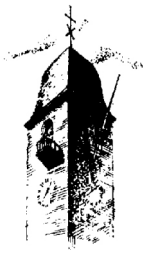


St Columba's

April/May 2021



ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



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Sundays

Please join us for worship at 11 am. The crèche is open from 10.30 am for babies and children up to four years. It can be found in the lower hall. Older children are invited to join the Sunday school classes appropriate to their age. They leave the service with their teachers following the children's talk. For teenagers, the senior study group leave with their teachers following the Bible readings. After the service, we warmly welcome everyone to the congregational lunch in the lower hall. The two-course lunch costs £3.50 and there is no need to book.



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Copy for future editions should be sent to us at the Church Office, preferably by e-mail

Dear Readers,

For the second year running we celebrate Easter under Covid restrictions. Flower Guild member Betsy Wilkie, missing the customary communal decoration of the church, and of course the scrumptious tea, encourages us to look about us and find blooms in unlikely places.

May 10th sees the 80th anniversary of the bombing of the old St Columba's during the Blitz. Janet Michalacopoulos writes about the life and work of her grandfather, Dr Archibald Fleming, minister of St Columba's from 1902 until his death in July 1941.

David Natzler has found time during lockdown to make a study of the books of the Apocrypha. In the first of a series of articles he looks into the story of Judith and wonders what is in it for us.

On a more light-hearted note, David Stewart kicks off what we hope will turn into another series – Desert Island Discs. Lockdown restrictions in some ways mimic desert island isolation: we'd love to know your thoughts on music to sustain, cheer and inspire. We all know the rules of the game!

With best wishes,

The Editorial Team

Cover photo: *London Scottish Chapel,*
by Steven Hicks, Squib Photography

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VESTRY LETTER



April/May 2021

Dear Friends,

Eighty years ago, in the corresponding issue of the Church Magazine (May 1941), a statement that was made to the congregation before morning service on the first Sunday after the destruction of the Church, was printed in full. The headline reads:

THE CHURCH BUILDING WAS DESTROYED BY
ENEMY ACTION
IN A RECENT AIR RAID.

GOD WILLING, ANOTHER BUILDING SHALL
ARISE AFTER THE WAR.

MEANWHILE, IN SPITE OF WAR, THE CHURCH
LIVES ON.

The statement describes the night of the bombing, and the attempts to save the building. It recognizes that “throughout the country, indeed throughout the world...the destruction of St Columba’s means the loss of a building that was inexpressibly dear by reason of many intimate associations and tender personal memories.” Amongst the many, three people “who will feel the loss more than anyone” are singled out. “I refer, of course, to Mr H L Anderson, whose father was architect of the church and who himself since his father’s death has watched over it with devoted care, and to Dr and Mrs Fleming, to whom St Columba’s was the focus of a long labour of loving service, and the whole congregation will unite today in earnest and heartfelt prayer that comfort and peace may be granted them.” It is fitting that this anniversary prompts our editors to include a tribute to the life and work of Dr Fleming (Minister of St Columba’s 1902-1941) written by his granddaughter.

By the time this issue comes to print we hope that there will have been the first, modest, safe, reintroduction of worshippers at Sunday service, from Palm Sunday onwards. Meanwhile, the live-stream services are set to continue. Inevitably, our Easter celebrations and gatherings will not be as we hope or remember. However, eighty years on from a time when the congregational home was ruined, let us be encouraged by the words that ended that original statement, only a week after the devastation.

“Here, then is our challenge and our opportunity. The enemy thinks that by the destruction of Church buildings he will not only scatter the faithful but break their morale and weaken their allegiance to the Church. Let us show him that underneath our attachment to the visible House of God, there dwells in us an unshakeable loyalty and love to Christ and His Kingdom, which will go with us wherever we go, and which bombs will never destroy.”

May the vision of what rose from ashes and lives on today speak to us of that other, ongoing resurrection. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Happy Easter.

Angus MacLeod

Memories of Margaret Brown

gathered together by Rosa Somerville



Jill Steele writes: "I shall remember Margaret fondly as someone who not only gave service to her Church in so many ways but was proud to be a member and depended on being in her usual seat Sunday by Sunday.

"Margaret was born in Glasgow and had many memories of life there and growing up during the war. Life was not easy: her father died when she was six and her mother had to work and look after Margaret and her younger brother.

"I got to know Margaret when she joined the Flower Guild. She was popular with us all, with her sense of humour and ability to fit in and help where needed. It was Margaret who stepped into the shoes of Elaine Rubli who had cleared the flowers each week for 30 years. I think Margaret was happier working backstage although she was well able to put an arrangement together and liked to have something on what she called 'the dark window' sill at the back of the Sanctuary. I was immensely grateful as there were no other offers! We did not always see eye to eye but any disagreement was short-lived and ended with a hug. I miss her very much.

"Very sadly, Margaret developed dementia which affected her punctuality, and ultimately prevented her coming to church, although she talked about coming each week and was able to enjoy being at the last Congregational Hymns evening service held in the Chapel. She was delighted to be amongst her friends again and had to be fetched from the Office where she and Paul were chatting over a cup of tea as the service was about to begin.

"As the illness progressed life became more difficult and a fall with subsequent admission to hospital resulted in her transfer to the dementia ward in a local care home. She hated being there and I witnessed the horrible effects of the disease. She had been moved within the final week of her life to a more peaceful building, and I hope and think that she was treated with love and respect in the final days of her life."

In addition to the Flower Guild, Margaret was a much-loved member of the Women's Bible Study Group (now Women's Fellowship Group) which meets on Wednesday mornings. On most Sundays she could be found preparing and serving the after-service coffees and teas in the Upper Hall. Tea and a chat were an important part of Margaret's life, whether it was with the office team, the minister or the congregation on a Sunday. She was also an active member of the Fellowship Committee, and would take on anything that needed doing when we were setting up the hall for a quiz.

She was delighted to be invited by Susan Pym to go with her to Buckingham Palace to collect a ceremonial wand for delivery,

via Heathrow, to the Dean of the Chapel Royal in Scotland. Her enjoyment of company meant she was always willing to do anything to help. Majorie MacHardy and Jim Blackwood testify to her popularity at the Service Unit (now Tea Together) teas and outings. For instance, when (undeterred by non-stop rain) she carried water from the kitchens of Capel Manor to the Service Unit coach so that their picnic could be taken there.

Margaret was an elder for 20 years. She was reliable and diligent according to Charlotte, her team leader. She retained a 'pawky sense of humour', and indeed a somewhat flirtatious manner at times. She was seen dancing enthusiastically at Camille's wedding. David Stewart remembers her calling him 'young David'. So although we remember her for the duty and hard work at the church we will also remember someone who was really good company and gave as good as she got in conversation. Even in her last days when Angus telephoned her and read the 23rd Psalm she joined in - "she wasn't up for much dawdling".

Several of the contributors to this collection of memories have ended their piece, "May she rest in peace." As a good and faithful servant, who "exercised her faith through hard work and dedication", she surely deserves this.

Thanks to Jim Blackwood, Charlotte Bradford, Marjorie MacHardy, Angus MacLeod, Susan Pym, Jill Steele and David Stewart.

Flowers for Easter

by Betsy Wilkie

Downstairs, to the right of the main door to my flat, is a little patch of ground I call my garden. I have some pots of shrubs, but nothing much will grow there because it is heavily shaded by a pyracantha hedge. It at least serves to shield the windows of the lower flat from the main road. I have in the past thrown some old bulbs, the sort you get in little pots from the supermarket, into the jumble of ivy and periwinkle under the hedge, hoping that perhaps they might grow. I was delighted to find, just recently, two little clumps of tête-à-tête daffodils happily blooming there, promising springtime.

This set me thinking about other places where I have flowers. During these past months when we have not been able to see flowers in Church it seemed to me to be important to look for places where we can at least picture them.

Some of you already know that one of my enduring delights is my collection of (mainly early) English porcelain. Very little on my shelf is later than around 1770 and the decoration on many of the pieces is very typical of that period. One of my favourites is a Worcester porcelain pickle dish dated about 1753 (*right*). About 3.5 inches long, its flowers look like honeysuckle and possibly freesia, and the outside is moulded like geranium leaves. More usual examples are blue and white, with the colour under the glaze so it is not destroyed by the acidity of the pickle, but this more rare polychrome piece is painted in enamels over the glaze and can't have been much used. It was a lucky find!

Flowers were clearly favourites among Georgian ladies who would serve tea and coffee in dainty cups



with flower borders, or little bunches of flowers. Dinner services and more particularly dessert services often had an abundance of flowers. In candlelight their tables must have looked stunningly beautiful with the garden brought indoors. The Chelsea factory, not far from St Columba's, painted really exotic flowers and fruit on their dessert plates, which would provide for discussion round the table. My porcelain shelves have certainly provided me with an abundance of all sorts of flowers from the quite ordinary to the unusual, but all bright and colourful in the darker days of winter.

Another place I looked for flowers when thinking about this piece was the hymn book. Three hymns in particular came to mind.

Look at number 137, "All things bright and beautiful":

Each little flower that opens... He made their glowing colours.

And at number 181, "For the beauty of the earth":

Hill and vale and tree and flower... flowers of earth and buds of heaven

The middle verse of number 147, "All creatures of our God and

King", says it all:

Dear mother earth who day by day unfolds God's blessings on our way...All flowers and fruits that in you grow, let them his glory also show.

The number of parks and gardens one can look at (on our permitted walks) is astonishing. I found so many trees with blossom – cherry, chestnut, even a mulberry – just up the road from where I live. The cherry in particular sent me back to re-look at another of my shelves where I have white porcelain decorated in the style of Chinese porcelain: in China, porcelain blossoms on the tiny cups and saucers celebrate the cherry tree season. Mine (*above*) are not Chinese but English. The decorators had clearly studied the real twigs and flowers carefully, as the twigs are marked like the markings on the trunk and branches of the cherry. These bring their own beauty into my house.

Next time you think, "Oh I do wish we could do flowers in church again", go and have a look around your house. I suggest you will find flowers in all sorts of places, like I found those old bulbs blooming in amongst a jumble in the hedge.



“He touched a multitude of lives”

A memoir of Dr Archibald Fleming
by his youngest granddaughter Janet Michalacopoulos



“Dr Archibald Fleming, whose name has become almost synonymous with St Columba’s has passed on to a greater glory.” With these words a newspaper reported his death on 2nd July 1941. Utterly devoted to the church since 1902 it was a blessing that illness kept him from knowing of its destruction a few months earlier. It is well nigh impossible to condense into a short article the 77 years of a life lived so fully: the little boy riding round Perth and the family property of Inchyra on an unbroken Icelandic pony, following the Scots Greys and thereby earning himself the nickname of the “wee sodjer”; the brilliant, prizewinning academic career which gained him a place at Edinburgh University aged only 16; the travelling across America and Canada in 1880 by horse drawn conveyance and railroad; eschewing a planned career in law and accepting the call to ministry like his father, grandfather and great grandfather before him. The years ahead were to be taxing but fulfilling. As the “wee sodjer” journeyed through life he met and

formed friendships with many of the well-known figures of the day but, in his own words, “Maybe I have had more statesmen in my congregation than most ministers, but that does not especially interest me. I have little time to spare for the wealthy classes. I have an enormous number of poor and lonely people to concern myself with.”

Born in Perth on 27th December 1863 where his father was minister of St Paul’s, Archie read Divinity at Edinburgh as a second degree, later being awarded DD, served nine months as Assistant at St Cuthbert’s and was then ordained to the Parish of Newton in the Lammermuirs in 1888. After nine years he accepted a call to the Tron and in 1902 took the brave decision to move his family to London to take on the charge of St Columba’s from the retiring minister Dr Donald MacLeod, the present minister’s great-grandfather. He devoted the rest of his life to serving Scots in London from all walks of life, even acquiring from the Press the nickname ‘Patriarch of London Scots’.

A brilliant preacher, the young minister’s reputation soon spread: “His preaching is the happiest blend of simplicity and erudition, topical without being partisan.” Word soon reached royal ears. He was for many years invited to preach to the royal families at Crathie, amongst them Queen Victoria (who once even postponed his visit, learning it would interrupt his honeymoon), Edward VII, George V and their families. After preaching to Queen Victoria at a private service in Balmoral he was invited on more than one occasion to dine with her afterwards. The trouble was he once left home in such a hurry he arrived without dress trousers. A tailor in the village ran up a pair in time but, in the haste, had to omit pockets. Alerted to this, her Majesty apparently made

several mischievous attempts to get him to put his hands in the non-existent pockets, thereby amusing herself greatly. She presented him with her Diamond Jubilee Medal in 1897. It was not the only time his haste landed him in trouble. Once in London he left his sermon behind and had to set the congregation singing the 176 verses of Psalm 119 whilst he signalled to his son to run home and fetch it.

There were other royal contacts. On the New Year’s Eve of 1908/9 he accepted an invitation as a houseguest of the Bishop of Peterborough where fellow guests were Princess Louise and her husband, St Columba’s elder, the Duke of Argyll with whom Archie ‘stayed up late and had snapdragon’. Then there were the royal visitors to St Columba’s: in 1923 the future Edward VIII attended the dedication of a memorial to Balfour of Burleigh and in 1928 the future George VI and Queen Elizabeth were present for the unveiling of the memorial to Earl Haig. Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll attended from time to time. Vitally interested in every issue of the day, friendships were forged with many well-known public figures. In 1923 the remains of Bonar Law rested in St Columba’s before a simple service and procession to Westminster Abbey where Dr Fleming read the prayers. A year before his own death, Archie was back in the Abbey, reading the lesson at the memorial service for his friend John Buchan who, with Balfour of Burleigh, Haig, Gordon Nairne, Governor of the Bank of England, the Earl of Stair, Lords Aberdeen and Amulree and the Duke of Argyll were all friends and elders but counted by him as no more important than the many others from all walks of life. They would at times dine at the manse where lively conversations would take place with

“He touched a multitude of lives”

Continued

Archie being so involved he would, to the annoyance of his children waiting to leave the table, attempt to eat his by now melted ice cream with a fork.

For all he enjoyed the company of these well known men, his loving care of the lesser known was paramount. Often he would leave a meal half eaten if called upon for help. Many were the ministers and parents of young Scots coming to work in London (there were about 600 in domestic service on the church roll alone) who wrote asking that a kindly eye be kept upon their loved ones. The congregation, widely scattered as it is today, posed a strain on visiting those in need so Archie must have been immensely grateful for the gift of a motor car when he celebrated his first 25 years as a minister. A further 25 years passed and his Jubilee was to be celebrated. He asked that any funds raised be put into a Trust to relieve want and distress. It is still in operation today. To mark the occasion he was presented with an illuminated manuscript offering grateful thanks, signed by the elders including the fathers of present day elders Stuart Steele and Henry Sherriff.

His care for the church was not confined to St Columba's and he was particularly keen to support smaller livings, devoting to them his wedding fees. He was often seen in Edinburgh on church business. He worked hard for union with the United Free Church of Scotland, achieving this in 1929. He was often Chaplain to Moderators and on occasion to the Lord High Commissioner. He took an active interest in the work of the Royal Scottish Corporation and Caledonian Schools. Over the years he was Chaplain to the Royal Scots and the London Scottish (for which he earned the Territorial Long Service Medal), to the Knights of the Round Table, the Pilgrim Club, to the Grand Lodge of Freemasons,

Scotland and he was a member of the RAF Chaplains' Advisory Board. It is not surprising that with all these commitments plus his first concern – that of care for his congregation – he turned down an invitation to be Moderator in 1931. The warmth and friendship St Columba's extended to wartime servicemen is well documented elsewhere. It is also not surprising that labouring 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, working into the small hours to reply to every letter appealing for help or opinion, he periodically succumbed to nervous exhaustion.

Providing services familiar to his exiled Scottish congregation was important to him yet whilst he was described as “a representative of all that Presbyterianism stands for, maintaining its dignity at the same time he lived on terms of mutual confidence and respect with the leaders of other churches.” He was the first Church of Scotland minister to preach in both St Paul's and Canterbury Cathedrals and was, with Mrs Fleming, a frequent visitor to Lambeth Palace, as they were close friends with Archbishops Randall Davidson and Cosmo Lang, both of whom, coincidentally, were raised in Presbyterian families. In 1923 he also preached in the Cathedral of St Pierre in Geneva in connection with the League of Nations. He was sufficiently interested in the Salvation Army for General Booth to issue him with a personal invitation to the opening of the Palais des Femmes in Paris in 1928. He was decorated with the Serbian Order of St Sava in 1919 (I would love to know why) and the Coronation Medal in 1937 for community services.

A gifted raconteur, one newspaper, on the news of his impending retirement wrote, “He has moved with genial ease in social and literary as well as religious circles.” He wrote for the Observer through which he became a friend of the

editor, W. E. Henley, the “Invictus” poet. Before moving to London his Editorship of Life and Work brought him into contact with Rudyard Kipling and J. M. Barrie. His skill with the pen was put to good use in starting the St Columba's magazine thereby keeping far flung folk in touch, and so well received was his “fine enunciation and clearness of voice” that he was frequently called upon to talk on the wireless. His talk on New Year's Eve in 1922, the first of many on the BBC, was one of the earliest religious broadcasts. His voice went out across the world, bringing Scots a longed for link with home.

One wonders how he ever found time for his family and yet he did. He was a loving and much loved husband, father and grandfather, with a mischievous sense of humour. Happy family photographs show them on holidays in Europe, at English seaside resorts and the summer visits to Speyside. He freely admitted he could not have done the work he did without the immense support of Mrs Fleming who undertook endless visits and was hostess to the enormous number of visitors to the Manse. The death of his older daughter Christian aged only 28 was a terrible blow.

Dr Fleming died on 2nd July 1941. Unable to hold his memorial service in the ruined church, the congregation and wider friends celebrated his life in St Martin-in-the-Fields, a church with which he had been associated through his friendship with Dick Sheppard. Tributes poured in, speaking of his magnetism, warmth and love of his fellow human beings. It was said then that Archibald Fleming “touched a multitude of lives, his touch was ever that touch of healing, help and comfort”, which is just what he would have hoped it would be.

Sermon

Sermon preached at St Columba's Pont Street by Revd Angus MacLeod on Sunday 7th March, 2021 at 11am, 3rd Sunday of Lent

"The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" John 2

As a child I have a dim recollection of seeing a black and white movie – possibly *Citizen Kane* (?) – and a scene where a grown up goes berserk in his study/office.

In a moment of anger or frustration he wrecks everything that is ordered. Great sweeps of tabletops, ornaments, papers, glass crashing to the ground. Bookcases and cabinets wrenched from their settings, to leave the room as if a typhoon has swept through it. I was astonished by this display of destruction, but my mother, herself a trained actress, explained that the actor hadn't really broken real things – they would just be props. Despite this lowering of the stakes involved, I couldn't help but think that it must be incredibly good fun to run amok like that...and get paid for it! [I await congregational responses – either to correct my film knowledge, or to analyse my "disturbed childhood".]

The gospel today, *the cleansing of the Temple*, is not short of mayhem – though it is more than a child's delight in breaking glass. At the Feast of the Passover pilgrims came from every known corner of the world; a great flood of humanity streaming towards the home of God on earth; Jerusalem's Temple, their destination. Astonishingly grand, a construction already 46 years in the crafting. On the high ground, of the city on a hill, its floor plan a dramatisation of Israel's relationship to God. First the Court of the Gentiles; open to non-Jews, god fearers drawn to the sacred sites. Next the Court of the Women – self-explanatory, in a tradition that saw men and women worship separately. Then the Court of the Israelites, at which the thanksgivings and sacrificial offerings were received by the priests. At its west end, the Temple proper. And at the Temple's west end, behind the veil, the Holy of

Holies, home to the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's most sacred possession. The Holy of Holies, into which only the High Priest might enter, and he, only on the Day of Atonement. An architecture of faith, drawing the pilgrim into proximity to the divine – though a divinity quarantined, lest the pilgrims be scorched by a face-to-face encounter.

Into Jerusalem the annual pilgrims streamed – up to 300,000. Into the Temple coffers poured an avalanche of the world's currencies. The mighty religious edifice was also a money-making machine; sustained both by the offerings, and by the annual Temple tax, collected throughout the land prior to the Passover festival. If pilgrims paid at the Temple itself, they had to exchange their home currency for the special coinage of the Temple – one that carried no graven image, the head of king or god. Hence the need for moneychangers, whose tables lined the Court of the Gentiles. And because of the system of animal sacrifice, the need also for a ready supply of livestock – sheep, goats, birds. They could be purchased away from the Temple but wasn't it more convenient to buy on site. Temple tax, currency exchange, sacrificial purchase – a small empire of commerce had taken root around the throne of a once wandering God. What was once the adventure of being led by the fire and cloudy pillar had become this mayhem of marketeering and religious rules. God bought and sold?

When Jesus entered the Temple he was already part of this story; presented there as a baby by shy new parents – blessed by Simeon and Anna; returning on the cusp of manhood to sit and talk with the wise minds of that place – and astonish them with his own wisdom;

"Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" Jesus surely held a vision of what the Temple, at its best, was intended to be; he longed for it to be true. Jerusalem, city of his ancestor David, was the city he wept over; its Temple should have been a sanctuary, a light set upon a hill, a house of prayer for all the nations, a thin place, his Father's house.

So, the clearing of the courtyard takes place.

Sermon

continued

Spontaneous or premeditated, token gesture or full spring clean – we don't know. Whether it happened at the outset of Jesus' ministry, as John records it or in the days of the Final Week, as the other gospels declare – that too is unsure. But it represents a burning of the boats, there can be little turning back. Jesus goes to the heart of the nation's religious-political establishment and declares it to be rotten. *"Stop making my Father's house into a marketplace!"* Later his disciples would remember Psalm 69:9 and attach a sense of prophetic fulfilment to this startling event: *"Zeal for your house will consume me."* Such a challenge to power and powerful men will not go unchecked. This is part of the Christ we seek to follow – not just the Great Comforter, but also the great Unsettler. As a nun once said to me: *"May the peace of God disturb you."*

From Irish priest and poet the late John O'Donohue's *Beauty*: *"A prophetic thought claims its own future, it awakens, disturbs and brings transformation."* In the latest of Christopher Rowe's film meditations from his parish of Colston Milton, one of the Church of Scotland's designated priority areas, his camera takes the bus journey from bleak low-rise housing estate to signs of Glasgow's wealthy centre – a parable of sorts. Historically, the wealth of that city, as with Bristol, or Liverpool or London, was fed by the profits of the slave trade – an uncomfortable awareness brought upon us much more in recent times, triggered in part by the prophetic thought/action of the American footballer, Colin Kaepernick, who in 2016 helped to launch a movement to take a knee during the national anthem before NFL games to protest racial inequality and police brutality. His actions came at personal cost. He lost his work. He persevered. Subsequently, his sports shoe sponsor created an advert, narrated by Kaepernick: *"Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything."*

Monied sportsmen may leave us cold, especially if their message is uncomfortable, but there are other prophets or prophetic actions that confront us. Recently the BBC journalist Orla Guerin tweeted: *"What a smile - this is Ahmed Rageeb, who is 9. In many years of travels he's one of*

the most extraordinary children I have ever met. When teachers don't turn up at his primary school in the city of Taiz in Yemen, Ahmed stands in and takes the class. Ahmed has been blind from birth." The televised report showed hundreds of children arriving for lessons each day in the ruins of a school near to front-line fighting between the government and Houthi rebels. As the children themselves say: *"We are in danger as we come to school and in danger as we leave school."* The report from Yemen was aired in the same week that the UK Government reduced its aid budget to Yemen. Still too remote? Unimaginable? Not really our business? Though perhaps there is a bridge this year via our Lent Charity, *Play for Progress*, with its outreach to unaccompanied minor refugees and asylum seekers.

"A prophetic thought claims its own future, it awakens, disturbs and brings transformation." The powerbrokers of the Temple are swift to push back at the disturber in their midst:

"What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them: *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* *"This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?"* But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

The gospel certainly asks us in this season of Lent what needs overturning? What fresh air/spirit is required for the sanctuaries of our churches or communities; in our public squares and private hearts? It also draws us deeper towards the cross. Jesus' *rising up* against vested interests will lead to the Son of Man being *raised/lifted up* – crucified, for all to see, and all to fear. As says St. Paul: *"The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."* The wisdom and power of God disclosed in the puzzling foolishness and vulnerability of the cross – this is our journey to Easter.

Amen

The story of Judith

David Natzler wonders what's in it for us

One of the few exhibitions last year which was open for long enough to pack people in was the Artemisia Gentileschi show at the National Gallery. The Artemisia brand combines a shocking personal narrative of rape by her instructor with her special talent for dramatic composition and colour, in the manner of Caravaggio. One of the most striking paintings in the show was of Judith, clothed in an electric dark blue, in the act of decapitating Holofernes. Her sleeves are rolled up to expose her strong forearms; blood stains the sheets of his bed. A few years ago I saw a later version she painted, now in Naples: it is uncomfortably memorable.

Who was Judith (or Judit or Yehudit, meaning Jewess)? She is a larger than life figure, like the Old Testament Jewish heroines Deborah and Esther or the villainous Salome or Delilah. But unlike them she is relegated in the Protestant tradition to the Apocrypha. The Book of Judith was probably written in Greek, around 125 BC, in Alexandria. It is not long: Jerome recounts that it took a short night's work to translate into Latin. I think the tale bears re-telling.

The story starts with Nebuchadnezzar King of Assyria vowing to take his revenge on the peoples of the Levant, including the Israelites, because they have refused to help him in his campaign against Artaxerxes or A, King of the Medes. He orders his chief general Holofernes to undertake a punitive expedition. When the peoples of Judaea hear of this they take steps to fortify their strongholds, including the town of Bethulia. Holofernes,

advised by the Moabites, captures the springs on which Bethulia depends for its water supply. As the lack of water begins to bite in the besieged town Uzziah, the ruler of Bethulia announces that if no help is forthcoming within the next five days – implicitly from Jehovah – they will have to surrender.

This arouses the wrath of the young and prosperous widow Judith, who declares that they cannot impose deadlines on God. She asks that she and her maid be let out of the city and affirms that within the five day period “the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand”. Shedding her widow's weeds, she puts on her best garments and anoints herself with perfume. She gives the maid a bottle of wine and a flask of oil and fills a bag with parched grain and a cake of dried fruit and fine bread. Wrapping them up with her vessels she gives them all to the maid to carry, and out of the gate they go.

The two are picked up by an Assyrian patrol. Judith tells them that she will show a way to capture the town. She is taken to Holofernes, to whom she spins the story that she has left because of her disgust that the people of Bethulia have started eating the food reserved for the Temple. She offers to lead him through Judaea to capture Jerusalem. He is bowled over as much it seems by her person as by her offer of help, and she is allowed to stay in the camp.

For the next three days and nights Judith stays in the Assyrian camp, eating from the supplies she has brought rather than with the Assyrians, bathing each evening

in the spring nearby, and praying. But on the fourth day she accepts Holofernes' pressing invitation to a private banquet. She dresses up and lays out fleeces to recline on. Holofernes, mad with lust, drinks heavily. His eunuch Bagoas and the other slaves leave, and Holofernes falls asleep, dead drunk. Judith takes his sword hanging at the end of the bed and with two strokes decapitates him. She calls her servant and the head of Holofernes is placed in the empty food bag.

Judith and her maid leave the camp and reach Bethulia. Judith tells her story, insisting that Holofernes “committed no act of sin with her”, and advises the Bethulians to hang out his head on the walls, and to gather outside the city fully armed for battle. The Assyrians are roused, find the headless torso of their general in his tent, and flee in terror, pursued by the Israelites and others. Judith is given some of the rich plunder, which she gives to the Temple in Jerusalem, and she gives thanks in a hymn of praise. She lives on as an honoured citizen to the ripe old age of 105; she does not remarry; and she sets the (presumably enslaved) maid free.

Artemisia was not the first or last painter to illustrate, more than once, this richly textured tale of a heroine of national struggle. Caravaggio portrayed Judith as a rather slight young woman with a sword and Holofernes awakening from inebriation into screaming consciousness. Mantegna and Michelangelo showed the placing of Holofernes' head in the bag: in Botticelli the maid carries the bag on her own head. The Prado in Madrid has a Rembrandt (or

The story of Judith

continued

Rembrandtesque) picture of Judith/Saskia as a gorgeously arrayed and plump lady at the banquet, seated and facing the viewer. In Vienna two years ago we saw Cranach's tight-lipped blonde Judith resting her sword on the severed head: Judith was heroized by Luther and Zwingli and became an image of righteous tyrannicide for Protestants and Catholics alike. Donatello's sculpture in Florence shows Holofernes cowering at the feet of Judith, who has a raised scimitar in her hand. And Klimt painted her, inevitably, as a *femme fatale*.

The story has attracted countless authors and playwrights and filmmakers. For example, the remains of a long Anglo-Saxon poem on Judith is bound up with Beowulf in the British Library's Nowell Codex. Vivaldi's only surviving oratorio *Juditha Triumphans* can be found on YouTube, recorded in Brixen in South Tirol. So can Mozart's *La Betulia Liberata*, never performed in his lifetime.

But what if anything is the significance of the story? Is it just a fable deservedly winnowed out of the canonical Old Testament? There seems to be little by way of moral teaching. The book of Judith is associated in Jewish practice with Hanukkah and eating cheese-based dishes, on the basis that it was Judith's offer of salty cheese to Holofernes which made him drink so much. But one can see that it has no great claim to be in the canonical Bible. There is no obvious Christian or ethical content.

Except for one thing. Judith is

angry at the idea that God is being given five days to save them or they will surrender. She berates them: *"Who are you, that have put God to the test this day and are setting yourselves up in the place of God among the sons of men? You are putting the Lord almighty to the test – but you will never know anything! You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart, nor find out what a man is thinking; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought....Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like*

man, to be threatened, nor like a human being, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him." That is to me a prophetic voice: and one we should heed in our times of trial. God is not to be browbeaten or timetabled or scheduled. And not all our prayers are answered, certainly not within the timescales we select. Judith risked direct and violent action rather than waiting passively for rescue. A bloody parable to be sure, but a weighty one.



Artemisia Gentileschi,
Judith Slaying Holofernes,
Museo Capodimonte Naples

Desert Island Discs

... and today's castaway is David Stewart

In early October – falling in the 'new calendar' somewhere between the first and second lockdown – I managed to escape Greater London for a couple of enjoyable weeks in 'God's own province'. On the second Saturday I had lunch with a cricket friend who until quite recently sat on an important Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. (I am reminded that Philip is the son of a Presbyterian minister who, after being widowed, remarried in... Pont Street!)

Over dessert, I suggested attending his church for morning service the following day. With an enigmatic smile he told me he no longer attended there because he had grown weary with some of the "fundamentalist" style sermons, and not being comfortable attending one of the neighbouring Presbyterian congregations, had started going to the oldest Anglican Church in the city – St George's: "The best singing in Belfast." Accordingly, the following day I went along. He was correct about the quality of the choir's efforts. As is my habit, when departing I gathered up any magazines and leaflets which looked interesting from a historical perspective.

The latest edition contained an article from their retired organist and choirmaster – a gentleman of most senior vintage, who has been involved in the music of his church for more than 60 years. His piece was under the same heading as this one, which inspired the thought to 'copycat'. I pitched the idea to our editor, suggesting it could become quite an intriguing series with different St Columba's members contributing. In her typically persuasive manner, I received a response along the lines of, "Why don't you go first..."

So, whilst my musical hinterland is but a fraction of what the old gentleman in Belfast could offer, here goes:

**1. 'Guide me,
O thou great Redeemer'**

25 years in Cardiff as student and young lawyer developed a love for this wonderful hymn. It is ever so Welsh - being written by William Williams of Pontypridd. Simply penning the title words brings back (I'm not ashamed to say) slightly moving memories of it being performed at Cardiff Arms Park – now the Millennium Stadium – by the likes of Morrision Orpheus and Treorchy Male voice; both among the very best of Wales' choral tradition. When I get round to setting out wishes for my own funeral, this will be the first entry.

**2. 'Danny Boy',
set to Londonderry Air**

At a very dark time for Northern Ireland, two outstanding sportspeople kept morale afloat amongst many of the population: Dame Mary Peters, as she is now; and Barry McGuigan. The boxer's father had been a professional singer, and before some title fights he would give this a decent rendering from the ring.

The Welsh have a great word: hiraeth. It translates as 'longing', and can usefully be applied to what an exile misses about their homeland - think Andy Stewart and 'Scottish Soldier', perhaps; a favourite from my own childhood days.

3. 'Suspicious Minds'

"We're caught in a trap, I can't walk out..."

It was only recently I discovered that the twin inspirations for the 'King of Rock and Roll' were gospel music and Negro spirituals. As a very small boy, Elvis would walk to the front of the family church in Tupelo, and try to join in with the choir. Like so many of the very talented ones, his candle burnt out long before what should have been his time.

**4. 'Benedictus' by
Sir Karl Jenkins**

During the lockdown (first, second and third) putting on Classic FM at bedtime has become a routine. It introduced me to this; I am almost

embarrassed I was not aware of it before. It is the most compelling new piece of music I have come across in a very long time. On YouTube, dozens have posted to say they find it therapeutic and consoling, especially after the loss of a loved one.

5. 'Nessun Dorma'

A few years ago, on a long-haul flight back from one of the winter cricket tours, I stumbled upon a biographical film of Pavarotti. The Director knew what he was doing: it finished with a Verona open-air concert where the encore, of course, was this. Admittedly fortified by little wine, I rewound at least half a dozen times just to hear the great man reaching once more for that concluding high note, the thought bubble above my head – as I 'conducted' – going, "Hit it, Luciano".

6. 'Edelweiss'

The last number written by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Another evocation of younger days. Like many children in the 1960s, Mum and Dad took us to see the Sound of Music – a Belfast cinema, 25 miles away, was the closest we had.

Christopher Plummer, in the role of Captain von Trapp, sings this at the end of the film, thinking he may not see his Austrian homeland again – more hiraeth. BBC 2 showed it again over the Christmas period; both tune and lyrics still 'get me'!

7. 'Desperado'

I'm not much up for big commercial concerts. About a dozen years ago, I was a late replacement at the new Arsenal football stadium for Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band on a hot summer Saturday. That was someone else's initiative.

The last one of my own doing was Wembley in 2019, when my favourite band were on tour again. "Dinosaurs leave big footprints" said Don Henley, when introducing the Eagles' set. This number brings back a warm reminder of wearing

Desert Island Discs

continued

out a friend's LP (remember them!) in the study at school.

8. 'Rhinestone Cowboy'

If you played rugby, however badly, you always had to have a 'party piece' handy for the bar afterwards, or the bus on the way back from an away fixture. This was mine.

Notable that it is another one from southern USA, the so-called 'Bible belt' where so many Ulster-Scots settled. A little research reveals that Glen's mother was the Campbell; his father (he was the seventh of 12 children) was a sharecropper, called John Wesley!

It is ideal that the radio programme gives us the Holy Bible and the collected works of William Shakespeare. In life's present setting, I doubt I will get through them from cover to cover, but it would certainly be one of the consolations of my desert island habitation to have the opportunity.

As for a third book, when I posed this question some years ago to a former colleague in Cardiff, he selected *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence. I've not come across anything in the intervening period which strikes me as being more appealing.

A luxury item? Given my interest in military history, some sort of electronic device (solar powered, perhaps) uploaded with the *World at War* series - produced by Glasgow Academy's Jeremy Isaacs - would nicely complement my reading.

Finally, I have to select one music item from the treasure trove listed above, to have with me on the island. That is fairly easy. The fabulous hymn at the start links church, rugby football and a happy extended period living in South Wales.

Over to you, now, to volunteer your own thoughts to our hopeful editor.

Songs of the Isles Play for Progress - Lent Appeal 2021

On February 21st, the first Sunday in Lent, Dr Anna MacDonald gave a talk during the live-streamed service. Anna is the Co-Founder of **Play for Progress**, founded in 2014 and registered as a charity in 2016. The church may have been almost empty but that meant all the more room for the Lent Appeal tree in a new and prominent position on the chancel steps.

Although Anna worked for many years as a doctor, her family is from Skye and the strong pull of her lifelong memories of music making in the ceilidh tradition encouraged her to change direction, turning from medicine to studying and performing the music of her cultural roots, and to caring for people in a different way. "Kurdish boys love to drum!" says Anna. Children helped by the charity come from many places – Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Sudan, Vietnam, Eritrea, Somalia: for all of them, the healing power of their own soul music is a keystone for the help they receive.

Anna writes:

"Play for Progress delivers therapeutic and educational music and arts programmes for traumatised and socially-isolated unaccompanied minor refugees. Our weekly Croydon-based programme is available to the hundreds of unaccompanied minor refugees and asylum seekers who are associated with the Refugee Council UK's Children's Section and guarantees that these vulnerable young people can rely on a close-knit and resilient community of mutually-trusting citizens of the world, who learn from and celebrate each other at every opportunity, and who use music and creative play as a tool for social change, self-expression, team building, and personal development."

Find much more detail on **Play for Progress** in the weekly newsletter. We also look forward to welcoming Anna to speak to us again on Sunday 28th March, Palm Sunday.

To donate to the Lent Appeal

Bank details: (Please use "Lent Appeal" as the payment reference)

Royal bank of Scotland
Account number 00264741
Sort Code 16 00 42

Cheques payable to "St. Columba's Church of Scotland" (with a note that it is for the Lent Appeal) should be sent to:

Finance Dept. (Lent Appeal)
St. Columba's Church
Pont Street

London SW1X 0BD

If eligible, Gift Aid greatly helps.



Baptisms • Marriages • Deaths

BAPTISMS

"Suffer the little children to come unto me"

MARRIAGES

"Except the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it"

DEATHS

"Blessed are they that die in the Lord"

26th January Margaret Brown, London, W2

February William Miller, London, SE12



Flowers at a service of thanksgiving for the life of Margaret Brown, live-streamed from St Columba's on Thursday 18th March 2021

Take out a magazine subscription

For information,
please contact the Church Office

St Columba's Church Office, Pont Street, London SW1X 0BD

Church Diary: 28th March to 6th June 2021

At the time of publishing we are live streaming via our website www.stcolumbas.org/livestream.

Please keep in touch with the Church Office or website to check if services may be attended in person.

28th March	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
1st April	8.00pm	Maundy Thursday Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
2nd April	11.00am	Good Friday Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
4th April	11.00am	Easter Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
11th April	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
18th April	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
25th April	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
2nd May	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
9th May	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
16th May	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
23rd May	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Forbes Walker
30th May	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Forsbes Walker
6th June	11.00am	Morning Service Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD

Prayer

Easter Reflection

Where have you gone, Lord?

Where have we put you?

Into tight spaces

where we can contain you.

Within the confines of our limitations

where we can control you.

Inside four walls where we feel safe.

Where have you gone, Lord?

Where have we put you?

Into rule books

where we can claim to understand you.

Inside our churches

where we can claim ownership of you.

Into creeds tailored to the chosen

where we can rest easy.

Where have you gone, Lord?

Where have we put you?

Not, surely, in a garden

where you have free rein

to walk among weeds and risk getting dirty?

Not, surely, where women weep

and wonder at their foolishness?

Not, surely, where we lie weakened

through pushing stones

to keep you where we want you?

Where have you gone, Lord?

Where have we put you?

Forgive us.

Rescue us.

Set us free.

(From Spill the Beans)

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