

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

3 Easter
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“A German Krista”

Once there was an Anglican parish in England in the village of Beckford, near Tewesbury. Beckford nestles at the foot of Breden Hill in the County of Gloucester. I would like to tell you that Beckford was very historic and very important, but really it was not. It was largely made up of farming folk, or people who lived in the village and its surroundings but worked in a nearby large city such as Cheltenham, famous for its racetrack, or Bath or even Bristol.

It is a beautiful scenic area that English people know as, the Cotswolds, lying to the South West and bordering the River Seven and across it, Wales.

Beckford Village has an old stone Norman church that dates back to the 12th Century. It has a square tower and old stain glass windows. Inside, the wood is so old that it is black and the old pews each have a small door, and a plaque with the name of the family, who occupy it, each Sunday. Nothing had changed in the parish of St. Cuthbert's since the Norman Conquest, one thousand years before. Even the Second World War had totally missed the village. No bombs fell on it, and life on the farms had gone on as normal. The only thing to make headlines in the Tewkesbury Gazette was the death of young John Harrington-Brown, whose parents lived in the Manor House at Beckford Hall, and the death of Francis Sloane whose father farmed Sloane Farm on the other side of Breden Hill. The boy's bodies had come home and were buried in family plots in the churchyard.

And that would have been the end of Beckford's relationship with the 2nd World War altogether, if it hadn't been for the little country train that pulled into Tewesbury station on May 31st 1947. Out of the train stepped a young man in military uniform. His name was Robert James Birtles and he was the son of the local doctor, Robert Senior, who had died the previous year. Robert Junior was, or had been, an army doctor. He had been kept on in Germany after the surrender, doctoring to victims of the war in various hospitals. Discharged in the spring of 1947, he came home to take over his father's medical practice. By his side was his pretty, but rather quiet young blonde bride.

At church on Sunday morning, he was greeted enthusiastically by all the parishioners, the Vicar Donald Kirby, and Major Harrington-Brown Sr, who said: “How glad he was that he was back and he was sure that the medical practice would be a great success.”

But at the “Peace” the Vicar went to shake Mrs. Robert James Birtles' hand, and simply say: “God's peace be with you” but she stood there frozen in the pew, till her young husband told the Vicar: “I'm sorry, my wife doesn't speak English, she's German.”

The whole church fell silent, as if the radio had just proclaimed that “Winston Churchill had died.” All eyes fell on the young German girl and then the whispers began and the

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tongues began to wag. They wagged throughout the Eucharist. People visibly moved to the next pew and after the service Robert and his wife, were cold shouldered ignored, and given the icy stare treatment.

And so it continued, week after week. A village hall meeting was called, where merchants stood up and said that on “no account would they serve that woman in their shops.” The village voted, and a letter was drafted, refusing the Vicar ‘permission to serve them communion.’

Even the Vicar stood up in the pulpit and preached against the evil of Hitler and the responsibility of the German people for so many deaths, the two local boys included.

At the Doctors surgery windows were broken and Swastikas painted on the Doctors door. People however, still called upon the Doctor, as he was the only one in the area, but they ignored his young wife, or were openly rude to her.

The winter of 1947 was the most brutal in living memory, with fierce snow storms that crippled the country. Farmers were particularly hard hit, because of the high freezing winds that piled snow into drifts and cut farms off from the rest of the world.

The weather was so bad, that the doctor had a record number of house calls day and night. The roads were impassible and black bag in hand, he was forced to walk. Major Harrington Brown was his worse case, having gone down with a severe case of pneumonia. When the call came to the Doctor’s office from the Sloane Farm that December night, the Doctor was already out. Mrs. Sloane was expecting a baby, and the baby had decided that this was the night. At 2 minutes to midnight there came a rap at the Sloane Farm door and there standing in the doorway was the Doctor’s young wife. She had walked through the snow over the hill for 5 miles and she delivered the baby with all the skill her training had taught her. No one in the house spoke and the only noise was the cry of little Michael Sloane as she left the farm at 4:45 in the morning.

And so it continued day after day, night after night. On December 7th, the doctor himself went down sick and exhausted and was confined to bed. The young German girl continued to work in the weeks and months that followed. She nursed and ministered to the old and the young alike that winter.

Some of the old people died, but most got better. The children all called her ‘Heidi’ because they didn’t know her real name. The village folk accepted her help in silence and nodded to her. The Doctor came back to work and in the April the bitter winter finally came to an end.

Everyone had been affected. Livestock had died in their thousands, and the farms were weeks behind in preparing for spring. No one came to church in those months, and a sort of quiet death lay across the village.

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On Easter Sunday morning, however, April 22nd, the sun shone for the first time. People made their way to church, but still with their heavy coats. The congregation was strangely subdued that Sunday morning and kept their heads down as if in deep thought or prayer.

The Reverend Donald Kirby got up to preach and his voice quivered with emotion. In desperation he reached for his Bible and the holy book fell open and he read the words as his eyes scanned the page, and they fell on John 15: verse 18.

“If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you, but because you do not belong to the world, the world hates you.

Remember the word I spoke to you. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. And they will do all these things to you on my account, because they do not know the one who sent me.”

And he looked up and fixed his eyes on the young German woman at the back of the church and closing the book, while still staring at her he said:

“Father forgive us, we know not what we do. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

With that he left the pulpit, but at the communion he walked down the aisle and administered communion to the Doctor and his wife Krista. All the people hung back outside the church after the service and greeted them with a quiet pressing of the hands, but with few words and true gratitude in their eyes.

The Vicar, Donald Kirby, went off to celebrate Easter Dinner with his wife, convinced that he now knew what Resurrection truly meant.

He had seen a transformation in the eyes and hearts of his people; and he had seen his Lord Jesus Christ rise from the dead and minister to his people in the form of a young German woman.

The analogy of the stone is of course taken from the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple around 510BC. Jesus too uses the example, but he is talking about another kind of building. He is talking about building the Body of Christ, the Kingdom of God.

As we look around our world we have to acknowledge that there are many rejected stones. Jesus tells us it cannot be that way with us. We must and need to accept all and give each person a place and a role in our life and in our church.

To do that the Psalmist says, you need a ‘heart of flesh within you, not a heart of stone.’

Robert James Birtles, lived and worked in the area for the next 40 years before retiring in 1980. His wife Krista acted as his medical nurse and assistant, they both died in the

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early 1990's and are buried in the church graveyard at Beckford. Each Easter villagers still put flowers on their grave.

Let us pray:

Father take away "the heart of stone within us; place in us a heart of flesh;" that we might love as you love, create as you create, and weep for what you weep, till we too rise in Resurrection.

Amen+

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