

Journeying in love

I have three cairns for the theme of today's service – journeying in love.

The first is Florence Allshorn. She was left an orphan at the age three and had rather a miserable childhood in Sheffield. However through links with Sheffield Cathedral she went out to Uganda with the Church Missionary Society in 1920 at the age of 32. On her arrival she was sent to the station of Iganga in Busoga. The climate of the Busoga country is exceptionally unhealthy and enervating. Seven young missionaries had been sent to the Iganga station in as many years, and none had been willing to stay. The difficulty was not only the debilitating and nerve wracking effect of the climate, but also the temperament of the senior woman missionary. She was of the pioneer type and very wiry. When Florence arrived she found the one and only sitting room divided into 2 halves. In the one was cramped together all the senior's furniture; the other half was entirely bare 'That's your half,' she was informed.

Though Florence did not know a word of the language, she was put in charge of the girls' school, the pupils of which knew no English. The other missionary went on her own way, dispensing in the hospital and visiting and left Florence to sink or swim in the school. Work was extremely hard. After coping with an outbreak of plague she said in a letter: "It isn't so much the work itself the gets on top of one, but the bother, jealousy, quarrels, keeping houses in repair and wages up and so little money."

By far the most important event in her four years in Uganda was that she was brought face-to-face with the meaning of love and it was at Iganga that the battle had to be fought and won. Florence describes the situation in a letter written a few months after her arrival:

"My colleague is a dear in some ways but Iganga is a hopeless sort of place. Of the people who have had my job before no one stayed more than a few months, because it's so unhealthy and has made them all ill. My colleague has stuck it; it just happens not to have affected her health, but it is absolutely rotted her nerves, and she has the most dreadful fits of temper. Sometimes she doesn't speak at all for two days. Just now we finished up three weeks of never a decent word or smile."

Florence was brought almost to the point of despair. She had come to the crisis of her life. She writes:

I went down to seven stone and my spirit and soul wilted to the same degree. Then, one day the old African matron came to me when I was sitting on the veranda crying my eyes out. She sat at my feet and after a time she said, 'I have been on this station for 15 years and I've seen you come out, all of you saying you have brought us a saviour, but I have never seen this situation saved yet.' It brought me to my senses with a bang. I was the problem for myself. I knew enough of Jesus Christ to know that the enemy was the one to be loved before you could call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, and I prayed, in great ignorance

as to what it was, that this same love might be in me, and I prayed as I have never prayed in my life for that one thing. Slowly things rightened. Whereas before she had been going around upsetting everybody with long deep dreadful moods, and I had been going into my school depressed and lifeless, both of us found our way to lighten each other. As we two grew together in a new relation the whole character of the work on the station altered. We had some little real love to show to the people on it; they were freer with us, and less uneasy of what sort of attitude they would meet in us when they came. Gradually the whole atmosphere of the place altered.

For a whole year Florence read today's epistle, the 13th chapter of Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians, everyday. Life became an adventure in learning to love instead of the agony it had been before. The older missionary became very fond of Florence, and Florence was able to write in later letters of 'my colleague whom I have come to love very much indeed'.

Notwithstanding the happy change that had come about in her relations with her colleague, after four years the strain of the work and the climate of Iganga began to tell on her and she had to go home to England. It took 2 years for her health to recover but then she started training missionaries for CMS. It was the spiritual regeneration that Florence experienced in Uganda that was the fount of all she taught in later years to successive generations of missionaries. She later went on to found the St Julian's Community. (from pages 25-29)

Her biographer, JH Oldham, writes: "Love for Florence was not a duty but a passion. It was the end, and the glory of life." (Page 120) Elsewhere he says: "The Christian life was for Florence not painful conformity to a code but a splendid adventure in search of truth and beauty. She wrote to a friend, "I don't think you will get out by being gooder, but by flinging something to the winds. Don't pray to be made gooder but to be made looser and lighter. It's the poets and lovers who get there." (Page 156)

My next offering is very brief. People who have been found guilty of child abuse especially paedophiles can have a very hard time when they are released from prison. In particular it is desperately difficult for them to make friends. In various parts of the country Quakers have set up circles of friendship for such people. How is that for Christian love in practice?

My last cairn is George Herbert's poem *Love*. I find it is a marvellous poem to have in mind, or perhaps I should say on heart, when approaching communion.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here;'

Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,

Who made the eyes but I?'

Truth, Lord: but I have marr'd them; let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down, says Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.

The section on Florence Allshorn is taken from JH Oldham, *Florence Allshorn and the Story of St Julian's*, London, SCM Press, 1951