Sunday 22 May 2016
Trinity Sunday
Shakespeare 400

On this Trinity Sunday as we commemorate 400 years since Shakespeare's death, we recall God the Father who is the maker who casts himself as a player in the drama of mankind as the person of Jesus Christ who himself leaves an impact upon the world in the person of the Holy Spirit. The drama of the Holy Trinity is an ideal theological device through which to understand more about the impact of Shakespeare on the human spirit and, just as this Eucharist is about our redemption, so let us see how the passage of Shakespeare's drama mirrors divine redemption – in the same way that the human maker mirrors the divine maker.

The mediaeval guildhall in Stratford-upon-Avon which now houses King Edward VI School which William Shakespeare would have attended was the venue in the late sixteenth century for groups of travelling players who came to this busy and successful market town in the midlands to entertain the locals in the days before multiplex cinemas and BBC1 on a Saturday night.

Playing day at Stratford was an eagerly-awaited treat and, in the 1560s, the local mayor John Shakespeare took his family along to sit proudly in the front row. John and his wife Mary sat there with a certain pride and nonchalance perhaps. Here was the first citizen by whose authority the travelling players had been permitted to appear.

He had also – we presume – given them permission to use the adjacent council chamber as their dressing room. Although, in fact, it was better known as the 'agreeing room' or – in good Warwickshire dialect – the 'greein' room and thus the first green room of its kind in theatre history.

On the back wall, behind the players on the stage, a thick layer of white wash concealed the badge of the ancient Guild of the Holy Cross whose meeting room this temporary theatre had been until the Guild was suppressed in the middle of the century. Today, the whitewash carefully removed, you can just about make out the cross bearing the crucified Christ and flanked by Our Lady and St John the Evangelist like ghosts looking out at you from the past.

But, although these controversial symbols of man's redemption lay concealed under a palimpsest of political expediency, the drama that unfolded in front of them was no less concerned with man's destiny or with the state of his soul. The travelling players had in their repertoire stories about King Lear and Henry V and, a few seats along from Mr Mayor, a young boy called William, sat enthralled – his face shining, his heart racing, and his mind ticking.

In the 1880s, the headmaster of King Edward VI School, Robert Laffan, summed it all up in a poem he wrote called 'Guildhall' when he refers to the house in Henley Street – still visited today by millions of tourists – as the birthplace of Shakespeare's flesh; but the guildhall as the birthplace of his soul.

And, in all of our musings on the legacy of Shakespeare's plays in this significant year, we must not overlook the fact that one of his earliest experiences was of theatre and that, when he wrote for the stage himself, he was an actor in his own troupe – so that we are talking about a practitioner and not a mere theorist.

This man slapped on the grease paint with as much vigour as he plunged his quill into the ink.

The religious controversy of the age was another reality which made theology a visceral experience which was literally a matter of life or death: the life or death of your body, not to mention the life or death of your soul.

And today, at a time when humanity has come of age and no longer needs the promise of eternal felicity to guarantee a good time in this life, we fail to grasp the sheer agony of doubt which hung over sixteenth century mortals as to whether, in the world to come, they would know heaven or hell.

Life was a problem that needed resolving if people were to experience comedy rather than tragedy.

And, at that point, we have to pause and consider this word: comedy. We might be excused – in the days of situation comedy and stand up comedy – to believe that comedy is all about making people laugh. That is merely one facet of the comedic devices of the stage. It is much more about resolution or – to put it in Christian terms – about redemption.

In a Shakespearean comedy, a series of problems are presented to the audience all of which will be resolved by the end of the play. In a Shakespearean tragedy, a series of problems are created by the central character who is then destroyed by the problems he has created.

There's much more to it than that of course but Shakespeare's average theatre goer would have yearned for the experience of Claudio in Measure for Measure or Hermione in The Winter's Tale and dreaded the experience of Iago in Othello or Gertrude in Hamlet.

In Christian theology, God shifts the blame and gives people a second chance. And this is what happens in Shakespearean comedy. In Measure

for Measure, Claudio is in fact guilty of the crime attributed to him – a moral crime of which his accuser is also in effect guilty. Only by withdrawing and disguising himself as a monk can the Duke see people for what they really are: he shifts the blame and Claudio's life is saved – but so by a combination of example and just dessert is Angelo 'saved' in the more Christian sense of that word.

Likewise in The Winter's Tale, jealousy causes Leontes to abuse his wife wrongfully and shamefully. She feigns death until the moment later in life when she hears her husband shift the blame from her to himself when he admits his faults and she returns to his side in a coup de theatre which is unrivalled in any of Shakespeare's plays.

For the Christian, to watch these plays – these comedies – is to sense, behind the whitewash, the cross of Christ rising above the conundrum and pointing to a divine comedy in which God has shifted the blame and given us a second chance. It's as if Jesus has acted out the prologue and the epilogue of our lives even before we have experienced the seven ages of man.

Shakespeare himself was obliged to be careful even if he did want to portray theological devices in his plays: tampering with Church doctrine on the stage was a capital offence so that, if Shakespeare wanted to play to people's religious anxiety about God, heaven and hell, he had to do so under the chimera of other dramatic devices.

The best example comes at the end of As You Like It when one senses that so many complicated relationships have been formed that even Shakespeare can't quite work out how to resolve them all if audience members are to get home before dark. And so, as the characters all stand awaiting their fate, the god Hymen alights upon the scene and, in

a brilliant speech of perfect word economy, resolves and redeems in equal measure – sending everyone away, yes, 'happily ever after'.

I remember a brilliant production of this play in Stratford in 1985. The play opened in Duke Ferdinand's state apartments in which a grandfather clocked ticked sonorously and resolutely. When Rosalind set off into the Forest of Arden to find her banished father, the rightful Duke, the clock remained on set but shrouded in a white dust cloth and almost imperceptibly the ticking stopped.

At the end of the play, when Hymen's speech concluded, the shroud fell to the ground and, through an extended silence, the clock began to tick again: reminding us that – despite the moments of glory to which we are occasionally party in life – the world always rolls back into place and we mere mortals must await our destiny while time like an ever rolling stream bears all its sons away.

But where it bears them was and is the great question of Shakespeare's age and our age and it is in the nature of our common humanity that we desire comedy not tragedy; mercy not sacrifice.

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