

## FLORENCE LI TIM-OI

*Christopher Hall preached at the service on 24 January 2004 at St Martin in the Fields when an icon of Li Tim Oi made by Revd Dr Ellen Francis OSH was dedicated. Christopher directed his words to Florence Li Tim Oi in the form of a letter:*

Dear Florence, or should I call you Tim-Oi ?

Tim-Oi was the name your father gave you to demonstrate that you were his Much Beloved Daughter – to demonstrate that he was not disappointed not to have a son. Florence was the name you chose at your baptism. Florence Nightingale was your role model. You later tended the wounded when Canton was bombed. Did you know that she too felt called to priesthood, but was denied it? May I call you Florence – the name we used when you stayed with us twenty years ago? Do you remember getting up before breakfast to write my father's name in Chinese to go on the cover of his biography? I remember you being so anxious to get it right.

Florence, what are your reactions to what we are doing today? I imagine you showing the same child-like pleasure as when you were welcomed back with firecrackers on your Return to Hepu in 1987 – puzzled at first and then jiggling up and down clapping with joy.

Sixty years ago you could never have imagined that the Episcopal Church in the United States would today be observing this Anniversary of your Priesting in its Calendar, or that the Anglican Cathedral in Seattle is marking today with a daylong event. You could not have imagined that I would have been in Minneapolis last year testifying on your behalf – nor certainly did I – and as a result here we are, and here is Sister Ellen Francis all the way from New York with the icon of you she has written – a commission she accepted with alacrity, because she had written about you in her doctorate on the ordination of women.

No saint claims to be a saint, and neither did you – except in so far as we are all called to be saints. In 1987 when Bob Browne was making the film Return to Hepu, you said to him: "I am just an earthen vessel with God's treasure inside me." No saint would claim more than that for herself. Yet here we have an icon of you with a halo. Just as I was writing this letter to you, by the grace of God, an Orthodox priest was explaining on Radio 4 his understanding of an icon. Every human being, he said, is made in the image of God. So when we look on an icon of a human being, we are to see, in it and through it, the



image of God. So when we, and others after us, come and stand before this icon of you, we are to see the treasure of God in your earthen vessel. I hope you are happy with that.

Sixty years ago what did my father and you talk over before he made you a priest in the Church of God? You told Ted Harrison, your biographer, that my father talked to you about lifelong priesthood, not of the momentous step you both were taking. After his death Ursula Niebuhr wrote to my mother saying that in 1942 my father had visited her and Reinhold. They had agreed that, if women were to be ordained in the episcopal tradition, then someone needed to do it first. The bishop knew then that there you were in neutral Macau, in pastoral charge of the congregation, and you and they were cut off from priestly ministry following the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. When he returned to the vast part of his diocese in South China early in 1943, you probably did not know

that he wrote to his brother bishops in China saying that he would ordain you when it was possible for you two to meet.

Did my father tell you that he was tempted to give you a new name – Cornelia? He recognised, even if you did not, that to ordain a woman was equivalent to Peter baptising the gentile Cornelius – quite contrary to the then understanding of God's will. Peter had been shown that, contrary to Jewish belief, gentiles were not unclean – and neither are women. What mattered to my father, as mattered to Peter, was that God had already given to you the gift of priesthood, which for three years you had been licensed to exercise, and your ministry had been manifestly blessed. Who was he to deny what God had already done?

You said to Bob Browne: "I know I'm not a diamond. Beautiful diamonds experience many cuttings and polishing." Florence dear, that most certainly was what you experienced: first from the Purple Guards, the episcopal vigilantes, whose minion persuaded you to resign your licence to exercise your priesthood. What must that have cost you for the next 30 years or so? You were, however, still seen to be a priest. In 1993 I met a Sri Lankan in Colombo who told me he had been puzzled in the early '50s seeing a woman in Canton wearing her stole priest-wise. I told him your story.

Soon after that the government in Beijing closed all churches and stopped ministers exercising their ministry. You told me you dare not then be seen with your Christian friends, lest you get them into trouble. I asked you how then could you worship. You said: "I just went up the mountain to pray. Nobody knew." Did you remember what St Paul wrote to Christians at Rome: "Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope"? Your character gave us hope and does so still.

There was much more suffering in store for you. Re-education in Beijing nearly drove you to suicide, but knowledge of your priesthood carried you through. Later the Red Guards came knocking on your door – more than once. You surrendered not only what might have been of value to them, also what was of no value to them but precious to you. They made you cut up your priestly vestments with scissors. You certainly experienced many cuts, but you were polished by the grace of God into a beautiful diamond. Today we celebrate your diamond jubilee.

At my suggestion your sister Rita accompanied you in your 80th year on that trip back to China. Your pastoral antennae were as sharp as ever. Do you remember late one evening in Guangzhou you insisted on responding to some personal crisis? Bob Browne overheard you arguing with Rita. She said: "Tim-Oi, you're retired. It's not your problem." You responded: "Rita, you no tough guy like me!" and off you went to give your care.

When we visited you in Toronto for what was to be the last time, there were five of us round your hospital bed, and you were ministering to us.

That reminds me of the text on which you chose to preach in Bolton 20 years ago: "Having loved his own, he loved them unto the end." That was your own experience. It was also true of your priesthood: You loved your sisters and brothers to the end.

You know Rita's so proud of you now, even if, when first you had heard your call to ministry in Hong Kong cathedral, she tried to dissuade you from becoming a 'bible woman' as she put it. Ten years ago she made the Li Tim-Oi Foundation possible, and now 130 women have been helped to fulfil their vocations just as you were helped. Edidah Mujinya was one of the first. She sent me a Christmas card from Uganda. In a note she described herself and her sisters as 'daughters' of Li Tim-Oi. Let me tell you: you now have 130 daughters in Brazil, Burundi, Fiji, Kenya, Lesotho, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Africa, the Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. What a family for you to mother! – and with God's help and ours it will go on growing. Pray for us as we strive to make that happen.

In this eucharist we give God thanks for you and for all you mean to us. Words by Sydney Carter were adapted for my father's epitaph. They are equally true of you: "She showed us how the Christ she talked about is living now."

