

SUNDAY WORSHIP WITH THE YORK MYSTERY PLAYS

A SERIES OF FOUR REFLECTIONS

1st Reflection

CREATOR, CREATURE AND CREATION

These medieval actors knew all about making things – Builders, Plasterers, Locksmiths and Carpenters. Each in their own Guild they acted out the greatest story ever told – from the Creation of the world to the Day of Reckoning. It was the Builders and the Plasterers who performed the making of the earth.

The voice of God boomed out, “I am Maker unmade” as he moulded the planet; “An isle shall I name which isle shall be earth”.

These actors were all craftsmen who knew the distance between an idea in your mind’s eye and the finished product. They knew all about working with raw materials, about design and honing your skills, and about the joy of completing something you once dreamed of. These Guilds of apprentices and master craftsmen had a great affinity with their Creator. They could well imagine how God had brought into being the whole of Creation.

I once heard a sculptor tell me about the intense bond he felt between himself and his sculptures. How he had poured himself into his creations. It wasn’t hard for him to believe in a Creator and in the Creator’s passionate commitment to his Creation. Nor was it difficult for him to understand why he and we would want to revere our Creator. It was an expression of that bond, that mutual affinity, that love.

You'll often hear people of faith talk and pray about worshipping God FOR all that he has made as if the earth is but a dish of delights for us to enjoy. But the Bible and especially the Psalms show that we were made to praise God not FOR but WITH all the other Creatures of God. The last line of the last Psalm calls out, 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord'. That means the world of nature, for the word nature comes from all that is born, every creature that breathes.

That little preposition 'with' helps us to remember our connectedness with all of Creation, prevents us from exploiting it and encourages us to live in harmony with the natural world. That's how God wants us to live out being made in the image of the Creator.

But Creation isn't just a once-upon-a-time act. It is ongoing.

Just as a spinning top needs constant pumping to be what it was made to be so Creation needs a continuous supply of energy to sustain it. God is at work doing that in this very moment. It is part of the bond between the Maker and the Made.

He's also at work through the way he uses the human family to fulfil his own purposes for the world. Mary the mother of Jesus was a great example of that and had a starring role in the Mystery plays. The Angel Gabriel calls her 'the maiden full mild' and tells of how central she is to God's plan 'to take kind of mankind', to rescue the world from sin and evil. And just as Mary, an ordinary young woman plucked from obscurity, had a part in the drama of God's salvation so do we all.

2nd Reflection

BROTHERHOOD, SISTERHOOD AND FRIENDSHIP

The Guilds that put on these street plays were like Trade Unions – but more so. They were brotherhoods. Skills were passed down through the generations. Brothers, sisters and cousins would learn together and from each other and hand the skills down to the next generation of apprentices. The Guilds were like an extended family.

That's why of all the scenes in the Bible to chose from for their plays they chose those tales about brotherhood, friendship and - betrayal; Cain and Abel and Jesus and Judas. Fellowship, friendship and family were the cornerstone of the Guilds and of society, and remain so to this day.

To betray a friend or member of your family struck at the very heart of the Guild. In the play the Angel condemns Cain's betrayal and murder of his brother Abel in the most scathing way,

“In bitter bondage thou art bound

Out-cast shall thou be for care;

No man shall pity thy misfare

For this affray”.

Cain's betrayal is a universal tale. It's the stuff of novels. It can happen in the workplace as well as the family. Cain's own treachery prefigured the thirty pieces of silver that Judas would earn for his betrayal of Jesus when, with a kiss, he handed him over to the authorities who would kill him with the same lack of truth and justice with which Cain murdered Abel.

Yet, mystery though it may seem, the purposes of God are not thwarted by these selfish acts so freely chosen.

Throughout my life, like many Christians, I've wrestled with how you can reconcile what is called the sovereign will of God with the freedom of human beings to do selfish and even evil things.

The following picture doesn't cover all the bases but it edged me closer towards, 'doubting my own disbelief', as Graham Greene once said.

Imagine a master painter working at his easel transmitting the image in his mind's eye on to the canvas with his brush and oils. Not only is he a great artist but he is also a wonderful grandfather. Surrounding him as he paints are many lovely but mischievous grandchildren who each have their own designs on the painting. They dab their fingers into the palette of oils and daub the canvass with their smudges. Yet so patient and forgiving a grandfather and so brilliant a master painter that instead of shooing them all away he incorporates their marks into his painting, so that their actions freely chosen ultimately add depth and texture to creation of his vision.

3rd Reflection

THE GIFT OF ALL GIFTS

It's a truism but it needs repeating that we live in a more enlightened age. Certainly more so than the world of the early chapters of the Bible where women and children were the possession of men. There are always lessons to be learned from other cultures, both past and present, but there also aspects that today we can say were categorically unethical. Abraham's attitude to killing his child was of his time and wrong.

Yet the medieval mystery plays made much of the story of Abraham being willing to go to the lengths of killing his son Isaac to prove his devotion to God. They saw in it a parallel and a parable of the sacrifice that Jesus made.

Both stories are heart rending. They share similar strains. And one of them is about giving, and about the lengths that human beings will go and give of themselves for the sake of others. Another universal theme.

We live in an age of self-discovery. People go to therapists as much as they go to priests. The great mantras of our time are about being free to be me. But the search for the real and true me is a bit like the quest for happiness. It's always set in the future. It's like looking in a mirror and trying to catch yourself blinking. There seems to be an elusiveness about finding the true me.

But without consulting either a priest or a therapist there's a good question that opens the door to finding the true me. What was the first and the last gift that you gave? And if that doesn't begin to unlock the door ask yourself what gift has given you the greatest fulfilment. For to adapt a saying of Jesus, 'wherever your gift is there you will find your true self'.

It is, of course, in the giving and in the gift of Christ that Christians find the true character of God. It's in his nature to give. He gives of himself in Creation, In Christ, on the Cross and in Communion with ourselves. We believe in the Giving God. To give is to love; to love is to give. And we ourselves are most like God, most like Christ, when we find ourselves giving.

If the gift is the most revealing of our true self then so also is grief. The more we have loved someone the more will we grieve for them. And it is on the cross of Christ that we see both gift and grief. The gift of God the Father and the grief of Mary his mother.

George Herbert in his poem Sacrifice put himself in the person of Christ at Calvary. The first and the last verses of that poem capture the gift and the grief.

Oh all ye, who pass by, whose eyes and mind
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blind;
To me, who took eyes that I might find you:

Was ever grief like mine?

But now I die; now all is finished.

My woe, man's weal: and now I bow my head.

Only let others say, when I am dead,

Never was grief like mine.

4th Reflection

CRISIS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

“Now is fulfilled all my forethought”, so speaks God on the Day of Judgement at the end of the Cycle of Mystery Plays.

When God made the earth he declared it to be very good. But he didn't say it was perfect! Creation, to use a modern phrase, is 'work in progress'. It's not finished. It's not yet been perfected. One day. But not yet. Just as all the Guilds had a part to play in the telling of the story so we all have a part to play in the perfecting of Creation.

This is dramatically portrayed in the Mercers Play that enacts the Last Judgement with Jesus seen standing between the Good Souls and the Bad Souls.

“Ye cursed caitiffs, kin of Cain

When suffering sow ye manifold

Not one of you a sorrow slaked

And so forsook me, young and old.”

These sorrows and sufferings are spelt out by Jesus in that famous parable when God separates the sheep from the goats. They have an eerily modern ring to them. The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. I'm struck by how these different groups correspond to the consequences of the environmental crisis now blighting the earth – famine, drought, refugees, destitution, disease. Of course, these things have been with us since the Flood. But they're clearly aggravated by the changing climate and continual conflicts.

Crisis is the Greek word for judgement. It's a moment of truth when you see what you've sown. The plays were like holding a mirror up to the audience to challenge and to change the way people lived.

Coming alongside people in Africa and Central America and in India where droughts and floods have claimed the lives of children has made me more conscious of my own responsibility. I can no longer expect to say to God on that Day of Reckoning, “when did I see YOU hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison?” I’ve seen him. And it is a truly dreadful sight. It changes your life.

A prayer that has formed in my soul over the years goes,

“Holy Jesus,

Child of Adam

Child of God

Come in glory

And renew

The face of the earth”.

It’s a prayer that takes seriously Jesus’ own prayer that God’s will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. It is a prayer for the earthing of Heaven.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

The Guilds of Craftsmen were made up of people who knew both the pain and the pride of making things. Some too would have known the hurt of creating something and then seeing it trashed by ingratitude. Yet they were aware that God was the 'Maker Unmade', whom they thanked for their own creation and preservation. Indeed for all the blessings of this life. They knew too that the only way to show their gratitude was through the gift of themselves to the service of God and humanity, and to be just and faithful in all their dealings. Their street plays were an earthy presentation of a faith that was rooted in Heaven.

THE GENERAL THANKSGIVING PRAYER