

REFLECTION: THE MAN WHO DIED OF AN INTERNAL FIRE

The world he lived in was both like our own, yet very different.

He lived most of his life in Venice. At the time the richest city in the world. A city famous for its indulgent sensuality—it boasted more prostitutes than anywhere else in Europe—and for a savage penal system Judith Collins would have been proud of. A city attracting huge numbers of tourists and fortune seekers from all over the world. A society ruled by its insanely-rich business leaders, about fifty of them. A glamorous city, with its Hollywood-style celebrities and its theatres and concert halls. A bustling city where you were taxied about in sedan chairs and gondolas—if you could afford them. A world where the arts and culture were patronised by the wealthy, for their usefulness for competition and arrogant display. A world where Church and State were closely allied, and faith wasn't taken too seriously by those at the top. A powerful Western trading nation, threatened by the rise of an equally powerful and ambitious Muslim Empire, with border wars and naval incidents threatening the peace.

His grandfather was a baker and a good Catholic, living in a small provincial town in Northern Italy. His talent was making good bread. When grandfather died, his widow took her son off to Venice. He inherited his father's skill: when he married he wrote down his occupation in the marriage register as baker. There are stories that he also became a barber; perhaps, like so many New Zealanders living on the edge of poverty, he worked at both jobs part-time to support his family.

But someone nurtured that little boy's talent for music and taught him how to play the violin; he became good at it—so good that by the age of 28 he had won a place in the orchestra of St Mark's Cathedral. No more baking or shaving for him now.

Giovanni Battista Vivaldi and his wife had at least six children over a period of eleven years. But things didn't start well for them. Their first child—they were to name him Antonio—was such a sickly baby at birth, so likely to die, that he wasn't baptised until six weeks later, and then by the midwife, not by a priest. And would you believe it, Antonio was born in the middle of an earthquake (of the kind that still jolts Italy). Try to imagine that, if you can...in the aftermath of our own earthquakes in Christchurch and Wellington. What must it have been like for the mother?

It is possible that in her terror she vowed that her son would become a priest if he survived; it is also a fact that for such a poor family a free education could only be got through the Church. Whatever the reason, the boy was trained for priesthood. At the age of 15 he was tonsured; over the next years he became successively a church doorkeeper, a bible-reader, an exorcist (!) and an altar boy. He was made a sub-deacon at the age of twenty-one, a deacon the following year and finally at the age of 24 he was ordained a priest.

Then tragedy struck. Only one year after his ordination (his commitment to the Church and to a life of celibacy) severe illness forced him to give up the supreme responsibility and honour for a priest, the celebration of the Mass. Three times, he tells us, he had to abandon the service he was leading because of a 'tightness of the chest', which left him unable to breathe. The doctors of the time could do nothing; we now know it was asthmatic bronchitis—which probably went back to the circumstances of his difficult birth.

Thousands of people suffer asthma today: some of its symptoms are constant coughing (which gets worse at night), a feeling of constriction in the chest, inability to breathe and even difficulty in talking. For the rest of his life the young priest endured the ailment which finally killed him 37 years later.

The funeral register of St Stephen's cathedral in Vienna reads, 'The Reverend Antonio Vivaldi, secular priest, died of 'internal fire' at the age of 63, and was buried in the hospital grounds.' What life was like for him we learn from a letter: 'I have not celebrated Mass for 25 years and I shall never do so again because since birth I have suffered from a complaint which makes me woefully short of breath. I almost never leave my house and only travel by gondola or coach because of the tightness in my chest. No gentleman of standing invites me to his house because all of them know of my infirmity. Immediately after the midday meal I can usually move about, but never on foot. If I should describe it, it is like burning with internal fire....'

So, what you do at twenty-five, facing a life-sentence of disabling illness, and disqualified from the profession you have spent 9 years training for?

Vivaldi was saved by his father's gift of music. (And his father was to live for a further 11 years, supporting his son to the last—we hear of him taking a year's leave of absence from the St Mark's orchestra to accompany his son to Vienna and Prague.)

Because Giovanni Vivaldi, the baker and barber turned violin player, had passed on his own skills to his oldest son, Antonio was now able to offer to do the same as a violin teacher to the girls at one of largest orphanages in Venice, the Ospedale della Pieta, which cared for foundlings, orphans and the illegitimate children of dissolute noblemen, giving them an education which would fit them for adult life beyond the orphanage. Until virtually the end of his life, Antonio Vivaldi served these children and young women, teaching them musical skills, writing music for them to perform, and arranging and leading concerts at which they could show off their own emerging talents.

He did so with a huge expenditure of energy and imagination: we hear of his contract to send two concertos a month, even when he was travelling abroad—for which he received one ducat per concerto. And it can't have been an easy job. There were the gifted girls who responded readily to Vivaldi's instruction, but many of the children, abandoned at birth, orphaned or illegitimate, must have shown in their behaviour the effects of the same psychological traumas which have afflicted many of the children in our own orphanages or placement under state care.

There isn't time to tell of his other careers as a violin virtuoso, a teacher of international students, a writer of operas which made him famous throughout Europe, or of the concerts he put on at Rome, Amsterdam, Prague and Vienna, on official leave from the Ospedella. He filled the world of his time and our own world with glorious music, and as more than one critic and scholar has pointed out, this disabled, pain-filled composer made every new composition, every successful operatic production, every brilliant concert performance a sign of his triumph over his infirmity. Better still, he gave to his hundreds of pupils at the huge orphanage the power to make music in their own disabled lives, and have the chance for a good life for themselves.

We can never be Vivaldis, but we can, like him, liberate whatever gift God has given us, and exercise it to God's glory and for the love of our neighbours—whoever they may be.

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