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Readings: Psalm 23  
1 Corinthians 13

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**“LOVE IS NOT LOVE WHICH ALTERS  
WHEN IT ALTERATION FINDS”**

Astute observers will have noted a distinct flavour about today's service. Perhaps we could describe it as “traditional worship raised to the power n”. Two hymns by John Milton and one by George Herbert waft us back to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Our readings have been given in the language of the King James Bible that was published in 1611 and our prayers of intercession, when they come, will be taken from the Book of Common Prayer that goes back even further in time. All this appeal to the past is to honour the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare – the Great Bard, the Colossus who bestrides the world of English culture. It's one of the miracles of the ages that this man who wrote so quickly and to order, who wrote so much and on so many subjects, should have lived before the invention of Tippex. He just seems to have written effortlessly, silkily, profoundly and movingly – the words appear to have flowed from his quill.

But I want to start somewhere more ordinary – in the home of my boyhood – for that's where I was drip-fed with my earliest experience of the writings of Shakespeare. My mother had a hard and simple life. She left school at 14 without ever dipping her toes into the waters of high culture. She was always singing. As she cleaned or cooked, as she scrubbed or shopped, there would always be a refrain or a chorus playing around her lips. Her repertoire was limited – “I'll be loving you – always;” “You are my sunshine;” “The white cliffs of Dover;” “Count your blessings one by one” – these I remember well. But there was another, a strange bed-fellow, a song with strikingly odd words. Only later did I discover that they were written by Shakespeare, something I'm certain my mother never knew until the day she died. The song is from one of Shakespeare's last plays: “The Tempest” and goes like this:

*Where the bee sucks, there suck I:  
In a cowslip's bell I lie;  
There I couch when owls do cry.  
On the bat's back I do fly  
After summer merrily.*

*Merrily, merrily, shall I live now  
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.*

I recall these words with a great feeling of nostalgia – indeed, everything in me wanted to sing them for you rather than recite them.

This song illustrates the way Shakespeare, whether we knew it or not, has entered the bloodstream of all people who speak the English language. In my case, long before I embraced the Christian faith and submitted myself to the way of Christ, Shakespeare had prepared my palate for the subtle flavours of linguistic excellence; and my mind to wrestle with the great questions that have faced human beings down the ages.

My mother must have learned that song in her early teens. I wasn't much older when I turned to Shakespeare in my own right as I studied *Macbeth* for my O-level exam in English Literature, a play in which our teachers marinated us. Here's a man eaten by ambition. He's already a nobleman, the thane of Glamis, and earns a promotion through his exploits in battle. Now he's the thane of Cawdor. But, on the back of a prediction made by some witches, he thirsts for a still higher prize, to be king of Scotland. So badly does he want this that he kills the reigning monarch in order to seize his crown. What is it that drives someone who already has so much to want yet more? And who'd kill to get it? First he assassinates the king and then the king's bodyguards. But that wasn't all. He hired a couple of thugs to kill his best friend and the entire family of another good friend. No wonder he says "I am in blood so steeped that returning were more tedious than to go o'er." My studies of Shakespeare were teaching me about the insatiable desires of a man driven to crush anyone who stood in the way of the fulfilment of his dreams.

The Bible begins with the story of the garden of Eden where the first human beings are surrounded by everything they could possibly want. Except for one thing. They must not eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Yet that's exactly what they feel impelled to do. And in the New Testament a man who's already wealthy keeps on wanting to accumulate even more wealth and to accommodate it in bigger and better barns. This instinctual drive, no doubt conditioned by evolution, is as old as humanity itself. And again and again whenever man's grasp exceeds his reach we begin to see what hell is like.

“Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied by men [and women] who act and think as the reader thinks he might himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion. Even when the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life.” So wrote the one and only Dr Samuel Johnson. Dear man! Whoever tires of Johnson tires of life! So Macbeth could well be Everyman, any one of us. His despair as he faced the collapse of all that he’d schemed and plotted for seems inevitable. Yet thousands have gone down that road across the centuries. And there, but for the grace of God, go we.

The gap between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots gets wider and wider. I could pause here and illustrate my point from the much-reported news of things like obscene pay packages for senior executives, booming house prices, offshore accounts and tax avoidance. Greed still drives people to want more than can possibly be good for them. But let me describe how this works out for the have-nots in the words of one of our young people at Wesley’s Chapel. Just listen:

“We worried people by our anti-social behaviour and anarchy, the days were filled with smoking weed on staircases, and heated discussions about religion and the government and conspiracy theories.... we didn’t have much regard for the system because as far as we were concerned the system didn’t have much regard for us. We were the lowest of the low, a bunch of uneducated misfits trying to find our place in a rapidly changing world. Funding was being poured into the regeneration of the area, we were seeing sky scrapers and luxury apartments popping up on every corner; along with trendy shops and restaurants came soaring house prices. In came the middle class hipsters with their long funky beards, moustaches and Apple Mac laptops and out went the poor with nothing but distant memories of a place they had once called home. The same thing was happening everywhere: Brixton, Stoke Newington, Clapham, Peckham, London Fields, Hackney Downs, and Stockwell. Blocks of flats on what were once considered as hugely deprived estates as far as the eye could see, were being knocked down and rebuilt into what they ironically called affordable housing that none of us could afford. ...Years of generational integration torn apart and ripped into shreds; racism was still around. In our world the gangsters won, the more ruthless and carefree the more successful the outcome.” [Louis Colley]

In a world where people seem driven by the insatiable desire to get richer and richer, more and more powerful, successful in every conceivable material sense, there will always be victims, the have-nots, the alienated, who will create their own counter-cultural universe. We will

have built our house on sand and, when the rain falls and the winds blow and beat upon that house, it will fall. And great will be its fall.

That's exactly the way it was for Macbeth.

Life became for him "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Those words sear my mind today as much as they did Macbeth all those years ago. In Haiti, Nepal, Japan and Ecuador countless people have died and whole communities destroyed by earthquake. We grieve for them. But surely we must also grieve with all those whose suffering is not caused by an act of nature but through the callousness, the stupidity, the wastefulness of human activity. How can we forget the faces of all those people staring out at us through wire fencing, a little child clinging to the feet of the good Pope Francis sobbing inconsolably, those faces lined with fear and despairing for their future – while people like you and me just wish the problem would go away? "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in [such a] petty pace" for such people, while "all their yesterdays [seem to] have led the way to dusty, muddy, death".

Half a decade after reading Macbeth, I thrilled to the words of St Paul, writing to the Romans: "I am persuaded," he writes, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I cling to that word of promise, but Shakespeare's words still haunt me. Life for those huddled masses on the island of Lesbos must seem to them to be a tale told by an idiot; they must surely feel like walking shadows, and everything must appear to signify nothing. But then I see the good old Pope taking a dozen of them onto his plane and the hope is reborn, rekindled, that humanity might still rise to the challenge and offer a way out of the mess we've all created.

Oh yes, Shakespeare prepared me for the existential questions which life has thrown at me and continues to throw at me. Ambition, the cruel treatment of anyone standing in my way, the collapse of hope when people over-reach – an encounter with all this preceded my coming to faith and certainly coloured the test to which I put that faith.

But let me end where I began with that song my mother sang.

The singer is Ariel [in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*] – a spirit who serves as right-hand man to Prospero. Prospero's world has fallen apart and he resorts to magic to put things right again. He finds Ariel enslaved and releases him; but only to require his total obedience to his every wish – another form of enslavement. Prospero is a master magician and Ariel is the sorcerer's apprentice. Prospero knows in his heart of hearts that the world can't run on magic so, when he's got everything back on track again, he gives up his special powers once and for all. As part of that deal, he releases Ariel from his bondage and, boy, is he chuffed? Just as the caged bird sings of freedom, so too does he. He rejoices at feeling as free as the bee that buzzes from flower to flower at will; lying in a cowslip's bell, asleep while the owls are hooting in the night sky, was like bedding down in a luxury suite at the Ritz; flying on a bat's back like going first class on Concorde; and living merrily under the blossom that hangs on the bough prefigures those wonderful lines of Wordsworth who wrote:

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
And to be young was very heaven.*

So Ariel rejoices in his freedom. And my mother's song proves to be filled with meaning that she never even guessed at. The Christian life offers those same raw feelings, the sensation of being free, free as a bird, Prometheus unbound, after being slaves to sin and death. We are breathed back into life, our chains fall off, our heart is free, we rise, go forth, yes merrily. Saint Paul strikes the very same note we hear in Ariel's song when he writes: "When anyone is united to Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away. Behold, everything has become new." And in our minds we do a cartwheel or two, throw our hats in the air, and we shout Whoopee! Glory hallelujah!

Let's close by listening to the song my mother sang and, as we do so, let's thank God for William Shakespeare who died on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1616 and whose legacy continues to add colour and vitality to our everyday lives.

**God help us.**

Amen.