A sermon for Shakespeare's birthday
preached at
Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon
on April 26th 2009.

Durham Cathedral commands the site it's built on; it bestrides its narrow city and the thousand years of its recorded history like a colossus. Its interior is no less imposing – soaring towers and fine Norman arches frame a vast space that's breath-taking in its immensity. I'll never forget my first visit. I was a tourist and a pilgrim, and found myself, a garrulous Welshman and a preacher at that, reduced to awestruck silence. I pitied those who had to deliver sermons from its lofty pulpit. What could words do to add anything to the statement being made by the cathedral itself? Wouldn't a preacher, however eloquent, simply belittle the place with his own littleness? Let the stones do the speaking, I thought to myself.

That's what I thought then and that's what I find myself thinking now. Who can by speaking add one cubit to the stature of William Shakespeare? Or say one new or interesting thing? We have his sonnets and his plays, let them do the speaking. And I'm sure you'd all say amen to that. But, since I've taken the king's shilling and accepted the rich hospitality of the last couple of fun-filled days and enjoyed myself so much, I must now perforce say something to the point by way of repayment. So here goes.

I'm the minister of Wesley's Chapel in London, a lovely Georgian building erected by our own great man, John Wesley. He died in the little house that stands just in front of the chapel and was buried, ripe in years and the universal affection of his generation, in the graveyard that spreads out just behind it. That was in 1791. The minister who followed him had the unenviable task of clearing up his effects, especially his books and papers. This man, unapproachably holy, took a lofty view of Wesley's literary heritage. So lofty that he made a bonfire of all that he considered worldly, unworthy of true piety. He found plenty of that in the secular literature of his predecessor's library including what's been described as "a fine quarto edition" of the plays of Shakespeare, heavily annotated by Wesley who clearly loved them. But into the flames this ancient volume was pitched and I've always felt just a tad ashamed of the sanctimonious little man who felt obliged to do such a thing.

But when I looked at the way Shakespeare has been treated by others, I found a curious tale. He has suffered mightily at the hands of players, editors and critics alike. They've sniffed at him, meddled with him, cleaned him up, wondered at him, damned him with faint praise, so that you end up thinking that he was too great for any of their tiny minds to deal with. Hardest to cope with, for me at any rate, were the class judgements that proliferated in the hundred years or so after his death. He wasn't educated properly, his Greek and Latin were woeful, his knowledge of Aristotle was non-existent with disastrous results for the integrity of his drama, and he introduced all those common people – mechanics, yokels and fools - into his plays. Whatever do you do with someone who resorts to such populist stratagems or displays such a lack of good breeding? It took Samuel Johnson to knock some sense into these snobs and bores. Ah! The good old doctor, from neighbouring Staffordshire, what would we do without him? Whosoever tires of Johnson tires of life.

"Shakespeare has no heroes," he writes; "his scenes are occupied only by men [and women] who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion: even where the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life." Aha! What common sense. What sound common sense.

It's not just with Shakespeare that we encounter this problem, of course. As a theologian, I'm fighting the same battle with critics, commentators, editors and hierarchs all the time as I try to connect with the real Jesus who lies buried behind so much clutter that he sometimes seems totally obscured. The makers of creeds have used the categories of Greek philosophy to turn him into an abstract formula. Artists of various kinds have used the conventions and materials they work with to knock the breath out of Jesus as they give him a makeover, changing him from someone we might love into someone whose image or statue evokes admiration from us, moving us all the while from the field of ethics to aesthetics. The textual difficulties, the impositions and presumptions of piety, the folly of copyists and the needs of popes and emperors to make the New Testament an instrument of control – all these have all but removed Jesus, the living and loving Jesus, from view.

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I've read serious claims that Shakespeare was a Catholic, a Protestant, an atheist; that he was an ignoramus and a populist; that he was homosexual, an adulterer, and that he wasn't Shakespeare at all.

And I've read equally serious claims that Jesus was an ascetic monk, a revolutionary socialist, a homosexual (they get everywhere), the partner of a prostitute, a fanatic.

But Jesus, like Shakespeare, at least when we can find them, holds up a mirror to life. He treats a madman like a fellow human being, he touches a leper, he brings a haemorrhaging woman or a man born blind out of the shadows and into the light, he offers affirmation and solidarity to a despised tax-collector or a hated Roman soldier, he urges his followers to a radical (an earth-shatteringly radical) love not only for friends but for strangers and even enemies. He doesn't wag a finger at the wicked, there's no pomposity in him, no strutting or fretting his hour upon the stage. He is the very embodiment of Corin's self-depiction when he tells Touchstone: "I earn what I eat, get what I wear, owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness, am glad of others' good, and content with my own harm." [*As You Like It*: Act 3. Sc.ii]

Religion so often gets up his nose – not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will get into the kingdom of heaven but only those whose deepest beliefs translate themselves into action. Religion can be a curse and its worst fruit is often hypocrisy. But at its best it is so noble, it so readily adds value to life. And it looks for goodness everywhere, especially in the dispossessed and disenfranchised. They have nothing to show off about. Jesus might well have said with Duke Senior:

> *This our life, exempt from public haunt,*
> *Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,*
> *Sermons in stones, and good in everything.* [Act 2. Sc.i]

Sermons in stones – that reminds me that I began by describing my first visit to Durham Cathedral. Let me end by telling you about my second such visit. I was not this time a tourist. I was the preacher. Yes. I had to open *my* mouth in *that* pulpit and try to say something, anything, of consequence. But it wasn't quite as hard as I'd imagined. There were three colourful processions

to divert the attention and give people something visual to remember. Firstly, the City and County Councils were there in their full regalia, reminding us of the place of the cathedral in public life and local history from the Prince Bishops who raised armies to keep the Scots at bay right down to the armies of miners whose annual rallies always ended in the cathedral, or the frothing and foaming sermons of Bishop David Jenkins fulminating against the worst depredations, as he saw it, of Thatcherism.

And then there was the Cathedral procession. Dean and Chapter, in their many-coloured copes, witnessing to the spiritual aspects of British culture from the time of Saint Cuthbert whose Celtic remains lie buried at the east end of the cathedral. And finally, a procession led by the Chancellor and Court of the University, all capped and be-gowned, illustrating the evolution of intellectual activity which certainly in the fullness of time gave us William Shakespeare but whose beginnings are celebrated in that place by the presence of the mortal remains of the Venerable Bede whose tomb stands proudly under the West window.

Economics, politics, the life of the spirit and the best kind of religion, high culture and popular entertainment – all these come together in a great place like Durham Cathedral. And they also cohere quintessentially in the life and work of our great poet and playwright, our observer of life and depicter of character – William Shakespeare whose memory we honour and whose praises we are delighted to sing.

“It is not the fashion to end a sermon with an epilogue; a good sermon needs no epilogue. I am not furnished as a beggar, therefore to beg will not become me. My way is to conjure you; and I’ll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this sermon as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women (as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them) that between you and the women, the sermon may please. If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that please me, complexions that liked me, breaths that I defied not: and, as I am sure, as many as have good beards or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I say amen, bid me farewell.”
[adaptation of the Epilogue to *As You Like It*]

And so I say: **Amen.**