

## BOTH THIS AND THAT

When you hear the two passages from the Bible which have been read, do you respond more fully or happily to one or the other? David's lament for Saul and Jonathan came from the Second Book of Samuel. The raising of Jairus' daughter came from the Gospel according to Saint Mark. I can readily see that we might be divided this morning into two groups – those who prefer the Samuel passage and those who prefer the one from Saint Mark, or possibly three groups, those two plus the people who either regard the two passages equally or fail to see why they should choose between them.

I suppose the case for St Mark is fairly easy to make, and quite obvious. A passage about Jesus is surely important for Christian people met in Christian worship; and Jesus' doing wonderful deeds, such as healing one woman and resuscitating another, must be important as we consider what he was doing and who he was. The lament of the Israelite king one thousand years before the time of Jesus has scarcely the same obvious significance for Christian people two thousand years further on.

But here I must come clean about something. The lament of David for Saul and Jonathan was one of the passages from the Bible which I learned by heart in school, and the fifth chapter of St Mark was not.

There were other passages, though I am not not sure in every case whether the passage was one we were told to learn, or rather was one which just stuck in the mind and memory without deliberate learning. The Ten Commandments was one, and Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth, from the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, and the fifty third chapter of Isaiah, Who hath believed our report? These, I think, we were told to learn. Others, which attached themselves without much deliberate effort, included, But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded? From the eighth chapter of the First Book of Kings. These and other passages were brought to our youthful attention for several reasons – moral, in the case of the Ten Commandments, doctrinal, for the fifty third of Isaiah, poetical, for David’s lament, and also for the fifty third of Isaiah – doctrinal and poetical grounds for learning it by heart; ‘Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.’

There is a poetical, even musical quality to such passages, even in the introductory sentence: And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son. Then he begins, and in the first sentence a phrase appears which is used in speeches and memoirs and journalism up to the present time. The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen. And the very next

sentence coins a phrase still used, though possibly not as commonly in shops or at bus stops as once it was. 'Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon.' Don't pass this on, if you want to keep it from certain people. Twice more in the lament we hear How are the mighty fallen.

Have you ever asked yourself what were the qualities for which people in the Bible were praised? I have a suspicion that greatness may have taken precedence over goodness; and if that inoffensive decency which marks the acceptable character in our world today is looked for in the world of the Bible, its presence is hardly prominent. Take the great David, who arranged the death of Uriah in order to take his wife Bathsheba – great, certainly, the unifier of his people, but good?

As I contemplated these lessons I was at the same time reading the biography of the Welsh poet R S Thomas by Byron Rogers. Thomas was a complex character, silent and solitary much of the time, and though he was Rector of three parishes he was not the sort of minister many people thought ministers should be. 'It was obvious to everyone who knew him at all that R S Thomas was not what you would call a natural parish priest', wrote Canon Donald Allchin. 'An almost total lack of small-talk, a lack of that kind of superficial cheerfulness and interest in the details of other people's lives, which can ease the beginnings of a

conversation, these were obvious disadvantages. He could be angular and critical. He could seem distant and aloof. At Aberdaron there were some who thought that he was so busy hurrying up to the headland to greet the latest flock of birds from Ireland, that he failed to recognise his own parishioners when he passed them on the bridge.'

But there are memories too of great acts of kindness and devotion to people in distress or near to death. And he knew the danger of fitting in. He wrote in 1969, 'It is socially very lonely here. I don't suffer from loneliness as I am always content to be alone in nature like the Celtic saints. But complete mental conformism among one's neighbours can produce another kind of loneliness.....'

Yet he could write poetry which ranks him high if not alone in describing the world he lived in, and the spiritual honesty of the twentieth century, as in *The Empty Church*.

they laid this stone trap  
for him,enticing him with candles,  
as though he would come like some huge moth  
out of the darkness to beat there.  
Ah, he had burned himself  
before, in the human flame,

and escaped, leaving the reason  
torn. He will not come any more.

to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still  
striking my prayers on a stone  
hearth? Is it in hope one  
of them will ignite yet and throw  
on its illumined walls the shadow  
of someone greater than I can understand?

Contemplating further the question of which qualities meet Biblical approval, I meditated on two mornings in London in April, visiting two exhibitions, one entitled Monet & Architecture, the other Picasso 1932. They were both good to see, and of course different. The Monet offered seventy seven pictures, each of which included a building, sometimes occupying the whole frame, as in his famous studies of Rouen Cathedral, and sometimes a cottage in the corner of a cliff and sea scene. The Picasso shewed pictures from the highly productive year 1932. The Monets looked like Monets, the Picassos like Picassos. At first glance the Picassos required more pondering than the Monets, but that is not to suggest that Monet was a superficial artist. Nevertheless the

Picassos demanded pondering, and offered the assurance that pondering would be rewarded.

Do passages in the Bible speak like that? I mean, do they speak both in the style of Monet and in the style of Picasso?

My guess is that they do.

What makes the Bible a holy book? What about it offers that special quality? Is it that any passage can be seen as straightforward and also as suggestive of something other than straightforward? I know that many statements, poems, speeches can point in these two directions, but the Bible has been authorised by the church to be seen in these ways.

In both the account of the recovery of Jairus' daughter and the other account of the woman with the haemorrhage there are the regular and the mysterious, the everyday and the rumour of heaven. 'Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about..and said, Who touched my clothes? ' There we have ordinary activity and mysterious spirit too. And what could be more ordinary, more everyday, than the ending of the account of the raising of Jairus' daughter, 'He...commanded that something should be given her to eat.'

And all of that leads me to the conclusion that while many areas of life may lead to 'either this or that', in the Christian religion, and possibly in all religion, the matter is often 'both this and that.'

BOTH THIS AND THAT

Mayfield Salisbury

1<sup>st</sup> July 2018