

Sermon for “Warwick Words History Festival” Service

by Alycia Timmis, Sunday, 1 Oct 2017

Readings: *Philippians* 2: 1-13, *Matthew* 21: 23-32

History is an endlessly fascinating topic. Who in history fascinates you? And, why? For a History-loving, endlessly curious Curate, there could be no better place to serve title than here at St Mary’s. St Mary’s is a treasure trove of historical delights. All around us are countless narratives with an unrivalled cast of characters. A cast of characters, in fact, that continues to grow - just last week, a special plague arrived, a gift from the George Washington Society in the USA, honouring St Mary’s as the “Ancestral Church of the 1<sup>st</sup> US President”. Quite an achievement, however, this parish church is more than just a place of the past, it is a living, breathing document of history, a place firmly rooted in its heritage and past, while simultaneously actively engaged in the present, with a vibrant vision for the future.

When faced with the task of speaking this morning on the theme of “history”, I knew precisely where to start. Visiting this magnificent space, alone, in the quiet hours of dusk, I came and sought guidance from the building itself. Allowing it to reveal to me the story that needed to be told today. I found myself in the Outer Vestry. Surrounded on all sides by memorial plaques commemorating the lives and service of three domestic servants: Jane Farnhill, John Bayley and Maria Home.

There was of course, immediate resonance for me with today’s reading from *Philippians* wherein we are reminded of God’s extravagant act of love for us in Jesus Christ, who: “humbled himself, taking the form of a servant.”

The life of Jesus invites us to (re)consider history from a unique perspective. Our two readings today offer a dichotomous portrait of Jesus, The Servant King, possessing both humility and authority. These two readings are a radical juxtaposition of meekness and power.

Power is central to the definition of history as penned by the Polish theorist, Jan Kott. Kott likened History to “a grand staircase upon which ascend a steady succession of kings and queens.” Many it seems share Kott’s view of history -- if *BBC History Magazine’s* “Hot 100 List” is anything to go by. Its annual survey of history buffs’ most beloved

heroes was topped this year by Richard III, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Anne Boleyn – humility and meekness are not exactly strong suits within this particular cohort. Jesus, rather intriguingly, placed just outside the Top 10 at No. 15 – up 42 point from his position at No. 57 in 2016!

Jan Kott's grand staircase was a compelling image to hold in mind as I considered the memorials honouring those who occupied shadowed existences below stairs, individuals who were more likely *cleaning* the 'grand staircase of history' than treading upon it. Theirs are hidden histories, lives for which the details are scant. Of the three, only Maria Home has left a lasting impression. What I found about her was not easy to come by – yet, when it did surface, it appeared in the most unlikely of places, such as: her Last Will and Testament which emerged from Canterbury; a tabloid chronicle of her domestic skills, demeanour and attributes in *The London Magazine* of 1821; and, the lithograph portrait of her that is held in the fine art collection of Calke Abbey.

How, you might rightly wonder, did a portrait of a lowly housekeeper at Warwick Castle, end up in the art collection of a stately home in Derbyshire? It is because Maria Home's story is proof that fact is often even more sensational than fiction. And, because her story is another tale of an extravagant act of love.

Although the spelling of her surname looks like the word "home", it was in fact pronounced Hoome. Maria Home was born on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1741, in Fogo, Scotland. She was the daughter of Reverend William Home, and his wife, Isabella. Maria served housekeeper at Warwick Castle for nearly sixty years. She appears to have started working at Warwick Castle in the 1770s, a period during which Warwick Castle began receiving visitors. At first, its visitors were members of the nobility and prestigious travellers from abroad. By 1815, it opened its gates to the general public who visited as day tourists. During that time there were no guides employed to host or lead visitors - domestic staff, namely Mrs Home, was expected to undertake this duty, alongside her others. Such was the volume and appreciation of the guests, that Mrs. Home amassed a fortune of £30,000 from the gratuities and tips that visitors gave to her. An incredible sum to gather even then, and an extraordinary achievement for a woman, and particularly, a woman of her class.

Mrs. Home was dedicated and fiercely loyal to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl, George Greville, and his family. George Greville became Earl in 1773, and was committed to improving the state of his ancestral family. He spent a vast amount refurbishing the castle's interior and undertook numerous building projects within the grounds and bought more land to extend the estate. According to one source, "Spending vast amounts of money was a great temptation to him - and his enthusiasm often exceeded his bank account." Alongside his zeal for improving the Castle, George Greville got himself entangled in a number of unsuccessful business ventures. As a result, he became insolvent.

Facing bankruptcy, it was his faithful housekeeper, Mrs Home, who came to his aid. From her own resources, Maria was able to satisfy the Earl's most pressing creditors out her own considerable savings. The Greville Family owed the survival of their inheritance to Mrs. Home's providence and generosity. It was a kindness the family never forgot. When Lady Frances Greville, one of the Earl's younger siblings, married Sir Henry Harpur, the 6th Baronet at Calke Abbey, her sister, Lady Louisa Greville, gave her a lithograph portrait of Maria Home as a wedding present.

Mrs. Home was a spinster, the signifier 'Mrs', being merely a polite affectation of the time for housekeepers, married or otherwise. She died at Warwick Castle on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1834, aged 93 years. In her will she left smaller legacies to St Mary's Church and the town of Warwick, with the lion's share of her wealth being bequeathed to the Greville family and heirs.

She's said to be buried here in St. Mary's, the memorial stone in the outer vestry records her "integrity" and she is praised for her warmth and faithfulness. These kind words of tribute do not go far enough, I fear, to express the indebtedness that the Greville family and by extension the town of Warwick and our community owe to Maria Home. Maria Home's story is one characterised by a surprising combination of humility and authority, power and meekness. Lady Shelley, who visiting Warwick Castle in 1819, noted in her diary an old housekeeper, whose name she did not recall, as one of the curiosities of the place. I wonder how many visitors to Warwick Castle never gave Maria a second thought?

The lesson we may draw from Maria Home's remarkable story points us back to the Gospels and the hidden histories that we find

there. Throughout the Gospels, especially *The Gospel of Luke*, Jesus sees, exposes and brings to the fore the stories happening on the margins, the narratives of the humble, strangers to status and place: women, children, foreigners, those who are infirm, those who are poor, tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers, and so on. The message, then as now, is that the overlooked in society – those who don't make the front pages or stride up the grand staircase of history – may very well have much to offer us and hold stories worth hearing.

Who do we overlook today? What are the gifts we fail to see in those around us?

Let us pray - for the Warwick Words History Festival, for all who will part and all who chronicle and share our histories.

*Creator God, thank you for the men and women who continue to enthrall, fascinate and inspire us. Open our eyes to the remarkable stories that surround us each and everyday.*

*Thank You for loving us, and for your Son Jesus Christ – who is the same yesterday, today and forever.*

*Amen.*