

Dear Friend

Today in the church we remember John Henry Newman.

Newman was an influential priest in the Church of England – a leading light of the Oxford Movement that wished to reintroduce some Roman Catholic beliefs and rituals that had been lost following the Reformation. Originally from the evangelical wing of the church, Newman moved towards the Roman church and was created a cardinal in 1879.

You probably know Newman best for his poem 'The Dream of Gerontius' – the story of a dying man's realisation of and approach to God. From that, we get the words of our hymn 'Firmly I believe and truly God is three and God is one'. He wrote many more hymns than that, but that is probably the best known and most commonly used these days.

The poem itself, which reflects the more Catholic views that Newman had come to believe, can present difficulties for some Anglicans particularly with reference to prayers for the dead. While I was training, one of the modules I studied was related to death and dying and I came across a prayer called the Proficiscere. It is a prayer to encourage the dying to 'go forth' unafraid of what is about to happen and it asks for them to be accompanied by a whole host of saints and angels. It is, in its original form, an extremely long prayer but is full of the type of imagery (designed both to comfort the dying and those gathered around the death bed) that Newman employs in the Dream of Gerontius (indeed, he uses parts of the prayer in his poem). Today, we use parts of the original in a prayer in our funeral services. Newman was created a saint by the Roman Catholic church in 1970. I am no expert on him, but for me there is a feeling of St Paul about him – that incredible drive and belief that what you are doing is right, even when it seems to go against what society believes.

The Collect for John Henry Newman:

God of all wisdom, we offer thanks for John Henry Newman, whose eloquence bore witness that your Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, even amid the changes and cares of this world: Grant that, inspired by his words and example, we may ever follow your kindly light till we rest in your bosom, with your dear Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; for you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

May you live this day in blessed peace.

Every blessing

Linda