

## Shakespeare Sermon

21<sup>st</sup> April 2013. Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon.

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* John 12.24

I have here a grain of wheat. The hard husk or shell needs to fall into the soil to be softened and broken open before its potential for life and growth can be released. Jesus is talking about human beings, you and me. The egotistical self with its self-protecting husk of pride needs to be broken open, to fall into the earth and die, before we can become our true God-intended selves, freed from the illusions of vanity. I think it was David Edgar who wrote *'Shakespeare's comedies teach us how to love and his tragedies teach us how to die.'* Learning to love and learning to die are at the heart of the human vocation. They both involve a renunciation of self-will and an embracing of self-giving. As Shakespeare reminds us *'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds/ Or bends with the remover to remove.'* Jesus teaches us again and again that we only find ourselves when we give ourselves away. Outside one of the monasteries I visited on Mount Athos, I read the words: *'Unless you die before you die, you will die when you die.'* W.H. Auden put it like this: *'Life is the destiny you are bound to refuse until you have consented to die.'*

To discover the truth, to live truthfully, we need to be stripped of our comforting illusions. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, to lead us into the truth, the truth that sets us free. One of the earliest of *The Homilies*, published in 1547, ordered to be read in every parish church in the country, probably heard by Shakespeare at St Clement Danes in London or here in this Church, begins: *'The aim of the Holy Ghost is to pull down man's vainglory and pride and to teach us the most commendable virtue of humility, how to know ourselves and to remember what we be of ourselves.'* Words which resonate in the sermon of the wounded Lear to his brother in suffering, the blinded Gloucester: *'I will preach to thee, mark... to consider what we be, whereof we be, from where we come and whither we shall go.'* It is only through the pulling down of our vainglory and pride that we can begin to see the brittleness of our self-regarding vanities. Richard II, looking at himself in the mirror, observes: *'A brittle glory shineth in this face/ As brittle as the glory is the face'*, before smashing the mirror on the ground. Similarly Lear, when stripped of all that sustained his hubristic self-image, reflects *'They told me I was everything, tis a lie, I am not ague proof.'* Facing who we really are, not who we would like to think we are, is painful and chastening. Herbert McCabe, the Dominican theologian, writes *'To sin is to construct an illusory self which we can admire rather than a real self which we can love.'* When the apostle Peter, having vowed to stay with Jesus forever and then denied knowing him three times, faces what he has done, that he is not who he thought he was, he weeps bitterly. But it is only from this place of painful self-knowledge and deep contrition that he can be lifted up and enter God's life giving purposes. We too resist such painful self-exposure. Auden puts this well: *'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.'*

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are brought low. Pride has to fall. The *'everything'*, that through the blindness of pride, they believed themselves to be, has to be *'nothinged'*. Kierkegaard wrote: *'the ones God calls, he first reduces to nothing.'* As we heard in our first reading, Paul writes: *'God chooses what is low in the world to reduce to nothing things that are.'* When Lear seeks to orchestrate his daughters' expressions of love for him, Cordelia resists his manipulations with that one brutal word *'Nothing'*. The one who believes he is *'everything'* cannot abide her *'nothing'*. *'Nothing? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.'* She replies *'Nothing, my Lord.'* And yet she, alone among his daughters, is the bearer of truth and true love. She is to become for him, a kind of Christ whose tears are *'holy water'*, to whom he will say, broken open as he is to be *'When thou dost ask me a blessing, I'll kneel and ask of thee forgiveness.'* She is the one he will hold, dying in his arms, in a kind of inverted Pieta. She is the one, described earlier by France as *'most rich being poor'* words of St. Paul, describing Christ himself. Lear's journey is from the myopia of pride to seeing again, or to *'seeing better'* as the loyal but abused Kent has urged him to do. Having fallen into the ground and been broken open, he can begin to see as God sees. He invites Cordelia with him to *'take upon ourselves, the mystery of things as if we were God's spies.'*

Unlike Lear, who is *'nothinged'* by the cruelty of others, who is divested by others of the power and glory of earthly kingship, Richard II, capitulating to Bolingbroke, divests *himself* finally accepting that he *'must nothing be'*. Lear is undone by others before finally shedding his clothes on the heath. Richard, wrestling with his continuing vanity in which he casts himself as a kind of Christ, and others around him as Pilates delivering him to his sour cross, deliberately uncrowns himself, letting go of the symbols of kingship:

*Now mark me, how I will undo myself/I give this heavy weight from off my head/and this unwieldy sceptre from my hand/ The pride of kingly sway from out of my heart/ With my own tears I wash away my balm/With my own hands I give away my crown....Make me that nothing have, with nothing grieved. Act IV.1*

At last in prison, he faces and recognises the vanities of his kingship, the hollowness of his crown, and the thousand flatterers that sat within it. Having been brought to nothing, he begins to see what really matters:

*But whate'er I be/ Nor I nor any man that but man is/ With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased with being nothing.*

To be eased with being nothing, to be stripped of vanity and brought to the place of humility is the goal of monastic life. It is something like this that St Paul meant when he wrote of *'having nothing, but possessing everything.'* Richard glimpses the redeeming possibilities within his humiliation, a new world that could emerge from the ruins of the old. *'Our holy lives must win a new world's crown/Which our profane hours have thrown down.'* V.1.24-25

There is a Greek proverb which runs *'If you are seeking wisdom, ask a fool or a child.'* Aspiring to the powers and glories of the kingdoms of this world will lead us away from Holy Wisdom. To become truly human we have to become as children, as Jesus says, or as fools as Paul tells us. We are to be downwardly mobile, or as the great Charles Simeon put it *'to grow*

*downwards.*' As so often in Shakespeare it is the Fools or the clowns who are the bearers of truth. Shakespeare has read his Paul and not least, our reading today. In *'All's well that ends well'*, Helena exclaims:

*He that of greatest work is finisher/Oft does them by the weakest minister;/So holy writ in babes hath judgement shown/ When judges have been babes, great floods have flown.*

It is only the Fool who can tell Lear who he is, *'Lear's shadow'*. Many of us heard the foolish wisdom - or the wise folly - from the lips of Touchstone in last night's brilliant production of *As you Like It*: *'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.'* Likewise, Feste, the clown in *Twelfth Night*, speaking of Wisdom, says: *'Those wits that think they have thee do very often prove fools/ and I that am sure that I lack thee may pass for a wise man.'* In *Much Ado*, it is the only through the folly of Dogberry and Verges that the plot of Don Juan and Borachio is discovered. Borachio confesses *'What your wisdoms could not discern, these shallow fools have brought to light.'* St. Paul tells us *'God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise.'* 1 Cor.1.27.

Finally, the journey to humility, in the Scriptures and in Shakespeare, is the journey not only into sight but into love and compassion. Knowledge of our own frailty brings with it a compassion and understanding of others. Lear, stripped of absolutely everything is moved to deep compassion for those others with nothing; *'Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm...'* Judgementalism is the mark of the unhealed and unredeemed. Those who judge others simply betray their lack of self-knowledge.

Compassion flows from deep self-knowledge. In *Measure for Measure*, a title taken directly from the Scriptures, Isabella challenges Lord Angelo, as Shakespeare challenges us. When speaking of Christ she asks:

*'How would you be/If he which is the top of judgement should/But judge you as you are?/ O think on that/And mercy then will breathe within your lips/Like man made new.*

To be humbled is to know both our need of mercy and to know the mercy of God. As forgiven, we forgive. As accepted, we accept. To get to this place of new birth and of hope, Mother Julian of Norwich reminds us: *'We need to fall and we need to see that we have fallen. For if we never fell, we should not know how weak and pitiable we are in ourselves. Nor should we fully know the wonderful love of our maker.'*

So in Shakespeare and in the divine economy of our own lives too we can sometimes see that *'sweet are the uses of adversity'*.

Yes, there is indeed so much of Shakespeare that *'like to the lark at break of day/Arising from the sullen earth/Sings at heaven's gate. (Sonnet 29)*

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