

SURPRISING WORDS

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Second Sunday of Lent

Readings: Genesis 12. 1-4a; Romans 4. 1-5, 13-17; John 3. 1-17.

WHAT is the connection between Nicodemus (in this morning's gospel reading); the King's School, Worcester; William Shakespeare; Vladimir Putin; and the General Synod of the Church of England? If you are nonplussed by the question, let me add the name of Roald Dahl to the list, and you will guess that this is something to do with words, and how we use them.

To take them in reverse order: you will all be aware of the recent controversy about the re-writing of Roald Dahl's children's stories, with the aim of making them less offensive to the present time. I do not intend to wade *very* far into this debate, about which many people hold very strong opinions, except to say that I think the debate became rather overblown in both directions. On the one hand, it does seem to me that some of the proposed revisions were based on the very doubtful idea that no books should ever cause any offence to anyone; which would make a dull world indeed, without many of our greatest writers. Jonathan Swift, dean of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, wrote wonderful books and offended everybody; but who would be without *Gulliver's Travels*, with its so contemporary insights into the absurdities of party politics?

On the other hand, those most apoplectic about the re-writing of Roald Dahl talked grandly about freedom of speech and censorship. From what I have experienced, few books are published without a robust negotiation between author and publisher about what should and should not appear in print; and as for censorship, what parent, reading stories to their children, has not skipped over a word or episode to avoid wearisome explanations and evasions? If this is censorship, we censor a book every time we decide not to read it.

The controversy, however (and this is the reason for mentioning it) is a reminder that later generations bring different perceptions to what earlier generations wrote; and all of us, all the time, have to find ways to appropriate and assimilate the sometimes unacceptable language of previous ages.

Which brings me to Vladimir Putin. In his presidential speech a couple of weeks ago in which he defended the invasion of Ukraine, he railed against the decadence and corruption of the West, and very startingly singled out the Church of England for particular condemnation. The Church of England, he said, was thinking of making God gender-neutral; all part of the decadence of the West. Well, what actually happened was that a member of the General Synod put down a written question, one of 206 written questions submitted during the February Synod on a whole variety of subjects; and this one asked about the possibility of exploring ways of referring to God which made God sound less aggressively masculine; and the Bishop of Lichfield replied that there would be some study of the matter. Not quite enough, you might think, to justify the invasion of Ukraine, but clearly Mr Putin was very put out. So put out that he quoted the words of Jesus, ‘They know not what they do’.

So here is an instance of language being handed down from past generations, provoking questions for people today. The tradition of Judaism and Christianity, which it shares with Islam, has generally spoken of God using male pronouns – He, Him, and His. It is not that we believe that God is male, whatever Mr Putin may believe. But we *do* believe that God is personal, by which we mean one able to love and care and forgive, and in order to express personality the constraints of our language give us a choice of He or She. The Judeo-Christian tradition has generally chosen He. The question put down at the Synod was simply this: is that the end of the matter? Or are there creative ways of using language that could move us beyond the binary choice of He and She when we speak of God?

I said that the tradition of Judaism and Christianity has generally settled for God as He. But not entirely. There is a whole strand of the Old Testament that speaks of the Wisdom of God – Wisdom personified, Wisdom as God’s primary agent in making the world, Wisdom as practically identified with God – and the word Wisdom is feminine. God as Lady Wisdom. Jesus told startling parables that compared God to the figures and features of everyday life – including a housewife who lost a coin and swept the house looking for it. God as Harassed

Housewife. Jesus spoke of gathering the chicks under their mother's wings. God as Mother Hen. St Anselm, one of the greatest orthodox thinkers of the middle ages, took up the same idea with a prayer beginning, 'Jesus, as a mother you gather your children to you'. And Dame Julian of Norwich, greatest of the English mystics of the middle ages, began a meditation, 'God chose to be our mother in all things ...'

You may think this is a dangerous tampering with the Christian tradition, the thin end of some enormous wedge. Clearly Mr Putin thinks so. But did the writers of the Old Testament, St Anselm, and Dame Julian, and Our Lord himself, tamper with the tradition? This is where William Shakespeare can help. Shakespeare wrote splendid plays, which are hardly ever produced as Shakespeare wrote them; indeed it is a puzzle sometimes to decide the definitive version of Shakespeare's text. Every performance of a Shakespeare play is a selection from the text, and sometimes a revision. People may call this 'tampering with the Bard', but the first person to tamper with the Bard must have been the Bard himself, author-actor-manager that he was. Every performance of Shakespeare is a unique, experimental, provisional bringing to life of the handed-down Shakespearean text; and you may have seen some pretty bold and adventurous experiments on the stage at Stratford.

Liturgy is very like a theatrical performance: it is a bringing to life at a particular moment of the handed-down words of the tradition. Often, especially in a traditional place like a cathedral, that bringing-to-life will be conservative; sometimes, especially in a radical place like a cathedral, that bringing-to-life might be experimental, provisional, surprising; as bold as an experimental performance of *King Lear* at Stratford; as surprising as the Gospels speaking of God the Harassed Housewife and God the Mother Hen.

I promised you a mention of the King's School, whose old members we welcome to the Cathedral today – *your* Cathedral, where you sat for assemblies and services and King's Day. Because of the Cathedral's connection to the King's School, the largest congregations here are congregations of lively, enquiring, intelligent young people. For their sake, as much as for anyone's sake, this

Cathedral should be known as a place in which the Christian tradition is loved and conserved - certainly; but also brought-to-life boldly, freshly, experimentally, a place in which it is safe to do unsafe things, and to use words in a bold and surprising way.

And so, very late in this sermon, to Nicodemus, the learned but anxious teacher in this morning's gospel reading, who seeks out an interview with Jesus under cover of darkness. Nicodemus is troubled. He can see the evidence that Jesus is a remarkable person, but he is troubled that Jesus is using old words in a new way. 'The kingdom of God' – yes, Nicodemus knows about the kingdom of God. But 'born again' or 'born from above'? Jesus is doing something new and surprising with old words there. 'How can these things be?' he asks. Jesus replies, as he so often does, with a question of his own: 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' Nicodemus is steeped in the tradition of the Old Testament; and yet, for that very reason, Jesus expects him to grasp the new and surprising words which we now call the New Testament. The tradition, says Jesus, does not stand still. Words, in the end, are but blunt instruments to capture the reality of God. We must come at the truth of God slant, obliquely; as Jesus did, surprising us with old words used in new ways. John Donne, the dean of St Paul's, put it like this (I have mentioned one famous cathedral dean; so let me finish with another):

On a huge hill
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go.¹

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Preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral
attended by Old Vigornians (former members of the King's School, Worcester)
on Sunday 5 March 2023.

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¹ John Donne, 'Satire III', *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, edited by John Hayward, pp. 127-130, at p. 129. London: The Nonesuch Press, 1972.