

Sunday 26th August 2018

Trinity 13 (Year B)

9:30am – The Church of the Ascension, Brookfield

I I am – St. Mary Magdalene's, Ribbleton

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

This week has been a somewhat challenging week for me. Some of you will know that I have been on jury service. I am not going to outline the gory details of the case that I was assigned to, except to say that it was an historic child sexual abuse case. It was quite grim. I recall thinking of Psalm 23 and the valley of the shadow of death. I also thought of the hymn “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”, and it is about that hymn and it’s author that I am going to speak about today. William Williams of Pantycelyn. I will never forget Church History lectures at Bangor university with Professor Densil Morgan. Densil was a huge fan of William Williams Pantycelyn and so you would always know it was going to be an exciting lecture if, within the first 5 or 10 minutes he said “well of course that was Willaim Williams of Pantycelyn” in his South Walian accent. Williams was born at Cefn-coed farm in the parish of Llanfair-ar-y-bryn, near the town of Llandovery (Llanymddyfri), in 1717, the son of John and Dorothy Williams. His father died in 1742, resulting in his mother later moving to the nearby farm of Pantycelyn ("Holly Hollow"). Now Williams was raised in a welsh Calvinistic Methodist family. In other words, Williams was a chapel goer rather than a Church goer. In Wales, there isn't the same division between Roman Catholic and Church of England (or Church in Wales). Rather the division is between the Church in Wales and non-conformist churches such as the Methodists and the Baptists. As a young man, Williams decided that he would seek ordination in the Anglican Church. A brave thing for a man raised as a chapel goer to do. Alas, he was eventually considered too Methodist following complaints from parishioners to

the Archdeacons Court at Breacon for the Bishop of St. David's who, having already ordained Williams Deacon, refused to ordain him as priest and thus the Anglican Church lost a great literary genius.

But why is Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch or in English, Guide me, O thou great Jehovah so significant to us this Sunday.

This last few Sunday's our readings have been all about bread. On the 5th August I spoke about Jesus as sacramental bread – Jesus truly present in the most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, and I spoke about the people of Israel in the dessert starving and how God fed them with bread from heaven. If you weren't here that Sunday, that sermon is now available on our new Church website.

The true genius of Williams is that he manages in most of his hymns to include doctrine (some form our outline of religious belief) with the experiential aspects of life. To Williams, hymns had to include both Biblical truths coupled with human experience thus producing the need for those singing his hymns to reach out to God in praise. Williams draws us in and shows us what he was feeling and what he is experiencing. This grips us and draws us in further.

So what is this hymn all about? Well, Pantycelyn understood that life as a Christian can be arduous. He speaks of himself as a pilgrim through this barren land. Full of doubts, difficulties and discouragements. 27th September 2015 was a day in which my family truly felt that we were walking through the barren land, rather like the people of Israel, as we watched as my grandma passed across the verge of Jordan, as Williams puts it. As she passed into glory. For us it was hard. I played for a funeral the other week of a good friends wife. He spoke to me afterwards about life as a son of the vicarage and how his faith meant that he knew that he would see his wife, Heather, again. A witness to the faith of which Williams shared. Back to the barren land that Williams is speaking of. The reference is clear. It is the story of the Exodus that he is referencing. The

people of Israel had packed up their bags and fled from Egypt. They were wandering like lost sheep in the desert. Williams is comparing this to himself. He was aware of his failings, as we should be ours. He's saying "I can't get through this wilderness that is life alone. Please guide me, Jesus. He has the conviction that Christ will bring him, and all the faithful departed, safely to the heavenly Caanan. He acknowledges his weaknesses. "I am weak but thou art mighty" and he prays "hold me with thy powerful hand". If you hold me, you will bring me home.

Williams goes on to say "Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more". Now, I very much doubt that Williams held to the view that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist. But let us take that premise for a moment. "Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more." It's like saying "Jesus, I know that you are here. Feed my hunger for you. Feed my thirst for knowledge of you. Feed my need to be in your presence." If you wish to follow the hymn through as I talk through it please do. It is hymn number 233 in our hymn books.

Verse two starts with this mysterious crystal fountain and you could be forgiven for wondering what on earth he is on about. What do you need most when you are in a desert? Anyone? Water! The people of Israel were not just starving, they were thirst so Moses asked God for water. God told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with the staff that he'd used to part the red sea and water will pour out. Low and behold, Exodus 17:6 tells us the water gushed forth and the people drank. Think of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. "Everyone who drinks this water will become thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give will never thirst". The bread of heaven, the water of life... all prefigured in Exodus.

What about the fire and cloudy pillar to lead me through my journey? Well for us the journey is life but for the people of Israel they needed help finding their way out of the desert. God gave it in

the form of a pillar of fire leading them by night and a cloud by day (Exodus 17:21).

Williams then brings it back to us today with strong deliverer be though still my strength and shield – protect me as you did the people of Israel. Williams is saying God, you sustained the people of Israel, now please sustain me in all my troubles.

Finally verse 3. The hymn ends in climactic fashion with the Hebrew people finally reaching their destination after forty years of wandering in the desert (Joshua 3:9-6:17). This stanza references the book of Joshua with the crossing of the river “Jordan” and the arrival at Canaan. The final lines conclude with exuberance, as the “people of Israel” sing of victory to their Redeemer and Provider.

I wonder if any of you have ever read the pilgrims progress by John Bunyan. It is a story with which Williams would have been very familiar. It’s the story of a Christian’s journey from accepting Christ as his Saviour until death. The Christian goes through many trial and tribulations before he can reach the final city, but the final danger is a river. That river called death at which so many can turn away from Christ in their fear. Well Williams again bounces it back on to himself. He is saying, Lord when I am about to dread the verge of that river, death, don’t let me be anxious. Don’t let me forget you. Don’t let me be afraid because you are the death of death and you are the destruction of hell. You gave your life so that I don’t have to fear death. May you destruction of death land me safe in your kingdom for ever. And what will I give you in return? Songs of praises for ever more.

There is another reason why I chose this hymn to speak about this morning. It talks of life’s journey. Well, some of you may know already that this morning will be my last Sunday morning with you. I intentionally haven’t made a big fuss about this as that happened 4 years ago when I went to Christ Church in Fulwood on placement. I confess I am nervous about my next steps as I leave you to go to

another organist post. As the post hasn't been ratified yet by the parish priest and PCC it would be unfair of me to put this in to writing at this time, but I would like to thank each and every one of you for the welcome back that you have given me. When I first came back I felt a bit like the prodigal Son but this Church has welcomed me back as one of its own so thank you. I want to finish with the words of Williams as I leave this place. Don't worry I am not going to say it in Welsh... and I say it as a prayer for each of us today:

*“Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,
Feed me till I want no more;
Feed me till I want no more.”
Amen!*