

The University Sermon
Preached at Great St Mary's, Cambridge
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The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name,
will teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I
have said to you. (John 14:26)

In a small upland farmhouse in mid-Wales, in the first years of the nineteenth century, a young woman sits writing a letter to a friend in a neighbouring farm, some miles down the valley nearer towards the English border. In terms of the village where Ann Griffiths lived, her family had some standing. Her grandfather had been church warden. Her father had held office in the parish. But Dolwar Fach was a small farm; the family held it as tenants, not as freeholders, and beyond their own district they were very little known, if at all. In the England of Jane Austen, Welsh-speaking hill farmers were scarcely to be acknowledged.

This is the subject matter of the letter; after a brief opening greeting the writer comes at once to the point:

Dear Sister, the most outstanding thing that is on my mind at present as a matter for thought is to do with grieving the Holy Spirit. This word came into my mind, 'Know ye not that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in you' and on penetrating a little into the wonders of the person, and how he dwells or resides in the believer, I think in short that I have never been possessed to the same degree by reverential fears of grieving him, and along with that I have been able to see one reason, indeed the chief reason, why this great sin has made such a slight impression upon my mind on account of my base and blasphemous thoughts about a person so great.

From her feelings of sorrow at her failure to understand God's nature, Ann passes at once to what she sees as its cause.

This is how my thoughts ran about the persons of the Trinity. I feel my mind being seized by shame, and yet under constraint to speak, because of the harmfulness of it. I thought of the persons of the Father and the Son as co-equal; but as for the person of the Holy Spirit, I regarded him as a functionary, subordinate to them. Oh what a misguided imagination about a person who is divine, all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful to carry on and complete the good work which he has begun in accordance with the free covenant and the council of the Three-in-One, regarding those who are objects of the primal love. Oh for the privilege of being one of their number.

The letter may well surprise us, both in its contents and in its style. It forms one of a little group of eight such letters, all that we have in prose from the hand of its writer. Wales' foremost literary scholar of our century, Saunders Lewis, has declared them to be among the finest texts in the whole history of Welsh religious prose. One is not inclined to disagree with him.

There are four points about the passage which, from a theological viewpoint, deserve our attention.

Firstly, the writer is a person of deep feeling. She experiences reverential fear, overwhelming shame, in considering the errors she has made in her understanding of God. She is also sensitive and tender-hearted, and powerfully moved by the things she believes. We remember that she is part of a movement which expects the life of faith to make a deep and transforming impression on our feelings.

But, secondly, she is also a person of a clear and penetrating intellect. She speaks at once of 'a matter for thought', she expounds 'one reason, indeed the chief reason' for her perplexity. She seems to experience her thoughts as somehow having a life of their own: 'this is how my thoughts ran ... I feel my mind being seized with shame'. In the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth there is a commonplace book belonging to the family at Dolwar Fach. In it there is a page where Ann, at the age of nineteen, has tried to write out a few scripture texts in English. She then adds one or two words in that unfamiliar language, of which she had only a limited knowledge. The first is 'incomprehensibility'. We should have known it was her, even if she had not signed her name on the page.

Thirdly, she is a person of outstanding theological intuition. Her grasp of the nature of theological thinking reveals itself in two ways in this passage. First in the mind which can see and express so clearly the failure of Trinitarian understanding which lies at the root of her dilemma. 'I thought of the persons of the Father and the Son as co-equal; but as for the person of the Holy Spirit I regarded him as a functionary subordinate to them'. She cannot have been aware of it, but in that one sentence she has articulated a tendency which has been common enough in Western Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, for some centuries. It is a tendency which in our own century has aroused, on the one side, powerful movements of enthusiastic, spirit-filled religion, and on the other, probing, careful and creative efforts to restate a more fully balanced doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, as scholars in the Christian East became aware of it, they have come to see this tendency to undervalue the person and work of the Holy Spirit as one of the most important differences between East and West in Christendom.

But, and here is our fourth point, Ann not only has a grasp of the contents of Christian theology. She has an equally penetrating grasp of its nature. Her error she sees is the product of her own misguided imagination. The truth is something which she receives as a gift from the God who reveals himself.

Dear sister, I feel a degree of thirst to grow up more in the belief in the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in my life; and this by way of revelation, not of imagination, as if I thought to comprehend in what way or by what means it happens, which is real idolatry.

On any showing this is an extraordinary letter. The product of a very fine, accurate mind, as well as a tender, over-sensitive heart and conscience. Knowing as I do now more about the context from which it came, of the quality of preaching and teaching which characterised the Methodism of North Wales at that time, in particular the teaching of Thomas Charles of Bala and Thomas Jones of Denbigh, I can see that Ann was not so isolated a figure as at one time I thought. But still, we can hardly deny that there is something astonishing in it. Here is a woman in her mid-twenties with perhaps two years of formal schooling in a little village school, someone who carries all the

responsibilities and cares of a family hill farm with her – for she is looking after her father and her two unmarried brothers, her mother having died when she was seventeen. We hardly expect such depth of reflection, such clarity of analysis on a point of pure theology.

But I do not want to linger over the person and life of Ann Thomas, or as she has always been known, Ann Griffiths, which was her married name. She died in August 1805, almost a year after her marriage to Edward Griffiths of Meifod, and two weeks after the birth and death of her only child.

What I want to do in the rest of this sermon is to look back into the tradition of which she was a part, that tradition of religious and theological poetry and prose which forms the backbone of the Welsh literary tradition as a whole for over a thousand years. One of the things which marks it is its understanding of the Holy Spirit as ‘all-present, all-powerful and all-knowing’ to carry forward the work of God, Three-in-One.

Here for instance is a passage from a mid-thirteenth century work, *Ymborth yr Enaid*, *The Food for the Soul*, whose writer was, as he tells us, a Dominican brother, very probably one who had studied in Oxford. This work reaches its climax in a highly detailed description of Jesus as a boy at twelve years old; but that vision is preceded by a substantial discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the way in which that doctrine is to touch the life of the believer. In it the writer sees the Church in heaven and the Church on earth as alike animated by sparks of a love which is truly divine.

From the tender love which flames between the Father and the Son (to which the Holy Spirit has been likened, and which he truly is) come the sparks of the church triumphant, and from there they pass to the hearts of the faithful who are the church militant here below. However small these sparks may be, they cannot be any less but only greater than the whole of creation, since, although they are called sparks, they are not less than the whole of the fire from which they come, that is to say the Holy Spirit, who is no less than the unity of the three persons together.

It is nothing less than God himself, God the Holy Spirit, or the three persons together, who dwells in the hearts of the faithful. Their

responsive love for God, and their love for their fellow Christians, flows directly out of that love which is at the heart of the Trinity.

Therefore, through the tender love which comes from the sparks of the Holy Spirit, who is the tender love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, humanity, the creature, is united with the creator who is God almighty.

The author of this treatise writes with a fullness and theological definition which is rare in the vernacular literature of the middle ages. We can see in his work influences of the writing of Peter Lombard, and very probably of Richard Fishacre, one of the first Dominican masters in Oxford. But the vision which it asserts, of a human life as grounded, rooted, in the divine life and love, is one which can be found in many places in the Welsh poetry of these centuries, which stretch from the ninth until the nineteenth. One particular formulation, striking but not untypical, comes from Meilyr Brydydd, writing in the first half of the twelfth century:

I will not break my friendship with my friend
A friendship according to the Trinity.

The covenant relationship established both by bonds of human kinship and by bonds of personal commitment, for the word *ceraint* will cover both meanings, is rooted in, established by the eternal relationships which exist within the very life of God. Human life, personal and social, is made in the image and likeness of the triune Godhead.

The poets of this period, and to some extent the poets even till today, can make similar and even more daring claims for their poetic craft, as being the gift of the Holy Spirit himself.

So in a fifteenth century controversy over this very topic Rhys Goch Eryri exclaims:

No, there is no muse but one
This to the tongue not seldom
From the Holy Ghost has come,
And then is sent from heaven,

Home of all gifts to us men
So that God's praise we may sing
As bond for her obtaining.

In the middle ages the word for 'muse' in Welsh, *Awen*, was constantly identified with the first word of the Angel's salutation to Mary, *Ave*. The word which brings the Spirit to the blessed virgin, the Spirit by whom the Word becomes incarnate, is the same word which brings inspiration to the poet, allowing him to embody in his words, the praise and glory of God as it is made known throughout creation and redemption. There is in this poetry, an extraordinary, latent, underlying Trinitarian structure of thought.

It would be foolish to say that such a vision of the poetic craft is universally or even widely held among poets today in Wales. But it was certainly not at all absent from the minds of the four great Christian poets of the middle years of this century, Saunders Lewis, Gwenallt, Waldo Williams and Euros Bowen. And in only 1996 a volume was published by one of the most brilliant and prolific of our younger poets, Gwyneth Lewis, a poet who writes with great eloquence in both languages, English and Welsh. It is a collection called *Cyfrif Un ac Un yn Dri, Counting One and One Makes Three*. On the cover we see a naive painting dating from the 1840s in which a young woman in Victorian finery is being baptised by a black-gowned minister in the River Rheidol, just above Aberystwyth. We see the two figures, the minister and our Mary-Ann, but it is a third person, the Holy Spirit, who performs the baptism, who unites earth with heaven, human with divine. We see two with our outward eyes; with the eyes of faith and understanding we see three.

I have spoken in this sermon of the tradition of Wales, of a people who share the southern part of this island of Britain with us though too often we seem to be unaware of that fact. After Ann Griffiths I have made mention in it of a notable representative of that tradition, who, in all probability, was educated in the early middle ages in Oxford. I would like to conclude with an equally eminent representative of the Welsh tradition who was educated in this university in the 1560s and 70s.

Edmwnd Prys as a young man became a fellow of St John's and a Preacher to the University. He had gifts, particularly in the

study of languages, which would have enabled him without difficulty to make an ecclesiastical career in England. But he decided, for whatever reason, in 1577, to return to West Wales. There he became rector of Maentwrog and Archdeacon of Meirionydd, and there he died in 1623 at the end of a long and chequered career, in which he had written much. Towards the end of his life he had brought to conclusion his long-awaited metrical version of the psalms of David. This was a work of such quality that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was frequently bound up with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as an integral part of both. It is a work which laid the foundation for the later flowering of Welsh hymnody in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

But I quote not from the psalms but from one of Edmwnd Prys' own poems, his *Ode on Our Redemption*, one of the great theological poems of the Welsh language. His begins with a verse which declares:

I shall praise in every clearing
The choice made in the heavens
A design of great love,
Three were united through the greeting
The great God, the good angel and the maiden.

This is the point where the work of our redemption begins in the design of great love which brings together heaven and earth, in the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. It is a design which is rooted in the being of God, Three-in One, in whose image and likeness humankind and all creation is made. It is the revelation of 'the free covenant and counsel of the Three-in One' of which Ann wrote in her letter to Elisabeth Evans; it is that eternal covenant which lies behind creation and redemption alike. It is that covenant and counsel, that design of great love which in the end will draw all things to their fulfilment in the feast of God's kingdom, in the joyful interchange of the divine love.

For Further Reading

An introduction to Ann Griffiths is to be found in A.M.Allchin, *Ann Griffiths, The Furnace and the Fountain*, University of Wales Press, 1987.

For more on *Ymborth yr Enaid* and its writer, see Oliver Davies, *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales: The Origins of The Welsh Spiritual Tradition*, University of Wales Press, 1996.

For the poem of Rhys Goch Eryri, see the anthology *Welsh Verse, Translations*, Tony Conran, Seren Books 1992. This anthology has a substantial introduction giving a survey of the history of poetry in Welsh.

