

Friday after Mothering Sunday – 2016.03.11

Faith in Honest Doubt *Alfred Tennyson*

You tell me, doubt is Devil-born.

I know not: one indeed I knew
 In many a subtle question versed,
 Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
But ever strove to make it true:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
 At last he beat his music out.
 There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,
 He would not make his judgment blind,
 He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;
 And Power was with him in the night,
 Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone,

But in the darkness and the cloud,
 As over Sinai's peaks of old,
 While Israel made their gods of gold,
Altho' the trumpet blew so loud.

We turn in the last two days of this week to the other poet for whom doubt and self-questioning opened up a path to deeper truth and renewed faith. It is this conviction that God might in fact be nearer to us when we doubt and struggle than when we bask in certainty that informs the extraordinary courage and honesty of Tennyson's great poem *In Memoriam*. Although written over many years, this poem was occasioned by the death of Tennyson's closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, the man with whom he had shared his great love of poetry, his personal sorrows and joys, and above all his conviction that personal honesty combined with free and open enquiry were the only ways to establish truth and personal conviction. The whole poem is a kind of spiritual journal, a series of intimate lyrics taking the poet from the first extremities of grief, through radical doubt that there is any goodness in the world, and finally towards a renewed and profound faith in the God who is Love. Today and tomorrow we read two extracts from this extraordinary poem.

Towards the end of *In Memoriam* Tennyson addresses those who condemn doubters as weak while suppressing or demonizing their own doubts. He shows instead that a mature and balanced faith is not one that has refused the agony and the wrestling but one that has been through them and grown from the experience. Paradoxically, in this famous passage about 'faith in honest doubt' he also makes one of his most explicit appeals to scripture, to the darkness and cloud of Sinai, contrasted with the sparkling certainties of the Golden Calf.

There is an interesting personal note to add to today's extract. The first line, 'You tell me, doubt is Devil-born', may well have been addressed to Emily Selwood, the brilliant woman who would have become Tennyson's wife and without whom, it is fair to say, a great deal of his poetry would never have been written. In the crisis that followed Hallam's death Tennyson entered a protracted period of doubt and depression. His brooding melancholy seemed perhaps to confirm the rumours of the supposed Tennyson 'bad blood', for he came from a family prone to mental breakdown. Tennyson's father was a violent alcoholic who drank himself to death and some of his brothers exhibited similar behaviour. Further, in giving voice to his doubts Tennyson found himself accused of atheism. Emily, who loved him, was forbidden to see him or correspond with him; as a devout Christian she was anxious about whether she could or should marry a man whose faith, at that time, seemed so weak. But as he brought his great poem to its conclusion he arranged for someone to send it to Emily, and when she read it she realized that Tennyson was indeed the right man for her. They were married in 1850, the year of its publication and the year he was made Poet Laureate. An *annus mirabilis* indeed.

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