

In-person sermon on Sunday 9 May 2021 by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: Acts 10.44-end & John 15.9-17

"Abide in my love," Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading. Twice, in the space of a few verses.

Then we had, "Abide in me as I abide in you," from last week's Gospel.

So today we are going to think about what it might mean to abide in Jesus, to abide in his love.

Chances are the first thing that comes into your head when you hear the word 'abide' is the hymn Abide With Me. We cannot, sadly, sing it today. But in a moment, we are going to hear it played and use its words as a meditation on that word "Abide".

This beautiful hymn is often used at funerals. Indeed, at my father-in-law's funeral recently, we heard it played by a brass band, which was fitting for a Yorkshireman who played brass instruments himself. Its familiarity meant there was actually no need for words.

The hymn words suit a funeral because they were initially written by the young Rev Henry Lyte as he sat at the bedside of a dying friend. As Henry sat there, the friend kept repeating the phrase "abide with me", a reference to Luke 24:29, when the disciples on the road to Emmaus asked Jesus to abide with them, "because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over".

Henry Lyte himself was often ill and, twenty-seven years later, he knew he was dying of tuberculosis. He recalled the words he had written all those years earlier and composed the hymn *Abide With Me*, although his tune is not the one we use today. Instead of quoting directly from scripture, he used his friend's more personal plea to Christ – *Abide with me*.

The Rev Lyte died a few weeks later and the hymn was sung for the first time at his funeral.

We are going to hear some of the verses of that original hymn, which is actually a bit longer than the one in our hymn books. Paul/Richard will play the organ and we will read along, in time, one verse at a time. You can do this in your head or quietly out loud.

After each verse we will pause for a short reflection.

*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.*

We live our lives surrounded by the love and care of God. We may not always recognise it, but it is always there, every second. The Bible tells us that God cares for everything and everyone He has made. We also live our lives surrounded by things and people that make us feel safe and give us comfort. What brings you comfort? Your family and friends. This church community. Your home or garden. The countryside. Your profession and work. Your status or your intellect. Art and music.

Yet, when all those are stripped away, what is left still is the help and comfort of God.

Help of the helpless, O Abide in me.

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

We know that our time here on Earth is brief. We know that we, "are but dust and to dust we will return". This is true of all living things which grow and change and decay. It is true too of all human constructions – empires, cities, cultures. The only constant throughout all this is God. To live well, we need to recognise and embrace our mortality, and to wonder in awe that God's nature is so different to ours.

O Thou that changest not, Abide with me.

*Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,
But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,
Familiar, condescending, patient, free.
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.*

This verse is probably unfamiliar, but what a shame we don't use it. It asks Christ to be to us as he was with the disciples, a constant presence not a fleeting acquaintance. A familiar friend who chooses to spend time with us. A friend and teacher who stays not a short while as a guest, but comes to dwell within us at our invitation.

Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.

*Thou on my head in early youth didst smile,
And though rebellious and perverse meanwhile,
Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee.
On to the close, O Lord, abide with me.*

Some of us have been lifelong Christians. Some of us came to faith later in life. Most of us will have had times when our faith was strong and times when we have followed other paths and been too busy with our lives to focus on God. Yet through all that, God never leaves us. From before our births until after our deaths God remains faithful. It doesn't matter that we leave Him, we are never left alone.

On to the close, O Lord, abide with me.

*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.*

Life is full of shades – of cloud and sunshine. Many of us will have felt we have spent too long in the clouds recently. The clouds may have felt so low and oppressive. We may have thought sunshine impossible. For the sources of sunshine in our lives, let us be thankful for those. Let's be thankful also for all that God provides to support us through the clouds.

Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

The final verse reminds us that even death has no power over God. That nothing can overcome Him. The cross and the resurrection tell us that the grave will not be our final place of rest. Instead, like Jesus, we will rise in glory.

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

Amen

