

Sermon

Sunday 20 December 2020

Lesson

St Luke 1: 26 – 38

Jane Haining, a Scottish missionary, was appointed matron at the Church of Scotland Jewish Mission School for Girls in Budapest in 1932. It was a boarding school providing education for four hundred girls, 70% of whom were Jewish. Miss Haining was 35 years old when she was appointed by the Church; it was an enormous responsibility for a young woman. Through the late 1930s and at the start of the Second World War, Hungary had tried to remain neutral. However, by 1941 Hungary was assisting Germany and in December of that year Britain declared war on Hungary. In July 1944, Haining was arrested by the Gestapo and murdered.

The daily routine of the school involved Bible class, Bible reading during breakfast, and prayers said in the morning, at lunchtime and in the evening. In addition to Christian Sunday school, there was also Jewish religious education and regular visits to the Synagogue; a rabbi was available for the Jewish children. A former pupil of the school, Esther, said that Miss Haining was ‘a mother to all of us, and

she treated us all equally'. Another Jewish pupil, Judith, recalled that when she had been very ill, Haining had given her memorable personal attention: 'Only a mother can give such attention to her child, and she was very kind to me'. The principal role of the school was not proselytism - converting Jews to Christianity - but care of an oppressed people. Along with others, the Church of Scotland arranged lectures to combat antisemitism: they opposed anti-Jewish laws and took a stand against 'Hitler's demonism'. Jane sheltered refugee children: she wrote, 'What a ghastly feeling it must be to know that no one wants you and to feel that your neighbours literally grudge you your daily bread'.

As the war progressed, many British people in Hungary left for the safety of India but Jane stayed. Writing of the school's care of Jewish children, Haining wrote, 'We have been enabled even in a small measure to lighten the lot of an oppressed people and to provide an oasis in a troubled world where they can be sure of a friendly reception'. As the Nazis tightened their grip of Hungary, Jews were required to wear yellow stars, the star of David. Jane was obliged to

sew a star on to the clothing of each Jewish girl at the school. Pupils recalled that Jane cried as she sewed. She was arrested when she challenged a man in the Hitler Youth Movement whom she had caught eating rationed food meant for the girls. Haining was charged with these crimes:

She had worked among the Jews
She had wept when seeing the girls wearing their yellow stars
She had dismissed her housekeeper, who was an Aryan
She listened to news broadcasts on the BBC
She had many British visitors
She was active in politics
She visited British prisoners of wars; and,
She sent parcels to the British prisoners.

Haining died in Auschwitz on 17 July, 1944. What strikes me about Jane Haining's story is the extent to which a young woman faced down the power and violence of a corrupt and evil regime. With her every breath she sought to care for the young Jewish girls, whom she described as hated, exiled and oppressed. I see Jane with a twelve year old girl and, through tears, sewing the Davidic star onto her uniform. Is not this the Biblical image of Mary? In the young Jane Haining, I see the *Pietà*, the Michelangelo marble carving of Mary

holding the body of the broken Christ, her Child, taken down from the Cross; her eyes filled with tears.

In her glorious song, the Magnificat, *Ave Maria*, Mary's soul sang of the greatness of the Lord. She sang that God had routed the proud and all their schemes; God had filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. In the Bible, Mary is not a mild, meek and bashful young girl suitable for appearing blue-clad in portraits on Christmas cards. She sang of the oppressed and God's demand for justice. Jane had remained in Budapest. She said, 'If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness'. Do you see something of Mary in the Scottish missionary, in the young woman killed in a concentration camp?

In the twenty-first century, may we discern the spirit of Mary in the words and protests of the young Swedish environmental activist, Greta Thunberg? Born in 2003, now aged 17, a year or two older than Mary of Nazareth, Thunberg has spoken at climate change conferences around the world, addressed the British, French and

European Parliaments and met Pope Francis. In her speech to the United Nations in New York, in front of a large gathering of world leaders, Thunberg said:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

Tough, unpalatable, perhaps impertinent words from a mere teenager, yet the Early Church placed the Magnificat on the lips of Mary, who would have been no older. Thunberg is lauded, criticised, ridiculed, loved, hopeful, naïve, prophetic.....just like Mary. In the love and tears of Jane Haining, do you see Mary of Nazareth; in the youthful face of Greta Thunberg, do you see Mary of Nazareth?

Many people read the birth narratives of Jesus, the annunciation, the visitation of the angel Gabriel, and the virgin birth in a literal sense. That is fine: in a literal sense, Mary spoke of the overthrow of the proud and the protection of the oppressed. For myself, I read the story of Mary and the Gospel birth narratives as part of a wider genre. In the Book of Genesis, an angel appeared to Hagar to announce the birth of a child; an angel appeared to Abraham to announce the birth of a child; and, in the Book of Judges, an angel appeared to Manoah's wife to announce the birth of Samson. In the ancient world, many believed that Alexander the Great had had a virgin birth and, at the time of Jesus' birth, the saviour of the world was the Roman Emperor, Augustus, believed to be born of a virgin, the son of Apollo, the son of god. Together with the Magnificat, the virgin birth of Jesus stands for God's Kingdom and against the values of the kingdom of Rome.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her. The metaphor, overshadow, meant that God's Presence would be with her. At the Transfiguration of Jesus, a cloud overshadowed

them. On Mount Sinai, a cloud, the glory of God, overshadowed Moses. It means God is intimately present.

Mary is not to be imprisoned on Christmas cards. Jesus honoured her and the Early Church honoured her. She pointed to God, to God in Jesus and she sang for the oppressed. Do we hear her singing today?

Amen.