

Peebs.net July 2004 Address

SWEETNESS AND LIGHT
Roger Stott

Preamble (Well George had one so I want one too.) Hello everyone. It would be good to think that we might turn our cyber encounters into some actual ones sometime — maybe at the Elephant and Castle in London? And our anonymous hosts could turn up in disguise and observe us all without us knowing they were there?

It's slightly daunting to be addressing one's words to such a shadowy company. When you are on the stage or at the pulpit, you can gauge reaction and play off it. Here there is (for the moment) just a stony silence. Maybe it will stay that way but I hope not.

Right off we go:

Introduction: Three Witches and Two Curlews

A hundred yards from our house in the village of Heavitree (part of Exeter) is Gallows Corner. It's not called that any more —there's no sign and it's not on the streetmap. But sometimes an older person will use the name ('carry straight on up and fork left at Gallows Corner') and it always gives me a chill when I hear it.

Heavitree seems to have been the place of execution for much of Devon. And history was made at Gallows Corner —the last women to be formally put to death in Britain for witchcraft were hanged there, on the 25th August 1682. Their names were Temperance Lloyd, Susanna Edwards and Mary Trembles. They all came from Bideford in North Devon and had been convicted of 'bewitching' several of their neighbours; in Temperance's case the charge was 'bewitching to death'.

I pass Gallows Corner most days. There's a cottage on the site now. Sometimes I feel as if I can see those three huddled figures waiting fearfully for the ropes to be placed around their necks. Two widows and 'a single woman'. From the record it is doubtful whether they were guilty of anything more serious than keeping herb gardens and experimenting with traditional cures for late 17th century ailments like gout, sore eyes, jaundice or 'griping in the guts'.

In an ancient city like Exeter (founded by the Romans in 50 AD) the ignorance and cruelty of the past laps against the present. It's all been 'English Heritaged' now and the tourists who walk round Exeter's magnificent mediaeval cathedral get an impression of a noble and jolly time, an age when life was easier and 'more natural' than it is now. They do guided tours in Exeter, lots of them, but although there is an after-dark 'Ghost Tour' (Pamela and I went on it and it was a lot of fun) they don't go to Gallows Corner, nor do they talk about the hundreds of 'witches' who were tortured and put to death, usually as a result of local gossip and spite.

Ignorance and cruelty. As ex-exclusives we have experienced quite a bit of that. And in some cases (certainly mine) contributed to it. I see my time in the exclusives as a kind of 'Dark Ages' in my history and like the past of Exeter it still sometimes laps against my present. I'm sure that's true of most of us. I want to talk about that. But first I want to take you to Ireland.

It's 1913. We are in a small village on the west coast of Ireland. At the end of the village,

just before the open moorland which borders the coast, is a scruffy little shop. A man goes into the shop to buy a few things. The old man who runs the shop is by nature hostile and rude and today he excels himself. The visitor leaves the shop and walks out into the countryside feeling resentful and upset.

As he walks he becomes conscious of the Atlantic morning unfolding around him and then, in that uniquely beautiful light, two curlews call out to each other and his irritation suddenly vanishes. In that moment of sheer beauty he thinks back to the old man in the shop. If I could see him as God sees him, not in our muddled way, there's probably something beautiful in him too. As there is in all of us.

It's that turning from irritation towards open-hearted generosity that interests me, the change from dislike to understanding and, yes, to love. This is how the man himself described the incident. (Fortunately he was the greatest poet of the 20th century.)

Paudeen

*Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite
Of our old Paudeen in his shop, I stumbled blind
Among the stones and thorn-trees, under morning light;
Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind
A curlew answered; and suddenly thereupon I thought
That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,
There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,
A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.*

'And in the luminous wind' . . . 'a sweet crystalline cry'. Use of the English language doesn't get better than that.

The poet was W.B. Yeats.

John and Clive

I've spoken of one Irishman. Now I want to talk about two more. (I didn't plan this talk round Irishmen, it just happened.) John was born in 1800 and his family lived mainly around Dublin. He died in 1882. Clive was born in Belfast in 1898. Most of his life was spent in and around Oxford. He died in November 1963 on the same day that President Kennedy was assassinated.

These two men had a very big influence on my life. John set the agenda for my childhood before I was born. (I wish he hadn't.) Clive was one of my lecturers at Cambridge. I knew him as an outstanding literary scholar and I studied under his guidance for three years. But he was already becoming world-famous for something quite different.

As you may have realized, I am talking about John Nelson Darby and C. S. Lewis. They represent the opposite poles in this section. Darby was a fundamentalist before the word came into use. His fundamentalism is still fuelling huge numbers of people, especially in the United States. I believe that his influence has been largely destructive.

We all have an outer, physical and practical life and an inner, imaginative and spiritual one. They impinge on each other all the time but they are also two separate landscapes. It's what Darby did to my inner landscape that I want to talk about.

I was born in 1938 in Kenilworth and I grew up in a world that was being devastated. We lived five miles from the terrible blitz of Coventry and some of my earliest memories are of skies full of bombers and searchlights and anti-aircraft fire. Bombs fell on Kenilworth too and it was quite usual to see buildings reduced to rubble and for the air to be full of fine dust and the smell of burning. And for the northern night sky to be lit up by the fires of Coventry. For a child it was like living in an apocalypse. But of course I had never known anything else.

It was Joseph Stalin who coined the term 'scorched earth policy'. He used it in saying that he would destroy everything in the Ukraine so that there would be nothing for the Germans when they invaded. The Germans themselves seemed to have similar plans for Coventry. After months of bombing, the worst night of all was 14 November 1940. 30,000 incendiary bombs fell on Coventry that night and these were followed by 10,000 high explosive bombs. 554 people were killed and 865 seriously wounded. 60,000 buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged. By morning three quarters of the houses in Coventry were uninhabitable.

During that early part of my life something similar was happening inside my mind and imagination. More than 100 years before that Darby had set in train a scorched earth policy of his own.

*This world is a wilderness wide;
I have nothing to seek nor to choose;
I've no thought in the waste to abide;
I have nought to regret nor to lose.*

It sounds a bit like the Ukraine after Stalin had finished with it.

Within the circle where Darby had influence he set to work to turn 'the world' into a wilderness. He collected every negative verse in the bible and set about bombing and strafing every aspect of 'the natural man'. Human love? Flawed and worthless. Man's world? Selfish and idolatrous. Music? Emotion without a moral basis (and most musicians are immoral). Literature? Just gilding the lily, all 'at man's level', of no value whatsoever. Painting and sculpture? A total waste of time. Slash and burn. Slash and burn. And you, you miserable little creature (I can see you skulking there) are vicious and wicked and filthy and there is no good in you whatsoever. You are going to have to have a heart and mind and personality transplant. We'll make a new you and then the old you can be thrown on the rubbish heap where it belongs.

I am not denying that Darby was personally kind and self-sacrificing; it's quite clear that he was. But his vilification of the world of men around him was violent and pathological. And sometimes he could turn it on friends who disagreed with him. When the open/exclusive split occurred in 1848 Darby's words about Muller and Craik (two gentle and benevolent men) were intemperate and unjust. And as the years passed his judgement became more violent still. Many years later he called the actions of Muller and Craik 'the coldest contempt for Christ I ever came across'. That was Darby at his disturbing (and disturbed) worst.

In his book *Father and Son*, Edmund Gosse (who was brought up in the brethren in the 1860s) described what Darby's devastation of the inner landscape did to his development

as a child:

Certain portions of my intellect were growing with unwholesome activity, others were stunted or had never stirred at all. I was like a plant on which a pot had been placed, my centre was crushed and arrested, while distorted shoots were struggling up to the light on all sides.

I felt much the same. As a child I carried around a dream that one day my father would say, 'It's OK now Roger. You can go out and live a normal life. We weren't serious about all that and it's over now.' I hated the fact that everything outside the brethren was seen as tainted and dangerous. Somehow I knew that it wasn't.

But help, substantial and surprising help was just round the corner. In July 1945 I won the English Prize at my school and was given Arthur Mee's 'Book of Everlasting Things'. I was seven. Suddenly I was confronted with Shelley, Burns, Keats, Macaulay, The Egyptian Book of the Dead, Wordsworth, Ben Jonson, Hazlitt, Francis Bacon, Matthew Arnold, Henry Vaughan, Malory, Shakespeare and Cervantes. (And that was just the first 20 pages out of 331.) I still have the book, it's on my knee as I write. My father nearly threw it away. (From his point of view he should have done.) This was all corrupt and wicked stuff, 'man's mind', darkness. But that wasn't the way I saw it:

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.*

The book became my survival kit, my anti-darbyism resource. I could go in there as if it was a large and beautiful garden and make fresh discoveries every day. I exulted. The material was so various, so beautiful, so unexpected, so wise. I learned poems then that I can still recite today. As I hold the (somewhat battered) book now, something of the old excitement still stirs in me.

Now I want to move over to the other Irishman, C.S.Lewis. The C.S. Lewis industry has become so overblown today that it is almost impossible to see him as he really was. He has been turned into a kind of Disneyfied John Bunyan. I was part of the team at BBC TV that made the first (1985) version of 'Shadowlands'. This was a TV film telling the story of Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman (with Joss Ackland and Clare Bloom). Bill Nicholson wrote it and I spent many hours at his house taking him through Lewis's books (which were new to him). Later Bill rewrote it as a stage play and then as a Hollywood blockbuster starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. And all the time it was going further away from the real story, losing contact with what really happened.

I started going to Lewis's lectures in January 1958. Joy Davidman died on July 11 1959 (22 days after I married for the first time). So during the first eighteen months that I was being taught by him all that agony was going on. I knew nothing of it at all.

I knew Lewis as an academic. He was Professor of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. (He still lived in Oxford, travelling over to Cambridge on Monday mornings and returning to Oxford on Friday afternoons every week.) I knew that he had written some christian books and some children's books but his books that enthralled me were

The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (1936)

A Preface to Paradise Lost (1942)

English Literature in the 16th Century excluding Drama (Volume 3 of The Oxford History of English Literature) (1954)

And several others. Studies in Words (1960) was a series of lectures which I heard him give.

What is my point here? It's a very simple one. Darby and Lewis can't both be right. They absolutely contradict each other. If Darby was right about separation and the utter corruption of all the Arts, then C.S.Lewis was a complete fake. And if Lewis was right in his beliefs and practice then it blows all that separative tradition of brethrenism out of the water. I've chosen these two as archetypes. (There are many more I could have used.) This is not a doctrinal dispute. It is a simple and absolute choice between one understanding of christianity and another. One of them has to be plain WRONG.

Not that Lewis was promiscuous in his social life. He wasn't. We heard stories in the late Fifties about him leaving the dinner table at his college more than once because the conversation was offensive to him. (Brethren would say that he shouldn't have been there. But I would have thought that his leaving spoke much louder than their absence?) It must have been something pretty strong to make him leave—he would debate most subjects trenchantly.

For me brethrenism is a combination of Puritanism and Phariseeism. I have to admit that I hate them both. (Not the people, the spirit that they represent.) A carping, rule-driven fastidiousness which is in the end saying 'I'm too good to mix with you lot'. And it's always claimed that they are being 'faithful to Christ'. But Peter says we should 'follow in his steps' and Jesus was out there eating with harlots and publicans and sinners. The way that brethren tied themselves in knots trying to explain that used to strike me as phony even when I was a child.

I feel so sorry for those ex-brethren whose lives and talents were blighted and cursed by ebism and then even when they escaped were so timid and unenlightened that they had to reconstruct some kind of separative wall between themselves and humanity. And even, scandalously, practising a degree of frigid separation from other companies of ex-ebis who differed from them by the thickness of rice-paper. Fortunately there are groups of ex-brethren (I was with one last week) who have genuinely rejoined the human race. And very happy people they are too.

I talked to a Bishop about all this a few years ago. (We were having dinner together before going to a play.) He said without hesitation: 'God is both immanent and transcendent. The brethren seem to have got hold of the transcendent part but it has turned them into utopians. They rubbish life on earth and try to live as though they are in heaven already. But they are not. What they are trying to do is only part of the truth and by applying only that they are getting into heresy. A dangerous, proud heresy that will injure their souls. This is God's creation and he is still there in it. That's immanence. The world is beautiful and full of marvels as well as sad and stricken. We are a part of the whole of humanity and we have responsibilities to fulfil. They should read the last part of Matthew 25, the meaning is unmistakable.'

A few words about Hamlet and C.S.Lewis

On Friday this week my wife and I are going to see Hamlet at Stratford. I have seen the play at least 40 times. I learn something new and fresh almost every time. (There were two exceptions.)

It was the first play I ever saw on the stage. In 1955 at the Theatre Royal, Brighton. I lied to my parents and went with my A Level class because Hamlet was a set text. I was 16. The actor was Paul Scofield (an old boy of my school). I knew the play very well on the page but seeing it acted (superlatively) reduced me to tears several times. That was embarrassing because I was sitting with my Sixth Form group. I thought, all theatre must be like this, it's not exceptional, what an absolutely wonderful thing I am missing.

But it turned out that the production was exceptional. The great theatre critic, Kenneth Tynan, said that it was the best Hamlet he had ever seen. So as a brethren schoolboy I had climbed over the wall of separation and without knowing what I was doing had stumbled into one of the major theatrical events of the post-war period. At that point in my life I was determined to leave the brethren for good. If only I had stayed with that conviction.

In that same review of Scofield's Hamlet, Kenneth Tynan says: 'The kind of modern Hamlet we had all been waiting for is beautifully defined by C.S.Lewis:

I am trying to recall attention from the things an intellectual adult notices to the things a child notices —night, ghosts, a castle, a lobby where a man can walk four hours together, a willow-fringed brook and a sad lady drowned, a graveyard and a terrible cliff above the sea —and amidst all these, a pale man in black clothes, with his stockings coming down, a dishevelled man whose words make us at once think of loneliness and doubt and dread, of waste and dust and emptiness, and from whose hands, as from our own, we feel the richness of heaven and earth and the comfort of human affection slipping away.

Can you even begin to imagine Darby engaging with the human condition with the same insight and affection that Lewis expresses in those words? Lewis speaks earlier in the same piece of the experience of seeing Hamlet and being 'caught up into an unforgettable intensity of life' and being 'haunted for ever with the sense of vast dignities and strange sorrows and teased "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" ' He asks ' . . . have we ever known the day or the hour when its enchantment failed? That castle is part of our own world. The affection we feel for the Prince, and through him for Horatio is like a friendship in real life.' The play is 'a certain spiritual region through which most of us have passed. . . I would go a long way to meet Beatrice or Falstaff. I would not cross the road to meet Hamlet. It would not be necessary. He is always where I am.'

Why have I developed this so far? Because I wanted to demonstrate that Shakespeare's great plays provide a moral landscape, that there is such a thing as 'the moral imagination' (Robert Hughes used the expression in his piece on modern art on BBC2 a few days ago.) That all the arts at their best engage in the great questions of life and death and truth and seeming and falsehood. Of appearance and reality.

And for the motley bunch of us who have escaped (some recently, some a third of a century ago or more) from a deadly and poisonous system of teaching and control which almost strangled the life out of us, which put our consciences and our vitality in mortal danger, it is a little reassuring to find that one of the greatest christian teachers of the 20th century had no problem in engaging with humanity and its practice of the arts. Without needing to blast and denigrate them. And in so doing (for me and for many others) shut the door finally on the bleak anti-humanisms of darbyism and exclusive

brethrenism.

I have seen so many people maimed by what I would call the remnants of brethrenism, still unable to take their proper place among the human race because some of the poisons of darbyism are still running in their bloodstream. They are crippled and inhibited by false and heretical teaching which they still believe to be partly true.

Conclusion

This is not the most straightforward piece I have ever written. Polonius in Hamlet speaks of 'by indirections find directions out' and I am conscious that I have steered an eccentric and convoluted course. It is time to bring the main strands together.

I began with the witches and the curlews. The former are simply a reminder (to me at least, almost every day) of the stupidity and heartlessness of powerful bigotry. We have lived in a landscape like that and we know how terrifying it is. We don't need to live there any more. My three witches are nothing like the Macbeth witches. They stand there at the bottom of our road, trembling, broken and paralysed by fear. There is no one they can turn to and in a few moments they will die an awful death. They are still there on that corner and they will be with me until I die.

Yeats' curlews have been important to me (on and off) for 50 years. They are a reminder (whenever we need it) that whatever our age or race or gender or belief, we are all part of the same humanity and all part of the same struggle. Some of us have been hurt by unimaginable cruelties and pressures, some of us have been enlisted into organisations which are full of hate and murder. But however deeply buried the human spark is still there.

Carl Jung spoke of 'an oceanic feeling', a sense that one is part of an immensely greater whole. Yeats describes the oceanic feeling in his own way in 1932:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table top.*

*While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.*

Why did I call this piece 'sweetness and light'?

Some of you may know the answer already. It has to do with bees. I'm pretty sure that it was Virgil who first used the expression but I haven't been able to trace the reference. In the modern era it was Jonathan Swift. In his terrific work, 'The Battle of the Books' (1710), Swift has the spider and the bee arguing together. The bee says finally:

The Difference is, that instead of *Dirt and Poison*, we have rather chose to till our Hives with *Honey and Wax*, thus furnishing Mankind with the two Noblest of Things, which are *Sweetness and Light*.

Matthew Arnold, the Victorian poet and critic, took up the phrase from Swift and called the first chapter of Culture and Anarchy (one of his major works) 'Sweetness and Light'. In the most quoted sentence from that book, Arnold said that 'the pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light.' (It was published in 1882, the year that JND died.)

The phrase has entered the language but few people link it back to the sweetness of honey and the light provided by wax candles. It has become a byword for what is best in us. Someone referred in an essay (I can't find it at the moment) to Sir Walter Scott being kept awake by a howling dog when he himself was wakeful because of toothache. 'Poor beast', Scott commented, 'it's lot is probably much worse than mine'. In that phrase, the writer of the essay said, 'is revealed all the sweetness and light of Walter Scott's nature. '

I hope that something of what I have said will make sense to you. Recovering from the disease of darbyism is not easy. We are all and will remain 'walking wounded'. But we are getting better. One last quote and then I am done. It's from Wilfred Owen, the greatest of the First World War poets. He is talking about a certain kind of soldier but for me for some years it has seemed like a fitting epitaph on darbyism and the corrupting doctrine of 'separation' :

*By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.*

Roger Stott