

A Sermon Preached in St Mary's Warwick ***On the Thanksgiving for Thomas Oken 2008*** **John 15: 8-17**

Two texts for this evening: the first is from the start of King Lear where the monarch is seeks an extravagant declaration of love from his third and youngest daughter Cordelia. Lear asks: 'what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.' Cordelia replies: 'Nothing, my lord.' 'Nothing?' 'Nothing,' repeats Cordelia. To which her father says, 'How? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.'

And the second text is from our reading this evening's reading, John Chapter 15, verse 13 where Jesus says, 'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'

And drawing on those passages, this year's sermon to Commemorate Thomas Oken is a work of fiction. The historical details in this story are correct and, although there's no evidence that these events did take place, there's no reason to believe that what follows could not have happened.

It's a clear, bright day and a man steps out of his house, which is one Tudor building amongst others near the centre of Warwick. The late January frost has melted away and the black and white houses seem almost incandescent in winter's midday sun. The man himself is dressed in fine clothes, as befits someone who's made his considerable wealth through textiles, and he begins to walk steadily up an incline towards the stalls in Church Street selling all manner of goods. His progress will be slow as he greets the many friends and neighbours from the town of his birth. He enjoys the rhythms of provincial life. Even in a town the seasons determine and shape a pattern to the year, which provides a structure to life in the face of much unrest and continuous rumour.

The year is 1572 and Thomas Howard the 4th Duke of Norfolk has this month been arrested by Queen Elizabeth for plotting to restore Catholic England. The turmoil and anxiety of monarchs and aristocracy is very real to those living so close to Warwick Castle and there have been times in his 63 years when Thomas Oken has had to play a leading role in managing the political torrents that have threatened to engulf his town. The ease with which he moves amongst the people on this January morning has been replicated at other times as he's had to lead negotiations with royal emissaries and others.

He stops at a greengrocer's stall to examine the produce. It's not the time of year for fruit and vegetables but some have been stored away and are for sale. There's a throng of people clustered around looking for some roots to go in a stew or some hardy cabbage to boil up for a warming broth.

Suddenly the stallholder shouts, 'Stop, thief!' and Thomas Oken turns sharply from inspecting foodstuffs and is nearly knocked to the ground as an eight-year old boy clatters into his midriff. Thomas grabs him by the collar and the furious greengrocer bears down on them both with a cudgel, which he points at the boy. 'That vermin stole an apple from my stall!' Many eyes focus on the young lad who opens his hand to reveal a russet-coloured apple with the distinctive, wrinkled skin of a fruit that's been stored since autumn.

Thomas reaches down and takes the apple from the boy's hand and returns it to its rightful owner. 'I'll deal with this,' he tells the greengrocer giving a conspiratorial wink. The two step aside into a doorway and the hustle and bustle of Church Street is quickly

restored as the man and the boy sit together on a doorstep. ‘Why did you steal that man’s apple?’ Thomas asks the lad.

The boy tells him he wasn’t going to eat it himself. He mutters some staccato sentences into his tattered jerkin: ‘Apple’s for John – ’e’s come with us to Warwick – ’e’n’t had any breakfast – ’is ma’s poor – she’n’t any money to buy food.

Thomas Oken rests his chin on his hands as he thinks about how to respond. ‘Yes, but is it right?’ he asks eventually. ‘Is it right to steal, even when this person has had no food?’

The lad replies, ‘John’ll be friends with me then, ’e’ll love him ’cos I’ve given him some ’ut to eat.’

Thomas thinks again about how to respond. ‘Do you really want to buy John’s friendship with an apple? Surely,’ he continues, ‘Love and friendship are things that are given not bought?’ The boy’s quiet for a moment, so Thomas prompts him, ‘What do you think?’

Eventually the lad says ‘Well my Dad always says, “Nothing will come of nothing” and everything has its price.’

Thomas nods and says, ‘Interesting phrase – “Nothing will come of nothing” – but I’m not sure that’s right though. There are **some** things with no price – beyond price, even. Friendship and love are two of the most valuable things we have and no one can put a price on them.’ He recalls Joan, his friend in marriage over many years until her death. Thomas sighs before saying quietly, ‘And don’t you forget Jesus’ words: *Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends* (Jn 15: 13). They’re some of the most important words ever recorded – don’t you forget that.’

They sit in shared silence for a moment until the boy’s mother calls to him, ‘William, it’s time to be going home. Where on earth have you been? You know it’s a goodly walk back to Stratford.’ Thomas Oken and the boy stand up and take their leave of each other and that shared moment. Thomas continues to walk up Church Street and in the background he can hear the stallholder shouting a last admonishment to the boy’s mother. ‘You keep your young lad under control Mistress Shakespeare or he’ll grow up to be no good whatsoever!’

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