

Third Sunday of Lent, 19th March 2017; WW1 Centenary Commemoration.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

It's nearly two years since members of the extended Simpson family came here together with representatives of the wider Regimental family of the Royal Scots to commemorate George Simpson, David's older brother, who died in the Gretna Green train crash in May 1915 and who is buried here in Edinburgh with so many of his fellow soldiers at Rosebank Cemetery. George may have been named after their father, but it was David who followed in their father's footsteps by joining The Black Watch. George senior had married a Canongate girl in 1887, and after their marriage George and Ellen Simpson travelled with the Regiment to Gibraltar, where their first son was born in 1890 and duly named after his father and grandfather. In due course George Junior acquired two sisters and a brother, the latter David, who we come to commemorate today. By the time of the census taken in 1911, the boys' father had died of a fever and their mother lived at 3 Forsyth's Close and worked as a charwoman. Appropriately enough Forsyth's Close is part of Whitefoord House today, the Scottish Veterans' Residence towards the foot of the Canongate. David himself at the age of fourteen was an apprentice brass founder but within two years he would have signed up for twelve years in the Army, and unlike his older brother, with The Black Watch, his father's old Regiment. He joined the Second Battalion and when war broke out in August 1914 they were moved from India to France, where serving in the trenches of the Western Front news would eventually have reached him of his big brother's death in the train disaster and where he himself would later fight in the devastating Battle of Loos until they moved east again, this time to Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, to fight the Turks in late 1915. That meant David and his battalion were spared the Battle of the Somme, but the harsh conditions of the desert produced its own challenges and it was there, on 14th March 1917, almost exactly a hundred years ago, that David Simpson was killed in action and his mother and sisters left here in the Canongate to mourn the loss of their only surviving son and brother.

It had been discovered that the Turks were holding an entrenched position around a railway station some twenty miles north of Baghdad, which had just been captured by the British. The Black Watch marched through the night to get there and then, according to one of their diaries, "lay down, gnawed a biscuit, tasted the precious water in our bottles and waited for news of the enemy". When they finally engaged with the enemy later that afternoon, the Black Watch lost a lot of men as they tried to attack in waves through the difficult sandy terrain. One report suggested that "as one leader fell, another took his place. One platoon changed commander six times in as many minutes, but a lance-corporal led the remaining men with the same dash and judgement as his seniors." That lance corporal was David Simpson and he died at 4-15 in the afternoon. Writing to his mother in a letter that must have been delivered to her at home down the road, his company commander said that David was "killed at once while most gallantly leading the left half of his platoon, which more than lived up to its hard fighting reputation by carrying the Turkish trenches in spite of losing three quarters of its men. All his company, in fact all who knew him," he continued, "miss your son very greatly. Always full of life and good spirit, he stuck the long summer in this country splendidly in spite of his youth – and his never-failing liveliness did much to help his comrades stick it too." *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

As it happens all the readings set for today are suitable for the life and death of a desert warrior like David Simpson, who faced for so long the heat and the dust of battle, and

preserved that precious water in his bottle. In the Book of Exodus we heard how the people of Israel travelled through the desert wilderness and became desperate for water until Moses was told by God to strike the rock and let water come out of it so that the people may drink. Romans 5 does not mention water in the desert but it does describe some of the characteristics that were intrinsic to desert warfare, “knowing” as St Paul writes “that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” But perhaps it’s the Gospel reading that rings most true today, the account of the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, Jacob’s Well where Jesus had come to rest about noon, the hottest time of the day when the sun was high in a cloudless sky, beating down on those who were battling with the heat and dust of another day, the long summer in this country was how we heard life in Mesopotamia described, and it could have been applied equally well to Samaria. “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,” Jesus tells the woman of Samaria, “but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, Behold I freely give
The living water, thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live:
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.*

Words by Horatius Bonar, who like previous generations of the Simpson family, lies buried here in our Kirkyard. Ellen is not buried here but like the woman at the well, weary and worn and sad, I like to think that she found a resting-place in this parish church after hearing the news of her second son’s death a hundred years ago. And as we commemorate David Simpson and his sacrifice, let us remember hers too, typical of so many up and down the Canongate in those dark and difficult days; and as Lent unfolds, the forty dark and difficult days and nights that Jesus himself spent hungry and thirsty in the desert, let us give thanks for the life-giving stream that flows from his sacrifice at its source. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* 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.