

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 15th August 2021

“The Paisley Fair” – the image that those words conjure up for me is vivid. When I was a boy, the looms of the great thread mills of Clarks at Anchor in Seedhill and J and P Coats at Ferguslie fell silent; factories such as Brown and Polson, Ciba Geigy and Robertsons Jam Works, stopped working for the first two weeks in August every year, and Buddies, in their thousands, migrated “doon the watter”, to Ayr, Prestwick, Largs, Dunoon, Rothesay and many of the other well-loved resorts of those halcyon days. I suppose that we don’t talk so much about the Glasgow or Paisley Fair these days as most of the heavy industries of the past are gone, and folk seem to take their holidays whenever they feel like it.

I was reminded of “Fair fortnight” recently when I was re-reading the story of Kenneth McKellar, Scotland’s greatest tenor of the twentieth century. It is a great read - “Don’t look at the Wallpaper” by Peter Cameron.

Kenneth, like myself, was born in Paisley, and like me, attended the John Neilson Institution, with its famous “porridge bowl” cupola, a superb part of the town’s skyline. The title of the book harks back to when Kenneth was a boy, and when his father, Harry, recognised that he could sing, he encouraged his son to entertain visitors to the family home in Mary Street. Kenneth obliged, but would only do so if he stood facing the wall!

In the book, the author tells us that Kenneth always got very excited when August came around and the time for the family to go to Innellan for their annual holidays. Along with Grandpa and Granny McKellar, his Dad and Mum, and his two brothers, Kenneth would take the train from Gilmour Street Station to Gourock to catch the ferry for Dunoon. As the pier at Dunoon was spotted, the family got

very animated, and following a taxi ride to Innellan, there were two weeks' freedom to which to look forward!

Harry and the boys used to love to go out on a boat fishing for mackerel near Toward Point, and often the evenings were spent at Innellan Bowling Green, where he recalled that the midges were murder. His Dad, however, was not in the least bit bothered by those infernal insects as he enjoyed a pipe, and obviously the little brutes did not like the Condor Sliced that he smoked!

In adult life, Kenneth took his wife, Hedy, and their infant son to Innellan to relive those wonderful boyhood memories whilst he was taking part in the summer show at the Queen's Hall in Dunoon. He was the first performer to have a Summer Show there in 1968, and he says that one of the highlights of his whole career was when the ferry was approaching Dunoon pier, over the tannoy system came his version of the "Song of the Clyde", with the line "at Kirn, and Dunoon and Innellan we stay..."

I can readily understand why the McKellar family was so fond of Innellan.

Developed as a holiday destination in Victorian times, passenger steamers regularly called at the pier with hordes of visitors who had come to enjoy the breath taking views over the Clyde, stretching from Kilcreggan and Loch Long, to the Cumbraes and Ailsa Craig, as well as the tranquil atmosphere of the village itself.

It was during this time that Innellan was blessed by the Ministry of the Revd Dr George Mathieson, and if you go to Innellan today, the locals are proud to give you a tour of what is still known as "Mathieson's kirk."

I can remember how moved I was when, a few years ago, I was invited to stand in the pulpit where George Mathieson had faithfully preached the Gospel to the eager congregations, the church packed to capacity during the summer months by the visitors who had come to hear him!

The son of a Glasgow merchant, he suffered from impaired vision from early years, and by the time he was 18, he had become totally blind. Both at Glasgow Academy and at the University, he displayed remarkable academic and intellectual gifts, and was one of the most distinguished students of his year, especially in the philosophical classes in which he was head and shoulder above his peers. It was thanks to his sisters that he excelled in both Latin and Greek as they tutored him through his studies.

After the completion of his assistantship at Sandyford Church in Glasgow, George received a call to Innellan Church, and soon his reputation as a preacher spread far and wide.

It is, however, undoubtedly as a hymn writer that the name of George Mathieson is best known throughout the world.

It was on the day that one of his sisters was getting married that he wrote the hymn which today is found in the hymnbooks of churches of all denominations throughout the world, and he recorded this account of that experience in his journal :

“My hymn was composed in the Manse of Innellan on the evening of 6th June 1882. I was at that time alone. It was the day of my sister’s marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something had happened to me which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes.”

Dr Mathieson does not reveal to us what his “severe mental suffering” actually was, but at any rate, it inspired him to write the hymn “O Love that wilt not let me go.”, a hymn celebrating the constancy of God’s love. He always regarded this hymn as his finest work.

With poetry, faith and the ineffable melody composed by Dr Peace, organist at Glasgow Cathedral, it does everything you can possibly ask of a hymn.

George Mathieson's great hymn borne out of suffering.

All of us suffer some sort of heartbreak, disappointment, disability at some points in our lives. What makes all the difference is our response – whether we let the hardship stop us or allow it to inspire us to greater effort.

Dr Mathieson suffered two huge blows – the loss of his eyesight, and being jilted by his fiancée. In both cases he made the best of a bad situation – and we are all the richer of it.

As the hymn reveals it was his faith in God that kept him on his feet through all the adversities that he suffered. He believed that God's love would not let him go, that God's light would lead him through the darkness, and that God's joy would seek him through his pain.

And that faith made all the difference.

During his own stellar career, Kenneth McKellar made a recording of the hymn along with the Choir of Paisley Abbey.

When "Mathieson of Innellan", as he had come to be affectionately known, passed away at North Berwick in 1906, it was said of him, "It is not the night but the light that has fallen on the strenuous brave life of Dr George Mathieson. He has received a house from heaven, where they who look out of windows are not darkened."

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister