

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 31st January 2021.

I am writing these few words on the morning of the 25th January, and recalling that it is exactly a year ago tonight since I had the privilege of delivering the Toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns at the St Andrew's Society of York, in the very pleasant surroundings of the Directors' Dining Room at York Racecourse! It was a splendid evening indeed and I was well looked after by the many expats who were present. Amongst the guests was the Lord Mayor of York and her Sheriff who were absolutely delightful company.

This year is a totally different scenario for my diary – no Burns Suppers, no Toasts, no travelling to various places to laud the merits of our local Bard, whose legacy of poetry and songs still touches people of all ages and stages, cultures and backgrounds. It is truly remarkable! And even all these years after his death, his words still reverberate in the human soul and psyche.

We cannot let this anniversary pass, for we are all quietly proud of him!

But, on the 25th January each year, Christians remember another man, for today is also the anniversary of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus...Saul, the Hebrew of the Hebrews, determined to wipe this scourge of this heretical faith from the face of the earth, bent on destroying Christians and all they stood for....Saul, who became Paul, the greatest Christian missionary who ever lived, and who wrote so many of the letters contained with our New Testament.

Robert Burns and Saul of Tarsus...what a strange combination! And yet, and yet...not so strange after all!

Saul, of course, came from a wealthy Jewish family, important enough to gain Roman citizenship. A pious Jew, practising with supreme devotion the faith of his fathers and forefathers, and yet, restless, still seeking, still spiritually unsatisfied, still searching for meaning and purpose in the eternal scheme of things. Yes, he diligently carried out all the rigorous rituals which his faith demanded on a daily basis; with unremitting commitment, he fulfilled every letter of the Jewish law, the Law which according to the Scribes and Pharisees, if you offended in any way, if you didn't carry it out, every t crossed, and every i dotted, then you had condemned yourself.

And Saul got to know about this itinerant preacher from Nazareth who had been crucified as a common criminal, this man who seemed to have drawn crowds of ordinary folk with His teaching and His powers and His sheer charisma; everywhere this man went, He seemed to be turn the faith of their fathers upside down. Only two things are important He had said – “Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Don't get bogged down with all the minutiae of your religion, but bask in God's unfailing grace and love, and treat everyone as you want to be treated yourself!”

Saul was greatly disturbed by the reports that were coming back to him about this new faith that was spreading rapidly and one day in Jerusalem he witnessed a young man named Stephen, a follower of this Jesus of Nazareth, being stoned to death, and Saul couldn't get over how his face glowed as he died.

But still he had to make sure that this new faith did not gain ground – he was hell bent on destroying all those who were people of the Way, these Christians, these followers of Jesus. As the avenging angel, he travelled around the cities and towns and villages of Palestine, searching them out and throwing them into prison, and making sure this heretic and his followers would be stamped out once and for all.

On his travels, he was making his way to Damascus, travelling from Jerusalem, and on that road, something happened, something momentous and earth shattering that turned Saul's little world around completely. We are told about a blinding light, and Saul hearing a voice, and being blinded – and Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle, the convert, the missionary, the man in Christ.

From that time on, Paul struggled still with all those aspects of his personality which had always troubled him – his temper and his pride, his “thorn in the flesh”.

“O wretched man that I am!” he writes, “Who will deliver me from the bondage of my sins?”

And Paul knew the answer; he had met the One who comes to deliver and free us, who makes us not only good, but makes us great.

So, on this date, we remember two men – Robert Burns of Alloway and St Paul of Tarsus. And each has something to tell us and to teach us. And it is not in the least inappropriate to remember them together.

Robert Burns is remembered as he is so like us in all his frailties and foibles; his sins and his shortcomings. I, for one, can equate with so many of his struggles which he voices in his poems and letters. He paints for us those exquisite moments of success and glory and those times of anguish and defeat. But he offers no solution. Yes, he has a wonderful dream, the dream of the brotherhood of mankind, but brotherhood can never come about till humankind has got itself into a right relationship with God.

He knew the Creator God around him in the natural world which he inhabited and he sensed his need of God – “A correspondence fixed wi heaven is sure a noble anchor” he wrote. But he could never lean on the everlasting arms because, I would contend, the theology and the pulpits of his day barred him from receiving that forgiveness and mercy and peace which he craved. He was beyond the pale as far as the Kirk was concerned. Yet, he was so near the heart of the Eternal.

St Paul is remembered as the one who knew his imperfections, he knew the struggles of the years; he knew what it was to cry out for deliverance and wholeness.

And the difference between them is that Paul found the answer that Burns sought and failed to find.

The 25th January each year is a date when we can pause to remember those who struggle with the burden of life and know only failure; those who feel themselves outsiders; those who feel their future mortgaged to their past; those who are all too conscious of their sins but don't know where to turn; those who find no peace.

The Church has a lot to answer for both in the days of St Paul and in the days of Robert Burns, for barring the doors, keeping people out.

We must guard our witness so that no one will ever feel shut out; and to those who come seeking an answer, we must always ensure that in our common life, in our preaching, in our worship, we can provide a Saviour, who will lift us up and renew us and give us the peace that only heaven can bring.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister