

All Saints Sunday, 30th October 2016, Canongate Kirk.

Rejoice in God's saints, today and all days.

As indicated in my recent letter to those on the congregational roll, and now also in the display cabinet out in the foyer, I have been reflecting recently on the Revd Thomas White, who first came to Canongate Kirk 130 years ago in 1886, and retired in 1936 after exactly fifty years serving the parish. In fact he retired just months before his death, and after his funeral service in Canongate on 5th December 1936 he was buried in a family grave in the Grange cemetery. I've suggested in this morning's intimations that I'll hold a short commemoration by his grave on Sunday 4th December this year, almost exactly 80 years to the day of the funeral. Much of his ministry was exercised in difficult times and circumstances – living conditions in the parish were largely grim, defined for long periods by poverty and unemployment, and the state of the church and the manse were not much better. But Thomas White persevered in his work at the Kirk and as chaplain to Calton Jail, and was recognised among those who were struggling as one who was always willing to give a helping hand. Having referred last Sunday to the Nelson Tower ahead of us on Calton Hill, all that is left of Calton Jail, the Governor's House, remains a distinctive part of the skyline in our corner of the city. In his fascinating book "Lost Edinburgh", Hamish Coghill describes how the jail was opened in 1817 to replace the Old Tolbooth, and became in due course the only place where executions were carried out. "In the condemned cell", he writes, "prisoners under sentence of death were fastened by chains to a long iron bar fixed in the wall."

By definition some of those sentences must have been carried out in Thomas White's time and I am confident that he must have ministered to the convicted murderers who found themselves chained to the wall of the condemned cell. With that in mind perhaps it's ironic that a door here in Canongate Kirk was chosen for his memorial, a door by which people could freely come and go, under his initials over the lintel at the back of the King David Aisle. When the door was dedicated at a ceremony in 1954, as part of a major refurbishment of the Kirk, it was said of him, "*When we honour Thomas White we come more into line with heaven's judgements than we usually are. Here was one of those who made little impression on the world, not very wise or brilliant or strong or anything that is commonly held in esteem...yet chosen to confound the false values of the world. For God had real work for him to do and, unseen of men, he did that work faithfully.*" It seems to me that no aspect of his work can have been more unseen than what he did and what he said in the darkness and misery of that condemned cell, unseen and unacknowledged, yet part of that real work God had for him to do, and work I am sure he did faithfully.

*Rejoice in those saints, unpraised and unknown,
Who bear someone's cross, or shoulder their own:
They share our complaining, our comfort, our cares:
What patience in caring, what courage, is theirs.*

All Saints is not just about the great and the good, the "wise or brilliant or strong", it's about remembering and giving thanks for those who worked faithfully and patiently and courageously to the best of their ability to further the Kingdom of God, and inspired us to do likewise. In our corner of that Kingdom we give thanks at this time for Thomas White and for so many like him whose faith and patience and courage are both our inheritance and our inspiration. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.