

## **Lent 2 2018. St Thomas on The Bourne:**

### **Mark 8, 31...**

*And he began to teach them that the Son of Man had to endure great suffering, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes; to be put to death, and to rise again three days afterwards...*

On the western bank of the River Severn in Glo'stershire is a small town called Lydney. It doesn't have many claims to fame but its history and geography have played a significant part, I believe, in shaping the lives of the townspeople.

During the Industrial Revolution, Lydney became a small port from which timber, iron ore and coal from the Forest of Dean were exported. For a while it had its own small iron foundry...it was actually where my father worked briefly as a young man in the 1920s and early 30s.

But Lydney's most famous son was a composer, a man called Herbert Howells. His family was exceptionally poor but it became clear as he was growing up that he had a rare musical gift. His father Oliver, who was a small-time local builder and handyman, was the organist at the local Baptist chapel. As a child, Herbert Howells deputised for him before later going on to join the choir of the Anglican parish church and to play the organ there.

His musical gift was recognised by a member of the Bathurst family and they arranged for him to have lessons from Herbert Brewer who was the organist at Gloucester Cathedral. So that is where his serious, formal musical education began, and where he studied alongside Ivor Novello (honestly... who, you will know, wrote 'Keep the home fires burning' for WWI and at the end of WWII wrote 'We'll gather lilacs')

Now let me take you in your imagination to Lydney and to the small docks on the Severn Estuary...

It's a late summer's evening, the swallows are flying high, the sun is casting its pearly light across the river...look down-stream to the Bristol Channel, let your mind wander, and you might just begin to hear on the soft breeze the first few bars of a hauntingly lovely anthem: 'Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks'. It was composed by Herbert Howells on January 8th 1941...and is an absolute gem; a treasure, an intensely beautiful piece... our choir will be singing it this morning.

Six years before composing that anthem Herbert Howell's nine year old son, Michael, contracted polio and within three days had died. It was a devastating tragedy and one which haunted Herbert Howells for the rest of his life.

Some of the aching pain of that loss, allied to the quiet beauty of the view down the River Severn is, I believe, to be found in the anthem. It is an anthem which is honest about our humanity. It recognises that all of us, in the depths of our souls, long for God, but it is also tentatively courageous. It recognises that our lives are not always easy and all of us are deeply wounded by loss and grief.

Now why all of this about the anthem?

As you heard at the beginning of this service, Heather Humphreys the Vicar of Tilford died suddenly and unexpectedly on Friday night. The loss for Tilford will be very considerable: but as the

parishioners work through their grief, her bustling generosity and thoughtfulness and pastoral loving-kindness will be remembered with thanksgiving, not least by All Saints First School and by all those in the parish who had come to love and respect her. She will be greatly missed.

Her sudden and unforeseen death will also have an impact here in The Bourne, and not least upon John Morris and Elaine, and on David Adams, David Baker and Andrew Tuck...her close professional colleagues. Please will you not only give thanks for Heather's life and ministry but will you please pray with all your hearts for John, for Elaine, for the other clergy, for the churchwardens here and for the churchwardens at Tilford. It is at times such as this when our faith is called upon to be resilient and strong...for, in spite of our shock, in spite of our sense of personal loss, do we not believe in the glory and the promise of Resurrection? And do we not believe in the great company of all the saints, who surround us and pray for us and who by God's grace will be welcoming Heather into God's nearer presence?

And, as the Broadsheet has announced today, many of us are also mourning the loss of Helen McFarlane, who with such understated grace and unobtrusive faithfulness served this parish and worked assiduously as a member of Alf and Co for decades. She too will be gently missed. We pray for her husband, Bill. And also in the past couple of weeks our parish has lost Monica Gudge and June Coote... stalwart, witty, kind and mischievously lovely members of our community.

It is on a Sunday such as this that we cannot avoid recognising that death is a constant companion to all of us. We simply do not know when death will strike. What we can do, without being morbid about it, is to look death in the face and prepare ourselves. We can pray. We can think. We can learn from our forebears in the faith. We can learn from each other and talk with each other about our fears and hopes, and the place our faith plays in our lives. We can, let's be completely practical, spend a bit of time writing down what music and readings we should like at our own funerals...and, by the way, Rob, I want, if possible, to have 'Like as the hart' at mine...

But then, having done all of that, we must turn to give thanks to God who, in his unbounded compassion and love for humanity, offered himself for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death is not the end; it is the beginning, the gateway into the ineffable riches and beauty of paradise, where our music and the music of the saints and the heavenly host will be as one, and will fill eternity with wonder...

As Pope John Paul II said: 'We are the Easter people and hallelujah is our song...' So may it be. Amen.

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert