

17th June 2022

Abide

“Change and decay in all around I see;
O thou who changest not, abide with me.”

Henry Francis Lyte, *Abide With Me*

Henry Francis Lyte was born in Scotland in 1793 and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where he won the prize for English poetry three times. It's not surprising, therefore, that after his ordination to the Anglican priesthood in 1815, he wrote many sacred poems and hymns, the best of which, the familiar *Abide with me*, remains a favourite to the present day.

Lyte wrote his hymn in 1820 when he was 27, and not, as many supposed, when he was close to the end of his life. He had visited an old friend who was dying. Over and over again his friend repeated the phrase “Abide with me”, and these words had such an effect on Lyte that, not long afterwards, he wrote a set of verses around them. It was only when he was reflecting on the end of his own life that he returned to the words he had penned twenty years before. He gave the manuscript to a trusted colleague, and the hymn was published after Lyte’s death in 1847.

The words quoted above came back to me when I was reflecting on “constancy” in my piece yesterday. We might feel we are surrounded by “change and decay”. But did the constancy of God not give a dying man, and a thoughtful companion, the reassurance of God’s abiding presence?

Reading the original of *Abide with me* offered me another thought. When we sing Lyte’s hymn today, we use five verses. The complete poem, however, is eight stanzas long. Here’s one I’d not read before:

*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!*

The language is Victorian, but the sentiments are real for me. Rebellious? Yes, that’s been me sometimes. Perverse? That too, I’m sorry to say. But from “early youth ... on to the close”, the Love of my God has never failed. Henry Francis Lyte speaks for me today. “Change and decay” will do their worse, but the God who “didst smile” on me will always be a constant.

A prayer for today

“On to the close”, or right at the beginning, smile on me, loving God,
and remind me of your abiding love for all of my days. Amen.