

An Old Acquaintance

Amos 5:6-13; 21-24 Luke 3:7-20

Presbytery Worship Service

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What makes some writers better than others? What makes some writers become literary giants who stand head and shoulders above the rest? What makes some writers become the standard by which all others are measured? What is it that singles out a Homer, or a Chaucer, or a Shakespeare, or a Tolstoy, or a Wordsworth, or a Dickens, or a Robertson Davies, or a Margaret Atwood, or a Farley Mowat, or a Salman Rushdie, or a J.K. Rowling as being special and extraordinary?

In his book, *The Western Canon*,¹ Professor Harold Bloom of Yale University comes up with two particular traits that mark out the greatest writers from the rest. The first of these is “strangeness”. Strange, he says, not in the contemporary sense of “weird” but, rather, strange as being “a mode of originality”. In other words, the author has such a completely new way of saying some old truth or questioning some established reality that it grabs our attention by surprising and shocking and offending us.

But, contends Bloom, such an archetypal writer also needs to display the characteristic of universality to make it into the literary hall of fame. He or she has to be able to write words that transcend “the particular prejudices and needs of societies at a fixed point in time” and say those things that will be applicable in all times and all generations. People of different countries and cultures have to be able to read the author’s words long after they have been written, and think: These words apply to me. In them, I see reflected myself, my times and my concerns.

Now, I must confess to be a tad disappointed that nowhere in the 560 pages of Professor Bloom’s exhaustive study of western literature does there seem to be any mention of one whom I would definitely consider to be in the pantheon of literary greats. I am, of course, referring to none other than Robert Burns, Scotland’s national poet, born 252 years ago this very day, 25 January 1759.

No-one could deny that Burns had a certain “strangeness”, an originality, an ability to say old truths in radically new and disturbing ways. There was, for instance, his brilliantly incisive critique of the staunchly Calvinist church of his times and its blind,

unquestioning adherence to the seemingly arbitrary Doctrine of Double Predestination which decreed that, from before time began, some would go to heaven and others to hell. Burns doesn’t attack this dogma by traditional theological means but in the unique, poetic form of *Holy Willie’s Prayer* where he says, “O Thou who in the heavens dost dwell, Who as it pleases best Thyself, Sends one to heaven, and ten to hell, All for Thy glory, And not for any good or ill, They’ve done before Thee.”²

Then, again, if universality is the measure of all-time greatness, Burns would make it on that score too. He had an uncanny ability to express everyday thoughts and feelings in pithy, memorable ways which are now commonplace in our everyday language. Who, when all their carefully thought-out plans begin to unravel, does not take consolation in the words, “The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley”.³ Or who, when exasperated by someone’s inability to see their own appearance or appreciate the insensitive impact of their actions, does not say, “O would some Pow’r the giftie gie us, To see ourselves as others see us.”⁴

But, even though Burns makes the top of the greatness leagues on the scores of strangeness and universality, I think the enduring appeal of this poet to so many countless people, Scots and non-Scots, really lies in the fact that he was a man driven by a fire in his belly. The fire of justice. For all his personal faults and failings, he had an insatiable need to right the wrongs and adjust the inequities he saw around him.

For instance, in times when slavery was socially acceptable, he risked much by speaking out about its evil, drawing particular attention to the slaves’ dreadful predicament and inhuman treatment, putting their plight into the most poignant of poems, *A Slave’s Lament*.⁵ Seemingly, American President Abraham Lincoln, had a lifelong admiration for the work of Robert Burns. Some have even claimed that the poet’s verse played a key role in motivating Lincoln to win the Civil War and abolish slavery.⁶

Then 200 years before feminism began to right the balance of gender inequality in society, Burns – ironically, in light of his weakness where the fairer sex

was concerned – highlighted the unjust treatment of women in the paternalistic society of his day, saying that, while there was a great deal of fuss about the rights of man, “The Rights of Woman merit some attention.”⁷

Perhaps the secret of Burns’ greatness, therefore, lies in the fact that he was a prophet as well as a poet, telling it “like it is” without fear of the consequences. Maybe he was just like Amos in the Bible who railed against the injustices of his day and exposed the hypocrisy of institutional religion. “You have oppressed the poor and robbed them of their grain,” Amos told the people of his time, “You persecute good people, take bribes, and prevent the poor from getting justice in the courts ... I hate your religious festivals. I cannot stand them. When you bring me burnt offerings or grain offerings, I will not accept them ... Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.”⁸

Or, maybe Burns was like John the Baptist as he denounced the people who thought they could hide their religious hypocrisy behind ancestral credentials. Just because you claim to be descendants of Abraham, John told them, does not mean you can get away with all sorts of injustices, treating others as religiously inferior, collecting more taxes than is legal or hoarding all your worldly goods, your food and clothing, for your own exclusive use. No, John the Baptist says, “The axe is ready to cut down the trees at its roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire ... Whoever has two shirts must give one to the person who has none and whoever has food must share it ... and don’t collect more taxes than is legal.”⁹

In a way, then, Robert Burns stands well within the same tradition of prophecy that we see in both Old and New Testaments. Like Amos and John the Baptist, he thirsted for justice. He felt deep within himself that God’s plan and purpose for humankind had been thwarted by human sin. Through inequality and unfairness, perpetuated by those with vested interests, ordinary people were being hurt and consigned to living lives of needless misery. But, though they might be unwilling to insist on their rights, he certainly was. And he was willing to speak out fearlessly on their behalf – a voice for the voiceless; an advocate for the oppressed.

I wonder, if Burns was living today, what things

might he be protesting about in our contemporary world? Where would he be aiming his calls for justice? Well, certainly, I am sure we would hear many a tirade against the fat-cat investment bankers and financial top-dogs who caused the recent economic crisis. And remembering Burns’ reverence for creation in poems about a little mouse and a mountain daisy, I am sure he would be railing against our inaction on measures to curb climate change. Oh and I’m sure we here in Canada would also be getting the rough end of his tongue on everything from the way we treat our aboriginal population to our inhumane culling of seals to our exporting of asbestos to developing countries.¹⁰

Perhaps, though, Burns would reserve his most pointed and powerful tirade for the church. He would, no doubt, be very scathing in his attack on its inherent hypocrisy, pledging to follow the one who befriended the poor, the hungry and the outcast, yet aligning itself so blatantly with the rich and powerful in society. He would be challenging the church to live up to its true calling; to be what Christ wanted it to be, a voice for the voiceless, an advocate for the oppressed, the inner conscience of society constantly calling people back to basic Christian values and to a stronger regard for issues of truth and justice.

Undoubtedly, if Burns were here today, he would upset many people by his prophetic voice. But then, again, maybe that would be good. Maybe we need to be upset. Maybe we need to feel uncomfortable. Maybe we need to be challenged if we are going to follow Christ more truly as his faithful disciples in 2011 and beyond.

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St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Books and School of the Ages*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995

² Robert Burns, “Holy Willie’s Prayer, *The Poetical Works of Burns*, p.45

³ Ibid. “To A Mouse” Ibid. p.137

⁴ Ibid. “To A Louse”, Ibid. p.120

⁵ Ibid. “The Slave’s Lament” p.216,

⁶ 20 facts about Scotland, www.scotland.org

⁷ Ibid. “The Rights of Woman”, p.166

⁸ Amos 5:6-12; 21-24

⁹ Luke 3:7-20

¹⁰ Mesothelioma Cancer Centre “Threat of mesothelioma continues as Canada exports asbestos”, www.asbestos.com, January 2, 2009