

Trinity Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2008

Geoffrey Hill

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36.26

And straightway the father of the child cried out and said with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief. Mark 9.24

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Hebrews 10.31

A couple of months ago I received from the Dean of Chapel an invitation to preach at this present service; it was he who suggested that I should take as my theme the matter of Christian repentance.

I accepted. Why did I accept? It is clear to me now, as I stand here, that I ought not to have done so. The theology, church history, the very language of repentance, are fraught with peril for the inexpert; they are matter for trained theologians to debate and to administer. The Roman Catholic church rightly insists on rigorous training and discipline for its confessors; for they know that incompetence can imperil the spiritual wellbeing of those to whom they minister. I am just such an incompetent and it is all too likely that what I say in the next ten minutes or so will do you an ill-service and be to me a reason for much subsequent remorse. In daring to speak amateurishly about such things one is indeed falling into the hands of the living God; and risks thereby his anger and retribution.

In the very dawn of the early modern life of the English Bible, in the reign of Henry VIII, the conservative Catholic Sir Thomas More savagely attacked the English Lutheran William Tyndale's version of the New Testament, a translation from the Greek New Testament then freshly edited and rectified by the great Desiderius Erasmus. I can touch on this vexed matter only briefly here. More accused Tyndale of wilfully and maliciously mistranslating the Greek term *metanoia* as 'repentance' not 'penance'. One can comprehend the grounds for More's Catholic objection. 'Penance' stands for the discipline of the Church, the third step in a process whereby the priest absolves the penitent: auricular confession (individual penitent to individual priest), absolution, imposition of penance. 'Repentance' is more a state of mind or spirit, untutored except by reading of the Scriptures (by the minority who could read); by vocal exhortation for those who could not; liable to every form of spiritual malaise, wildness, eccentricity, imperilling of soul by soul. I have it on good authority that More was arguing in bad faith, that Tyndale's wording had in fact been anticipated by the reformist Catholic Erasmus, himself More's friend. But there is here no time to speak further of that quarrel.

There is scarcely any time, either, to attend to the Church of England's own growing anxiety, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, concerning the

potential aberrations of subjective interpretation, and of the English Church's own attempts, in the writings of Richard Hooker, John Donne, and Jeremy Taylor, to draw the whole question of repentance back into the field, or fold, of formal penitential discipline. The sub-title of Taylor's book of 1655 is surely significant: *The Doctrine and Practice of Repentance*.

As I have already confessed to you, I am not a trained theologian. I read theology, which is a dangerous thing for someone in my state and condition to do; and I try to keep my aberrations, my wildness, my savage melancholia, under restraint by much reading of secular and church history.

During the last quarter of my professional life I read in, and lectured on, the prose and verse of the English sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and this inevitably included much religious, as well as political, verse and prose: Roman Catholic as well as Anglican and Separatist. What I brought away from my study of Tudor and early Stuart English was the realization that our language at that time could sustain nuance and fine distinction in ways not now sustainable or understood. Who now cares for the authority of *metanoia* or whether it is translated as penance or repentance? Who—staking out the same reservation as a moment ago—would care now to ponder the semantics of the two words *attrition* and *contrition*? Yet the doctrine and discipline of the 17th century English Church, as enunciated by John Donne and Jeremy Taylor, hinged on such fine distinctions. Here is Donne:

We acknowledge that there belongs a Contrition, a Confession, and a Satisfaction; and all these (howsoever our Adversaries slander us, with a Doctrine of ease and a Religion of liberty) we require with more exactnesse and severity, than they doe. For, for contrition, we doe not, we dare not say, as some of them, that Attrition is sufficient – that it is sufficient to have such a sorrow for sin, as a naturall sense, and fear of torment doth imprint in us, without any motion of the feare of God.

The slandering adversaries referred to by Donne could be both the Roman Catholics and the Calvinist Separatists; and Donne is attempting to show that the penitential procedures of the *via media* are in fact more rigorous than the auricular confession and imposed penance of Rome; or the Geneva Catechism. It's possible to argue that until about 60 years ago you could trace an unbroken line, in Anglican theological teaching, from such 17th Century texts as Jeremy Taylor's *The Doctrine and Practice of Repentance* through to the work of someone like Martin Jarrett-Kerr of the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield. I'm thinking here of Jarrett-Kerr's 1948 publication *Our Trespasses: A Study in Christian Penitence*, from which I quote one sentence: 'repentance is an attitude of mind which implies readiness to have the mind changed (*metanoia*).'

In the light of the fine-edged discourse that I have been quoting, I have to confess that I seriously doubt whether I have ever truly repented. That is to say, I have experienced a persistent and overwhelming sense of attrition; I am much less certain that I have felt true contrition. John Donne writes that 'we teach [meaning the early 17th century Church of England as distinct from early 17th century Romans and early 17th century Calvinist separatists], that no man hath done truly that part of Repentance, which he is bound to doe, if he have not given Satisfaction, that is, Restitution, to every person damnified by him.' I frankly do not know how I would

begin to make restitution to those persons, within my family circle and without, whom I have variously ‘damnified’ over the past nearly 80 years. I do not like having to confess this to you; but this was on the cards once I had made the capital error of accepting the Dean’s invitation. How can one preach *on* repentance without preaching *to* repentance; or, if that is not possible, speaking with an inescapable, unmistakable, note of attrition: *And straightway the father of the child cried out and said with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief.* ‘Attrition begins with fear. Contrition hath hope and love in it; the first is a good beginning, but it is no more,’ Jeremy Taylor, 1655.

In a striking sermon preached in this chapel a couple of Sundays ago, Professor Brian Cummings spoke of the conjunction of faith and luck; and took as an emblematic statement William Tyndale’s 1530 Englishing of the Hebrew Genesis 39.2 relating Joseph’s reception in Egypt: ‘And he was a luckie felowe.’ Cummings noted that by 1560, when the Calvinist Geneva Bible was produced, things had sobered down somewhat: ‘And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a man that prospered.’ A modern English rendering of the Hebrew Tanakh reads, ‘The Lord was with Joseph and he was a successful man;’ but my adviser counsels me that the best English rendering of the Hebrew at this point probably *is* our word ‘prosperous.’ Tyndale, a good Hebraist, was also a good Lutheran, and was stylistically influenced by Luther’s German: in this case the word *gluck* must have been in Tyndale’s mind: *gluck seliger man wart*: he became a happy blessed fellow. But in the 1530s, *lucky* was practically synonymous with *prosperous*.

I would guess that perhaps 85% of practising Anglicans would regard themselves as lucky – prosperous – in their faith, finding strength in their renewed Easter commitment, comfort in their regular partaking of Communion, courage in their assurance of salvation in Christ. But what of the 15% of us who are unlucky in our faith, who feel almost as if God had cursed us to believe. To whom the taking of communion has never emerged from the comminatory shadow of the prefatory sentences in the old *Book of Common Prayer*: ‘so is the danger great, if we receive the same unworthily...we eat and drink our own damnation.’

For me one of the truly iconic figures of 20th century literature is the Polish poet Aleksander Wat, or Chwat, (1900-1967). A Jew and a Communist, harassed, though not too severely under the right-wing regime of Pilsudski, then hideously persecuted under Soviet Stalinism, in late life he was baptized into the Roman Catholic communion; but of this experience he later remarked: ‘Even at the moment of that act I felt with despair that it failed, that it was not accepted, “did not take” on me, that I was called but not chosen, that I was an outcast. I never received the eucharist.’ (Venclova, *Aleksander Wat*. p.179) One is put in mind, by this melancholia (for melancholia it must surely be), of the morbid, masochistic *gelassenheit* of that peculiar people, the early 16th century anabaptists of St Gall.

In four years time, if I live so long, I shall be 80. Even by a generous estimate I am getting towards the end of my natural span – though when I am behaving particularly bloodily my family swear that I will outlive them all. I fear dying and I fear the Judgement. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; I pray that in the hour of my death I do not fall *out* of the hands of God.

There is something in this sermon which may remind you of the final shot from Joseph Losey's 1967 movie *Accident*, now newly available on DVD. The little dog trots down the driveway, directly at the camera, disappears so to speak beneath the lens. Pregnant silence for about two seconds. Then the screaming of brakes, rending of metal, shattering of glass – the very sounds with which the film begins.

Perhaps when I accepted the Dean's invitation I subconsciously anticipated this confessional debacle, this rending of metal and shattering glass; but wished also to offer it up, to make it work perhaps for that conjectural handful 'out there' who also feel unlucky and isolated in their faith, a faith which through all that pain and gnawing dread, they cannot and will not abandon.

To that handful I say: be of good cheer; you are not alone. There is a place in God's redemptive pattern of history for the Anabaptists of St Gall and for Alexander Wat; and who is to say that there is not a place for us also.

In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.

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And he leaping up, stood, and walked, and entered with them into the Temple.

[Acts 3: 6,8]

AMEN, SO BE IT

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