

Creation speaks... the eagle

A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's Chesterton on Sunday 12 June 2016

Now, which of you tittered or at least raised an eyebrow as the choir sung the verse from the psalm 'Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things : making thee young and lusty as an eagle.'? I don't know where Miles Coverdale got the word 'lusty' from because the modern translation 'your youth is renewed like an eagle's' is more accurate if a little bit more bland. But what the 'lusty' does capture is something of the spirit of the eagle; not perhaps in its sexual appetite but in its moral ambiguity. Admire the eagle as we do, we also fear it for its fierceness, its feral quality, its ferocity. Some of us were looking at the poems of Ted Hughes on Friday and he captures in his nature poems that mixture of beauty and wildness – ferocity that stirs both wonderment and fear. Here's his poem about 'The Eagle': [see below]

Hughes was brought up to love the wild and inhabit it; his father would take him hunting and fishing. It was in his soul – and in his life story, that mixture of tenderness and artistic sensitivity combined with a passionate ferocity that meant that he was an unfaithful partner, living through the dramatic suicides of both his first wife and the lover he left her for. Tall and ruggedly handsome, there was in his soul both darkness and light – he was a Heathcliffe and, as such, so the ladies of our group conceded – indeed protested – was deeply attractive to women.

It was a poet who wrote the proverb we heard as one our Old Testament readings, a poet musing perhaps on the mystery of a young friend of his who has inexplicably transformed from warrior to lover having been captured by Cupid's dart – sorry, wrong religion, but you know what I mean.

¹⁸Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
¹⁹the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a girl.

The word for girl – in Hebrew 'halma' – is the same word used of the virgin who will conceive and bring forth a son in the vision of Isaiah we read at Christmas. The meaning in Hebrew isn't so much on the sexual experience of the maiden but on the fact that she is just reaching the age when she is ripe for marriage. The man is wooing and what an extraordinary thing it is to behold. To the poet's eye it is like the mesmerising effect of seeing a ship plough its way effortlessly through the high waves or a snake gliding across a rock by writhing its body both spelling and uttering the letter S; or like the eagle soaring and swooping in the sky. How mysterious and wonderful is our world – but also fearsome, the eagle's talons, the snake's sting, the cruel sea, and the cruelty also of human love and passion where romance is so often mixed with tragedy.

The eagle is the symbol of St John the Evangelist. You can see them both on the right hand side in the east window – where John is depicted, correctly in my view, not all soft and serene as he usually is but as slightly wild, for the John we encounter through the NT writings that were written either by him or by those who sought to follow and imitate him – this is the one Jesus nicknamed 'Son of Thunder'; the one

known for teaching that 'God is love', known for his own deep love of the brethren and known for practising the love he preached, this is also the John who thunders out of the Book of Revelation with all its anger and tumult and wildness. John is the great theologian of the Word in the NT, the great visionary, the one who has the eye of the eagle, able to see things far off that no-one else can see, who can hold his nerve, keep his piercing eyes focussed despite all other tumult raging around him and his fellow persecuted Christians. He shapes our hearing and receiving of the word as written by him and his contemporaries; we mount our Bibles and read them from his symbol, the eagle, because that word evokes our wonder and admiration but at times also speaks with startling ferocity. The word is wild.

The astonishing image that we are given in Exodus 6 sees the story of Israel's rescue from captivity in Egypt as if they were swept up on eagles' wings and flown off to the divine nest high up on Mount Sinai where they encountered God himself: 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.' Their encounter with the divine presence was one where they experienced soaring with the eagle and their journey of salvation was one where they experienced both exaltation of spirit and fear boarding on terror. That was their experience of God, a God like Aslan in the Lion, the Witch and the wardrobe: 'He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.'

We English people are the descendants of the barbarians, the wild peoples of Europe. The Roman Empire could never quite civilise us but the Christian gospel did – and it did it in part by converting armies of barbarian soldiers of the flesh into armies of barbarian soldiers of the spirit. Young men who would have been destined for armies and battle went instead into monasteries and battled against the world, the flesh and the devil. Our continent was transformed and energised by the great spiritual powerstations of monasticism – as all that youthful, wild, lusty energy was partly tamed but also partly harnessed and redirected not for the cause of the tribe but for the greater Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. But barbarianism hasn't died out; we have seen it in recent days in the streets of Marseilles – youthful, wild, lusty young men under the influence being tribal, raping and pillaging – or at least pillaging. I don't say that just to condemn; my reflection is how we in the church reach such young men. Monasticism seems to have no appeal today – do we need to come up with other ways that can direct and harness all that youthful, wild and lusty energy for the Kingdom of God? Are we just too tame? Somehow 'wildness' and the Church of England don't seem to go together. I haven't time to develop that theme this morning – I simply throw it out because it's something I'm beginning to think about quite deeply.

But what has also to an extent always helped to transform youthful, wild, lusty men has been that encounter that was so mysterious to the writer of the Proverb, the way of a young man with a young woman. It has been Christian marriage that has been the making of many men, that has harnessed their wildness and lustiness, to create loving and peaceful homes and to give life and love to others. It is the love of women that has rescued so many men. We saw in our gospel reading that behind the ministry of Jesus lay the personal and financial support of the usually invisible female disciples. It was the women of course who remained faithful to the end when the men had all bottled or panicked.

And in our national life it has been our female monarchs who have given us the longest and most sustained periods of stability: Victoria 150 years ago, the first Elizabeth 450 years ago and the second Elizabeth in our own era. Wedded to the nation in their service, they have used their feminine charms to channel our Barbarian warrior spirits into nobler endeavours and have sought to build and maintain a Christian commonwealth in more ways than one.

We shall conclude this service by singing the National Anthem which is, of course, a prayer – ‘God save our gracious Queen, long live our noble queen’. Not all our monarchs have been as worthy of that prayer, not all have deserved to be called ‘noble’; it is therefore in a spirit of thankfulness that we can affirm that this much offered prayer has been wonderfully and appropriately answered.

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EAGLE

Big wings dawns dark.
The sun is hunting.
Thunder collects, under granite eyebrows.

The horizons are ravenous.
The dark mountain has an electric eye.
The sun lowers its meat-hook.

His spread fingers measure a heaven, then a heaven.
His ancestors worship only him,
And his children's children cry to him alone.

His trapeze is a continent.
The sun is looking for fuel
With the gaze of a guillotine.

And already the white hare crouches at the sacrifice,
Already the fawn stumbles to offer itself up,
And the wolf-cub weeps to be chosen.

The huddle-shawled lightning-faced warrior
Stamps his shaggy-trousered dance
On an altar of blood.

Ted Hughes

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