

Tuesday after Mothering Sunday - 2016.03.08

What It Is To Be Human *John Davies*

She within lists my ranging mind hath brought,
That now beyond my self I list not go;
My self am centre of my circling thought,
Only my self I study, learn, and know.

I know my body's of so frail a kind,
As force without, fevers within can kill:
I know the heavenly nature of my mind,
But 'tis corrupted both in wit and will:

I know my soul hath power to know all things,
Yet is she blind and ignorant in all;
I know I am one of nature's little kings,
Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.

I know my life's a pain and but a span,
I know my Sense is mockt with every thing:
And to conclude, I know my self a man,
Which is a proud, and yet a wretched thing.

So, how are we to get past that reluctance of the mind to look in on itself that Davies observed at the end of yesterday's extract, and move onto some real self-knowledge? Later in the poem Davies moves on to argue that it is only when we suffer affliction that we are motivated to turn our attention in and ask serious questions of ourselves. Otherwise we just fritter away our time in distractions, and let our 'ranging minds' go where they will, as long as it's not home to look at ourselves. But when things go wrong, when we are ill or confined to quarters and thrown back on our own resources, then the real questioning and the fruitful work can begin. Just before the above passage, Davies tells us in a playful parable that he has met with failure, disappointment and illness; all three are summed up in the word 'Affliction'. But in his poem Affliction appears not as a hag or a nightmare but as a wise woman teaching him what he needs to know, rather as Philosophy appeared to Boethius in his cell:

*She within lists my ranging mind hath brought,
That now beyond my self I list not go;
My self am centre of my circling thought,
Only my self I study, learn, and know.*

There is a lovely play on the word 'lists' here. Lists were set areas marked off for contenders in tournaments, but 'list' also meant 'to will', or want something strongly.

Affliction curbs his 'list' or lust, for novelty and brings him into the lists for more concentrated contention with himself, leading to self-knowledge.

So the arrival of Affliction leads to one of the poem's great set-piece expressions of the ambiguities and paradoxes of being human. In a passage that anticipates Hamlet's 'What a piece of work is a man' speech. Davies constantly juxtaposes our greatness and our frailty, our extraordinary capacity and potential and our always besetting weakness, our heavenly nature and our constant corruption. But all the knowledge in this great passage comes to him because he has allowed himself to learn from Affliction, the wise woman.

- Malcolm Guite, Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge

www.kingschapel.ca

The Lenten Poetry is available on the website for the Parishes of Sackville and Dorchester at sackville-dorchester-anglican.org. Click on 'Worship' and then 'Lent'. Towards the bottom of the page you'll find 'Poetry'.