



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Advent Good News – The Italian Chapel

December 4, 2016

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In 1942, 1300 Italian POWs, captured in North Africa were sent to the Orkney Isles, the second most northern part of Scotland, to help with the building of what were called the Churchill Barriers. Three years earlier, a German U-boat had slipped into the waters between the islands and sunk the HMS Royal Oak, a battleship at anchor in the port. 833 crew members were lost. Orkney's location made it strategically important to the war effort and to safeguard the many ships of the British Navy that put in for fueling and supplies, something had to be done to foil the invisible U-boats. The plan was to build a series of causeways between the islands. The only problem was the lack of an available labor pool. Most able bodied men were off at a front somewhere and women were doing everything else. Enter the Italian POWs. 600 of them were housed at a POW camp on the small island of Lamb Holm.

Most of us grew up with movies like *The Great Escape*, *Stalag 17*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and even the more lighthearted *Hogan's Heroes* as our knowledge base of POWs during WWII. We didn't know much about the prisoners captured by the Allies. I at least remember the stories that my step-mother told of having German POWs working on her farm in Upstate New York. She remembered how delighted the men were when her son, a chubby toddler, came along as she brought them lunch. They would hold Dave on their laps and showed my mom photos of their families. They were regular homesick dads and brothers and sons and she apparently felt no anxiety having them there. They seemed to enjoy the farm work – it had to have been better than being at the Russian front.

Anyway, the story of the Italian POWs on the little island of Lamb Holm on Orkney is in a class by itself. One small difference was that a year after arriving, Italy surrendered and so their status changed but they still had to remain guests of the British government. They were allowed a measure of freedom as they continued their work on the Barriers and so they set about making their camp more to their liking. Concrete was plentiful so they paved pathways, and planted gardens. They build themselves a theater, a recreation hut with three billiard tables, all made from concrete. There was also a sculpture of St. George in the camp, made out of barbed wire and concrete. The artist's name was Domenico Chiocchetti.

Also in 1943, a new commander came to the camp, Major Thomas Pyres Buckland. He was approached Father Giacobazzi, the camp chaplain, Chiocchetti the artist and some of the prisoners with a request. They had no place to worship and would like to build a chapel. Major Buckland was in favor of the idea and provided two Nissen huts which they placed end to end and the work began.

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Chiocchetti became the chief designer and artistic general of his troops. Their creativity was turned loose to the glory of God. The interior of the sanctuary end of the chapel was covered with plaster board, Chiocchetti built an altar out of concrete. It is flanked with two windows fitted with painted glass. The POWs pooled their own money from the small stipend they were paid, to purchase the gold fabric curtains. A baptismal font was made from the inside of a car exhaust and covered with concrete. The light holders were fashioned from corned beef tins.

Another prisoner had been a blacksmith back home and he spent months making a wrought iron rood screen separating the sanctuary from the nave. And finally Chiocchetti started the painting. The entire interior looks as if it is made of Italian marble and bricks, with decorative plaster work – but it's all just paint. Chiocchetti recruited all who could be taught to help with the painting – but he did most of it himself. A charming façade was created for the front of the chapel, complete with a bell. Soon the Nissen huts were a house of prayer, a thing of beauty. And then suddenly, the war was over and the men were sent to a camp in Yorkshire. Domenico Chiocchetti was allowed to stay behind and complete the baptismal font for his masterpiece. When he left, the Lord Lieutenant of Orkney assured him that the Orcadians would look after the chapel that they had built with such love. And the Orcadians have kept that promise. It is one of the most visited sites on the Orkney Isles.

In 1960, the BBC funded Domenico's return to Orkney. He did some restoration work and there was a service of rededication with over 200 Orcadians in attendance and it was broadcast in Italy. Domenico returned once more in 1964 with his wife and he made a gift of 14 wooden stations of the cross. Finally something not made of concrete. Then in 1992, 50 years after the Italians were brought to Orkney, 8 of the former prisoners returned to see their little chapel so lovingly preserved. Domenico was not one of them, he was too ill to travel, but his daughter sang *Panis Angelicus* during a mass.

100,000 people a year visit this little chapel, this moving memorial to reconciliation and kindness in the midst of a brutal war. Shortly after visiting the Italian Chapel, Peter and I happened to see the movie *The Railway Man*, about the building of a railroad in Burma by Allied POWs. More than 12,000 POWs died along with untold numbers of civilians. The Japanese lieutenant in charge of the building was convicted as a war criminal and sentenced to death. The torture and deprivation and inhumanity in Burma was thrown into stark contrast with the charming little white chapel, built with the approval and support of the camp commander and guards, the captors and lovingly maintained by those against whom war had been declared. The Italian Chapel is proof that heaven can be found, indeed created, even in the midst of a war. It's all about the choices that we make, what we allow ourselves to see. It's about the kind of people we choose to be.

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This is the message of Advent...wake up and the Spirit of the Lord will be upon you...

Do not judge by what your eyes may see, or decide by what your ears may hear; but choose righteousness and decide with equity and be like a little child who has not learned to hate but knows only love.

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