

Life and Death

Psalm 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11

Henry Francis Lyte was born near Kelso in 1793. He went to Trinity College, Dublin, and became an Anglican priest, serving in several parishes in England. When in Devon, he became passionate about education, and particularly keen to ensure that the children of the local fishermen got a good start in life because schooling in the area, and the demands of having to start their working lives young, made getting regular education difficult. He was a generous soul. Each year Lyte organised an Annual Treat for the 800–1000 Sunday school children, which included a short religious service followed by tea and sports in the field. Although politically conservative, he was a good friend of Samuel Wilberforce and was active in the anti-slavery work in the 1830s which led to slavery's abolition in 1833.

Today Henry Francis Lyte is best known as the author of the hymn we'll sing at the close of our service, *Abide with me*. The story goes that he was visiting an old friend who was coming towards the end of his life. On his death bed, the old friend kept repeating the phrase, "abide with me, abide with me." Lyte left the bedside and wrote the hymn and gave it to the dying man's brother. Towards the end of his own life, after a farewell sermon to his congregation, the story goes that he revised the hymn in 1847, and we have the words today, not meant to be an evening hymn, but one that contemplated the closing of the day of life.

The hymn became a favourite of Kings George V and George VI. Nurse Edith Cavell, who had nursed Allied and German soldiers during World War One, and helped around 200 Allied soldiers escape German-occupied Belgium, was imprisoned and court-martialled by the German

authorities. It is reported that the words of the hymn were what she recited as she faced her execution by firing squad.

Abide with me has been sung prior to the kick-off at the English FA Cup since 1927. Though its popularity is waning, it is still a regular choice for funerals to this day. Intensely personal, it sings of a deep trust in the God Who never let's go, Who never abandons us, Who *abides* with us.

Whatever the darkness, God abides. Whenever others desert us, God abides. Whenever circumstance and context change, God abides. Whatever the temptations, God abides. Whatever the brightness and the murkiness, God abides. Whatever the physical or mental pain, whatever the bereavement, whatever the sense of our own mortality, God abides. Whatever the life, whatever the death, God abides.

For many it's a hymn that depresses or frightens or upsets, but its last two verses talk about triumph and the mercy and power of the cross, and shining light through gloom, and a bright new morning after the long, dark night, and in life and in death, God abides. It is one of the most powerful affirmations of faith, God's faith in us, and our faith in God, that we can ever sing. Not timidly and weepingly, but confidently and hopefully. It may remind of loved ones who have died, but it says much more about the hope and the light and the heaven and the God Who accompanies, and Who abides with us and never lets us go.

Both our readings this morning talk about the issue of life and death, and how God stand with all His children and encourages each one of us to choose life - and hope - and brightness - and faith. Not fear and sadness and despair and resignation. It seems so obvious, but we all know how hard this can be when circumstances and situations and relationships go awry and we feel we are often left picking up the pieces in order to reshape and reorder the fragments of our existence.

God, through Moses, in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, says, *"See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life."*ⁱ In Chinese philosophy the connection between life and death is seen to be woven together: *"Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides."*ⁱⁱ And in this time of the men's football World Cup I was reminded of the late Bill Shankly, a Scottish footballer who also managed Liverpool, who once said, *"Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that."*

In every matter of life and death, whatever the life and death matters are, God is with you. For the person of faith, however weak or strong their faith is, life and death are both about coming to terms with the possibilities and the limitations and the realities. Are you, at the moment, living the best life that you can? Whether circumstances are easy or difficult, are you living up to your potential, are you making the most of things as best you can? Are you letting your faith shape who you are and what you do, so that in matters of life, you are living well? In matters of life - are we shaping our priorities and our aspirations and our days and hours and weeks and years, and even our minutes - in such a way that the blessing of belief inspires and challenges, helps and corrects the kind of person that we are? Choose life - says God. Not a series of regrets and things not done, but a life of trying and giving and sharing; a life of helping and hoping and becoming. A life not crippled by guilt and shame but one, through faith in Jesus Who came to set you free when you put your trust in Him. No magic wand over the difficulties, but generous love to help you out and to help you up. The promise of God in Jesus, through baptism, and through our daily lives lived to the best of our ability, is that God *cannot* turn against us and God *cannot* forget us. Because of Jesus we will remain perpetually at the forefront of God's heart and mind. This is the

gospel, the good news.ⁱⁱⁱ This is how we walk daily with the opportunity to walk in the newness of life.

This doesn't mean we don't still have fears about judgement and oblivion and the ending of life in death. The point of Paul's words in Romans is that faith in Jesus helps enable us to face the future in spite of our fears about judgement and oblivion, in spite, even, of the reality of death. It requires determination; it requires courage, but there is Jesus, offering this hope to you today. Abide with me. You will not be alone.

Death comes to everyone and everything. Not an easy truth but one faith enables us to face openly. Bereavement for the ones left behind is painful and unsettling and unleashes all sorts of emotions, but we do not face it on our own. Abide with me, says our loving God. I shall not leave you or forsake you. In the face of death and dying, God continues to walk with us, from this life, through death, into the life that is to come. In the face of the death and dying of loved ones, God continues to walk with us too. Abide with me. Yes I will, says God. And if we feel we cannot hear God or see God at those times, then might there be hints of God's nearness in the thoughtfulness of a family member; in the knock on the door of a neighbour bringing something to eat; in the phone call of a friend out of the blue asking how we are. In the midst of life, there is death. But in the midst of death, there is life. *"Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides."* In our Psalm reading we are told that on those days when life has hit us hard, we are not alone. On those days when we feel far away from God, we are reminded that we are not alone and that God will take care of our distance. On those days when the fear and emptiness and reality of death blots out almost everything we are reminded that in Jesus, God came through death, and out on to the other side. That God will be found on both sides of that divide, with those who are left behind, and those who have gone forward. Abide with me.

When it comes to life and death, our faith is not a spectator sport. It's about participating trustingly and hopefully alongside God, and the rest of Creation, in the natural cycle of things. Might it be the case that as people of faith we are not being called to worry about and fear death, but rather to wrestle with the more powerful challenge, what are we going to do with our lives? How more positive and hopeful and wonderful to make the most of those minutes and hours and months and years. Being real about the life and death matters, but being equally real about our decision to make the most of our lives, and be the best in our lives, as we continue to walk alongside our loving God. Bidden or not bidden, God will be present. So may we sing, *Abide with me*, not in regret or sadness, but in hopeful trust in the God Who is not simply waiting for us at the end of things, but the God simply living with us in the midst of things. *Abide with me*. God with us in life, in death, forever. Right at this very moment.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Deuteronomy 13:19

ⁱⁱ Lao Tzu, C6th BC philosopher

ⁱⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid*, p6