

AN OPEN HEAVEN

Evensong

Clare College, Cambridge

Sunday, May 3rd 2015

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Some of you may have come across the poetry of the Orcadian poet, Edwin Muir. Muir is buried not far from here, at Swaffham Prior. On the simple headstone for him there, which also commemorates Willa his wife, run these few words: ‘his unblinded eyes saw far and near the fields of Paradise’. They come from Muir’s own sonnet, *Milton*. Here, Muir has Milton stepping out of Eden into the fallen world.

They are telling lines coming from the pen of Muir, who was a fine poet and who wrote out of an oft trying life. Born, as I said in the Orkneys, his father, a crofting farmer, went bankrupt. Moving to Manchester, Edwin lost almost all his siblings to consumption in their teens. Then, working in the office of a miserable Glasgow boneyard, prepared this sensitive young man for a life scarred by depression. Maybe this is partly why he, and his wife Willa, gave up a significant proportion of their lives to translating the writings of Franz Kafka into English. In doing so, they did wider humanity a great service, of course.

For, Kafka too had a scarred life and indeed that shows itself in so many of his writings. Humanity appears to Kafka, to be caught in a bewildering labyrinth with no map with which to navigate, a maze with apparently no exit. It is captured classically in a brief parable in his novel, *The Trial*. The tale runs like this: Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gate comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. The gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man asks whether he will be allowed entry later on. ‘It is possible’, says the gatekeeper, ‘but not now’. The gate as ever is open and the man peers in. The gatekeeper is amused by this inquisitiveness and says: ‘Try to enter if you like, but every room has a gatekeeper’. The man thinks better of it – the gatekeeper, with a black Tartar’s beard, is a deeply forbidding figure. But the man is surprised since he thought the law was accessible to all.

There he sits for days and then years. He converses with the gatekeeper about his home country and bribes him with all the treasures he’s brought. Finally, the man’s eyes grow dim; he knows he has little time to live: ‘What do you *still* want to know?’ asks the gatekeeper. The man replies: ‘Everyone seeks after law, so how is it that in so many years no one except me has come to ask for entry. The gatekeeper sees the man is weak and dying and replies simply: ‘Here no one else may gain entry, for this gate was made only for you, and now I am going to close it.

It’s a sharp and even cheerless tale, but it picks up certain recurring elements of human life and existence. So, for example, a few weeks ago, with the help of someone else I attempted to redeem mileage points on the East Coast mainline. We followed all the steps. The computerised process booked seats on a train that we could not take. So we rang back the call centre. The gentleman there told us the ticket was non-transferable. That was it – a Kafka-life experience. Computer bookings and the like often feel like that. Of course, that’s a trivial example, but more serious episodes in life can feel equally trapping, constraining or even terminally impossible.

Of course, Kafka as a Jew, was exploring the law as a religious conundrum. One of the points at issue is the law itself. Kafka's parable indicates that *legalism* is not the issue. Christian writers can easily characterise Judaism as legalistic. But at its best and most sophisticated, Judaism is a supremely humane and nourishing creed. That closed door to the law is more subtle than that. Let me return to one of our readings.

That second reading we heard just now was a snippet from the Revelation to St. John the Divine, often simply known as *The Apocalypse*. Apocalypse does not mean essentially what it's popularly seen as meaning - that is a violent end to all things. Instead it means simply *uncovering, revealing*.

That's precisely what we encountered just now in that reading which included two of the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Those letters within *The Apocalypse*, to the seven churches, are not entirely encouraging to say the least! One church is told it tolerates Jezebel; another, Laodicea is accused of being lukewarm; Sardis, we heard had the name of being alive, but was effectively dead. But Philadelphia, (which of course, means love of the brotherhood), Philadelphia, gets better marks. We heard that had held before it *an open door*. 'You have little power', the church is told, but the grace of God is with you.

The Apocalypse is a most unusual book. In places it feels repellent and elsewhere demoralising. But almost certainly it was written out of terrible persecution. In its coded and sometimes terrifying way it attempts to encourage the faithful. Even in death it offers hope. It is, at its highest points, indeed flooded with hope, with Resurrection, that is with the powerful message behind this season of Eastertide. But still it pulls no punches. It is more than realistic about the trials that people are enduring. It recognises that Paradise is not always just around the corner. Like Muir's *Milton*, the gift of hope does not deny – instead is ironically illuminated by the dark places of human existence.

In his most anthologised poem, Muir touches on this. He shows, amongst other things, what Kafka taught him. So he writes:

'One foot in Eden still, I stand
And look across the other land,
The world's great day is growing late,
Yet strange these fields that we have planted
So long with crops of love and hate...'

Eventually, Muir's realism bears fruit in his final lines:

'But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
Blossoms of grief and charity
Bloom in these darkened fields alone.
What had Eden ever to say
Of hope and faith and pity and love
Until was buried all its day
And memory found its treasure trove?
Strange blessings never in Paradise
Fall from these beclouded skies.'

Here is a real hope, as rich as ever might be drawn, issuing from both the darkest and lightest experiences of human love.

Amen

Readings: Isaiah. 60. 1-14. Revelation. 3. 1- 13