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## Hoping and Doing -- Leaving a Footprint on History

by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade

The current divisions in our nation tend to make conversations cautious. We have reason to fear tripping on one of the political, racial, gender, and historic lines that crisscross our common life.

Robert Shirley (1629-1656) lived in similar circumstances and provides a model for us. The particulars of his story do not commend themselves to everyone at every time, but his final epitaph is a footprint on history we all might wish to leave.

The context for his short life was the English Civil War (1642-1651) when King Charles I was executed by forces identified with Oliver Cromwell. The differences between Cromwell's Roundheads and the royalist Cavaliers were many and varied. When open hostilities ended with the royalist defeat in 1651, the differences continued to simmer, much as ours did after Appomattox. As was so often the case in those days, political differences found expression in religious practice.

Robert Shirley was a royalist who came into his inheritance, an estate known as Staunton Harold in the East Midlands, at the age of 17. He quickly joined several clandestine plots to overthrow Cromwell's Protectorate and restore the Stuart monarchy. His activities raised suspicion and cost him six months in prison.

His religious expression was far less subtle. While churches throughout England were being stripped of imagery, Sir Robert built the Church of the Holy Trinity on his estate. Defiantly, the new church had an altar, candles and much more guaranteed to boil the blood of Puritans. While not against the law, it was clearly against convention. The disapproving authorities

proclaimed that since Sir Robert had the funds to build a church, he should also outfit one of Cromwell's warships. Refusal to do so landed the young nonconformist back in prison where he died at the age of 27.

Robert Shirley's covert and overt actions in a time of national tension may or may not suggest appropriate actions for us in our day. But his epitaph above the door of Holy Trinity Church suggests a code of conduct for which we all might wish to be remembered:

**SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY, BARONET ...  
WHOSE SINGULAR PRAISE IT IS, TO HAVE DONE THE BEST THINGS IN YE WORST OF TIMES,  
AND HOPED THEM IN THE MOST CALAMITOUS.**

What is required for one to leave such a memory? The essential thing is to be counterintuitive. The "worst of times" tend to make us self-centered, protective of what is ourselves and our own. The Robert Shirleys of this world turn in the opposite direction – outward, toward others and in service to broader principles. In a similar manner, hoping tends toward passivity, keeping an eye on the horizon, an ear cocked for the distant sound of bugles or the flutter of rescuing angels. Simple hope usually seeks something outside of oneself rather than inside. The best kind of hope looks inside to where one's attitudes, actions, and accountabilities are formed.

Those who, in times of pandemic and protest, would leave a footprint similar to that of Sir Robert need not enter into clandestine plots or endow countercultural landmarks, but they do need to act in the interest of others and dare to be the agents of their own best hopes.