

Pericles and Reconciliation

Evensong, Trinity College Chapel, 10 February 2008

1st lesson: *Pericles*, 5.3.29-41
39

2nd lesson: Psalm

‘O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence, and be no more seen.’ (Ps. 39: 15).

In 1604, William Shakespeare turned forty – the age at which, we are proverbially told ‘life begins’. For the rest of that decade, the first of the new century, Shakespeare was to consider and depict the plight and losses of old men. His old men thought a good deal about death, at which they were very frequently looking close-up, and about daughters: King Lear most darkly, and probably first of all; Prospero perhaps last and with most sense that dying might be an art to be mastered like other arts, the *ars moriendi*: ‘every third thought shall be my grave’. And between these – probably between these – two Kings, Pericles and Leontes, in *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale* respectively, who each believed they had lost beyond recall both wife and daughter; who saw, therefore, nothing for which they

could live; and who each encountered, to his profound wonderment and at the eleventh hour, a transforming reversal.

I do mean that they discovered their wives and daughters were, after all, alive and ready to love them, but I also mean something else. A change of mind: a reconciliation to something as well as someone; *metanoia*. Professor Hill talked about this word ‘*metanoia*’ a few days ago, and touched upon its political and theological history. I have that history in mind, and its connection with the disciplines of repentance is one I commend to you for your own contemplation, but just here and just now I think I only want to say that it is a Greek word which actually *means* a ‘change of mind’. It is still used that way today, beyond its theological context; it is, for example, the name of a website which attempts to persuade potential suicides to decide to live.

In the scene you heard this evening, King Pericles receives the second of two shocks. Act 5, scene 2, sees him reconciled to a

daughter, Marina, whom he thought dead; in scene 3 his wife Thaisa – who was thrown into the sea in a sealed coffin after a fatal childbirth some acts ago – is added to the growing family party. The scenes are, in a sense, bitty and diffuse; there are few sustained speeches of the kind which might stand alone, and of the longer speeches none is particularly distinguished; minor characters constantly take it upon themselves to remark this and that, or to reiterate bits of plot; music is given a potentially transformatory symbolic importance but sometimes it seems only Pericles can hear it and the pointers for it are a bit of a muddle; much is done with *tableaux*; the goddess Diana, *dea ex machina*, interferes, in a rather halting and elliptical piece of verse, in order to get Pericles to sail in the right direction towards his wife.

And so on. The usual romance hotch-potch; more uneven than usual. The text of the play is, after all, doubtful; and it is very likely to have been written in collaboration with another writer, George Wither, whose avocations as petty criminal, pisshead

and small-time pimp don't preclude him writing great literature ,
but whose other literary achievements are, as it happens,
moderate.

So the last two scenes of *Pericles* don't present as tractable
extracts, to be thought about in isolation beyond the stage –
which might be said to be something of a pity for this evening's
purposes. Nor do they jump out from the page in private
reading. But they can be profound theatre; I have seen and been
part of an audience which wept, puzzled and even annoyed as to
why it was weeping, throughout these closing scenes of unlikely
joy. And as to why they weep – that, I think, brings the matter
back again and makes it one for the serious consideration of a
congregation engaged in the worship of a gracious and self-
giving God. They weep because of the ways in which, for a
man in despair, here death doth touch the resurrection.

The Biblical reading tonight was Psalm 39, one of the two
psalms appointed, in the Book of Common Prayer, to be said at

funerals. The movement of its thought permeates the movement of Pericles' *metanoia*, his change of mind, culminating in the fragment of almost direct quotation you heard at the point of mortal ecstasy – 'that on the touching of her lips I may melt / And no more be seen'.

The point about the use of Psalm 39 as a funeral psalm, though, is not that it is about death. Of course a psalm appointed to be said at almost all funerals you attend will be associated with death. But what it is *about* is grief. It is there for mourners to feel, not as an indirect remark on the feelings of the dead about being dead. They are beyond that. Funerals, as early modern preachers are fond of pointing out, are for the living: it was at funerals that mourners were invited to remember they must die, with the coffin as silent witness. The point was never hammered home with so much energy as it was in funeral sermons for the young – the women dead in childbirth, the dead children. What is so bold, so sure and so risky about including Psalm 39 as a funeral psalm is that it's about the corrosions of

grief: fear, bitterness, refusal. It describes a kind of living death, a death-in-life subsisting in the one who mourns. It speaks, moreover, to the kind of grief which presents as agony that the speaker, too, will die. The pastoral intention seems to be that the formal iteration of feelings so impacted, so destructive and so passionate within the liturgy will release those involved in it as they speak the shift from dumbness to rebellion to pleading which is expressed and enacted by the psalm itself. It doesn't take you all the way to reconciliation by any means: the liturgist is more realistic than that. But it takes you far enough for you perhaps to be readier for it when it comes.

This is the movement which Pericles experiences. As Act 5 opens we are told that he is 'a man who for this three months hath not spoken / To anyone, nor taken sustenance, / But to prorogue his grief.' 'I held my tongue, and spake nothing: I kept silence, even from good words, but it was pain and grief to me.' The closedown of grief and refusal shows, too, in his refusal to eat and his soiled garments. He is lost to himself.

Helpful minor characters inform each other that his ‘main grief’ springs from the loss of his wife and daughter, though there are other elements, not then named or narrated. Pericles is an island of silence, unresponsive to the action which circles about him until addressed directly by the young woman who is actually his lost daughter, Marina. To her greeting he utters for the first time: a wordless sound: ‘Ha, hum’. As she speaks to him she asserts that hers is ‘a grief might equal yours’. The challenge, along with her demeanour and eerie familiarity, shakes him into broken speech. As he begins to glimpse the enormity of the truth before him he begins also to interrupt, tumblingly, his words circling round her parentage, her status as a ‘stranger’, her claim to grief’s authority.

This claim irks him especially, revealing how much this grief of his obtains in the kind of self-destroying self-regard the psalmist’s request to know ‘the number of his days’ also reveals.

Pericles, too, is counting:

‘Tell thy story.
If thine, considered, prove the thousandth part
Of my endurance, thou art a man, and I
Have suffered like a girl. Yet thou dost look
Like Patience, gazing on kings’ graves, and smiling
Extremity out of act.’

Against the anger that turns upon itself and clutches its own mortality like a suicide weapon, Marina’s ‘Patience’ stands as clear as sight. The transforming nature of such looking is all over the last scenes, much like the word ‘look’; ‘behold’; (‘ide’) is used in the Gospels, to mean ‘see and understand’; ‘see beyond sight’. Such seeing takes Pericles a little while. Upon learning her name he begins to crumble, even the refusal itself finding the words of a man for whom fortunes, parentage, love itself is ‘vanity’ and life a ‘vain shadow’ :

‘O stop there a little, this is the rarest dream
That e’er dulled sleep did mock sad fools withal;
This cannot be my daughter, buried.’

Finally overcome with belief, but still with his mind on the securities of self-harm, he nevertheless manages to speak the

vastness of the sea which took his wife's body and in the midst of which his daughter was born:

'Strike me honoured sir,
Give me a gash, put me to present pain
Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me
O'erbear the shores of my mortality
And drown me with their sweetness'

In this journeying play the sea's element expresses birth and death together, most directly as they juxtapose in the childbed which kills a wife and brings a child to her first breath. 'Thaisa was my mother' says Marina 'who did end / The minute I began.' Death and birth meet in its midst in storm. 'A tempest, birth and death' says Thaisa. This is a play which wanders and wanders; in spite of its insistence upon the securities of 'parentage' and nobility, everyone in it is 'a stranger... and a sojourner, just as my fathers were.' This sea is the element in which we subsist: it is a sea of passionate breath. 'I am but a stranger' says Marina to her own half-comprehending father. 'Thou lookst like one I loved indeed' he replies, bewildered. 'O I am wild in my beholding'. What he sees is life beyond

possibility: he has had to change his mind: *metanoia*. And to do so he must understand all the world differently.

Unlike other fathers in Shakespeare, we know of no specific occasion for repentance in Pericles. He has not rejected his wife and child like Leontes or banished his daughter like Lear. The most one can say is that while to lose one family member is misfortune, to lose two looks a little like carelessness. All the same, his discipline of reconciliation is a real one, and is more than the physical fact of a restored wife and child. As he moves towards the recognition scene with his wife Thaisa she involuntarily re-enacts her own death in silence and fainting. Pericles watches uncomprehending. ‘What means the mum [the *mmm*]?’ he asks – meaning, why does she not speak, what does her inarticulacy convey? A curious and revealing question for a man who has been desperately silent for three months. Thaisa’s wordlessness is the wordlessness of being overborne, overboard, overjoyed. Life presents like death; its images meet; and they

are all ones of surrender. 'All thy waves and storms' writes the psalmist elsewhere, 'have gone over me.'

There has been a good deal of literary criticism, one way and another, about resurrection in Shakespeare's 'late plays'.

Frequently the question is articulated as if a religious dimension to reading, let's say, the end of the *Winter's Tale* will somehow take the play's sphere beyond the confines, and thus beyond the losses, of human mortality. To think like this is to miss an important point about these returns from the dead, which is that none of them are Jesus. Like Lazarus and Dorcas, so Thaisa will die, Pericles will die, Marina in her time will die. In terms of pathos, there is a comparable charge between Othello saying from Desdemona's arms 'If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy' and Pericles calling 'on the touch of her lips I may melt / And no more be seen.' 'My bones are poured out like water', says the psalmist in Psalm 22, the Passion psalm spoken by our Lord on the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Behind the ecstasy of 'I may melt' is the

desolate self-giving of Christ's Passion, in the starkest possible contrast to the self-withholding desperation of much of Psalm 39.

Pericles' *metanoia* is a very specific one. He knows grief and loss are only deferred, just as the writer of Psalm 39 acknowledges at its close that all reprieves from death are partial and devoutly to be wished. His reconciliation is to a life in which self-giving, reconciliation, must mean loss, and where therefore loss must be embraced as he embraces wife and daughter, allowed to his love for now, however long now may last. 'Now our sands are almost run' says the play's narrator. 'More a little, and then dumb'.

But in the meantime, learns Pericles, we may be spared a little.

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