

**A Sermon Preached in St Mary's Warwick**  
**by The Revd Vaughan Roberts**

*Candlemas 2010*

*Today is the part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual National Storytelling Week, which runs to next Saturday, so this evening's sermon is a Candlemas tale written especially for St Mary's Warwick. It's a story about snowdrops which, as you may know, are the flower for Candlemas. Also it's deliberately 'timeless' and written such that it could have happened thirty years or three hundred years ago.*

Simon was an average boy in many ways. He was of average height; he was of average weight; he was of average intelligence and he was average when it came to any kind of games. But he was far above average when it came to one thing. He had what people called 'green fingers' and Simon was able to make just about anything grow in his father's garden. Whatever he planted, he cared for; whatever he sowed, he tended; and whatever he put in the ground, he nurtured. This was just as well because his father showed no interest in cultivation whatsoever. Simon's gift had been passed on from his mother and she had received it from her father. But his grandfather had died when he was seven and his mother when he was ten, so this love of gardening was one of a small number of things that connected the twelve-year old with his mother, her family and his receding memories of childhood.

Simon's father worked as the verger at St Mary's Church. It was a difficult job. The hours were unusual and the duties were very time consuming. Simon often went to work with his father but would be left to amuse himself in the main part of the church, or the medieval Beauchamp Chapel, or (his favourite place) the crypt. But one day after a hard and snowy winter – when the first, faint intimations of Spring were in the air – Simon had an idea. To his young eyes, St Mary's was a large and formidable structure. As you approached it from below on the west side, it seemed to tower above him and on some, particularly stormy days he felt that it appeared to glower in his direction. 'What this building needs,' thought Simon, 'was a garden.' And he was just the person to create it.

So, without telling anybody about his idea he set to work at that lower, west end of the church. To begin with he marked out the small area for cultivation. He dug up the grass, which had not yet started its rapid period of spring growth and ... well, that was enough to begin with as the dark evening started to enclose the young gardener and his endeavours.

He tidied up his few, small, garden tools and went to tell his father about his new project. In the last light of that murky January evening his dad came and inspected Simon's hard afternoon of work. He was impressed and asked him what he was going to do next. 'I'm going to carefully transplant a few of those snowdrop bulbs that are just starting to poke through at home and see if I can get them to take,' he announced proudly.

And that's just what he did. He gently dug them up from his own garden and brought them to his new, church garden; replanted them and like all his plants he cared, tended and nurtured them. A short while later he was rewarded with a few, small and beautiful

flowers, which looked so striking and so fragile against the imposing majesty of the church.

However, almost immediately disaster struck because the next day Simon came to St Mary's and someone had stamped all over his painstakingly cared for garden, leaving his snowdrops splayed and smashed on the dark brown earth. They looked like six, sad teardrops shed on behalf of the project that Simon had spent so much time on. His father came and collected up the devastated flowers, trimmed their tattered stalks and placed in a small jar of water on the altar and that's why we have snowdrops on our nave altar to this very day.

But Simon felt devastated at such a wanton act of destruction. He was only trying to bring some colour and life into the churchyard but his efforts had been wrecked – trashed by someone who felt threatened by the poignant beauty of a few snowdrops. He lost his enthusiasm for the garden and he gave up on his project. Simon retreated into the church, carried on playing in the crypt and discovered other new places and new games.

Simon's father tried to encourage his son to take up his project again but Simon remained downhearted at the senseless destruction of his flowers. Late winter turned to spring; spring eased into summer and others found that their gardens had been assailed – plants uprooted, flowers stolen, shrubs with branches torn off. As summer turned to autumn it was discovered that someone had sneaked into the Master's Garden at the Lord Leycester Hospital and damaged several plants there.

Every time the St Mary's verger tried to encourage his son to take up the cultivation of his church garden, the answer was always the same: 'What's the point? Someone will only come and destroy it whatever I start!'

Even the news in October that the culprit had been caught, punished and made to repair at least some of the damage that his wanton and reckless activity had caused failed to change Simon's mood. 'There's no point in starting anything now,' he would say to his father when he raised the subject. 'It's nearly winter. The cold and the snow will set in soon. Nothing will grow then!'

The church garden was forgotten, the plans went into hibernation and Simon's colourful hopes seemed as bare and as barren as any farmer's field in January. Then, on one bright and frosty day, Simon was walking to church with his father. As they entered the churchyard the sun seemed bounce off the stone of the building onto the paths and the grass below. And there amidst the overgrown weeds of Simon's forgotten garden the rays of the January sun picked out twelve snowdrops growing from the bulbs planted by the boy the previous year. The original flowers had been trampled on and crushed but the bulbs had survived.

This was a symbol of hope; this was a truly fresh start; this was a sign of resurrection and in that moment Simon made a decision ... he went and found his gardening tools and set to work anew on his garden.