that church buildings will not be open for services and congregational worship until the late summer or early autumn. I realise it seems a long way away but I suspect that gatherings of large numbers of people will still prove a potential risk for the spread of Covid-19 for the foreseeable future. We'll see what the experts say. For the meantime it may be possible to open St George's for private prayers for a few times each week provided appropriate preparations and precautions are in place. We'll keep you notified via the website and Facebook.

Thankfully most parishioners seem to be doing well over recent months although there have been a couple of family bereavements. Gordon Claney died in April and Carolyn Rhodes' father, David, died on 22nd May. Please remember them in your prayers. Once again I would like to emphasise that I am available at 02890701350 (Rectory) or at 07902792080 (Mobile) at anytime, should you wish to get in touch. I pray for you all everyday and ask that we continue to hold each other in prayer until we can meet again.

Every Blessing,

Brian Stewart

Editorial

GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATION (GDPR)

Dear Parishioners and Friends of St George's

St George's is currently – rather belatedly - updating its processes for storing data in line with GDPR. We hope, by the end of the process, not just to comply with GDPR but also to improve our communication with you by creating email lists for different purposes such as publicising services, concerts etc. We had planned to complete this during April and May 2020. In the current circumstances we have decided to try to make as much progress as possible since this can be an online exercise for most people.

To this end, we need to ask for a completed form for EACH MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY INVOLVED IN ST GEORGE'S IN ANY CAPACITY, e.g. each parishioner, everyone connected with the Parish Choir (choristers, adult members, parents and assistant organists), each Sunday Club member and parents, members of the Chamber Choir. In other words, for a couple with two children in the choir, we need to have four forms – one for each of the four people. For those who are not parishioners but who attend from time to time, please complete a form if you would like to be contacted about relevant events such as special services and concerts. It should only take a couple of minutes to complete.

Parents/guardians: if your child is under 13 years of age, you should complete the form on their behalf. However, please do not include email addresses or mobile phone numbers of persons under the age of 13. If you are unable to complete the form yourself, your nominated representative can complete the form on your behalf. For parishioners who are not internet users, there will be an opportunity to complete a hard copy when normal parish life resumes in the future. We are trying to get as many online responses as possible at the moment. If you have any queries, please email sgcbdata@gmail.com

The link to the form is HERE: <https://bit.ly/sgb-gdpr>

Thank you very much for your co-operation. Keep well,

The Select Vestry

THE WALLET FROM WIPERS



A song, a smell, an object as innocuous as a cracked old wallet can conjure memories from a well as deep as an ocean. My mother's song to my brother and me as young boys can still find a tear clouding each of my eyes, her soft, sweet contralto tugging at my heartstrings.

'The Boers have got my daddy', her father's favourite from the turn of the century before last is one such catalyst for recollection. The battered and tattered old bill fold in my hands is another.

"Mammy, come and see the man. He likes my car and knows my name. Come in and meet him". I remember tugging at my mother's apron and pleading as only a four-year-old can. I begged; "He says he can't stay long."

"Okay, okay" she said, deciding to humour me through the dining room, a sharp left through the heavy green curtains that hung from ceiling to floor and into the living room with its newly fitted carpet.

"There, I told you Paul," she scolded. "No man here unless he's hiding behind the sofa."

"But he was, Mammy, he was," and when I described him in childish detail; the wire-framed glasses, the white unruly hair and the flat cap like our neighbour Johnny Cunningham, my mother hugged me to herself.



"That must have been your Granda Paul", she said matter of factly with no tremble or fear, just the simple acceptance that a man, dead more than four years, had visited her home and her son - again.

Her father had died just a couple of days before my birth. He'd been so looking forward to the new baby and even though he hadn't been well, he had laughed and joked until near the end when there was time only for prayers.

"You'll call him Paul after his Granda, won't you Sarah?" he had said every time she had called in, always using her proper name. It was a family name of his and it

rolled off his tongue with a happy taste.

She leaned against the warmth of the gas cooker and remembered his first visit. The blue light that had hovered over the cot only days after the birth. How she and my father had lain in the big bed at the side, too startled to speak but not afraid, never afraid. It was only Granda after all, although daddy had joked that it was just as well that they had named him Paul all the same.

I remember all of this as I open the wallet. It is about four inches in length, pale and cracked, two ragged pockets to hold notes, a larger one that is filled with several yellowing sheets of folded paper and a little window on the opposite flap that should hold a picture of its owner. It is not distressed as

fashion would have it, but certainly distressing.

I take the papers, unfold them carefully like ancient scrolls and read my grandfather's army discharge record. He had been with the Royal Irish Rifles as part of the 16th Irish Division, joining the ranks, like thousands of others, in response to John Redmond's call to Irishmen to enlist 'in defence of the highest principles of religion and morality and right'.

But the bloodbaths of the Somme and Ypres, that Granda referred to as Wipers and where he bought the wallet, were no place for any of those high falutin' ideals. Gentle souls, like my grandfather – a man who preferred to smile and keep his own counsel about the conflict, were wounded physically and emotionally for the rest of their lives and they were the 'lucky' ones.

I remember with more than a little shame the postcard to my grandmother from the front saying, 'Safe and well. God Bless you at home', that disintegrated over the years in my custodianship and the little photograph of my Granda in wounded fatigues that, thank God, I still possess.

'A man of good character' says a captain whose signature I can't make out and a typed list of personal details. Paul Collins, five feet five, brown hair, slim build and sallow complexion, three years and 353 days in service, twice wounded by enemy shrapnel and 'unfit for further action' on that day just weeks before the Armistice.

A man of good character. Five words in an empty, decaying leather wallet that mean more to me than gold.

(Continued from page 6)

from home; we had a chat a couple of days ago and she is hating not being able to go into the office and talk with her colleagues.

So, **is** God trying to tell us something? Perhaps when this is over, and we all can get back to a semblance of normality, what will that normality actually be. In future will we really need to take four foreign holidays a year. Will we need to buy the latest gadget when the one we have is still working fine. Will we still need to have the newest car in the street, or have God's beautiful creatures slaughtered just to have the latest fashion, or buy some inane trinket with ivory in it? Will people still have to sleep in shop doorways, when maybe some of the derelict buildings could be tidied up to provide them with shelter, will people still have to use food banks just to have one meal a day, when in other areas food is wasted at a disgusting rate.

Certainly, I appreciate our economy is and will be in a bad way for quite some time – I've never understood economics so all I know is that of course the country has to get back again to being able to function. It still needs its "consumers" to get it there I guess and couldn't even begin to think how we can make the economy healthier. However, it would be wonderful if that could happen, but we became less demanding of things that we really don't **need**, but just want for status.

WILL WE HAVE A DIFFERENT WORLD?

The “plague” is still with us, and life as it was has not yet returned. People are still mainly following the guidelines and staying at home unless for essential reasons to go out. At present the “four nations”, as the UK has suddenly become known, are having different views on when schools, restaurants, pubs, gyms, non-food stores should re-open: at times confusion reigns.

I have called it the plague for a reason; as I said to a good friend just last week, I’m wondering if God is trying to tell us something about how we humans have behaved for a very long time. Gone is the community spirit that used to exist, where we knew who our neighbours were, when we actually engaged in conversation with them, when we knew if they were ill or needed help. We got to the state where it was *“to the devil with you, mate, I’m ok”*. There were those who think that it is reasonable to ride roughshod over those who get in their way and who have no care for other people, exploiting those who were desperate to survive and lived on a pittance. Indeed, we still have those people with us, having to work zero hours contracts, those still employed by unscrupulous factory owners, and even worse, those dealing in providing drugs.

There are those who must have the latest trend, be it technology such as the latest huge TV set, the most expensive new mobile phone, car, or fashionable clothes, shoes, handbags; what particularly enrages me is when animals are cruelly slaughtered just for someone to put on a pair of ridiculous shoes or drape a handbag over their arms. Of course, we also have parents who go into debt to provide their children with these items. Sadly, I do know in the society we now live in, if children and teenagers don’t have the latest of whatever they are made fun of and sometimes bullied. Another indictment of our society. When I was a child, we had things when my parents could afford it – I still remember the great excitement when my parents were able to buy a TV; we could hardly believe what we were looking at! Of course, I’m very old, but my son never asked for the latest pair of trainers, or designer sweatshirt, and he remains unimpressed with material things.

With the onset of this dreadful illness the community spirit seems to have largely returned. It is heart-warming now to hear of the many thousands of little deeds of kindness, not to mention the generosity, that has been forthcoming from “ordinary” people. I know, too, that a few of the country’s more privileged have also been donating, though, without sounding “bah humbug” they are in a better situation to do so. I do still think, though, that some of them have no idea there are those who, even without this pandemic, have to live depending on food banks. I know it’s wishful thinking on my part, but it would be so wonderful if there was no need for food banks etc. I’m so proud of St George’s which is part of the help being given to those who don’t have enough to get by from week to week.

On another point, I have to admit that I’m beginning to get fatigued watching interviews and news programmes done from computer screens! I totally understand the necessity at present, and the guidelines must be followed, but it does weary me at times! I’ve also read where even the interviewers are beginning to wish they could get back to normal. My sister-in-law is PA to one of the BT executives here in Northern Ireland and of course is working

(Continued on page 5)



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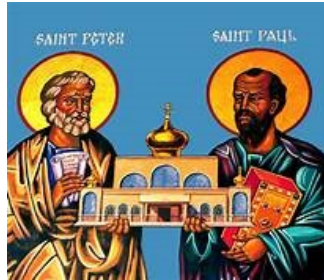
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ST PETER & ST PAUL



The picture on the front of this month's magazine is a medieval icon of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. June 29th is the date on which we celebrate the lives of Peter and Paul. They came to be seen as having different roles to play within the leadership of the Church: Peter in witnessing to the lordship of Christ and Paul in developing an understanding of it's meaning for the followers of Jesus. Peter and Paul have been remembered jointly on this day since the very early days of the Church, it being regarded as the anniversary of their martyrdom.

We know quite a lot about the life of Peter from the Gospels and from the Epistles of Peter. We know that he was born in Bethsaida on Lake Tiberias and that he was introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew. He is the first to confess that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. And in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus renames him as 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church'.

After Pentecost we see Peter as taking the lead in the Church and this lead does not seem to have been disputed. Both Clement and Ignatius testify that he was in Rome and was martyred in the Nero persecutions, probably in AD 64. There are oblique references to him in the Epistle to the Romans, and Eusebius says that he was crucified head downwards.

We know a lot more about Paul. He tells us a lot about himself in his Epistle to the Galatians. We know that he was persecuted by the Jews and appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome. We do not know much about what happened to him there, but the tradition has it that he was martyred there in the Nero persecution. Eusebius dates his martyrdom to AD 67. However, there is a tradition that he was martyred on the same day as Peter.

MY DESERT ISLAND DISCS BY ANNE MCBRIDE



Hello, my name is Anne. I was born and brought up in Belfast during the 1950s and 60s in a family of four children. My mother was Scottish and my father English, so we weren't really considered good Ulster stock with cousins in the country like other people. We all went to school in Knock and, complete with beret or cap on our heads and books in baskets, would have ridden our bikes there along relatively quiet roads. My parents enjoyed music, and sometimes on summer evenings when we were in bed we would hear my father playing the piano and singing. On Sundays we would often gather round the piano to sing hymns, something some of us found a bit embarrassing I have to admit. In those days our family had no radio or television to rely on for entertainment.

At primary school we had a P5 teacher who let us join in with the Singing Together radio programme played on a huge wireless at the front of the class and taught the us to sing in parts – I loved that. I had already started piano lessons at that stage though sadly didn't practise the way I should have done. Nevertheless, I do remember enough to be able to play a bit for relaxation in my retirement.

So my first piece is that great hymn with words from 1 Peter and music composed by Samuel Wesley to be sung on Easter Day Evensong at Hereford Cathedral, and sung here by the choir of St Paul's Cathedral:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSpsrRJmQKk>

My favourite subjects at school were French and German, so it made sense to choose Modern Languages to study at Queen's University. As part of my course I spent a memorable year in Hamburg as an “English” assistant at a Gymnasium where I had some difficulty convincing both teachers and pupils that my name was pronounced “Anne” and not “Enn”.

It is fitting then that I choose a piece by that great German composer,

Johann Sebastian Bach, his Toccata and Fugue in D minor.

<https://youtu.be/FHNLdHe8uxY>

During my time in Germany I accompanied a school trip to Vienna and there was amazed at the beauty of its architecture which, unlike Hamburg, had remained untouched by the Second World War. Of course, one of Vienna's favourite sons was Mozart who composed much of his music there.

My next piece the **Lacrimosa** from **Mozart's Requiem**, composed in Vienna in late 1791:

<https://youtu.be/FUaIUHYfhjs>

France of course featured heavily in my time abroad and, in later years when our children were young, my husband and I spent many happy holidays there. Staying on campsites we explored a large variety of regions from the Vendée, the Loire Valley and the Dordogne to the Cévennes, the Ardèche

and Alsace. Being a teacher, it was also a good way for me to keep up my spoken French.

One of my favourite pieces by a French composer is perhaps the **Organ Symphony by Saint Saëns**, and here we hear the last movement where the organ really does come into its own:

https://youtu.be/4_9J32IV81Q

In keeping with the European theme, I thought I would add a piece a piece of rock music which I also enjoy. And so, we come to Spain. **Barcelona by Queen** with Freddy Mercury in concert with the Spanish operatic soprano Montserrat Caballé, backed by the band, is to my mind a masterpiece.

<https://youtu.be/Y1fiOJDXA-E>

Walter has a fine collection of CDs and we often enjoy listening to a wide variety of music here at home – from Blues to Jazz, to orchestral music and opera from all eras. One piece I find particularly moving is the lament **“When I am laid in earth” from Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas**, sung here by the late great American operatic star Jessye Norman.....It is haunting and beautiful.

<https://youtu.be/jOIAi2XwuWo>

After almost 30 enjoyable years in education, involved in schools in Banbridge, Belfast and Lisburn, I retired in 2009. At my leaving dinner a certain talented soprano (our very own Maeve Falconer) sang the beautiful aria **“To the Moon” from the Opera Rusalka by Dvořák**, and here it is today by Renée Fleming at the Proms.

<https://youtu.be/JHM3zMBQxTQ>

We joined St George's about 15 years ago and have made many good friends there. We enjoy the reflective nature of the services, the dignity of the liturgy and the superb music, all of which inspire us in the worship of God. And so, my final piece is one which is sometimes sung by the choir **“If ye love me, keep my commandments”** by the sixteenth century English composer, **Thomas Tallis**.....

<https://youtu.be/eqt005j1dB0>

If I were stranded on the desert island my one item of luxury would perhaps be an endless supply of chocolate, but on reflection I think I will choose my mobile phone with solar-powered battery and access to all my music.

As for a book, apart from the King James version of the Bible, it would probably have to be my Kindle, which again would have a solar-powered battery. I much prefer holding a real book with a cover and the ability to flick back or forward as I wish. However, under the circumstances I would probably be happy with my large collection of electronic books which would allow me to lose myself in a completely different world.

APOLOGIA PRO VITA MEA BY WILLIAM ODLING-SMEE

PART 2

When I was at school in the Fifth Form a missionary, a layman, came from the SPG (now USPG) to talk to the boys in the Fifth Form just before we were to take our 'O' Levels. He worked in an agricultural college in Allahabad in India, and he described how he was experimenting with new agricultural methods and teaching them to his pupils who would, he hoped, go out into the field and put them into practice. In this way he hoped to improve the yield of crops and also improve the nutrition of those who dwelt in the villages in India. To my surprise he did not talk about converting the natives as I had been expecting him to do, and when asked about this he explained that it was a Christian duty to improve the lives of all those who were just subsisting, whether they were Hindu, Muslim or Christian.

I was most impressed by this approach and, as I had decided that I wanted to be a doctor, I thought that it was my duty to try to improve the lives of the Indian villagers through medical work. I therefore joined the SPG Association of Missionary Candidates and went to conferences in three consecutive summer holidays in St Augustine's College in Canterbury.

The first thing was to become a doctor. I went to the University of Durham College of Medicine in Newcastle upon Tyne, and qualified in 1959. I had met Anne Thacker, who was reading Social Studies at Kings College Newcastle upon Tyne in the University of Durham during my training and we were married in 1959. Our first child was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1960.

I did my pre-registration House Officer jobs in the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle upon Tyne, being House Officer to the Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the Professor of Medicine, and the Professor of Dermatology. After this year I became a full registered medical practitioner.

During this time, I had kept in touch with the SPG and had been accepted as one of their prospective doctors in my pre-registration year. They offered me a post as assistant doctor at St Werburgh's Hospital in Nandyal, in India. So, in February 1961 the three of us set sail for India. In those days the ships sailed through the Suez Canal which was an interesting experience, and we arrived at Bombay and took the train to Nandyal. We were met by the Bishop and stayed with him until the house designated for us was ready and I started work almost immediately.

At that time mission hospitals in India were very different from hospitals in the UK, and the work was very generalised. You were expected to do everything, from dealing with a man with a stroke to a child with worms, to doing a Caesarean section for a woman in obstructed labour. Because I had had some experience in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, I got those sorts of cases directed to me. The Hospital was open except for the operating theatre and had been built so that the wind could blow across the wards. There was no air conditioning and the only fan was in the theatre. The consulting rooms were small and stuffy but opened onto a cool veranda.

I had bought a book on Tropical Medicine but to my surprise tropical conditions were a very small part of the patient load. Trauma was the major condition with infectious disease following closely behind. Tuberculosis was a major pathology and that was followed by abscesses of the breast, abdomen and the legs.

The Diocese of Nandyal had two hospitals, one in Nandyal and one in Giddalur, a small town high up in the Eastern Ghat. After we had been in Nandyal for nine months the doctor in charge of St Raphael's Hospital in Giddalur resigned and went to Australia. The Bishop asked me if I would go to Giddalur and take charge of the Hospital there, and Anne and I agreed to go. We spent the next two and a half years in Giddalur and came to know the people and the surrounding villages

very well. As I was in charge I had to learn how to hire and fire people and how to keep the hospital accounts. It was an interesting experience. I also discovered that uterine prolapse after multiple childbirth was a major problem, and as I had witnessed these operations in Newcastle upon Tyne, I started to do them. Very soon I was doing four or five a week!

Traditionally at Giddalur the medical staff looked after the local people with leprosy. There were about 200 of them in the area, and they were shunned and discriminated against by the local population. I very much enjoyed looking after their medical needs and ensuring that they got their dapsone, a drug which cures leprosy. We would go out to prearranged places and the lepers would gather at the roadside and I would hold a clinic in the open air.

We came back to the UK in 1964. We had managed to produce two more children in India and so we came back with a family of three. I realised that although I had done quite a lot of surgery in India, I needed to be properly trained, and so we went back to Newcastle upon Tyne where I got a surgical training post. After a year in training in Newcastle upon Tyne, I got a post for 6 months as demonstrator in Physiology at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Anne and the children stayed in Newcastle and I went home to them at the weekend.

I went back to training in Newcastle and in 1968 got my FRCS. Very shortly after this a doctor from the Ministry of Overseas Development came to see me. He explained that there was a civil war in Nigeria and the British Government wanted to send a team out to reopen the Teaching Hospital in Enugu, which had been closed because of the civil war. He asked if I would be the surgeon on this team and after discussion with Anne, I agreed. And so, in January 1969 the whole family flew to Lagos and went up to Enugu in a battered old DC4 together with a load of stock fish.

We spent a quite extraordinary year in Enugu. The Biafrans felt that they were invincible, and so on a day in September 1968 when the Federal Army appeared over the hills, the population of Enugu fled. The hospital was like the sleeping beauty; the patients had just got up and fled and there had been an operation in progress. In two or three beds there were the remains of those who were unable to flee. The hospital was largely untouched except that someone had got in and stolen all the scissors.

With the help of the Nigerian Army we got a gang together to cut down the elephant grass and clean up the hospital; the British Government sent ample supplies of linen and pharmaceuticals and we opened for business. The first day we had 4 patients, the next day we had 40 patients and the third day we had about 800 patients, and so it went on. We were the only medical unit for the local population in the north of the East Central State of Nigeria. Trauma was the major problem for a surgeon but strangulated inguinal hernia was also rife; I did two hundred and eighty-five cases in the year that we were there.

The British High Commission in Lagos were very worried about children up in the "war zone" but in fact our children flourished. They had uncles and aunts in all the other members of the team, and they learned a lot about living in a war zone with a restricted water and electricity supply. Anne set up a school for them and they were joined by the children of Nigerian doctors.

After our year's contract and as the war was coming to an end, we returned to our house in Newcastle upon Tyne and I looked around for a job. One was advertised in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. I thought that I would not get it as they would have a local candidate, but to my surprise I was offered the job and became a consultant surgeon on the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Mater Infirmorum Hospital staff.

GODFATHER by Terence Mayne

My grandfather, Henry Homer (H.H.) and Garnet Nelson got to know each other whilst rowing competitively for The Belfast Boat Club. It was a surprise a few years later, when they met by chance in a New York hotel. H H was an agent for Liddles of Donaghcloney, the largest linen mill in the world, calling on shipping companies and hotels selling quality cloth. Similarly, Garnet worked for big time Belfast Ropeworks, trading everything from mammoth ropes for the port and small twines for everyone else. Time passed; H H's father died necessitating his return to Belfast to mind the shop. And so, it was Garnet, spark plug that he was, ups and aways to Buenos Aires for potential wealth, and find it he did. Because there's so much beef about in those parts the tanneries have stacks of hide. Put simply, he set up a business buying the leather, cutting into strips, punch a few holes in it, and stick buckles on the end. He made a fortune.

One night, at a hooley at his rugby club, a lady persuades him to enter a tango competition, to come last and get the sympathy prize. The Judge was Florence Thomas, a descendant of those Welsh who emigrated in 1865 to preserve a language they thought to be dying in the homeland. She was a vivacious stunner and whilst chatting after the awards he was not slow to casually request she dine with him. Well, that was the start of a sizzling courtship of joy. All this I have learnt from letters sent to my grandfather, now in my possession. Florence taught him to tango and Charleston well, often to be seen dancing the night away at top spot "Te Matare Ramirez". They picnicked, rowed on the river, held hands in coffee bars, and sailed on top yachts. All the things an engagement should be, and engaged they were, and so married. Two more years followed of bliss and laughter, but sadly, Florence died in childbirth, 1927. Garnet was overcome with grief at having lost a love that was more than a love. Unable to cope he slipped into gambling, heavy drinking, and riding horses wildly with the gauchos on the pampas. This last did for him, falling off a brute of a horse, he lost a leg. Meantime, needless to say, the business went dead meat; nothing for it but back to Belfast where H H, a man of influence, got him a job as a one legged cinema manager plus, letting him have the use of his holiday home in Groomsport

My father and mother, Fraser and Cambridge, became very friendly with Garnet and thus he became my Godfather, holding me in his arms at my Christening at St Mary Magdalene Church, Donegall Pass. He did more than that; he left me his remaining £400 when he died in 1937. At the funeral in Glenavy with the great and the good in attendance, H H stepped forward to put a beautiful urn of Florence's ashes beside the coffin. I really enjoyed getting rid of my inheritance having fun in Africa before becoming a successful tobacco farmer and meeting my wife. We have a lovely girl. Guess what we called her?.... FLORENCE.

Endpiece by William Adair

"ABIDE WITH ME" - LIFE'S LITTLE DAY

Does the name Henry Francis Lyte mean anything to you? If not, it will if you read on.

Lyte was born in Scotland in 1793, of English parents, spent his early life in Ireland, graduated at Trinity College, Dublin, where for three successive years won the prize for an English poem. He was ordained and moved to England. When attending the deathbed of a clerical friend, he had a deep evangelical conversion which changed his ministry and preaching. In 1823, he was appointed to the parish of Lower Brixham in Devon, where he remained for the rest of his life.

His health was never robust, and he was obliged to take long periods of rest abroad to recuperate his strength. It was from one of these he returned to Brixham in the spring of 1847, a dying man, and he knew it.

On Sunday 4th September, although far from well and despite the protests of his family, he celebrated Holy Communion and preached at the morning service in his church. He rested much of the rest of the day and in the evening re-joined the family and handed his sister-in-law a manuscript headed 'Abide with me' together with a tune he had composed for it. One of the finest hymns ever written, and one of the worst tunes I have ever heard! If Dr WH Monk hadn't written the tune 'Eventide', it is possible the hymn would never be sung. Lyte's original hymn had eight verses, but the three omitted do not in any sense impoverish what we sing now.

The eight-verse hymn produced on that evening was not instantaneous; it had been drafted a few weeks earlier and this was the revised and final form. Within a few days he left home again to return to the South of France, where he died on 20th November and was buried at the English Church of Nice, aged only 54.

Lyte got his inspiration from St Luke, who in Chapter 24; 28-31, of his Gospel tells the lovely Easter story of the two disciples walking to Emmaus, accompanied by the Risen Lord whom they hadn't recognised, because some say the sun was shining in their eyes. But they wanted this 'stranger' to stay on, "Abide with us" they said, "for it is toward evening and the day is far spent". He did just that, and in the breaking of the bread their eyes were opened, and they recognised their Risen Lord.

As I already said, on 4th September 1847, Lyte knew only too well he was a dying man; for him the fading light, the gathering darkness symbolised the eventide of life – it was his own life he was thinking of when he wrote the hymn. Death would not be long, but how was he to meet it? In pointing to the living, risen, victorious Christ, he had the answer, and in altering "Abide with us" to "Abide with me", he created a personal, deep and meaningful prayer, reminding us of the brevity of life and the certainty of death. When you think of this hymn in this way and

put an entirely different interpretation on it?

Now a few points worth noticing:

Verse 1 When we reach the eventide in life and the darkness deepens, the one prayer the Christian can offer is “Lord with me abide”. The third line, “when other helpers fail, and comforts flee” refers to an incident when some of his choir and Sunday School teachers left the parish and joined the Plymouth Brethren. His friends had let him down, but he turned to the “Help of the helpless” the Friend who never changed and would abide with him to the end.

Verse 2 As “life’s little day ebbs to its close”, we have to admit that old age can be inconvenient and “earth’s joys grow dim”. In the present world situation the next line, “change and decay in all around I see”, is surely prophetic: but the last word lies with Christ, “the same yesterday and today and forever” – “O thou who changest not, abide with me”.

Verse 3 What a verse this is – what a prayer every Christian needs to pray – “I need thy presence every passing hour”. Life is seldom a smooth journey, but is full of problems, trials and temptations (*the devil sees to that!*), so we need the grace, the guidance, the support of the abiding Christ whatever the circumstances – “cloud or sunshine”.

Verse 4 We are now reaching the climax – each verse ends with “abide with me” and that is key thought throughout the hymn. As Christians, we are not exempt from trouble or adversity; we will meet opposition, tears will be shed, and death and the grave are before us. St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 55-57 asks, “O death where is thy sting, O grave where is thy victory?” and finds the answer in “God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”, Lyte echoes those words when he affirms, “I triumph still, if thou abide with me”.

Verse 5 In the triumphant hope of that last verse Lyte prays, “Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes”, - a vision of the crucified Saviour whose blood had atoned for his sins. As Isaac Watts wrote in a verse omitted from most hymnals –

His dying, crimson as a robe
Spreads o’er his body on the tree
Then am I dead to all the globe
And all the globe is dead to me

But he was asking for even more. Most hymnals begin this verse “Shine through the gloom”, whereas Lyte wrote “Speak through the gloom”. He prayed that not only might he see his loving Lord, but actually hear His voice whispering words of comfort “welcome home” – “heaven’s morning breaks” and Henry Francis Lyte is with the abiding Christ for all eternity.

In “Abide with me” surely Henry Francis Lyte has left a legacy which has enriched the Church of God for well over a century and will continue to do so for generations to come.

P.S. A chapter from ‘Hymns that talk¹⁵ by Frank Colquhoun has helped me to write this article in the lockdown.

