

THE LIFE THAT I HAVE
Maundy Thursday
24th March 2016
Mass of the Last Supper
St Mark, Hamilton Terrace
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Those of you here of more senior years – rather like me – might remember the film going – or *movie going* as we have now learnt to say from an American idiom – of your youth. It was the time of the ABC Minors – films for the young at a cheaper rate – being part of a club. It was still the time of Pathé News, of *Tweety Pie*, *Woody Woodpecker*, and of the best seats in house being 3s.9d. each. But going a stage deeper it was a time when *westerns* still dominated the movie menu with war films coming a close second. Some war films were better than others. One of the most powerful I remember was *Carve Her Name with Pride* based on the book of the same name by R. J. Murray.

The story, which is a true story, is of Violette Szabo. She was brought up in London - her father was English and her mother French. She falls in love with a Frenchman, Étienne Szabo and they have a daughter whom Étienne never sees, as he is killed fighting in the desert in North Africa. After this Violette volunteers for the Special Operations Executive and goes out twice to work with the French resistance. She is given a poem by her husband before he leaves to fight. The poem is later used as a code-like piece to encrypt messages, but it has great power in itself.

The first two stanzas go like this:

‘The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours.
The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.

The poem, of course, brings with it devastatingly moving echoes. For Violette - in her second foray is trapped by the Nazis - terrifyingly tortured and then shot by her captors. So the poem brings memories of Étienne her husband, echoes of a new love she discovers following his death – and all at the same time remains a key to a life of enormous courage and fearlessness.

It is a telling tale for Maundy Thursday, since Violette *hands herself over* for service of the most dangerous and ultimately -deadly sort. She realises the dangers but is brave enough, and has sufficient integrity to live with the possible consequences. Tonight, amongst all the emotional moments in this great week, is perhaps the most powerful moment of all. This is the night of Jesus’ temptation in Gethsemane. This is the night when all his followers desert him. This is the night of his most intense loneliness. It is the night when Judas betrays him.

Of course, it is interesting that the Greek word used for betrayal in the gospels means literally to ‘hand over.’ Jesus is *handed over*. But there is a greater irony still, for that very same word also means *tradition*, for tradition is exactly that, it is what is ‘handed over’ or

handed on ‘generation after generation.’ Rather remarkably, all of these resonances come together in our three amazing readings this evening.

First from Exodus we read of the Passover Lamb. In order that Israel might be saved, the people are told that the Passover lambs must be slaughtered and that with great marks their blood be painted upon the door lintels. The lambs are *handed over* and their blood saves Israel. Then in his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul sets out the origins of this great sacrament in which we partake tonight. But listen to the introduction:

‘For I received from the Lord what I also *handed on* to you.....’

Then, at that moment, follow what we call the ‘words of institution.’ In some translations we actually read: ‘For the tradition I received from the Lord.....’ But then last of all in John’s Gospel we heard moments ago:

‘ “ He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean but not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him.’

Or in a literal translation: ‘For he knew who was *to hand him over.*’

So this evening is perhaps the most significant transition point of all. It is the ultimate conclusion of Jesus’ ministry. For from now on Jesus ceases to do. He is *handed over* and thereafter he is ‘done to.’ Only by allowing this extraordinary transition to occur is the redemption of humankind made possible. Our redemption is made true through a *handing over*. God in Jesus empties himself for us.

This is telling for us all. Few of us like the thought of handing ourselves over. Few of us like feeling that we are losing control. Few of us want to feel indebted to others. Clergy are no better at this than anyone else. One of the great lessons each of us who has been ordained has to learn is to be prepared time and again to hand ourselves over, to relinquish control, to admit we do not always have an answer. So a mother grieves over the death of her child. ‘Why it has happened?’ she asks. Our instincts are to find a quick answer, but there isn’t one. We can only relinquish control, we can only *hand over* to God.

In that story of Violette Szabo with which I began, it is this ‘handing over’ which is perhaps that which gives the story its real depth. There are two more stanzas to that short poem. Let me give them to you now:

‘A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause.

For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.’

The poem, used by Szabo, was written originally by the poet Leo Marks on the death of his girlfriend, Ruth. There is in it a real sense of self- giving. In a far more profound way still, that is the truth which challenges us tonight. Jesus is handed over, he gives himself – and not in long green grass, but on a cross of green fresh wood is he crucified. The sequel, the dénouement, we all know. But first of all, tonight and tomorrow, there is no avoidance of death, it’s a real death. In the words of the poem Jesus effectively says:

'The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.'

Amen

Readings

Exodus 12: 1-4 [5-10] 11-14

I Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35