**THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL**

New College, Oxford. Evensong 25 January 2015

**Fond Phrases**

This being the 25th January, the date appointed by the Church to commemorate the conversion of St Paul, it is only appropriate that I spend some time considering a man who, despite not having English as his native language, has contributed words and phrases to our common vocabulary, words and phrases which are in the daily parlance of believers and non-believers alike...

Phrases such as : To see ourselves as others see us

or an honest man's the noblest work of God

or The best laid schemes of mice and men

Now if these quotations cause some consternation to hyperactive Bible readers who cannot remember such verses in Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians or Ephesians, there is a simple explanation.

They do not come from the writings of St Paul.

**Haggis and Whisky**

While today, in the world of Anglo Catholicism, sanctuaries have been censed and those with allergies incensed in celebration of St Paul, lower caste Calvinists in Scotland are - even as I speak - substituting for bread and wine copious quantities of haggis and whisky in celebration of another letter writer, born on the 25th January whose name is Robert Burns and whose mother-tongue I share, coming as I do from Kilmarnock where his poems were first published.

**COMMONALITIES**

Although living eighteen centures apart, there are some commonalities which St Paul and Burns share – one being a working knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, a second being a deep belief in the power of love – though admittedly for Burns that was more *eros* than *agape.*

And the third, in which they are more consonant, is a disparagement of privilege.

St Paul inveighed against Pharasaism, denigrated faith which was predicated on barren rituals, and criticised exclusivism and privilege in religion.

Burns wrote poems about religious hypocrisy and stood on the side of those who were disaffected from the church because of the dead hand not of tradition but of the landed gentry.

**Laigh Kirk. Kilmarnock**

As an example of what religion in Scotland of his day was like, let me read a brief paragraph from the history of Kilmarnock. This concerns the Laigh church, the oldest church in the town which Burns attended. In his day – as was the case in English parish churches – the choice of the encumbent lay in the hands of the landlord and patron of the church. The new encumbent whom the Earl of Glencairn had chosen did not exactly please the people. This is what happened when his appointee, a certain Reverend Lindsay, was installed.

**Q** The mob *(meaning* the congregation) who had place themselves in a convenient

position for attack, no sooner observed the patron and clergymamn approaching

than they assailed them with a storm of execrations, and pelted them to such a

degree with mud and other filthy substances, that it was with the greatest of

difficulty that they gained entry to the church.

Here a scene of confusion and uproar took place, which even Hogath, so noted

for his faithful delineations of the ludicrous, would, we believe, have failed to

depict.

All, indeed, was riot, noise and disorder. The precentor, William Steven, had his

wig torn from his head. The wig of one of the magistrates too, was tossed into the

air amid the cheers of the mob; and the Earl of Glencairn was struck in the cheek

with a dead cat.

*(History of Kilmarnock by Archibald McKay 1909)*

**COMPLIMENTARY ATTRIBUTES**

Bad as hypocrisy, spiritual smugness and the elitist control of religious establishments are, I don't so want to reflect so much on the commonalties of Burns and St Paul, as on their complimentary attributes.

**Paul the Theologian**

Paul was a persecutor of the church to the extent that he consented to the death the apostle Stephen and held the jackets of those who stoned him. After his conversion, je became an intrepid travelling evangelist andwas the early church's primary theologian.

For both Jews and Gentiles he tried to reconcile the perceptions of God inherited from their religious traditions with the full revelation of God in the person and teaching of Christ. And he did this not in systematic fashion which St Augustine or Karl Bart subsequently practiced. Instead he sent ad hoc letters to churches often in response to misapprehensions regarding the purpose of God and the practice of the Christian faith.

Being a sterling intellectual, an urbanite and a convinced defender of the faith, he writes in prose more reminiscent of the language found in a forward to an acadmic tome than in the editorial of the Sun newspaper.

As a resuilt, while musicians from Montiverdi to James MacMillan have set biblical text from the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, I cannot think of any composer,living ort dead who has set Second Thessalonians to tunes which the public can sing or appreciate.

This is no disparagement of Paul. His gifts of intellectual argument and biblically rooted theology are unquestioned. But while philosophical theory and crafted doctrine might benfit or befuddle the mind, it does not necessarily move us existentially. I know countless Anglican clerics who believe that women are their co-equal yet persist in using language which excludes their gender. Doubtless last week at the global economic summit at Davos, there will have been economic theorists of the highest calibre whowill have convinced the wealth makers that there is a correspondence between gross inequality of income, social malaise and a weakening of the capitalist system. But will that lead to the rebalancing of a world in which 85 people own as much wealth as 3.5 billion of the world's poorest.

Just as we cannot live on bread alone,

we cannot live on prose alone.

Finally – as a distnguished American scholar has in the title of a one of his books -

finally comes the poet.

**The Poetic Vocation**

Ans the poet's vocation is not to win an argument. Nor is it to make money – as everyone from Burns to Carol Anne Duffy, the present Poet Laureate has discovered. (This will also be known by any undergraduate who has tried to have their deepest musings published)

On the positive side, poetry has a longevity about it. This is what the German theologian Karl Barth attested when he cited as his favourite hymn, not some mediaeval Latin text, but:

Jesus loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so.

In a book called THE GREAT POETS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE, an American pastor wrote:

Poets put thought in the most persuasive form,

for not only do they understand the idea, they see it.

They think in pictures and speak in metaphors.

They make truth visible through action, story,

symbols and all concrete forms.

*(Charles Allen Dinsmore 1937)*

**Paul vs Poets**

St Paul may write of creation groaning under the weight of human sin,

but Burns visualises this in cosmic and personal terms in his apology to a fieldmouse whose house he has upturned with a plough;

I'm truly sorry man's dominion

has broken nature'ssocial union

and justifes that ill opion

that makes thee startle at me

they poor earth born companion

and fellow mortal.

*Robert Burns: To a Mouse*

St Paul might look forward to the ethereal joys of heaven and union with his Saviour,

but an unknown female Irish poet of the 14th century provides a more graphic image:

I would like the company of heaven in my own house,

with barrels of good cheer laid vout for them.

I would like to have Jesus here among them.

I would like a great lake of beer for the King of Kings.

I would like to be watching heaven's family drinking it through eternity

*Unattributed C14th Irish*

St Paul might favour compasssion over indifference,

but Siegfried Sassoon brings this to the attention of the clergy in his war poem ' They'

The Bishop tells us: ' When the boys come back

They will not be the same; for they'll have fought

In a just cause; they lead the last attack

On anti-Christ; their comrades blood has bought

New right to breed and honourable race,

They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.

'For George lost both legs; and Bill's stone blind;

Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;

And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find

A chap who's served who hasn't found *some* change.'

And the Bishop said: ' The ways of God are strange!'

*'They' by Siegrid Sassoon.*

**The Appropriation of Truth**

This is not to elevate secular poetry to the status of Holy Scripture. It is, rather, to suggest that truth, deep truth, truth that affects the heart, the imagination, the activity of our bodies does not percolate soley through the conduit of the intellect. Poetry has the potential to go beyond the bounds of mental apprehension and to take up a vantage point and lodging place in the soul.

Take these words of the American pastor who I quoed a moment ago:

They think in pictures and speak in metaphors.

They make truth visible through action, story,

symbols and all concrete forms.

**Jesus' Poetic Vocabulary**

...and you see the Jesus has as an affinity with Burns as well as St Paul.

For the Gospel was neither first preached nor recorded in tortuous convoluted sentences, but in aphorims:

Blessed are they that mourn

For they shall be comforted

Blessed are the peacmakers

they shall be called the chidlren of God

...and in stories which go against the grain of common sense:

A father who welcomes home a wastrel of son who has squandered half the family fortune

A traveller who shows excessove kindness to the victim of a mugging, a man of a race which despises his nationality and culture.

A king who throws open a state banquet to people who live in the streets

...and in poetic images which never wear threadbare despite constant repetition:

The light shines in the darkness

and the darkness has never put it out.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,

and whoever believes in me will never thirst.

**THE INTERNAL DEPOSITORY**

These are truths which are meant for the memory, for that internal depository of wisdom which stores riches beyond the quantifiable value of plastic wealth. You have within you as I have within me an impregnable fortress which contains the sayings of our grandparents, the experiences of our childhood, the pains and passsions of our youth. And in that depository there also are words, the images, poetry which we may not fully understand but evokes time, place, people and value.... and will do so even oif we end up on a comma or suffering from dementia.

There will be junk among it, like this confessional couplet from the pen of the English poet, Naomi Roide Smith:

I know two things about a horse

and one of them is rather coarse/

But there will also be more precious gems from more poignant texts which are worth pondering:

Turning and turning in the idening gyre

The falcon cannot see the falconer;

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

*(W B Yeats: The Second Coming)*

And, pray God, there will also be words which nourish the spirit

You did not choose me;

I chose you.

I appointed you to bear fruit,

fruit that will last.

For the good of our health, particularly our mental and spiritual health you and I have to ensure that in the depository of our soul which stores sacred and special things, there is more than opinon, more than theory, more than prose alone.

**Burns and Paul**

Should on this day, 25th January in the heaven which defies our comprehension St Paul and Robert Burns congratulate each other on their shared anniversary, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that if they quaff a quarter gill of nectar, Burns might say to St Paul,

Paul, would you like to tell me what exactly you meant when in

Seconnd Timothy chapter 2 at verse 11, wher you wrote

'Salvation for the woman will be in the bearing of

children, as long as she continues in faith, love and

holiness with modesty.'

To this St Paul might well reply,

'No Robert, I'd rather not.

But I'd really like you to sing for me

My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose.

**TO THE ONE WHO MAKES THIS AND ALL THINGS POSSIBLE BE OUR PRAISE AND OUR GLORY, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**