

Hymn of the Week

Conversion of St Paul

Glorious things of thee are spoken

Words – John Newton (1725-1809)

Tune – Abbot's Leigh by Cyril Taylor (1907-1991)

Our hymn this week speaks of the city of Zion being founded on the “rock of ages” which is most appropriate for this Sunday when we remember the conversion of St Paul whom Jesus was to name as the rock on which the church would be founded.

The hymn was written by John Newton whose life alone merits a lengthy article but in these few lines I can only mention a few significant milestones. Newton was born in London, the son of a merchant shipmaster, sadly his mother died when Newton was only seven and without her influence he grew into a dissolute ne'er do well who followed his father into the Merchant Navy where he had some involvement in the slave trade. Newton was subsequently press-ganged into the Royal Navy where, as a consequence of a dispute with his crewmates he was himself given into the hands of a West African Slave Trader and became the slave of Princess Peye the trader's Sierra Leonian wife.

Newton was eventually rescued by a captain commissioned by his father and returned to the UK, during the voyage he underwent a conversion to Christianity after surviving a violent storm. He returned to sea and was involved in the slave trade for several years although in doing so he gained a reputation for kindness towards his cargo. Following a serious illness Newton left the sea and embraced evangelical Christianity eventually being ordained as an Anglican Priest in 1779 as the Vicar of St Mary, Woolnoth in the City of London being at that time one of only two evangelical priests in the City.

Newton became a close friend and ally of William Wilberforce and as such an ardent campaigner for the abolition of slavery living long enough to see the enactment of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 – a town in South Africa is named in his honour and memory.

Older readers, like me, will still associate the hymn with the tune Austria which was composed for it by Josef Haydn in honour of the Hapsburg Emperor Franz Joseph and later adopted for the German National Anthem. In more recent years, the less bombastic “Abbot's Leigh” written by Cyril Taylor in 1941 has gained popularity.

The hymn is sung here in St Paul's Cathedral at the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Her Late Majesty

<https://youtu.be/CglCntx5OIU?list=RDCglCntx5OIU>

Keith Day - 21st January 2026