

Genesis 4: 1-15 & Romans 6: 3-11

It's sometimes thought that on Picnic Sunday the congregation should be let off our usual in-depth analysis of God, Church and World, and your diligent listening through the rest of the year be rewarded by something much lighter. It may therefore be fortuitous that a few weeks ago some of us learnt for the first time that Hilaire Belloc (the writer, statesman and much more) was also a member of this very Inn,

In recent years Belloc has rather passed out of popularity, but for several decades around the turn of the twentieth century he was considered one of the great literary figures of the age. Born in 1870, he became President of the Oxford Union, and made his name as an historian, a poet who wrote both children's verse and religious poetry, an orator and politician. He served as the Liberal Member of Parliament for Salford from 1906 to 1910. He died in 1953.

He's probably best remembered today for his Cautionary Tales, written ostensibly for children, including "Matilda". We haven't got time for all of it, but here's a taster:

*Matilda told such Dreadful Lies,
It made one Gasp and Stretch one's Eyes;
Her Aunt, who, from her Earliest Youth,
Had kept a Strict Regard for Truth,
Attempted to believe Matilda:
The effort very nearly killed her,*

*Once, towards the Close of Day,
Matilda, growing tired of play,
And finding she was left alone,
Went tiptoe to the telephone
And summoned the Immediate Aid
Of London's Nobel Fire-Brigade.*

*Within an hour the Gallant Band
Were pouring in on every hand,
From Putney, Hackney Downs and Bow,
With Courage high and Hearts a-glow
They galloped, roaring though the Town,
"Matilda's House is Burning Down"*

Which of course, it wasn't. However...

*It happened that a few Weeks later
Here aunt was off to the Theatre
She had refused to take her Niece
To hear this Entertaining Piece:
A Deprivation Just and Wise
To Punish her for Telling Lies.
That Night a Fire did break out-
You should have heard Matilda Shout!*

*[But] every time She shouted "Fire!"
They only answered "Little Liar!"
And therefore when her Aunt returned,
Matilda, and the House, were burned.*

Truth is a vital but fragile thing. Once trust is lost it's difficult to regain. We have become used to marketing, where we are led to buy things on the basis of what is at best gross exaggeration and at worst invented by the advertisers and nothing to do with the product. The world of fake news quickly follows, where the agenda creates the facts rather than the other way round. Who is speaking the truth about Brexit? What happens to truth in the age of Twitter?

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free". His followers trusted him because he had integrity – he stuck with what was true even though it made him unpopular and the enemy of those whose position and power he threatened.

But to return to Belloc.

He became a British citizen, but he had been born in France. His family were Roman Catholic, and after a lapse he adopted an uncompromising Catholic faith. It was part of the Latin European culture which he was forever celebrating and defending. He wrote

*Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There's always laughter and good red wine.
At least I've always found it so.
Benedicamus Domino!*

He was a defender of the Latin Tridentine Mass, so would have appreciated our Table Graces here, if not always their pronunciation. The problem today is of course that few people learn Latin at school. Hence, and I know it's an old joke, the boy who translated "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" as "Gloria was travel sick at the first day of the week"!

But to return to Belloc

He had what's been called an "Olympian contempt" for any other faith than traditional Catholicism, be that Islam, or Protestantism, or especially Puritanism. And not just because he loved wine. He believed that orthodox Christianity, as preserved and articulated in the Roman Catholic Church, was the only truth which could address human nature and be the way forward for the world. As a historian he perhaps started that 20th century re-appreciation of the Reformation, that it was not just a cleansing of Catholic excesses.

And his faith very much directed his politics. He had entered the House of Commons in 1906 as a Liberal, but he became a vehement critic of every political party. His starting point was Catholic social teaching, and a vigorous desire to defend Christendom against the attacks of socialism, capitalism and secularism. He envisioned the socioeconomic system which became known as distributism. Those who held this view saw property ownership as a fundamental right. They believed that the means of production should be spread as widely as possible rather than being centralized under the control of the state (state capitalism or state communism), or a few individuals (plutocracy), or corporations. He called for the dissolution of Parliament and its replacement with committees of representatives for the various sectors of society. Some of these views coincided with Socialism, others were also held by the Fascists.

The important thing for us is that Belloc formed his politics on the basis of his faith. Like William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King, he did not keep them in separate compartments.

We might contrast Belloc with Stanley Baldwin, who entered Parliament at the same time and went on to become Prime Minister in 1923. In his recent Memoire Gordon Brown tells the story of how the Attorney General at the time could never understand why Baldwin's speeches

were always being referred to him for comment. Baldwin's practice was to scribble down a rough outline, from which he would speak extempore, send it up to be typed, then add some notes in the margin before it was typed again. Whenever the letters "AG" had been added, this copy was sent to the Attorney General who could never see why the particular matter was his business. They only realised much later that by "AG" Baldwin meant not the Attorney but "Almighty God": these were the places where he knew his argument to be weak, and where he would call upon the Almighty to witness to what he was saying!

Baldwin was not so happy when God or the Church intervened on their own accord. In 1926 at the height of the General Strike a group of bishops tried to get together the government, coal industry and miners. Baldwin's response was to ask how the bishops would feel if he referred the Athanasian Creed to the Iron and Steel Federation for revision!

But to return, for the last time, to Hilaire Belloc, member of this Inn. Towards the end of his life he wrote

*When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read'.*

He said that if we want to be "happy, decent and secure of our souls" we should "drink some kind of fermented liquor with one's food; go on the water from time to time; dance on occasions, and sing in a chorus". Good advice for the choir as we go to the Picnic.

And when he came to contemplate his own death...

*You shall receive me when the clouds are high
With evening and the sheep attain the fold.
This is the faith that I have held and hold,
And this is that in which I mean to die.*

Amen to that.