

## Sermon: The religious sense...

When I was thirteen I made a new friend: John Illingworth whose father worked as a verger in the chapel of the municipal cemetery in New Wortley in downtown Leeds. We all knew John's father because, when we were playing hide and seek among the gravestones, he would rush out and chase us off. We called him the Ghoul. He once tried to immerse me in a barrel of cold water. I must say, John Illingworth wasn't a great deal of fun, but he had a sister, Joan who was - the body and soul of Elseworth Street. Her mother was what I suppose we would now refer to as a liberated sort of person and she used to love to have the house full of young teenagers. This was a change from my own parents who were of the hard-working, non-believing but very puritanical kind

Mrs Illingworth was affectionately indulgent to us all. She was a sort of lecherous matriarch and she once offered to teach me to play, with one finger, Strauss waltzes on her dilapidated upright. She was into the pop music of the time and her favourite piece was the b-side of Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock*: a melancholy ballad called *Thirteen Women* which she used to play all the time on Joan's new *Dansette* record player, and hum to it, swaying with a fag in her mouth: *Thirteen women and only one man in town...*

She was also extravagantly religious, but the churches and chapels in Armley weren't lively enough for her and so, while her lugubrious husband, the Ghoul, used to take himself off to *The Brunswick* pub on a Sunday night, she would get dolled up and go into the middle of Leeds to the Four Square Gospel Church where they sang rapturous choruses such as:

*Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine; O what a foretaste of glory divine:  
Perfect submission, perfect delight,  
Visions of rapture burst on my sight.*

In between playing *Thirteen Women* and *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, she would bang these choruses out on the piano and get very hot and red in the face. She gave us evangelical pamphlets to read and these were called *tracts*. Very lurid. Hell fire and the devil and all his works. Sins of the flesh enough to make buckets of lard. They were a sort of spiritual pornography.

But these evangelical, rather downmarket, tracts could not be beaten for their immediate presentation of religion. Rather like Noel Coward's saying about the tremendous potency of cheap music. Let me try to remember one for a taster:

A man in deepest gloom goes to his doctor: "Doctor, I'm in the depths of despond. I've tried tablets and the talking cure - the lot. Nothing lifts me out of this swamp. Please help me."

The doctor replies: "I know just what you need. In town all this week there is the most wonderful clown. He has everyone rolling in the aisles. Here's a ticket for his performance. Go and see him and I know you'll be cheered up."

"But ah!" the man answers, "I am that clown."

There is an inside-out texture to stories like that. They can get inside you and haunt you. The same sort of thing you get in Walter Scott's vision of Merlin. Or the painted masks in Mexico's Day of the Dead. Or in the ghost stories I used to make up to frighten my sister. Like when I told her of the night I saw a ghostly hag right by the side of my bed. I pulled the covers over my face and somehow, after an age, managed to get back to sleep. When I awoke in the morning, I could sense the sunlight though the sheet. I pulled it back. And in the dazzling dawn, she was still there with her bulging eyes and toothless grin.

These experiences are very near the centre of the religious sense which was described for us by Rudolf Otto in his great book *Das Heilige – The Idea of the Holy*. Because *holy* does not mean something soppy and pietistic, choirboys in ruffs and butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Or precise geometrical high camp in the Sanctuary. Holiness is very close to sheer terror. As when Jacob wrestles all night with God and awakes to exclaim, *How dreadful is this place!* Like Isaiah's vision in the temple when he is terrified and says, *Woe is me, for I am undone. For I am a man of unclean lips. And mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.* Or on the battlements when Hamlet's father's ghost appears and Shakespeare makes them ask, *What art thou that usurpst this time of night?*

Or all those years ago in Leeds and I would be walking back from the *The Capitol Ballroom* or from seeing that haunting film *Last Year at Marienbad* and in the black silence the great steeple of St Bartholomew's was looming blacker than the black sky. And, as you walked through the wet, deserted streets, it seemed to follow you.

All these things came flooding back to me this week after I'd been in a long and tedious discussion about doctrine with a very unimaginative and literal-minded Christian enthusiast. He was going through the doctrines of the faith, crossing the "I's" and dotting the "T's". Frankly he made theology seem more like accountancy than divinity. As if God does an audit on us and inspects us precisely to make sure we have the correct understanding of the Athanasian Creed or the Filioque Clause.

Of course doctrine is important. Christianity is not just soft sensations, feeling nice about people and chiefly feeling nice about yourself. We are indeed led, as the Bible tells us, *out of the darkness of error into the marvellous light of the truth*. But this truth is not something cold and abstract like a proposition from Aristotle or Euclid. The truths of the Christian faith are truths for us to feel and taste and see with all our senses and imagination. But there are some

doctrinal Christians so fastidiously correct and achingly dull that they wouldn't recognise a spasm of the imagination if it rose up and bit them on the bottom.

When we approach the Christian faith, we enter a world of sounds and scents and presences, full of noises, sounds and sweet airs. And holy terror: the cracked rocks of the wilderness, darkness upon the face of the deep and the haunting Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. The darkness at the ninth hour on Good Friday. The earthquake and the stone rolled away. War in heaven. This is holiness. The word originally meant *otherness*: that which is strange, moving and disturbing and which by its strangeness and power changes us inwardly.

We have aids to this sort of understanding in the under-the-skin-sounds of Plainchant, Tallis and Byrd and Lassus and Purcell. The rustic mysticism of Vaughan Williams' G-minor Mass. The Giotto crucifix and the taking down from the Cross. The Pieta and the Madonna and Child. The Sanctus from the B-minor Mass. The hilarious-miraculous Gothic Disneyland of Gaudi's *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona. In such words as *Christ is risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.*

If someone pretends to religion and is not moved to laughter and tears at such things, he is not religious at all but as good as dead. I have been talking about the sense of the holy. This is the gift of life itself. Remember Our Lord's promise: *I am come that ye might have life – and have it more abundantly.* Now, you're not going to turn that down are you?