

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR
19 JUNE 2016
TRINITY 4

Return to your own home, and declare how much God has done for you.

These are the words spoken by Jesus to the Gerasene demoniac after the people had come out of the city to see that he was now **clothed and in his right mind**. We heard the story in our second reading in the course of this morning's service.

Return to your own home, and declare how much God has done for you.

But let me steer away from that New Testament account for just a moment while I draw your attention to a particular literary anniversary.

The anniversary to which I allude is the 300th anniversary of the birth of the 18th century poet Thomas Gray. Born in 1716, Gray, who lived his adult life in Cambridge as a Fellow, first of Peterhouse and then of Pembroke College, did not publish a vast amount of poetry and, if it were not for one or two pieces, might well be entirely unremembered today. But there is one poem that he wrote, of which most educated English people have at least heard. It is his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' completed at Stoke Poges, just up the road beyond Slough, in 1751. Stoke Poges was where his mother and aunt had lived for the previous nine years.

As the poet looks upon, and thinks about, the graveyard, he writes early in his poem:

**Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
The rude forefathers of the Hamlet sleep.**

And the poet bids his readers, aware that **The paths of glory lead but to the grave**, not to be dismissive of the simple folk who here lie buried, but to acknowledge in each one of them an albeit otherwise unrecognised and uncelebrated kind of greatness. Within the confines of modest rural life:

**Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.**

**Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,**

Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

And a little later, some lines perhaps even better known:

**Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.**

Something of the heroic, so Thomas Gray seems to say, can be lived out in the humblest ways and in the most ordinary circumstances.

Now to return to our reading from the Bible, we note that the Gerasene demoniac, clothed and in his right mind, begged to go away with Jesus. His life having been renewed by his encounter with this life-restoring man, his first impulse was to leave his home country; to turn his back on the familiar. Yet it is precisely to his home that Jesus sends him. **Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.**

Brought up as we have often been with stories of adventurous saints, missionaries and martyrs, of monks and scholars, of lives of sacrificial service amongst the lepers and the outcasts and the poorest of the poor, we Christians sometimes fail to appreciate the fact that most of us are challenged to respond to God's call to us in the quite unspectacular context of the ordinary and the everyday; you might even say 'the hum-drum' and 'routine'. It is easy for us to forget our responsibility to leaven this world, in our daily dealings with one another, with the love of God and the truth of the Gospel. It is easy for us to collude with life's little lies and unkindnesses; to acquiesce in assumptions that our worthwhileness is only ever measured by money and any power we possess to make demands of others; to be neglectful. We can fail, amongst our family and friends and neighbours and colleagues, through words and deeds of care, forgiveness and self-forgetfulness, to bear witness to the real power of God.

Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.

The Gerasene demoniac was released from his demons; experienced renewing of the mind. In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul recognises that we all, in some way or other, are in need of a 'renewing of the mind'. He writes: "Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

I suppose, though we might not be fully conscious of it, it is for the renewing of our minds that we come to church each week. We are seeking grace to have

developed in us what St Paul elsewhere calls “the mind of Christ” so that, like Jesus Christ, we might see clearly what it means for us to be obedient to God, and to bear witness to God’s love. And with minds at least in part renewed we hear the words of Christ: **Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.**

If, in the year that marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Gray, we remember his poem that celebrates the greatness of the “rude forefathers of the Hamlet”, perhaps we might also celebrate all those modest Christians who, their minds having been renewed, have leavened the world with the Gospel, and been instruments of God’s purpose in ways of which they have never dreamt.

The nineteenth century American Quaker John Whittier clearly had the story of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac in his mind when he wrote the lines – lines which form part of a much longer poem - which have become one of the our most popular hymns. The hymn is a prayer, and to bring this little sermon to a close I shall read the first verse. I think it provides a reasonable summary of what I have tried to say.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.

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