

## Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021. Epiphany 3. Canongate Kirk.

### Burns and the Bible.

In 1771 an Edinburgh lawyer by the name of Henry Mackenzie published a book entitled “The Man of Feeling”. It was to become a highly influential novel in which the hero, according to one description, demonstrates his unwavering benevolence and acute sensibility through various scenes in which he comes to the rescue of the down-trodden, loses his love and fails to achieve worldly success in his lifetime. It won’t come as a great surprise to discover that Robert Burns, another man of considerable feeling, described this book as one of his “bosom favourites”. What might come as something more of a surprise is that he is said to have loved it “next to the Bible”. For when it comes to books that had a profound influence not just on the writing of Robert Burns but on his thinking too, the Bible – in its Authorised Version – by his own admission came first.

Now I am no authority on Burns, far from it, but I have no doubt that his affection for the Bible must have stemmed from his early years, both at home and at school. He was, of course, the son of a cotter, a farm-worker living in a tied cottage, initially near Alloway in Ayrshire. And a central verse from his famous poem “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” must surely reflect his own experience of the influence of the Bible in his own home.

*The cheerfu’ supper done, wi’ serious face,  
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;  
The sire turns o’er, wi’ patriarchal grace,  
The big ha’-Bible, ance his father’s pride.  
His bonnet rev’rently is laid aside,  
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;  
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,  
He wales a portion with judicious care,  
And “Let us worship God!” he says, with solemn air.*

For it would have been his own father who once reached “wi’ patriarchal grace” for the old family Bible after the meal was over, his own father who would select “a portion with judicious care”. The Cotter’s Saturday Night comes straight from the heart because it comes from the home life and experience of Robert Burns. And school would have played its part too, for in those days the Kirk was directly involved in education, and as the Burns family moved around various farms wherever the cotter could find work, so the children moved around various schools, and Robert would not only receive the good grounding in English literature that would stand him in such good stead for the future, but would get a good grounding in Scripture too,

becoming familiar with its flights not only of language but of faith. His own paraphrase of the first Psalm suggests that though in his own lifetime he was often to find himself associated for one reason or another with the ungodly, he still knew where the source of true and lasting happiness was to be found:

*The man, in life wherever plac'd,  
Hath happiness in store,  
Who walks not in the wicked's way  
Nor learns their guilty lore.*

*That man shall flourish like the trees,  
Which by the streamlets grow;  
The fruitful top is spread on high,  
And firm the root below.*

It's quite clear that Burns's own roots were firmly grounded in the message of the Bible, and the fruitfulness of his poetry attributable not least to his enduring affection for the rich language of the Authorised Version. It would be easy to assume that Burns had little time for the Bible and the things of faith, for the more notorious aspects of his life and character seem to suggest that the way of faithfulness in any sense was not for him. And famous poems like "Holy Willie's Prayer" are not exactly pro Church by any stretch of the imagination. But when Burns is critical of the Church he is critical of the ways in which Church folk interpret and so often misinterpret the Scriptures to suit themselves. He is not critical of the Bible. He is critical of the often harsh and uncaring Calvinistic approach adopted by so many ministers and Kirk Sessions in his day, but he is not critical of the people who to his mind deserved more sympathy and forgiveness than they were likely to get from the Kirk, and its official representatives.

*But he, whose blossom buds in guilt,  
Shall to the ground be cast,  
And, like the rootless stubble, tost  
Before the sweeping blast.*

How often must Burns have identified with those whose blossom buds in guilt, who found themselves cast out from their local church community. And how often he must have identified too with the teaching of Jesus, there at the very heart of the Scriptures. It's said that as well as the Psalms his favourite books of the Old Testament were Job and Proverbs and in the New Testament St Matthew's Gospel and St Paul's letter to the Romans. Job and Proverbs are both suitably poetic, Job the story of a man who suffers terribly, and Proverbs a source of great wisdom applied to practical everyday concerns like respect for the poor and loyalty to friends. And while all that must have struck a chord with Robert Burns, his preferences amongst the New Testament are even more telling. For St Matthew's Gospel is concerned

primarily with the humanity of Jesus; from the very beginning it traces his genealogy and stresses the human side of his nature, and it goes on of course to reflect the most humanitarian side of his teaching in passages like the Sermon on the Mount, which not only begins with the Beatitudes: Blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the persecuted and so on, but continues with just the very condemnations of hypocrisy that centuries later would so appeal to our national poet....”And when thou prayest”, says Jesus in the Authorised Version of St Matthew’s Gospel, “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men”. And in Romans, another favourite, another major influence, what do we find but a recognition that all people need to be put right with God for all are sinners alike, and a disdain of self righteousness. “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”, says St Paul. And to that Robert Burns would surely have said Amen.

Burns and the Bible. Perhaps not so incompatible after all. For his early grounding in the Scriptures at home and at school was in fact to have a far wider and deeper influence on his writing and on his thinking than you might expect. Deprived of our Church Burns Supper this year, we might also find ourselves lamenting that the Bible no longer carries the same sort of influence in our own community and even in our own homes as once it did; if so, then perhaps now is as good a time as any to reach for the old family Bible once again.

*He wales a portion with judicious care,  
And “Let us worship God!” he says, with solemn air.*

Amen.