

# The legacy of our lives

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020 (All Saints Day)  
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst at the 6.30 pm Memorial Service

Reading: Revelation 21:9-11, 22:1-5

## Introduction

The Corona Virus has had quite an impact on us as a church this year. For me personally, it has meant that I've had to take a greater share of funerals because my 2 colleagues were self-isolating. One of the best bits of a funeral for me, if I may be allowed to say this, is listening to the tributes that have been written by the relatives of the person who has died. In the sad atmosphere of a funeral service, it is lovely to hear laughter and see smiles on people's faces as we hear funny anecdotes about little incidents in a person's life, and personal quirks that made the loved one so unique. I hope you are still smiling from time to time as you think of your loved one and how he or she would have reacted in a particular situation.

But it is also very moving to hear about the huge impact that a person has had on the lives of their family, friends and colleagues. Although none of us are perfect, it is always heart-warming to be reminded that the way a person treats other people, their sense of humour, their example of integrity or courage can be an inspiration, and can help others to get through difficult times.

I wonder what you will be remembering about the person whose life you have come here to commemorate? As you light a candle later in this service and listen to music from the choir, I expect you will be thinking about them and the legacy they have left in your lives.

Which brings me on to a few words about the hymn which the choir sang earlier, *Shall We Gather at the River?*<sup>1</sup> I came across this while I was reading up about another hymn written by the same author, Dr Robert Lowry, and as I read about the author and the story of this hymn I was struck by three things. The first, a more minor one, was that the hymn was written in the middle of an epidemic in New York that claimed many lives – something that resonated with our present experience of the Covid pandemic.

The second was about the upbeat message of hope which the hymn carries, as it focusses on the joy of being reunited in heaven.

But the third was about how the hymn had an impact far beyond what the author ever imagined. Let me tell you the story.

Robert Lowry was born in Philadelphia, March 12, 1826. His fondness for music was exhibited in his earliest years. As a child he amused himself with the various musical instruments that came into his hands. At the age of seventeen he joined the First

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the hymn is at the end of this document

Baptist Church of Philadelphia, and soon became an active worker in the Sunday-school as teacher and chorister. At the age of twenty-two he gave himself to the work of the ministry and became a preacher in the Baptist Church.

Dr. Lowry was described as “a man of rare administrative ability, a most excellent preacher, a thorough Bible student, and whether in the pulpit or upon the platform, always a brilliant and interesting speaker. He was of a genial and pleasing disposition, and a high sense of humour was one of his most striking characteristics. Very few men had greater ability in painting pictures from the imagination. He could thrill an audience with his vivid descriptions, inspiring others with the same thoughts that inspired him.” As a preacher myself, I would love to be remembered in that way!

Although he considered preaching as his principal vocation, Lowry wrote the words and music of a number of hymns. *Shall We Gather at the River?* was written in New York in 1864 during a heatwave which accompanied an epidemic in the city which claimed many lives. In the midst of the heat, Lowry thought of the passage in chapter 22 of the Book of Revelation, in which the writer sees a river of the water of life in the heavenly city. He wrote, “I began to wonder why the hymn-writers have said so much about the 'river of death' and so little about 'the pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb'”.

Lowry himself did not consider this one of the best of his hymns. But he wrote about several occasions when he was deeply moved by the singing of that hymn. Here's one example:

"Going from Harrisburg to Lewisburg once I got into a car filled with half-drunken lumbermen. Suddenly one of them struck up, *Shall We Gather at the River?* and they sang it over and over again, repeating the chorus in a wild, boisterous way. I did not think so much of the music then as I listened to those singers, but I did think that perhaps the spirit of the hymn, the words so flippantly uttered, might somehow survive and be carried forward into the lives of those careless men, and ultimately lift them upward to the realization of the hope expressed in my hymn."

Lowry also wrote of another occasion that showed him what an impact his hymn had had on others. “I was in London, and had gone to meeting in the Old Bailey to see some of the most famous Sunday-school workers in the world. They were present from Europe, Asia, and America. I sat in a rear seat alone. After there had been a number of addresses delivered in various languages, I was preparing to leave, when the chairman of the meeting announced that the author of *Shall We Gather at the River?* was present, and I was requested by name to come forward. Men applauded and women waved their handkerchiefs as I went to the platform. It was a tribute to the hymn; but I felt, when it was over, that, after all, I had perhaps done some little good in the world, and I felt more than ever content to die when God called."

Tonight, as we give thanks for those we have known and loved who have made such a big impact on our lives, let me suggest that we might all consider how we will be remembered when *our* time comes to die. What legacy will we leave in the lives of members of our family, our friends, neighbours and colleagues? We may not be remembered for being famous, or for writing popular songs, but the world will have been affected for good or ill by our lives here on earth. Will the impact of our kindness, our listening ear, our thoughtful actions mean that the world is just a little better for us having been part of it? What would we like people to say at *our* funeral?

*Acknowledgement:* material for this sermon came from [www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Lowry\\_\(hymn\\_writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Lowry_(hymn_writer))

The text of the hymn is:

Shall we gather at the river,  
Where bright angel feet have trod;  
With its crystal tide forever  
Flowing by the throne of God?

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.*

Ere we reach the shining river,  
Lay we ev'ry burden down;  
Grace our spirits will deliver,  
And provide a robe and crown.

Soon we'll reach the shining river,  
Soon our pilgrimage will cease;  
Soon our happy hearts will quiver  
With the melody of peace.