

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 1st August 2021

Have you managed to get away for a few days' break yet, or are you still planning to go? Or perhaps, like me, you just love being at home! All those of my ken who have been on holiday of late were so happy this year just to have a change of scenery and kitchen sink! As the months of the Pandemic rolled past with all their attendant concerns, and with the stress of several Lockdowns with which we have had to cope, it has been such a blessing to have had this wonderful spell of sunny weather, allowing us to enjoy what is on offer here in this attractive corner of Ayrshire too.

Three friends and I enjoyed a week away, savouring the delights of Arran, the beauties of Keswick in the Lake District and the picturesque environment of Kirkcudbright – all within 7 days! Mind you, I think that will be my final motorhome holiday – I am now at the stage in life where I need a little luxury! Having to set up your bed for the night and put it away each morning is not my idea of fun!

Ian and Margaret, good friends of mine of long standing, who migrated to Hampshire away back in the 1980's, have extended an invitation to me to come down to visit them in their lovely home in Romsey as they are keen to take me to visit Norfolk and especially Sandringham House, the Queen's home in that attractive corner of England. I am going to take them up on it, firstly as they are super company, secondly because Margaret is a wonderful cook and thirdly, I haven't seen them since their Golden Wedding two years ago.

When they moved south of the border on account of Ian's job with IBM, I always so enjoyed my times spent with them and their young family in years past – Mark and Elaine are now married and both live in Perth in Western Australia with their growing children.

On the long drive south, I would take the opportunity to stop off somewhere, often in Oxfordshire or the Cotswolds. Such an idyllic part of the world - the names of villages like Bourton on the Water, Broadway, Burford, all redolent of images of thatched cottages of honey coloured stone and quaint pubs.

One year when I broke my journey in the "city of spires" itself, I was sitting in the restaurant of Boswell's, a delightful family owned department store, and I was enjoying a pot of tea and a scone, all the while flicking through a couple of books which I had purchased round the corner in Blackwell's, when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I put down my book and looked up.

"You're Mr Aitken, aren't you?" asked the charming lady in her quite distinctive Scottish accent.

Taken aback by her enquiry, I smiled and assured her that I was!

"O yes," she continued, "the moment I saw you coming in, I said to my husband who you were! You spoke last winter at our Guild meeting in Kilmarnock!"

Goodness me, how very relieved I was that I didn't have a glamorous buxom blonde hanging on to my arm or I would have been the "talk of the steamie"!

Anyhow, it so happened that she and her husband were down visiting their daughter who lived in Woodstock, not far from Oxford, and she went on to tell me that they were going that afternoon to pay yet another visit to Blenheim Palace, the stately home of the Dukes of Marlborough, and the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill.

A seed had been sown!

I decided to make my own personal pilgrimage, and so the following morning, I set out, planning to visit firstly his grave in the village of Bladon and then the Palace after lunch.

The parish church of St Martin's in the village of Bladon, is an ancient place. In the little churchyard, there were wild flowers growing among the old weathered headstones.

The great man's grave is close to the church itself, and beside him lie many of his family, including his mother and father. As I stood all alone in the summer sunshine, I was touched as I read the memorial stone with the simple inscription: WINSTON LEONARD CHURCHILL, and the years of his birth and death, 1874 – 1965. Nothing more.

About a mile away, looming through the trees, you can see the ornate roofs of vast Blenheim Palace itself. It is a magnificent place. It was built, with its wide lawns and artificial lake, three hundred years ago by Queen Anne as a gift to Churchill's great ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, in gratitude for his famous victories in Europe.

Close by Sir Winston's grave, however, another stone caught my attention. It stands just across the narrow path from the Churchill plot, and it says, "In thanksgiving to God for the sweet life of Milly Smith, who entered into her rest on June 24, 1936, in her 58th year." And at the foot of the stone are carved the words of our Lord from St Mark's Gospel, "She hath done what she could."

In the peaceful morning sunshine, the birds chirping in the trees, I stood and pondered the simplicity of that brief epitaph, and the contrast between the two graves.

On the one hand, a memorial to a colossus of history who had hammered out a nation's destiny amid the fires of war; and on the other, a loving remembrance of an obscure and peaceful life, which had yet left behind in some heart a very fragrant memory.

Who was Milly Smith, I wondered?

What gentle qualities in her life had prompted someone to remember the Gospel story of the woman who, in the last days of Jesus' earthly life, had brought her alabaster box of pure oil of nard, very expensive perfume, and broke it open and poured it all out on Jesus? You remember how in the narrative, some hard bitten men who were present in the room, criticised her for this extravagance. "To what purpose is this waste?" they muttered. But Jesus defended her (and you're always ok if Jesus defends you!). "Let her alone," He said, "She hath done what she could."

And so their dust lies mingled in God's quiet acre at Bladon – Sir Winston Churchill and Milly Smith.

A reminder that the final verdict on these lives of ours does not lie with history, but with the One who sees and knows the intentions of every heart.

As I made my way back to my car, I paused for a moment under the ancient lych-gate to read what was written there. Tradition has it that these covered gates were built to provide a resting place for the coffin while the mourners awaited the arrival of the priest. The inscription carved in the oak timbers read, "I know that my Redeemer liveth".

However great or humble the world may judge us to have been, to have that conviction in our hearts makes us more than conquerors whoever we are.

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