

Easter Day 2026

A victory against all the odds, the powers of darkness overcome, all the saints in glory celebrating. I'm talking of course about last night's FA Cup Semi Final. We need no further proof that miracles such as the resurrection are possible after Southampton's victory over Premier League leaders Arsenal. For this southerner at least, ministering deep in north London territory, Easter was certainly celebrated on Easter eve. For gooners among you, I'm sure Easter Day could not come soon enough.

Allegiances aside, last night's outcome takes us a little closer to the proclamation of the resurrection when the FA Cup Final finally arrives in May. It will come when the crowd are invited to join in the singing of Henry Francis Lyte's 18th century hymn *Abide With Me* - a tradition that began in 1927 in the reign of King George V (when Arsenal were defeated by Cardiff City no less) and printed on the back cover of your orders of service this morning...Many will join in wholeheartedly even though they might never darken the door of a church.

Often sung at evening prayer or funerals, it remains among the country's favourite hymns in national surveys. In an age when religious expression in public life quickly comes under scrutiny, it doesn't seem to be going anywhere soon. When a local school sang evensong here last year, one of the staff members was in tears hearing it in rehearsal. He took it upon himself to explain the hymn's resonance to the children. It carries the echo of voices we have loved and lost. It occupies considerable space in our shared cultural hymn memory.

On the surface it can seem like a hymn weighed down with sorrow – *'fast falls the eventide', 'the darkness deepens', 'change and decay in all around I see'*. These are not, at first glance, the triumphant notes we might expect on Easter Day.

And yet, they are words that meet us where we are. When violence and war is raging in our world. When many have fears about the future – about economic hardship, about climate change, the state of our public life and the threat of extremism. One wonders about the leaders of our world - are they praying for the opposite of that for which Jesus prayed, trying to make it on earth as it is in hell?

The words of the hymn give voice to the story we have heard up until this point in Holy Week. On Good Friday we were reminded of the very worst humanity can do – perhaps it helps explain why there were fewer people in church than this morning – because the truth is we don't like to confront it – when God appeared among us, we killed Him – *'earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away'*.

The Christian faith is a stern choice. It's not some consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence – a quiet Sunday morning hobby, a refuge from reality or even *'all about community'* as observers from afar often assume. Those with faith are not spared the hardships of this life. Lyte knew something of frailty and the nearness of death writing the hymn in the final weeks of his life, his own strength failing. Faith *'is an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence, and that reality, and there apply the Charity of God, confront His mysterious purposes, and bear the cost'*. (Underhill – adapted).

And yet what emerges from Lyte's pen is not despair but *'abide with me'*. Not *'spare me every difficulty'* or *'remove me from every shadow'* but a quiet, steady and deep rooted hope all because of what we proclaim today – *'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'*.

The resurrection of Jesus shows us the reason for true joy – that not even the most painful and betrayed death can change God, or force God out of this world. Through the nonviolent, forgiving embrace with which Jesus goes to the Cross, God is at work and that is demonstrated by God being faithful to Jesus in his death, and beyond it. The life of God cannot be extinguished and goes on being real in an extraordinary and mysterious way. Christ being risen means that love is stronger than death; that neither height, nor depth, our fears about today or tomorrow, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God because Jesus is alive.

The hymn, so often sung at the edge of life, is not about endings at all. It is about the enduring presence of God in all times and in all places, *'thou who changest not'*.

The Easter story is not about how Jesus dodged death and came back in superhero fashion as he was before. It is about Jesus being plunged into its darkness and being called again out of nothing, still recognisably who he always was, yet changed in ways that Mary and the disciples cannot quite grasp. The joy of Easter does not come from ignoring the darkness of the world. It comes from looking straight at it and finding there is something else beneath it, even within, which speaks of God's enduring faithfulness and love which no darkness can overcome.

Easter is the first day of a new creation. Everything we strive to acquire, the fantasies we perpetuate about control, the games of us versus them – it will all weaken, dissolve, fade and die – *'change and decay in all around I see'*. But the life Jesus offers us, *'the help of the helpless'*, *'our guide and stay'*, *'thou who changest not'* is rooted in God's call that endures for ever. Can we let that foundational life come through in us? Can we trust that abiding presence? Can we hear God call our name, just as Jesus calls to Mary, and recognise that this is the only life that truly matters. Amen.