THE SHAKESPEARE SERMON

John Stroyan

This sermon was preached on 21 April 2013 at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, during the celebrations marking Shakespeare's birthday.

> Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)

I HAVE HERE A GRAIN OF WHEAT. The hard husk or shell needs to fall into the soil to be softened and broken open before its potential for life and growth can be released. Jesus is talking about human beings, you and me. The egotistical self, with its self-protecting husk of pride, needs to be broken open, to fall into the earth and die, before we can become our true God-intended selves, freed from the illusions of vanity.

I think it was David Edgar who wrote 'Shakespeare's comedies teach us how to love and his tragedies teach us how to die'. Learning to love and learning to die are at the heart of the human vocation. They both involve a renunciation of self-will and an embracing of self-giving. As Shakespeare reminds us, 'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds / Or bends with the remover to remove' (Sonnet 116). Jesus teaches us again and again that we only find ourselves when we give ourselves away. Outside one of the monasteries I visited on Mount Athos, I read the words: 'Unless you die before you die, you will die when you die'. And W. H. Auden put it like this: 'Life is the destiny you are bound to refuse until you have consented to die'.[1]

To discover the truth, to live truthfully, we need to be stripped of our comforting illusions. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, to lead us into the truth, the truth that sets us free. One of the earliest of the *Homilies*, published in 1547, ordered to be read in every parish church in

[1] W. H. Auden, 'For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio', in *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelsohn (New York: Random House, 2007), 353.

The Way, 53/2 (April 2014), 25–31

the country, probably heard by Shakespeare at St Clement Danes in London or here in this church, begins:

> The aim of the Holy Ghost is to pull down man's vainglory and pride and to teach us the most commendable virtue of humility, how to know ourselves and to remember what we be of ourselves.[2]

These are words which resonate with the sermon of the wounded Lear to his brother in suffering, the blinded Gloucester: 'I will preach to thee, mark ….' (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 195); '… to consider what we be, whereof we be, from where we come and whither we shall'.[3] It is only through the pulling down of our vainglory and pride that we can begin to see the brittleness of our self-regarding vanities. Richard II, looking at himself in the mirror, observes: 'A brittle glory shineth in this face / As brittle as the glory is the face' (*Richard II*, IV. i. 294–295), before smashing the mirror on the ground. Similarly Lear, when stripped of all that sustained his hubristic self-image, reflects: 'They told me I was everything, 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof' (IV. vi. 118–119).

Facing who we really are, not who we would like to think we are, is painful and chastening. The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe writes: 'To sin is always to construct an illusory self that we can admire instead of the real self that we can only love'.[4] When the apostle Peter, having vowed to stay with Jesus forever and then denied knowing him three times, faces what he has done—that he is not who he thought he was—he weeps bitterly. But it is only from this place of painful self-knowledge and deep contrition that he can be lifted up and enter God's life-giving purposes. We too resist such painful self-exposure. Auden puts this well:

> We would rather be ruined than changed
> We would rather die in our dread
> Than climb the cross of the moment
> And see our illusions die.[5]

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are brought low. Pride has to fall. The 'everything' that, through the blindness of pride, they believe themselves

[2] 'A Sermon of the Misery of All Mankind', in *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches*, edited by John Griffiths (Oxford: OUP, 1859), 16, available at http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/index.htm, accessed 17 March 2014.
[3] 'Sermon of the Misery of All Mankind', 16.
[4] Herbert McCabe, *Christ and Us* (London: Continuum, 2003), 18.
[5] Auden, 'The Age of Anxiety', in *Collected Poems*, 530.

King Lear with the body of Cordelia*, by Friedrich Pecht*

to be has to be 'nothinged'. Kierkegaard wrote: 'everything which God is to use, he first reduces to nothing'.[6] As we heard in our first reading, Paul writes: 'God chose what is low … in the world … to reduce to nothing things that are' (1 Corinthians 1:8). When Lear seeks to orchestrate his daughters' expressions of love for him, Cordelia resists his manipulations with that one, brutal word: 'Nothing'. The one who believes he is 'everything' cannot abide her 'nothing'. 'Nothing? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.' (*King Lear*, I.i.92) And yet she, alone among his daughters, is the bearer of truth and true love. She is to become for him a kind of Christ, whose tears are 'holy water', to whom he will say, broken open as he is to be, 'When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, / And ask of thee forgiveness' (V.iii.11–12). She is the one he will hold, dying in his arms, in a kind of inverted Pietà. She is the one described earlier by the king of France as 'most rich being poor'—words of St Paul about Christ himself.[7] Lear's journey is from the myopia of pride to seeing

[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journal*, edited by Alexander Dru (Mineola: Dover, 2003), 245.
[7] *King Lear*, I.i.271; 2 Corinthians 8:9.

again, or to seeing better, as the loyal but abused Kent has urged him to do. Having fallen into the ground and been broken open, he can begin to see as God sees. He invites Cordelia with him to 'take upon's the mystery of things, / As if we were God's spies' (V.iii.17–18).

Unlike Lear, who is 'nothinged' by the cruelty of others, divested by others of the power and glory of earthly kingship, Richard II, capitulating to Bolingbroke, divests himself, finally accepting that he 'must nothing be' (IV.i.204). Lear is undone by others before finally shedding his clothes on the heath. But Richard, wrestling with his continuing vanity, in which he casts himself as a kind of Christ and others around him as Pilates delivering him to his sour cross, deliberately uncrowns himself, letting go of the symbols of kingship:

> Now mark me, how I will undo myself;
> I give this heavy weight from off my head
> And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
> With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
> With mine own hands I give away my crown ….
> Make me that nothing have, with nothing grieved.
> (IV.i.206–211, 219)

At last, in prison, he faces and recognises the vanities of his kingship, the hollowness of his crown, and the thousand flatterers that sat within it. Having been brought to nothing, he begins to see what really matters:

> … but whate'er I be,
> Nor I nor any man that but man is
> With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
> With being nothing.
> (V.v.38–41)

To be eased with being nothing, to be stripped of vanity and brought to the place of humility, is the goal of monastic life. It is something like this that Paul meant when he wrote of 'having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (2 Corinthians 6: 10). Richard glimpses the redeeming possibilities within his humiliation, a new world that could emerge from the ruins of the old. 'Our holy lives must win a new world's crown / Which our profane hours have thrown down.' (V.i.24–25)

There is a Greek proverb that runs 'If you are seeking wisdom, ask a fool or a child'. Aspiring to the powers and glories of the kingdoms of this world will lead us away from Holy Wisdom. To become truly human

we have to become as children, as Jesus says, or as fools, as Paul tells us. We are to be downwardly mobile, or as the great Charles Simeon put it, to 'grow downward'.[8] As so often in Shakespeare, it is the fools or the clowns who are the bearers of truth. Shakespeare has read his Paul and, not least, our reading today (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). In *All's Well That Ends Well,* Helena exclaims:

> He that of greatest works is finisher
> Oft does them by the weakest minister:
> So holy writ in babes hath judgment shown,
> When judges have been babes; great floods have flown
> From simple sources ….
> (II.i.145–149)

It is only the Fool who can tell Lear who he is: 'Lear's shadow' (I.iv.223).

Many of us heard the foolish wisdom—or the wise folly—from the lips of Touchstone in last night's brilliant production of *As You Like It*: 'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool' (V.i.30–31).[9] Likewise, Feste, the clown in *Twelfth Night*, speaking

Keith Pattison © Royal Shakespeare Company

Nicholas Tennant as Touchstone in* As You Like It*, RSC, April 2013

[8] Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833), 170.
[9] This refers to the Royal Shakespeare Company performance on 20 April 2013 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

of wisdom, says: 'Those wits that think they have thee do very often prove fools / and I that am sure that I lack thee may pass for a wise man' (I.v.30–31). In *Much Ado*, it is the only through the folly of Dogberry and Verges that the plot of Don Juan and Borachio is discovered. Borachio confesses 'What your wisdoms could not discern, these shallow fools have brought to light' (V.i.221–222). In Shakespeare's wise fools, as St Paul tells us, 'God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise' (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Finally, the journey to humility, in the scriptures and in Shakespeare, is the journey not only into sight, but also into love and compassion. Knowledge of our own frailty brings with it a compassion for and understanding of others. Lear, stripped of absolutely everything, is moved to deep compassion for those others with nothing: 'Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm ….' (III.iv.32–33) Judgmentalism is the mark of the unhealed and unredeemed. Those who judge others simply betray their own lack of self-knowledge. Compassion flows from deep self-knowledge. In *Measure for Measure*, a title taken directly from the scriptures (Matthew 7:2), Isabella challenges Lord Angelo, as Shakespeare challenges us. When speaking of Christ, she asks:

Compassion flows from deep self-knowledge

> How would you be,
> If He, which is the top of judgment, should
> But judge you as you are? O, think on that;
> And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
> Like man new made.
> (II.ii.76–79)

To be humbled is to know both our need of mercy and the mercy of God. As forgiven, we forgive. As accepted, we accept. To get to this place of new birth and of hope, Mother Julian of Norwich reminds us:

> … for we need to fall, and we need to be aware of it; for if we did not fall, we should not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker's marvellous love so fully.[10]

So, in Shakespeare and in the divine economy of our own lives, too, we can sometimes see that 'sweet are the uses of adversity' (*As You Like It*, II.i.12). Yes, there is indeed so much of Shakespeare that,

[10] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Penguin, 1998), 143.

Like to the lark at break of day
Arising from the sullen earth
Sings at heaven's gate.
(Sonnet 29)

John Stroyan has been the Anglican bishop of Warwick since 2005. He had previously ministered in inner-city and rural parishes. Before ordination he was involved in creative writing and directing drama, and retains a strong interest in the arts and theology. His other interests include rural affairs, the Eastern Orthodox Church, interfaith activities and reconciliation.