

The largest mining disaster in the Durham Coalfield in England was at West Stanley Colliery, known locally as "The Burns Pit", when 168 men and boys lost their lives as the result of two underground explosions at 3:45pm on Tuesday 16 February 1909. In the Towneley Seam 63 lay dead, in the Tilley Seam 18 lay dead, in the Busty Seam 33 lay dead and in the Brockwell Seam 48 lay dead. But incredibly, there were still men alive underground. A group of 34 men and boys in the Tilley Seam had found a pocket of clean air. They were led by Deputy Mark Henderson. A few of them panicked and left the group, they died instantly after inhaling the poison gas. The remainder sat in almost total darkness, when one of them began humming the Hymn "Lead Kindly Light". In no time at all, the rest of the miners joined in with the words, "Lead kindly light amidst the encircling gloom, lead thou me on, The night is dark, and I am far from home. Lead thou me on." These 26 men were rescued after 14 hours and were taken out into the light of the day.

On the evening of April 14, 1912, shortly before the Titanic was struck the iceberg, a soloist named Marion Wright sang "Lead, Kindly Light" during an evening prayer meeting. Hours later, as survivors sat freezing in the lifeboats through the pitch-black night, the rescue ship RMS Carpathia was finally sighted on the horizon as dawn broke. Upon spotting the Carpathia, passengers in one of the lifeboats—led by Noëlle, Countess of Rothes—spontaneously burst into song, singing "Lead, Kindly Light" to express their relief and guide their focus toward salvation.

And in the darkest of days shortly before the end of World War II, the same hymn was sung by a group of women—including Betsie ten Boom (sister of Corrie ten Boom) and as they were marched by S.S. guards into the Ravensbrück concentration camp. They were never seen again. The darkness for them had given way to eternal light where no more pain could touch them.

This remarkable hymn was written by a young Anglican clergy man called John Henry Newman, the man who would later become a Catholic, a priest, a Cardinal and, through the wonders of divine providence, the saint we celebrate today. He wrote those words when illness prevented him from travelling and then, after he recovered, he was delayed from returning home because of the lack of transport. His own frailty and then problems of life frustrated him, but led him to place his hope and trust in the Lord.

In our own frailty, in our own frustrations, the lord invites us all to do the same. To trust in him. To abandon ourselves to divine providence and trust in his infinite love and mercy.

To encourage us along the way, the Lord has given us shining lights to lead the way. The light of St John Henry Newman has inspired many to return home to the Lord. The light of St Gerard Majella has given comfort and strength to so many facing afflictions of all kind.

And what unites our two saints today? The simple truth of God's love. In different ways, they both experienced the immensity of that love in their lives.

The only motive for God's love is His own interior identity, the tenderness of a father's heart; a father who treasures his children simply because he does. As St. John says, "God is love," and the nature of love is to give itself away radically. When Christians say that "God is love," we don't merely mean that God loves His people "a whole lot," but rather that God Himself is the essence of love, a relationship of love, from all eternity.

Christian life comes from the nature of God Himself. All of Christian life comes down to sharing in the exchange of love within the heart of the Trinity, and then offering that love to others in our relationships.

Pope John Paul II once wrote that love is the "fundamental and innate vocation" of every human being. This vocation -- or "calling" -- is the heart of the Christian

faith. We are created by the God who is the source of love itself; a God who loved the world so deeply that He sent his only Son to redeem it.

In other words, we were made by Love, to receive love ourselves, and to show love to God and to others. That's why we're here. That's our purpose.

Love always has implications that translate into actions. "Love" is a small word, but for Christians, it always unpacks into a lot of other words: truth, repentance, forgiveness, mercy, charity, humility, courage, justice. These are action words, all of them, including truth, because in accepting Jesus Christ, Scripture says that we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free (Jn 8:32) -- not necessarily comfortable or respected; but free in the real sense of the word: able to see and do what's right. Our freedom is meant to be used in the service of others. And that's why working to defend the poor, the homeless, the disabled, the unborn child, the immigrant, the infirm and the elderly is always, always an act of Christian freedom.

And no matter what happens then – the collapse of everything, like those miners a hundred years ago; the loss of everything, like the passengers on the Titanic, or even death itself, as known in the concentration camp of Ravensbrück – no matter what comes, we know we are loved and with that love in our hearts, we too can become saints.

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home,

Lead Thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.