

**All Saints Church, Boyne Hill Maidenhead**  
**Sounds of Worship**

**Sunday After Ascension Day**

The Gospel for the Sunday after Ascension is taken from John Chapter 7 (v1-11). Before this section, Jesus has already tantalised his disciples about his forthcoming death and resurrection by saying that in a little while, they will see him no more and again a little while later they will see him. The gospel text then describes how Jesus looks to heaven and speaks about the promise of eternal life for those who believe that Jesus was sent by God. This prayer to God, which is said in the presence of the disciples, continues by reassuring them that they belong to God and their closeness to God will bring them closer together between themselves.

The words of the hymns and anthem I have chosen reflect on the union between ourselves, the ascended Jesus and God. As it happens, between them, the authors and composers of these works, have a connection with each of the Nations of Great Britain and Ireland. Also, by coincidence, at the end of Mental Health Awareness Week, two of them succumbed to mental health conditions, in one case with tragic consequences, but all of them have provided a legacy of creative work which illuminate and express the key facets of today's gospel.

The first hymn is "Hail the day that sees him rise" AM 228. Written by Charles Wesley it was published in 1739 in Hymns and Sacred Poems under the title "Hymn for Ascension-Day." The original poem comprised 10 stanzas, of which the first, second, fourth (highly altered), and fifth are preserved in our hymn book, Ancient and Modern.

The first stanza addresses the day of Jesus' ascension, the second the gates of heaven which accept Christ in glory. The third emphasises the true humanity of Jesus and his continued connection in the lives of those on earth. The fourth stanza describes his crucifixion and the final two stanzas present Christ as the intercessor for humankind through him our own ascension to an eternal heavenly life.

The hymn was published in 1820 in "Selection of Psalms and Hymns". An editor, Thomas Cotterill made some minor textual changes. The addition of "Alleluia!" at the end of each line was instigated by E.G. White for the 1852 publication of "Hymns and Introits".

It is interesting to note some of Cotterill's textual changes. A couple of them reflect the subtle change in meaning of words over time. For example, in the first stanza, the original "Ravish'd from our wishful Eyes" is altered to "To his throne above the skies". The origin of the word "Ravished" comes from the Latin rapere which means to seize. Hence, we lose the sense of loss which Wesley was trying to convey in his original text. Similarly, in the second stanza, the word "pompous" is replaced with "glorious," again we lose the power of the original meaning of the word which was magnificent or splendid.

One of the least justifiable 'corrections' is the replacement of "Wide unfold the radiant scene" with "Christ hath conquered death and sin," which looks like change for change's sake.

The tune now associated with this text is Robert Williams' melody "Llanfair", which first appeared in John Parry's collection, Peroriaeth Hyfryd (Sweet Music), in 1837. The tune name is an anglicised form of the author's hometown in Wales, Llanfechell.

Text: Charles Wesley (1707-1788), Thomas Cotterill (1779-1823) and others

Tune: "Llanfair"; Robert Williams (1782-1818)

1. Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!  
to his throne above the skies; Alleluia!

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- Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, Alleluia!  
enters now the highest heaven! Alleluia!
2. There for him high triumph waits; Alleluia!  
lift your heads, eternal gates! Alleluia!  
he hath conquered death and sin; Alleluia!  
take the King of glory in! Alleluia!
  3. Lo! the heaven its Lord receives, Alleluia!  
yet he loves the earth he leaves; Alleluia!  
though returning to his throne, Alleluia!  
still he calls mankind his own. Alleluia!
  4. See! he lifts his hands above; Alleluia!  
See! he shows the prints of love: Alleluia!  
Hark! his gracious lips bestow, Alleluia!  
blessings on his Church below. Alleluia!
  5. Still for us he intercedes, Alleluia!  
his prevailing death he pleads, Alleluia!  
near himself prepares our place, Alleluia!  
he the first fruits of our race. Alleluia!
  6. Lord, though parted from our sight, Alleluia!  
far above the starry height, Alleluia!  
grant our hearts may thither rise, Alleluia!  
seeking thee above the skies. Alleluia!



*Figure 1 "Hail the day that sees him rise" AM 228*

An anthem that the choir has sung many times and is appropriate for this Sunday is "O for a closer walk with God", words by William Cowper (1731-1800) arranged by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924).

Stanford has selected three of the six verses from Cowper's hymn:

1. O for a closer walk with God,  
a calm and heav'nly frame,  
a light to shine upon the road  
that leads me to the Lamb!
4. Return, O holy Dove, return,  
sweet messenger of rest;  
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,  
and drove Thee from my breast.
6. So shall my walk be close with God,  
calm and serene my frame;  
so purer light shall mark the road  
that leads me to the Lamb.

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The full text can be found in our hymn book AM 131.

The hymns today set the tone of the joy and celebration of the ascension. This anthem provides a contrast and expresses the inner joy and confidence that can be found in being called to God through Jesus. These three verses have a symmetry which makes for a satisfying anthem text. The third line of the 6th verse makes an expressive high-point which Stanford emphasises by building a musical climax here and then allowing the music to subside to a quiet end. You will notice that he repeats the word "Return" in the first verse several times to provide an extra piece of word painting.

The melody itself is not by Stanford but is taken from a "Scottish Psalter" published in 1635 and is called Caithness in our hymn book.

The author, William Cowper William one of the most popular poets of his time. He changed the direction of 18th century nature poetry by writing of everyday life and scenes of the English countryside. In many ways, he was one of the forerunners of Romantic poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called him "the best modern poet", whilst William Wordsworth particularly admired his poem Yardley-Oak.

After being institutionalised for insanity, Cowper found refuge in a fervent evangelical Christianity. He continued to suffer doubt and, after a dream in 1773, believed that he was doomed to eternal damnation. He recovered and wrote more religious hymns.

His religious sentiment and association with John Newton (who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace") led to much of the poetry for which he is best remembered, and to the series of Olney Hymns. His poem "Light Shining out of Darkness" gave English the phrase: "God moves in a mysterious way/ His wonders to perform."

Sir Charles Villiers Stanford was an Irish composer, music teacher, and conductor. Born to a well-off and highly musical family in Dublin, Stanford was educated at the University of Cambridge before studying music in Leipzig and Berlin. While still an undergraduate, Stanford was appointed organist of Trinity College, Cambridge.

In 1882, aged 29, he was one of the founding professors of the Royal College of Music, where he taught composition for the rest of his life. From 1887 he was also Professor of Music at Cambridge. Among his pupils were rising composers whose fame went on to surpass his own, such as Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. As a conductor, Stanford held posts with the Bach Choir and the Leeds triennial music festival.



*Figure 2 "O for a Closer Walk with God" C V Stanford*

The final hymn is another well-known Ascension hymn, "The head that once was crowned with thorns" AM 232

Erik Routley, the hymn writer and musicologist, described this hymn as "perhaps the finest of all hymns; (the author,) Thomas Kelly, has comprehended the whole Gospel, and he tells of the Good news and of the mysterious mercy by which we may lay hold of it" ('Hymns and Human Life', 1952).

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Kelly's words are built around two passages from the New Testament: Hebrews 2:10 and 2 Timothy 2:12 – both of which reflect on the attainment of salvation by persevering through suffering.

It is possible that Kelly derived his first line from a poem by John Bunyan, which includes the lines:

“The head that once was crowned with thorns  
Shall now with glory shine;  
That heart that broken was with scorns  
Shall flow with life divine.”

Thomas Kelly was ordained into the Church of Ireland in 1792. (He had been born in Kellyville in 1769 and died in Dublin in 1855.) He became well-known as a preacher but the Archbishop of Dublin eventually prohibited him from preaching in the diocese because of the evangelical emphasis of his message. As a result, Kelly left the Church of Ireland and preached as an independent minister in two unconsecrated buildings in Dublin. Those who followed him were known as ‘The Kellyites’.

Thomas Kelly's life has echoes of the brothers John and Charles Wesley. Like John, he also formed congregations in other towns, became active in many good causes, and was particularly esteemed by the poor; like Charles, he was a prolific hymn writer. Kelly's ‘Hymns on Various Passages in Scripture’ went through a number of editions during his lifetime and, by the last printing in his lifetime, it included 765 texts. As well as “The head that once was crowned with thorns”, these included “We sing the praise of him who died.

The tune most associated with this hymn is “St Magnus” which first appeared in Plyford's “The divine companion” in 1709 and is attributed to Jeramiah Clarke. Clarke was one of the pupils of John Blow at St Paul's Cathedral and a chorister in 1685 at the Chapel Royal. Between 1692 and 1695 he was an organist at Winchester College, then between 1699 and 1704 he was an organist at St Paul's Cathedral. He later became an organist and 'Gentleman extraordinary' at the Chapel Royal, he shared that post with his friend and fellow composer William Croft. They were succeeded by John Blow.

Clarke did not live to a great age, sadly he committed suicide whilst suffering from fit of depression brought on by unrequited love.

1. The head that once was crowned with thorns  
is crowned with glory now:  
a royal diadem adorns  
the mighty Victor's brow.
2. The highest place that heaven affords  
is his, is his by right,  
the King of kings, and Lord of lords,  
and heaven's eternal Light:
3. The joy of all who dwell above,  
the joy of all below,  
to whom he manifests his love,  
and grants his name to know.
4. To them the cross, with all its shame,  
with all its grace, is given:

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their name an everlasting name,  
their joy the joy of heaven.

5. They suffer with the Lord below,  
they reign with him above:  
their profit and their joy to know  
the mystery of his love.
6. The cross he bore is life and health,  
though shame and death to him:  
his people's hope, his people's wealth,  
their everlasting theme.

Text: Thomas Kelly (1769-1855) Tune: "St Magnus"; Jeremiah Clarke (c1673-1707)

