

MOUNT ZION SILENCE by MARY THOMSON

It was never quiet up here;
there was always a living to be got -
hear that squeal? - a wild boar
pierced by a hunters spear
when bronze was a new metal.

A mutter of voices around a fire
in the lee of the hill where they dug clay,
keening for the dead,
a pyre burning,
an urn burial.

Tramp of boots, creak of wheels,
Roman squaddies, weavers carts,
hammering quarries,
stones clinking into place
for sheep folds.

Chattering streams,
mill wheels thumping,
cogs and crank shafts rattling,
incessant din of shuddering looms,
clogs clattering home.

Then stone upon stone
a chapel arose:
namesake for heaven,
a house of prayer.

Mount Zion's walls enfold us.
With world and weather muted,
we step into the solace
of silence.

Outside in the graveyard behind Mount Zion chapel there is a grave and memorial to an early sexton, Simeon Priestley, whose service and qualities are very much celebrated on his gravestone. However, his wife, Hannah Priestley, gets simply the date of her death, her age, and this quotation: *"She hath done what she could"*.

At first, as a 21st century woman, I found this very patronising, but when I understood that the quotation comes from the gospel of Mark, I found that the words were those of Jesus, and I thought again.

Mark tells us Jesus said: "She hath done what she could," after a woman had broken a jar of precious ointment and anointed Him. His disciples thought this a waste and said it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus tells them that her act was one of devotion and worship, and at the time, all she had to give. I was moved to write the following poem for Hannah.

HANNAH'S HANDS by MARY THOMSON

Against his *"quaint sayings"* she is mute.
Against his *"striking originality"* she is shy.
Against his *"sterling piety"* hers is a mystery.
Against his *"unwavering zeal"* she lives for us
as his wife, and her date, on his stone.

Imagine her strong fingers,
calloused and chapped,
reddened by soda and wind,
nails grimed with soot or flour rimmed,
smelling of herbs, beeswax or soap
because Hannah's hands must have
sifted, kneaded, baked,
peeled, chopped, pared, stoned, stewed,
scrubbed, rinsed, pegged, folded,
swept, mopped, swilled, polished,
waxed, buffed, shone, tidied,
dug, weeded, hoed, pulled,
picked, dried, pickled,
knitted, sewed, darned,
birthed, held, lost,
prayed, obeyed,
taught.

"She hath done all she could"
not damning with faint praise,
but describing her hands' busyness
as daily acts of devotion.