

THE ADDRESS AT THE SERVICE OF  
COMMEMORATION, BURWASH

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By THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

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PRIMATE OF ALL ENGLAND AND METROPOLITAN

All great artists know more than they know that they know, and Kipling was no exception. For so many of the greatest artists in our own language and in many others, the effort to explain what they think they are doing is one which reduces them to incoherence. And sometimes when Kipling, rather like Dostoevsky, tried to spell out in prose and in non-fiction what he thought he was most deeply about, he said things that were neither coherent nor edifying. But he knew more than he knew that he knew, and his work comes from deeper places than prose or theory.

One writer, commenting on his possibly now rather notorious poem on "The White Man's Burden" points out that there Kipling speaks of taming races who are 'half devil and half child', and notes that it was from 'devils and children' that Kipling drew some of his deepest inspiration; from dark and difficult places in the psyche, and from the extraordinary, varied, tragic experience of children, including Rudyard Kipling as a child. Kipling knew more than he knew that he knew, and, if I can add one more refinement of complication to that phrase, he knew that he knew more than he knew that he knew. That is to say, he was aware that his deepest inspirations came from dark places, and one of the things to which he was most resistant was the attempt to capture once and for all, in prose or in theory, what those faces of inspiration and vision were about.

He wrote two stories which reflect very vividly indeed on what this means. "The Finest Story in the World" is a tale about a young bank clerk, not particularly literate or educated, who suddenly begins to produce narratives of the life of a galley slave in the ancient world, so full of vivid detail and poignancy that the narrator can only conclude that this is a case of reincarnation. But stripped of some of the rather murky superstructure of metaphysics and theories about reincarnation and

transmigration, this is surely a story about the inspiration we don't know about, about the deep places that are not affected, you might almost say 'infected', by too much theory, too much introspection. The bank clerk is a master of imagination because he doesn't know what he knows, and it surges up from his depths, with a vividness and a poignancy that no practised or educated artist can achieve.

Even more pointed is a story wonderfully entitled "A Matter of Fact" in which three journalists coming back from South Africa on a steamer are confronted in the middle of an ocean storm with a sea monster, thrown up from the bed of the ocean by the tumultuous storm, lamenting over its mate who has died. The journalists are of course excited beyond words to see this, they rush off to file their copy, and then they realise that no one is going to believe them – not only because no one believes journalists as a matter of course – but because there are things that are too large to describe, there are truths that are too strange to tell; and the story ends with a hymn of praise to fiction, 'the illegitimate branch of the profession'; because fiction tells those truths that cannot be put into prose or theory.

Now with an approach like that to the imagination, it's not surprising that Kipling showed (to put it mildly) a degree of impatience towards orthodox religion, not to mention the practitioners of orthodox religion. I cannot imagine that he would have been all that comfortable at the thought of an Archbishop preaching in his honour. The clergy who appear in his fiction are not always a credit to the profession, and it was, I think, Angus Wilson who said that the one really evil character in *Kim* was the Anglican padre – evil in the sense that this is a man who wants the world to be smaller than it really is, less diverse, less mysterious; and he stands under judgement for that. Time and again, what arouses Kipling's anger, impatience and contempt, is that attempt by some kinds of organised religions at least, to make the world smaller. And it leads him at times to assume that orthodox religion itself is out to shrink the world.

More imaginatively, more movingly, he can reflect and reflect at great depths on how certain images of heaven, of fulfilment, and completion, actually take something away from the reality that is loved and valued in human experience. The poem "The Return of the Children" which stands alongside that wonderful ghost story "They" is a poem about how no child could be happy in the heaven of orthodox theology because children

need the warmth, the laughter, the immediacy of a humanity which Kipling assumes disappears in heaven. At another level, the end of *Kim* depicts the Lama returning from the contemplation of the eternal and the dissolution of the soul, into a world where his primary task is to love and care for the boy who has loved and cared for him. In some ways it's a very Victorian or late Victorian agnostic attitude "your chilly stars I can forgo, this warm kind world is all I know" (not Kipling incidentally, he could do better than that). And so Kipling assumes that to come to the end of the story, to come to heaven, to come to peace, to reconciliation, is to lose what matters most about life, reality, and human truth.

And yet, there is something in him, which at the same time recognises that the Christian story is not as dismissive as that might suggest, of the warm realities of immediate human life. In what is surely one of the most unforgettable pieces of fiction to have come out of the tragedies of the First World War, Kipling shows a mother looking for the grave of her son, in the wilderness of the war graves of Flanders. She has not admitted to anyone that the man she is looking for is in fact her son; he has been, for public purposes, her nephew. She can't find his grave, a stranger says, come, I will show you where your son lies, and she, 'supposing him to be the gardener', moves away to find the grave. 'Supposing him to be the gardener', one of Kipling's innumerable biblical references, the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ; it is as if at that moment, searching for language in which to capture the most intimate of human compassion, Kipling can look nowhere else but to the crucified and risen Jesus, in whom, in any orthodox sense, he didn't believe. And as with many artists, it is in that struggle with the Christian faith in its glory, in its muddle, in its failure, that one sees something of how the imagination and the soul strike and kindle against one another.

The last thing Kipling ever is, is an apologist for faith or dogma of any kind. And yet in the very struggle against dogma, he can at times open the door to a rediscovery of what faith might be about, that should strike every person of faith with a freshness and a challenge. And that, after all, is the burden of yet another of the great short stories, "The Church that was at Antioch", describing the encounter between Peter and Paul and the Roman Imperial bureaucracy and civil service. Kipling has shamelessly and anachronistically, as always, recreated the Roman Empire in the image of the British.

But the young soldier Valens, who has just arrived to perform his duties in Antioch and is killed protecting the Christians from riots in the Jewish quarter is, to Peter and Paul, a sign of what they believe but have virtually forgotten. " 'Gods do not make laws. They change men's hearts' ", say Valens at one point. And as Peter and Paul look at one another over the dying body of the young Roman officer, they realise that he has made them understand something, which before was only words. Paul would like to baptise the dying youth, Peter stops him violently and angrily. " 'Think you that one who has spoken Those Words needs such as we are to certify him to any God?' ". And yet it is undeniably a truth of the baptised life, of the Christian experience that is put before us, not just some general sense of the sacred, or a general veneration for God. And that story crystallises, I've suggested, exactly how Kipling is such a necessary and such an exhilarating partner for people who like to think of themselves as more orthodox in their faith. As he challenges every orthodoxy, as he reminds us that for every great religious figure 'his own disciples shall wound him worst of all'. Kipling calls us to account before what we say we believe, he tells us that the world is greater than orthodoxies, whatever their truth. He tells us that there are truths so strange that language must become very strange to carry them. He tells us that the changing of hearts does not come by law – and that is something for which a Christian, or any other person of traditional faith, may very well thank him; and may very well thank the God in whom he sometimes believed passionately and sometimes disbelieved equally passionately, for his life, for his words, his imagination, and those dark places of devils and children, out of which came words to change hearts.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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