

Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wand'rings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.

Unlike the first two hymns chosen in this series, I want to focus on this rather older hymn which comes from the Victorian era. It was written by a woman, Love Maria Willis, in the USA. The first version of this appeared in print in 1859, but it remains popular, especially in Lent..

I chose this hymn because it always has a place among my favourites – for two reasons. Firstly because I remember we sang it at the service at which I was confirmed – and I recall that it really spoke to me, a shy idealistic teenager for whom faith had perhaps till then seemed rather ordinary, routine. This hymn suggests that faith is a struggle to be lived with a degree of courage – and that sounded – sounds - exciting!

Secondly, as an adult, this hymn has always appealed to me because it is about our day to day lives – with all their ups and downs, encouraging all who sing it to remember that God is there to guide them whatever they – we - face.

Some of you know that last September I walked St Cuthbert's Way... all the way from Melrose to Holy Island.. over five days. We were very lucky in the weather – but the terrain at points was quite challenging. A few stretches landed us calf deep in boggy ground.. Elsewhere we stepped out attentively and with care over exposed tree roots. In yet another place, exposed rock on a steep downhill slope would have been a hazard had it rained..

I walked with a group. Mark, our guide, looked after us all. He tirelessly checked that we were all OK, walking sometimes at the front, other times at the back, particularly on steep or treacherous parts of the route. He opened gates or gave a hand to help over stiles. He motivated us, and distracted us, talking about the history and geology of the area as we walked, feeding us sweets to keep us going! He planned in rests when he saw us flagging. Throughout the trip he made sure that everyone else's needs were met before he looked after his own.

Our day to day lives too are full of challenges and unexpected hazards – as well as all the moments of joy and contentment. Just now we are finding our way through the misty landscape of coping with coronavirus.. Which is the best path to take? How can we best support each other as we find our way forward? It seems to me that God guides us as we journey through life.. He looks after us all.. checks that we are OK.. he doesn't always seem close but he always walks nearby when we need Him.. he helps, motivates and distracts us and gives us rest when we need it..

This hymn – in form – is a prayer. It is a prayer firstly for strength and courage to engage with all that God wants us to be and do

It is not a prayer for ease or idleness.. there is a strong Victorian work ethic here.. We don't expect our lives to be endless sunny uplands – or as the hymn suggests – green pastures.. some days weeks or months will seem more like the boggy climb up to Wideopen summit, the highpoint of Cuthbert's Way. We pray that instead we may always 'tread rejoicingly' – get on with our journey - in a positive – even joyful frame of mind..

The images in the hymn are evocative: we don't imagine that we will be able to drift along in daily life enjoying the scenery, though there will be times for that – but Mrs Willis uses the contrast between still waters – beautiful – but not necessarily safe (think for example of a still, stagnant lake – not refreshed by new water – or the saying that still waters run deep) – she contrasts that with the living fountains of water that we might release from the rocks around us.. fountains that flow into a stream or a river in those beautiful and challenging hills. Living water is constantly being renewed – nurturing a healthy environment in which everything flourishes.. God will help us to create conditions for us and our whole community to flourish.

In the final verse, we reiterate our prayer for strength – particularly when we are feeling inadequate to cope with the challenges of our day to day lives : and we have all been there in this rollercoaster year... We ask that God, our Father, will remain beside us through endeavour, failure, and even danger - when we are working hard, when things aren't going right – and when situations seem threatening or hazardous to us as individuals or as a community of Christians.

So, as we each walk on through Lent, and as we encounter the challenges which lie ahead of us.. economic, social, practical and spiritual, I suggest we might make use of this hymn as a prayer – recognising through it that we are not alone: we are journeying together, and with God – and each of us is learning to recognise God's guidance, and to help each other as we continue our journey through the complexity of our everyday existence.

## **COVID-19**

Some of us at St Columba's have agreed to pray together (wherever we are... on the bus, at work or at home) at 12:00 midday (or if that is not possible at 6:00 pm) for the current situation that we face together.

Remember that there will be people praying at the same time with the same purpose. Thank you if you can join us.

Jesus, people came to you when they were in trouble or in pain.

Friends carried them, strangers told you about them, some met you walking along the road...

In this time of uncertainty hear us now as we bring to you those who are sick across the world. Sustain and support those involved in care and research.

Guide all who make decisions about health and wellbeing in this community and beyond.

Be with the anxious - remind us not to be afraid, but to trust in you, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love. Amen

You may also wish to pray the Lord's prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

Amen.