

Column

In the house in which I grew up there was a tiny book with old fashioned coloured illustrations highlighting the hymn “Lead Kindly Light”. I am thinking of this book today because I see by the public press that the hymn’s author, John Henry Newman, is set to be canonised (officially named a saint in the Roman Catholic Church) Aug. 13.

Newman’s hymn transcends the communions and denominations of Christendom, appearing in most standard hymnals. It was written in 1833 while Newman -- an Anglican clergyman at the time -- was on a holiday in Italy. Towards the end of his holiday, he contracted gastric or typhoid fever, forcing him to remain in that country for an additional three weeks.

After finally beginning his journey home, he encountered yet another delay. The lack of wind forced the vessel in which he was sailing to spend an additional week in the Straits of Bonifacio. Here, impatient and homesick, he penned words which would bring comfort to many over the years. Some of the most memorable lines are:

“The night is dark, and I am far from home, /
Lead Thou me on! / Keep Thou my feet; I do not
ask to see / The distant scene; one step enough for
me.”

“So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on. / O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and
torrent, till / The night is gone.”

According to one account, the hymn was sung
on the ill-fated Titanic shortly before the vessel
struck an iceberg on April 14, 1912. In a few
hours, the same words were sung on one or more
lifeboats as the occupants awaited rescue.

Perhaps you find yourself today in a situation
not unlike that of Newman's – life's steering
wheel seems to have been taken out of your hands.
In the past, events and plans seem to have been
very much under your control, but no more. No
longer are you the “master of your own fate . . . the
captain of your ship”.

If that is where you find yourself today, why
not turn Newman's verse into a prayer: “I loved to
choose and see my path; but now / Lead Thou me

on! / I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, /
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!”

Newman departed this life Aug, 11, 1890, in Birmingham, England. His words, however, still speak. On the occasion of his honouring this month in Rome, let us, regardless of our church affiliation, lift a glass to him!

O LORD, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in thy mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen. (Words attributed to Newman)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.

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