

## A Sermon Preached by Rt Revd John Stroyan, Bishop of Warwick at St Mary's Warwick for the *Warwick Words* Literary Festival 2009

A story is told of the artist James McNeill Whistler. A woman came up to him at one of his London exhibitions and said: 'I came in along the Thames today and do you know, Mr Whistler, it was just one long series of little Whistlers.' To which Whistler replied: 'Yes Madam, nature is gradually catching up.' His paintings had helped this woman to see, as it were, through the doors of his perception. Today I want to reflect on one whom Coleridge called 'the greatest genius that perhaps human nature has yet produced, our myriad-minded Shakespeare', one whose influence on our language, our culture and indeed our 'way of seeing' has been unique.

The question 'How much of Shakespeare did Shakespeare actually write?' though pertinent still to some scholars of Shakespeare and topical to members of St.Mary's Warwick - for whom the answer might be tantalisingly close - is not one I am seeking to answer. Instead, I want to reflect on the capacity of literature - indeed of the arts - in the economy of God, to 'lead us into us into truth', or to borrow from St Paul to '*enlarge our hearts*'. I will be doing this through the lens of 'our own' Shakespeare.

The writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge played at least a tangential role in my own journey of faith. I remember being struck when I read in my late teens these words of his from *Aids to Reflection*.

'He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own church better than Christianity and end by loving himself better than all.' [*Aids to Reflection*.]

The artist's warning to the Church not to be blinkered by putting the Church and the things of the Church before God, or putting '*Christianity*' - that is what people have made of the Gospel of Christ - before Christ Himself who *is* the Way, the Truth and the Life. This kind of ecclesiasticism, this regarding of the church as a self-authenticating 'thing in itself' is actually an obstacle to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, to borrow Lear, it '*smells of mortality*'. If artists are indeed, as Ezra Pound puts it, '*the antennae of the race*', they more quickly than most will detect the 'smell of mortality', the smell that comes from the Church which is not centred on God but itself. Jesus said '*I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness*.' John 10.10. And Irenaeus '*the glory of God is a human being fully alive*.'

How far is this life to be found in the Church? In your life or mine? Is our faith bringing us to *life*? Or is it simply making us more religious?

How do the artists answer this question, the artists who know that it should be?

Blake writes in 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' of the intrusion into the Garden of Love of the Chapel with 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door and the gates of the Chapel were shut and '*priests in black gowns were walking their rounds and binding with briars my joys and desires*.' How easily can organised religion smother the freedom for which Christ has set us free and inhibit what Paul calls '*the glorious liberty of the children of God*.' More recently, RS Thomas, the Welsh priest poet, writes sweepingly of Protestantism as:

*'The adroit castrator of the arts  
the bitter negation of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy.'*

And many would agree that the moralism and the scholastic and philosophical theology of the western Church have eclipsed the sense of the *beauty* of God we find so clearly rooted in the Scriptures and embedded in (eastern) Orthodox theology. Our English translations often miss the nuancing of the Hebrew and Greek texts. In Genesis 1, when God created, after each act of creation, he looked and '*saw that it was beautiful*'. The Psalmist writes '*Behold, the beauty of the Lord*' (Ps 27.4). Jesus says '*I am the beautiful shepherd, the beautiful shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.' (John 10.11) Protestantism

particularly and Catholicism frequently neglected *beauty* as an attribute of God and have forgotten that humanity, male and female, is made in the image of the *Creator* God. In fact Aquinas puts it simply: *In God there is perfect fecundity*. We are made to be creative and creativity means breaking new ground. So what? So this. Two points before we go any further.

First, how badly we, as Church, need to welcome and embrace the God-given gifts of creative artists. And as part of this, we need perhaps gently to point contemporary artists back to the most life-giving inspiration for all that is good and beautiful and true, namely the revelation of God in Christ. As the well-known atheist, Marghanita Laski has written:

*Since the Renaissance... it's been all too sadly apparent that in all the arts there has been no inspiration comparable with the inspiration that religion gave. There have been no words for secular music to compare with the music of a Mass. I certainly think that belief in God did give a shaping and a pattern for life for which I can see no conceivable substitute.*

Second, and for more *personal* reflection, we need to recognise too that the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters within the depths of our own being. Are we, each of us, truly open to what God would give birth to in and through us?

Not very long ago Pope John Paul 2 said this: *'We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity who have shared to the full the joys and hopes, the anguish and the sadness of our day.'*

Today I want to speak of Shakespeare as an 'expert in humanity', as one who was -to borrow Wordsworth - *'alive to all that is enjoyed and all that is endured.'* The sheer breadth and depth of his understanding of human nature in its greatness and in its frailty is breathtaking. As George Steiner put it, 'In the playhouse of Shakespeare no variety of feeling, no element from the crucible of human experience was alien to his purpose.'

This bringing to light the truth of our humanity in all its nobility and its ignobility, in its comedy and in its tragedy is like all true art, like the work of the Holy Spirit indeed, both *revealing* and *healing*. As the French writer Emile Zola put it, *'We simply paint humanity as we find it, we say **let all be made known that all may be healed.**'* -The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring the truth to the light, to bring to the light things now hidden in darkness. Revealing for healing. Revealing for transforming.

To read Shakespeare, or better, to watch Shakespeare or better still, as the French put it, 'assist[er] à', to participate in the drama, to help create the holy space (to use the language of Peter Brook), is through our laughter and our tears, through our pity and our fear, to grow in the truth. And in growing in the truth, in the words of Simone Weil, we sooner or later fall into the arms of the One who is Himself the Truth, Jesus Christ.

Shakespeare's plays thankfully are not sermons but there is manifestly within them much as Sonnet 29 reminds us which:

*'like to the lark at break of day  
arising from sullen earth  
sings at heaven's gate.'*

He is not writing to instruct the public in Christian theology or morals - there are plenty of others doing just that. But his work is full of the language and themes of the Scriptures, of Christian liturgy and preaching. As A L Rowse concludes, 'Of all Shakespeare's "sources" the Bible and the Prayer Book come first and are the most constant.'

His plays also reveal a close familiarity with the Homilies. The first volume of these written by Cranmer and others was published in 1547. The second volume written by John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury,

Archbishop Matthew Parker and others was published in 1563. They were required to be read out in parish churches throughout the land. [They still form, as evidenced in Article 35 of the 39 Articles of Religion, official Anglican doctrine.]

One of the earliest of the Homilies has the cheerful title 'Of the Misery of all Mankind'. In it, the author [Archdeacon John Harpsfield] writes that: 'The aim of the Holy Ghost is to pull down man's vainglory and pride' - an aim which inspires many of the utterances of Jacques, of Hamlet, of Lear and of Timon - 'and to teach us,' it goes on: 'the most commendable virtue of humility, how to know ourselves and to remember what we be of ourselves.' Words which could suitably preface many of Shakespeare's plays. Words which are indeed picked up by the wounded Lear in his sermon to his brother in suffering Gloucester:

I will preach to thee, mark, ...to consider what we be,  
whereof we be, from whence we came and whither we  
shall...we all come into this world and go out of the same in like sort,  
that is, as of ourselves full miserable.'

There are many such resonances between the Homilies and Shakespeare.

One of the great preachers of Shakespeare's day was Henry Smith. He preached at St Clement Danes in the Strand at about the time Shakespeare was spending his so-called apprentice years in London. Smith was an inspiring and imaginative preacher -eulogised by many not least Shakespeare's fellow dramatist, Thomas Nash. He died in 1591 and whether or not Shakespeare heard him preach, he may well have read his sermons which were published in 1593.

Jacques' famous 'seven ages' speech '*All the world's a stage ...*' may well take its inspiration from these words from one of Smith's sermons:

'While we play our pageants upon this stage of short continuance, every man hath a part, some longer and some shorter and while the actors are at it suddenly death steps upon the stage like a hawk...there falls one of the actors dead before them and makes all the rest aghast, they muse and mourn, and bury him, and then to the sport again.'

There are many further echoes of Smith in Shakespeare not least from Smith's sermon on 'the warring conscience and the gnawing conscience' a profound exploration of sin and guilt developed by Shakespeare so hauntingly in Macbeth and also Othello. In betraying others, we betray ourselves. Few can teach us more about the drama of a guilty conscience than Shakespeare.

But to move on: It is said that after the death of Prince Albert, while the Queen was in deep sorrow, there was a Bishop at Windsor who tried to comfort her. 'Do remember, ma'am, that Jesus Christ is now your husband.' The Queen paused for a moment before replying:

'That, Bishop, is TWADDLE, ABSOLUTE TWADDLE.'

There is a danger on this sort of occasion of wrapping Shakespeare in the cloak of Christian piety, of making a too easy equation between Shakespeare and Christianity. His intentions cannot possibly be domesticated in such a way and any attempt to do should command an equally robust rebuke!

Reputable scholars *have*, however, interpreted Shakespeare's works in overtly Christian terms. Scott-Craig has argued that 'Shakespeare's tragedies are examples of a tragic vision illuminated by a biblical faith and of biblical faith transforming the tragic vision of life.' Wilson Knight claims each of Shakespeare's tragic heroes as a 'miniature Christ.' More recently, of course, Dr Stocker has argued that he was a devout and courageous Roman Catholic.

One of the disciplines of studying texts we call '*exegesis*', that is bringing out the meaning of a text. It can be contrasted with the much more human tendency of '*eisegesis*', that is reading a meaning into a text. One could of course with selective editing read into his works almost any theology or philosophy. But the genius of Shakespeare is precisely that he cannot successfully be hijacked by any lobby group, religious or ideological. He does not tell us what he thinks.

I want now to return to the centre, the centre of the Christian faith, the Cross of Jesus Christ. Discovering Life through death, living through dying. I visited Mount Athos some years ago and spent time in the monasteries and little sketes, prayer cells on the Holy Mountain. Outside one of the monasteries I stayed in were written the words: *Unless you die before you die, you will die when you die.*

Jesus said: 'In truth in very truth, I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies it yields a rich harvest.' *John 12.24.*

This truth we proclaim is not a privatised truth. Nor is it simply one small dish from a smorgasbord of truths we can pick and choose from. It is, whatever the Post-modernists might say, a universal truth, a principle of all existence. Epitomised by the cross, symbolised in baptism, the truth at the heart of human experience. In Christian terms this discovery of life through death comes by means of repentance, the recognition of and turning from our self-centredness. It involves the crucifying of the false self in all its vainglory. It is a journey from spiritual blindness to sight.

This is the way of the Cross. The Cross we would each and all avoid. As Auden puts it:

*'We would rather be ruined than changed  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the Cross of the moment  
And see our illusions die.'*

And yet we need to see our illusions die, each and all of us.

The words of Jesus, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain...', could suitably preface any of the great Tragedies. The tragic hero undergoes such a journey.

As Aristotle tells us, the tragic hero has heroic qualities but, like all of humanity, is flawed. The flaw in his character and his error of judgement precipitates the tragedy. Through his 'hubris' - the blindness of pride - he falls and in this fall or humiliation there is a reversal of circumstances, a recognition, a discovery of the truth. This really is the journey of a soul. It is one in which we participate simply by being human.

It is also one in which we as audience at a Tragedy participate. Through *catharsis*, the purging of our pity and fear, we too are cleansed from all that 'narrows us and makes us blind'. The greatest art is indeed both revealing and healing. Pride falls. The exalted are humbled. It is the stuff of the Gospel. It is the stuff of Tragedy. It is also of course the stuff of Comedy. Pride has to fall, the husk of the grain of wheat needs to fall into the ground...to be broken open... before it releases the life within.

Othello, Hamlet and Lear each in his own way aspires to realise as husband, as son, as father some shining ideal of human relationship. This is their 'hubris'. Each finds in those around him and deep within himself an enmity which is to bring him low. In his humiliation, he begins to see, and to grow in the truth. Lear's blindspot is indeed his vanity. His 'hubris' - the blindness of pride - is clear from the outset, as he rewards those who do not love him and abuses those who do. He cannot see the truth about himself. Others can. 'See better Lear!' urges the abused but loyal Kent. 'He hath ever but slenderly known himself' observes the contemptuous and disloyal Goneril as she continues to humiliate her father.

Lear's is an agonising journey from blindness to sight, from illusion into truth, from pride to humility. It is a journey in which he is stripped of majesty, of revenue, of kingdom, of retinue, of shelter and finally of

reason itself. As Bradley puts it, '*Lear's sight is so purged with scalding tears that it sees at last how power and place and all things in the world are vanity except love.*' Echoes of I Corinthians 13!

It is a journey which brings him in his nakedness on the heath to an identification with, and a new compassion for the poor and the outcast: '*Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm.*' It brings him to a recognition and confession of his folly – his sin against Cordelia - '*I did her wrong*'. And finally it brings him to that most haunting final scene; out of the ruins of their lives, out of the broken husk of his humanity is born something new, something fragile, the language of penitence, of prayer, and of reconciliation:

*'Come let's away to prison,  
We two alone will sing like birds in the cage,  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
and ask of thee forgiveness; and so we'll live and pray  
and sing and tell old tales and laugh at gilded butterflies  
...and take upon's the mystery of things  
as if we were God's spies...'*

No, we do not need to claim for Shakespeare an evangelism which was never his. As poet and dramatist he has scaled the heights and plumbed the depths of human experience. His words do indeed enlarge our hearts and our understanding of goodness, truth and beauty and help us also '*to take upon us the mystery of things ... As if we were God's spies.*'

Shakespeare made his will on 25th March 1616, 'in perfect health and memory, God be praised.' It had the regular Protestant introduction, ignoring the Virgin and the Saints. 'I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaker of life everlasting.' Just as Shakespeare's mortal remains find their proper place in a building consecrated to God, Holy Trinity Stratford-upon-Avon, so his works find their proper place within the revealing, healing and illuminating providence of God.

*'Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'* *Philippians 4.8*

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