Traherne

We at St Mary’s Teddington have the honour of looking after the mortal remains of someone commemorated in the Church of England’s calendar of saints and festivals, and today is his day! 345 years ago today, Thomas Traherne - poet and mystic as the calendar calls him - was buried in this church and his remains deposited under the reading desk, wherever that was exactly.

Now for most of this period this fact, that has brought us together this evening, was a matter of complete indifference to the good folk of Teddington, or indeed the Church of England as a whole. For after his burial, Thomas Traherne had been more or less forgotten. He published little in his lifetime beyond a few items of religious controversy of only minor significance. He only passed the last few months of his life here, having spent most of his clerical career as a country parson in Herefordshire. The few testimonies to his life suggest that he was a generous, humble soul who owned little other than his books. But that’s about all we know.

No, the person who was remembered - and is commemorated to this day in this fine monument in the chancel - was Sir Orlando Bridgeman who had been one of the most powerful lawyers and politicians in England under King Charles II. He had a grand house around here and Thomas got a position as his chaplain, which was what brought him to these parts. But he died after only a brief period in post. He wouldn’t have had many friends or supporters here at his deathbed outside the household of his employer, who had himself died a few months before, and it’s unlikely that he was remembered here for very long after his early demise at the relatively young age of 36 or 37.

What are we to say about this part of Thomas’s story? It seems a sad end to an all too brief life, brought to a close at the very moment when he’d hitched his fortunes to a powerful individual who, I’m sure, he hoped would secure promotion for him in the church - yet by the end of the year they were both dead and buried within these walls: Bridgeman with a splendid monument to perpetuate his memory as befitted a man of his exalted status in this life, Traherne with none, so far as we know, as indeed befitted his. A lesson to us all, then, of the fickleness of fortune and the futility of worldly ambition.

And yet in 2019, the tables are turned. Who now has heard of Sir Orlando Bridgeman? He’s just another forgotten grandee, of interest only to students of the turbulent politics of his time. But Thomas Traherne - the humble parson of no account - has joined the canon of English literature, with his own fan club and Twitter feed, a multi-volume edition of his works and a place in the church’s calendar that brings us together this evening. How on earth did the post-mortem transformation in his reputation and significance come about, and what are we to make of it?

We now know that Thomas was a prolific writer in both poetry and prose. And, by what can surely only be described as a series of complete flukes, the manuscripts that were left behind after his death were not thrown away but survived, unread and neglected, for over 200 years until two of them - including the Ms of his great prose work the Centuries of Meditations - were spotted in a London bookseller’s in 1897. Recognised as the output of a gifted writer, the resulting publications led to a quest for more material and the 20th century saw the identification of more Traherne material in libraries across the world - and even on a bonfire in Lancashire.

I’ll say more later about what we might make of the extraordinary story of his late rediscovery, but first I need to say something about what makes his work so attractive. Surely some element of his popularity must be due to the incredible story of the chance survival of his works in manuscript and their accidental rediscovery in a barrowload of old books. But Traherne was clearly a great writer with a unique poetic vision and an extraordinary mind that resonates with contemporary sensibility, whether religious or not. He is rightly praised for his pure and vivid sense of the intimate presence of God in himself, and in creation:

**Your enjoyment of the word is never right till every morning you awake in heaven; see yourself in your father’s palace; and look upon the skies and the earth and the air as celestial joys… you never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars and perceive yourself to be the heir of the whole world.**

All this has a clear affinity with many modern forms of spirituality, as well as being beautifully written. Traherne also has a clear understanding of the utterly transcendent, metaphysical nature of God.

**He is an infinite sphere, yet an infinite centre. He is infinitely before us, yet infinitely after us. We are equal to him, yet infinitely beneath him…. By making us each a possessor of eternity and the end of all things, He hath made us like himself.**

Traherne was well aware of the developing scientific interests of his times, which led many to seek to think of God as creator of the material order. But for Traherne, God is not merely a powerful creator being, he is the necessary precondition for being itself, not part of the cosmos but the reason why anything exists at all. Traherne’s God is both incredibly close and completely transcendent. This vision of God he received from the great medieval theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas, but it was slowly falling out of favour in the seventeenth century as metaphysics and reason gave way to experimental science, then called natural philosophy, as the key to understanding the world.

For me at least this above all is what makes Traherne’s writing so luminously inspirational. His is arguably the most beautifully poetic rendition of the classical idea of God that has ever been produced. It’s high theology in exquisite verse and perfectly lucent prose. Philosophy and mystical devotion in one, written for all to read and for all to delight in.

Thomas’s understanding of God is what lies at the heart of what we feel to be his mystical vision which, above all perhaps, is what has made him so appealing to modern taste. His sense of the oneness of the individual with the All, of the moment with Eternity, of the finite with the Infinite, draws above all on his understanding of God as both unimaginably close to all creation, and incomprehensibly transcendent and different from it, a vision of God also shared with mystics in other religious traditions.

So Thomas was an outstanding writer and gifted interpreter of the nature God to humankind, and of his relationship to the heart of the individual believer and to nature. But now it’s time to turn to Jesus, who for Christians is the ultimate reconciliation of the finite with the Infinite, of God with the created order, because He is both.

Our Lord told meaningful stories about the finding of lost things - coins and sheep rather than literary manuscripts, but you get the point - to illustrate for us the persistent love of God for lost humanity that never gives up searching till he’s brought us home. For 200 years, Thomas was lost - not to God of course, who In the infinity of His knowledge always knew everything that he had ever thought and written - but to us, his fellow creatures. Through a mundane event in finite time, a chance find in a London bookshop, we have been given the chance to share in the radiant vision of the infinite plenitude of God and of his intimate proximity to us and to the whole of creation which Traherne possessed, and which he expressed so powerfully and so beautifully for our good, and for the glory of God. And so for his life and his work and his vision let us give thanks to Traherne’s God and ours, and let him have the last word:

**Suppose a river, or a drop of water, an apple or a sand, an ear of corn, or an herb: God knoweth infinite excellencies in it more than we. He seeth how it relateth to Angels and Men; how it proceedeth from the most perfect lover to the most perfectly beloved; Oh what a treasure is every sand when truly understood! Who can love anything that God hath made too much? … What a world would this be, were everything beloved as it ought to be!**

May the soul of our brother Thomas rest in peace

and rise in glory.

Amen