

Trinity College Cambridge
Sunday 10 June 2012

Good Books

George Eliot: *Middlemarch*

Bible Reading: Micah 6: 6–8

Lord Carey of Clifton

I am delighted to be with you this evening and to participate in your series on great books. When invited by the Dean I had no hesitation in choosing George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It's a sprawling book of over 800 pages that has rightly been called a 'classic'. Of course, in these days, to call anything a classic is tantamount to a kiss of death. As Mark Twain once said: 'A classic is a book that people praise and don't read'. There is an element of truth in that verdict that speaks of the fact that a classic, a great book, makes demands upon us in terms of time, thought and application that many prefer to resist. As the American satirist Dorothy Parker once said of a book: 'This book should not be put gently aside – it should be hurled with the greatest of force'. This is something one should never to do any of George Eliot's books, least of all *Middlemarch*.

What is it about? The subtitle is: 'A Study of Provincial Life' and in that title Mary Anne Evans, for that was her unmarried name, declared her intention to explore the lives, beliefs and behaviour of inhabitants of a small country town set in the Midlands. Started in 1869 and completed two years later, *Middlemarch* is a complex novel which traces the failed aspirations of several of the characters. Dorothea, possibly modelled on George Eliot herself, is the innocent idealist anxious to do some act of outstanding generosity but is trapped in a hopeless marriage with the pedantic and boring Dr Casaubon. There is Dr Lydgate, the new young doctor with ambitions to make a name for himself in the world of medicine and who himself is narrowed and defeated by marrying the shallow Rosamund. The Revd Farebrother is a broad churchman who loves science as well as theology but, in a town where evangelicalism dominates, has no chances to progress materially. The strange scholar, Dr Casaubon, is a prominent character whose great quest is to find the key to all mythologies. We mustn't forget Bulstrode, the rich, bigoted evangelical banker whose great piety clothes criminal acts. Then there is Will Ladislaw a young man who is deeply attracted to Dorothea and appalled that she is in a sterile, loveless marriage to Dr Casaubon. The novel will end with Dorothea rejecting her fortune in order to marry Will, even if it means a penniless existence.

But that is not all what it is about. We need to dig deeper. Virginia Woolf called *Middlemarch* 'one of the few English novels written for grown-up people'. And so it is – even today, we find the book speaking to our lives, disturbing, challenging and enriching – as great classics, of course, do.

Disturbing. Written twelve years after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, *Middlemarch* contains evidence of George Eliot's great interest in scientific thinking and its impact on current thought. We see from the quotation earlier that Dorothea, the idealist, has no orthodox creed, and that was so with the author. Mary Anne Evans was an extremely well read, cultured and able thinker. Although in several areas largely self-taught, her marriage to George Lewes united her to a keen and brilliant mind who was a well-known thinker of the time. They were an equal match intellectually. *Middlemarch* pours scorn on those looking for ultimate answers. Dr Lydate's ambition to excel in medical science is crushed by his wife's exuberance in spending. But the person who becomes the object of George Eliot's scorn on final answers is the unfortunate Dr Casaubon. In Book 3, Chapter 39, the author interrupts her own text as some Victorian novelists were prone to do by saying: 'For my part, I feel very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at the this great spectacle of life and never be liberated from a small hungry shivering self- never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold.' But is this not the problem of all scholarly ambitions?

Dr Casaubon's lifelong research is the search for the key to all mythologies. Perhaps we might think of this as something akin to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. What George Eliot might be saying indirectly is that ultimate explanations are futile. Dr Casaubon was a clergyman and it is possible that the author is attacking theology's aim to provide answers, although it is as likely that her attack is general in character. In our own day some physicists are searching for a 'Theory Of Everything' whilst others argue that such theories are in principle untestable. Be that as it may, here we are in a chapel that makes claims of a final character – that there is a God, that he has spoken in a final, revelatory way through Jesus Christ, that prayer is a real relationship with God, that the 'mercies of God are renewed every morning'. George Eliot questions our certainties and asks: How can you be sure? Are not final answers impossible?'

Now, we must not make an atheist of George Eliot. She may have rejected her evangelical faith when she was 19 but there is no evidence that she rejected God as a reality, or religion as a socially good thing. Faith plays a huge part in her books from her very first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life* through to her last great book, *Daniel Deronda*. She was deeply interested in theology and in particular German theological thinking. We must remember that her funeral was conducted by a Unitarian minister. Nevertheless, her penetrating examination of faith in life urges us to recognise in the words of St Paul that we 'see through a glass darkly' and that faith and doubt are not opposites. It is certainty that is the opposite of faith, not doubt. Doubt is a fundamental element in any student's make-up and is certain to be found as a root cause of enlightenment in us all.

Challenging is another word common to all great books and George Eliot was not afraid to challenge current thinking – whether it was conventional morality, law or views on marriage. Marriage, indeed, is one of the connecting themes of the book. Of course, Mary Anne Evans caused a great scandal by living with George Lewes when he was a married man. It scarcely seems that she had a high view of marriage. We would be wrong in that conclusion. To be sure, we see the highs and lows of marriage through the eyes of a woman who was describing life before the Reform Bill of 1832. We have to recall that for most of

the Victorian period for a woman to get anywhere it had to be through 'making a good catch'. We see Rosamund rising high in marrying Dr Lydgate and through his weakness and her silliness destroying his career. We see Dorothea, as a St Teresa figure marrying an elderly, reclusive, sterile Dr Casaubon because of his great mind, only to find disappointment – because he only really wanted a secretary.

Does this mean that George Eliot really had a low view of marriage herself? No. In *Middlemarch* she brings to light the different types of marital relationships and unlike most writers of her era was prepared to show the reality of bad marriages as well as good. So Dorothea says to Rosamund: 'Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings'. For George Eliot the test of a true marriage is the way a couple deals with poverty, riches and society's intrusive glare. In the passage read as a text, Dorothea was to find in Will's love of beauty the romance she could never find in the dry old Casaubon. The idealistic St Teresa eventually marries the romantic 'Byron' that she discovers in Will, and she makes him worthy of society. Indeed, there is in *Middlemarch* the idea that marriage is the place where wives educate their husbands to make them worthy of them. As Mary Garth says towards the end of the book 'husbands are an inferior kind of class, who require keeping in order'. George Eliot, as we know, entered into a second relationship with John Cross shortly before her death at the age of 61 but her marriage, as we must call it, to George Lewes was for her a deep, happy and lasting relationship until his sudden death. We can't help but wonder what George Eliot would make of same-sex unions and whether or not they should be called 'marriages'. I think we know the answer.

But let me close by saying something about the way great books enrich us. The reason why we recognise some books as great books, as great classics, is because what they do to us. We are often not worthy of them, but their impact on us and our culture is ennobling; they stretch our minds to think and take in characteristics of thought and understanding. Years ago, I wrote down these words: 'Read the big books on your subject. The curse of our time is the crowd of little books. I do not mean to suggest that mere bigness is a safe index of quality, but where a large mind had been dedicated for a year to a subject and uttered itself in a great book, you should read that book'. The quotation comes from Adolph Harnack in his *History of Dogma* (1885), and shows that it is not only England that must resist the challenge of smallness.

The reason why our age should take that to heart is that the superficiality of our time not only leads to bad conversation, bad reasoning and bad talking but also to a culture of lies and the dumbing down of our rich, commodious language. George Steiner had reason to observe after the war that 'languages have great reserves of life. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy and cheapness ... but there comes a breaking point. Use a language to conceive, organise and justify Belsen; use it to make specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanise man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it. Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language.'

I am not saying that such a thing is happening in our day, but we all know about ‘spin’ and about the profiteering agendas of advertising companies and the half-truths of political parties. Great literature keeps us focused; keeps us grounded in the honesty and timelessness of words. Here in this place the words of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible remind us of their central place in the English language. Even though George Eliot may have rejected much of her evangelical faith at the age of 19, what she was unable to reject was the way the Christian faith had been absorbed in the marrow of her education, her thinking and her life.

And for that we are more grateful than we can possibly say.