

March 28th

Memory verse:

I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go:

I will guide thee with mine eye.

Psalm 32:8.

Younger ones can learn the words in bold. Very tiny ones could learn “I will guide thee” and understand that God is speaking, and that “thee” is like the word “you”.

Something to sing: The story of Ann Griffiths¹

The picture on the right shows a typical Welsh rural landscape. It also shows the life-long home of one of Wales best loved hymn-writers. Wales has often been called the “Land of Song” but perhaps it would be more accurate to say “the Land of Hymns” as this is the kind of music in which the Welsh really excel, especially in their own language.

One of the greatest of the Welsh hymn-writers was Ann Griffiths (1776-1805). Wherever Welsh is spoken her hymns are still sung. A note in the National Library of Wales collection where the single letter in her own handwriting that remains is preserved explains, “Ann Griffiths is considered to be one of Europe's leading religious poets on the basis of a fairly small body of work composed over a period of less than ten years.” After her death in the nineteenth century there is no doubt she was the most famous Welsh woman in the world – a fact that would have utterly astonished Ann herself had she ever known it.

Many people who speak English have never heard of Charles Wesley or John Newton, to name just two of England's best known hymn-writers. If you ask any fluent Welsh speaker, however, they will be pretty certain to have heard of Ann Griffiths.

The “fairly small body of work” mentioned above is a collection of just thirty hymns. How did they come to be written?

Ann Griffiths's maiden name was Thomas and she was born in 1776 at Dolwar Fach farm, **Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa** in Montgomeryshire, which you can see in the picture. Her family were tenant farmers which means they did not own their land but rented it from a landlord. Ann had some education and could read and write. She was unhealthy and suffered twice from rheumatic fever which must have seriously weakened her. Eventually, like other members of her family, she also suffered from tuberculosis.

Ann had a brother called John who in about 1792 was converted. Ann was not a believer at this time, although she attended the parish church with her family – her father was a churchwarden. One



¹ Information from Robert Rhys, *The Life and Hymns of Ann Griffiths* an address at Heath Evangelical Church on Monday 12 March 2007.

day she saw a group of Christians setting off (probably on foot) for **Bala**. Here, in 1791 there had been a revival² so powerful that it changed the whole character of the town. If you know the story of *Mary Jones and her Bible*,³ you will remember how Mary Jones walked to Bala to buy a Bible from Mr Thomas Charles, a man who did much to help the spread of the gospel in Wales, especially in the north of the principality. Ann was very scornful, ‘Look at the pilgrims on their way to Mecca’ she said as she watched them. To her the Methodists such as Mr Charles and his followers were no better than heathens.

Ann's mother died in 1794. Now Ann had to take her mother's place as mistress of Dolwar Fach farm and care for the family. She was 18 years old. Managing a farmhouse was hard work. There was the dairy to supervise, the poultry, the wool to be spun... A lot of food had to be prepared for the farm workers too, especially at busy times of the year when seasonal help was employed. Ann had a maid to help her, Ruth Evans. If it had not been for Ruth Evans, all of Ann Griffiths's hymns would have been lost forever. Here is the story of how it all happened...

On Easter Monday 1796 (**28th March**) Ann went to the fair at the nearby market town of **Llanfyllin**. Here she heard the Independent minister Benjamin Jones (1756-1823) of Pwllheli, preaching in the churchyard of the Pendref Chapel which you can see in the picture.⁴ Whatever he preached on that day, it made a great impression on Ann. For the first time she felt herself to be a sinner and she recognised that the awful penalty for sin was hanging over her. She went home without going to the fair and in great distress of mind. What could she do?



It was not until later in the year that Ann found the answer to this question. It was Christmas time when the old Welsh carol service was held in the early hours of the morning at the parish church. Ann went as usual to hear the *plygain*, a special type of Christmas carol sung in Wales which tells the whole story of Christ from the garden of Eden to the resurrection – often with more than twenty verses! After the service Ann asked the curate, Mr Thomas, for help about the troubled condition of her soul. No doubt she was trying to see how her anguish over sin fitted in to the wonderful story of salvation she had just been hearing in the *plygeiniau*. Far from helping her, he made a joke of it, taking hold of her hand and saying, “Let me see, Ann, if the veins of vanity have all gone out of thy hand.” His other unseemly remarks made her blush and she went away in more distress than ever, convinced that the trouble of her soul could not be cured at the parish church. She would have to turn for help to those “pilgrims on their way to Mecca” about whom she had been so scornful. So she went with her brother to the chapel he attended and “the message of dawning hope came to her there”.⁵ Here Ann found forgiveness for her sins and faith in Jesus Christ.

One by one the other members of her family, including her father, were converted. They “turned their back on Llanfihangel parish church, not to mention the leisure activities of the majority of

2 “Revival” is a term used to describe a period of intense spiritual blessing with many conversions.

3 Everyone should know this story. You can read the original version of it here:

<https://archive.org/details/storyofmaryjones00rope/mode/2up> . Or buy your own copy of the Gospel Standard reprint for under £4: <https://www.gospelstandard.org.uk/Publications/Books/Biographical/Mary-Jones-and-Her-Bible> Beware of imitations! See lesson for 16th December (in preparation). Mary Jones is the only possible rival to Ann Griffiths for the title “most famous Welsh Woman in the World” in the nineteenth century.

4 From <https://www.explorechurches.org/church/pendref-chapel-llanfyllin> permission sought 01/11/21 via email: explorechurches@nationalchurchestrust.org

5 H. Elvet Lewis, *Sweet Singers of Wales*, London 1889.

their fellow-parishioners and the entertainment which characterised the fair, the patronal festival⁶ and the *noson lawen*.⁷ One by one they joined the *seiat*, or Methodist Society meeting at Pont Robert about four miles away.



During the rest of her short life Ann⁸ poured out her thankfulness to God in a series of hymns. She had heard the language of the beautiful translation of the Bible made by William Morgan⁹ read every day in family prayers since babyhood for, even before he was converted, her Churchwarden father had held daily family prayers using the Welsh Prayerbook. She also became familiar with Thomas Charles's, *Geiriadur Mawr* (Great Dictionary), a Welsh spiritual and theological classic. She was familiar with the *plygeiniau* with their unique style which often used paradoxes to point out truth. She was well versed in other kinds of Welsh bardic poetry within her family circle, her father having written poems himself. Ann forged a style of her own from these elements. It is a compressed style,

deftly expressing great truths in very few words, making the hymns exceptionally hard to translate into English.

Ann's first hymn was written while she was returning home from a service. "...[F]ull of her own unworthiness and of the glory of Christ, she turned down a narrow, sheltered lane, in order to be alone to pray.... by the time she had reached her home she had composed her first verse – the fourth in the following hymn:

1. Great Author of Salvation
 And providence for man,
Thou rulest earth and heaven
 With Thy far-reaching plan:
Today, or on the morrow,
 Whatever woe betide,
Grant us Thy strong assistance,
 Within Thy hand to hide.

2. What though the winds be angry,
 What though the waves be high,
While wisdom is the ruler,
 The Lord of earth and sky!
What though the flood of evil
 Rise stormily and dark
No soul can sink within in
 God is Himself the ark!

3. Give us the faith of angels,
 That we may look and see
Salvation's depths of radiance
 And holy mystery;

6 Celebration of the patron saint St David of Wales.

7 <http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/introduction.html>. *Noson Lawen* is a form of entertainment hard to translate into modern terms roughly the equivalent of the Scottish *cèilidh*. At Dolwar Bach before the members of the family were converted it would have taken the form of singing, dancing, card playing, story telling and instrumental music such as fiddle or harp playing.

8 It is said that no portrait of Ann exists. The portrait shown here is identified as "Mrs Griffiths" and thought possibly to be Ann. Image used with permission of The Trustees of Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London.

9 See lesson for September 10th. (to come)

Two natures in one person,
Harmonious part and whole;
The blood divine availing
To ransom every soul.

4. My soul behold the fitness
Of this great Son of God;
Trust Him for life eternal,
And cast on Him thy load;
A Man! - touched with the pity
Of every human woe;
A God! To claim the kingdom,
And vanquish every foe.”¹⁰

Ann wrote these hymns for her own spiritual benefit. She generally did not write them down herself and certainly did not expect them to be published. However, the maid who worked at Dolwar Fach, Ruth Evans, was a Christian woman. She committed the hymns to memory, having heard them from Ann. Ruth could not write herself but she could read. Sometimes she would find Ann's hymns hidden under the cushion of a cane chair. She would peep at them and memorise them. She urged Ann to write the hymns down more formally. “I do not wish anyone to have them after me,” said Ann. “I compose them for my own comfort.” In 1805 Ruth married John Hughes, a weaver, later to become leader of the Pont Robert *Seiat*. John had already begun to realise the significance of the hymns Ruth had been memorising and he had written many of them down at Ruth's dictation.

In the previous year Ann herself had married. Her husband was a young Methodist leader, Thomas Griffiths. Ann's father had died not long before and Thomas joined Ann at Dolwar Fach to help run the farm. Their little girl was born some ten months later but was very weak and died aged less than one month old. Shortly afterwards Ann herself also died.

Though I have to cross the river,
There is One, Who, there before,
Strong as ever to deliver,
Guarantees a golden shore.
Gazing heavenward at the haven
Entered by Immanuel,
I expect to triumph even
Over death, the grave and hell.

Though my flesh must see corruption,
And be buried in the grave,
He Who is The Resurrection
Is Omnipotent to save.
Now, as through a glass and darkly,
Faith enables me to see
My Deliverer, but shortly
I shall see with certainty.

When the veil is rent asunder,
And the records are unsealed,
To mankind and angels' wonder,
Jesus Christ shall be revealed.
I shall meet Him as a Person

10 H. Elvet Lewis, *Sweet Singers of Wales*, London 1889.

Crowned and seated on His throne,
And behold a Blessed Ransom
Found in Him and Him alone.

Present pleasures prove vexation,—
Earthly treasures vanity,—
But the waters of salvation
Satisfy and sanctify.
Oh to live and die esteeming
Temporalities as dross,
And arise through the Redeeming
Blood of Him Who bore my cross!

(Os rhaid wynebu'r afon donog)

Translated by George Richard Gould Pughe (1831-1917))

After Ann's death, John Hughes spoke to Mr Thomas Charles of Bala. Mr Charles listened to Ruth reciting some of the hymns. He was struck by the beauty, theology and devotional character of the hymns. He urged John Hughes to write down everything that Ruth could remember. The copybooks in which John Hughes carefully wrote down everything he could are still preserved today in the National Library of Wales. In 1806 the first published collection appeared and the hymns have been loved in Wales ever since.

In today's Optional Resources files you will find the verse beginning “Give us the faith of angels” from the first hymn quoted above with the music for you to learn to sing it. It is a prayer for faith to believe in Jesus Christ's death for sinners and touches on the great mystery of His two natures—a human nature and a divine nature. He is both God and Man. His two natures are inseparably united (not mixed) in what theologians call the hypostatic union. Here is a short explanation:

The New Testament affirms that Jesus Christ, who walked the earth, died on a cross, and rose again, was fully a member of the human race with a fully functioning human nature (without sin). At the same time, Jesus was fully God. He willingly humbled Himself and gave up His glory and the right to use His divine attributes apart from the direction of God the Father, but He never ceased to be God. Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God—He has the nature of both. He is a man, but He is more; He is also God. He is God, but He has forever joined Himself to a human nature.¹¹

Even in the not very adequate English translation you can see what an achievement it is that Ann has compressed this difficult doctrine into a few lines of a hymn! Here it is in Welsh:

*O! am gael ffydd i edrych
Gyda'r angylion fry
I drefn yr iechydwrriaeth,
Dirgelwch ynddi sy;
Dwy natur mewn un Person
Yn anwahanol mwy,
Mewn purdeb heb gymysgu,
Yn berffaith hollol trwy.*

¹¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christ-two-natures.html>

Map work

Mary Jones walked 25 miles to Bala to get her Bible. Use a map to find out how far it is to Bala from Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa. Someone walking from Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa to Bala today by the most direct route would pass a large geographical feature that was not present in Mary Jones and Ann Griffiths's day. Can you spot what it is?¹²

Something to do

In Ann Griffiths's day walking was a necessity. It was the primary means of getting from one place to another. Today we do not need to do as much walking and we miss out on some very healthy exercise. You might want to walk to Bala from Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa as a challenge or an exceptionally long ramble but you do not *have* to do it if you live in Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa and want to go to a special service in Bala! If you did the lesson for 7th March you will have seen some tips for improving your walking. Now that the spring is really here again plan some good rambles, perhaps with a picnic. If you ever go to mid Wales (perhaps for a holiday) you will find that the area where Ann Griffiths lived is wonderful walking country.¹³

12 Lake Vrynwy. This is a reservoir that was not built until the 1890s. See the lesson for August 6th (yet to come).

13 <https://www.visitmidwales.co.uk/Lake-Vrynwy-The-Ann-Griffiths-Walk/details/?dms=3&feature=7&venue=1023341> Is a detailed guide to the “Ann Griffiths Walk”, a signposted trail of some 7 miles in the Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa area.