

Evensong St Michael's Cornhill fourth of July 2016.

Anthem by Philip Moore containing the epitaph stanzas of Gray's elegy.

Ecclus 44:1-7

Rom 11:33-36

1. It can be hard to locate Thomas Gray in the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"
2. Is he the omniscient poet looking on in the first stanza.

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

3. Is he the anxious friend of the missing poet to whom the hoary headed to Swain says

*'The next with dirges due in sad array
'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'*

4. Is he the poet of the epitaph

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.*

5. Thomas Gray struggled all his life with a sense of personal insignificance, and a deep reluctance to publish his own poetry. His total output in his life was 13 poems. 1000 lines.
6. He also wondered all his life whether it was possible to engage with integrity in the public sphere. Could you be famous and still be yourself?
7. Let us acknowledge two ironies here.
 - a. Firstly, it is this poem which finishes with an epitaph to an obscure poet in a rural retreat which is reason why there is a grand memorial to Thomas Gray in Poets' Corner: A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
 - b. Secondly it is this celebration of anonymous and uncelebrated virtue which has brought "The Lord Mayor and representatives of many of the City of London Livery Companies, as well as poets and academics" to this "this joyful thanksgiving for a productive creative life."

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

8. Through the Christian centuries and generations since the death of Thomas Gray, millions of English speakers have committed his Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard to memory. They have found the words good to live with, good in the mind and on the tongue and in the heart.
9. What have they found to think, and taste, and feel in this great poem?
10. It is, first and foremost, an elegy, by title, by poetic form and by content.
11. That is to say it is a representative of the great Christian and philosophical tradition of the Memento Mori. This is the conviction, widely shared through history, that the perspective of

death is the perspective from which we most clearly understand life. It is often the conviction that this is also the perspective from which life is most fruitfully led.

12. When we have grasped this fact about the poem its content falls more sharply into focus.
13. From the perspective of death the great achievements of the great, and the small achievements of the small look very much the same. Gray does not disparage or deny either, but he does encourage us not to be beguiled by fame, or contemptuous of obscurity.
14. From the perspective of death, or more specifically from the perspective of the dying, however, being remembered, being mourned, is important. The shed tears and simple obsequies of a country churchyard are given full dignity in this poem.
15. And finally, in the epitaph, two things of real value seem to emerge. For this life, the blessing of friendship. In the face of death, the love of God.
16. How can we fully and worthily celebrate the tercentenary of Thomas Gray? I think there are three things we might consider.
17. Firstly, we should seriously consider learning the poem. It is 128 short lines, made for learning, and it will provide us with a stock of thoughts and words to enlighten us for life and fortify us for death. You too can think, and taste, and feel this great poem.
18. Secondly, we should allow ourselves to be reminded by Thomas Gray of that truth most obvious and inconvenient— the full and equal humanity, the full and equal value of the famous and the obscure, the rich and the poor, the native and the migrant. In God's eyes and from the perspective of death these our distinctions do not look so distinguished.
19. Finally, we should give far more thought in our busy and sometimes dementing lives to the things that give them true value. What are we here for? What are we made for? The blessings of friendship and the love of God are what we were made for.
20. Do "hear, Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Elegy.
21. It is a thing of beauty and wisdom, and there is never enough of that in the world.
22. More importantly, it is a witness and a pointer to some truths that we begin to forget, and that we forget at our peril.