

St George's Windsor
Lent 2 2016 (21 February)

According to our reading from St Luke's Gospel, some friendly Pharisees (clearly, they were not all hostile) came to warn Jesus that Herod was out to kill him. They advised him to get away quickly. I shall return to this scene a little later, but I want to begin somewhere else.

A couple of days ago, I came across the script of a talk I had given, almost a quarter of a century ago, on the poet and musician Ivor Gurney. Ivor Gurney (considered by many a 'genius'), psychologically fragile and traumatised by his experience as a soldier in the First World War, died in 1937 in the City of London Mental Hospital at Dartford, where he had been a patient for fifteen years. At the end of my talk about him (so I discovered) I had read a poem that, in 1921, Gurney had set to music; one of his many lovely songs. It seemed somehow to be appropriate.

The poem had been published in 1916 (exactly a century ago) and so it seems equally appropriate to resurrect it now. It was written by J. C. Squires, an early Twentieth Century literary figure, and great friend to Gurney. It is called: "The Ship". I am sure that some of you will know it as the song that Ivor Gurney composed. It is not a long poem, so I shall risk reading it to you in full.

There was no song nor shout of joy
Nor beam of moon or sun,
When she came back from the voyage
Long ago begun;
But twilight on the waters
Was quiet and grey,
And she glided steady, steady and pensive,
Over the open bay.

Her sails were brown and ragged,
And her crew hollow-eyed,
But their silent lips spoke content
And their shoulders pride;
Though she had no captives on her deck,
And in her hold
There were no heaps of corn or timber
Or silks or gold.

The poem speaks of journey's end; of the completion of a voyage "Long ago begun"; of coming home. Weary and worn and wounded maybe, and with no outward trophies signifying worldly triumph, and yet with contentment and satisfaction at the thought of some deeper thing accomplished: ".... Their silent lips spoke content / And their shoulders pride."

I read that poem at the end of my talk about Ivor Gurney because, although life had given him a battering ("Her sails were brown and ragged, / And her crew hollow-eyed") the return of the ship, after that voyage "Long ago begun", seemed to symbolise the completion of a life well-lived.

The motif of the voyage, the quest, the journey (with all its dangers and adventure) weaves its way of course through all the great literature of the world (and much of the not-so-great as well).

I need do no more than mention 'The Odyssey' of Homer or 'The Aeneid' of Virgil or 'The Divine Comedy' of Dante or Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress' to set your minds chasing after countless more examples. And why do such stories resonate with us so profoundly? Part of the answer must be that each of us has a deep-down sense of his or her own life as a 'journey' (a voyage for many of us "Long ago begun") while, at the same time, we cherish a longing to come, after all the vicissitudes of this life, safely into harbour.

Much of St Luke's Gospel concerns a particular 'journey'. Luke Chapter 9 verse 51 reads as follows: "When the days drew near for him to be received up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." The 'receiving up' of which Luke speaks is sometimes translated as 'his assumption' or as 'his ascension' or as his being 'taken up into heaven'. The next ten chapters of the Gospel tell the story of this 'journey' to Jerusalem, while the rest of the Gospel tells us what happened when he had arrived, and what he had to pass through before he would be 'received up'; before he would arrive at journey's end.

Jesus "set his face" to make the journey to Jerusalem. He knew that he was to suffer. But, if he was to remain true to God, to his determination to be conformed to the loving will of God, and to his hope for enduring union with God (to what you might call the 'controlling vision' of his life, his compass point and his constant inspiration), there was no avoiding it.

Now this is where those friendly Pharisees come in. They met up with Jesus half way through that journey to Jerusalem, and they advised him to 'take care'. (They 'tempted' him, you might say.) But, however well-meant their tempting advice was, Jesus would not allow the threat of Herod, or his Pharisee friends' concern for his welfare, to influence what he had to do, one way or another. In his own time, he would continue his journey to Jerusalem to meet the destiny that waited for him there. There could be no evading it; no turning back. He was not here to 'take care'; to look after himself; protect himself. He was here to be obedient to his vocation, whatever the cost might be.

So he travelled on. And on the way (you can read this for yourselves in St Luke's Gospel) Jesus tried to help his disciples to understand what it would mean for them to follow him; what the cost of true discipleship would always be; what would be involved in their remaining true to their vocation. If they were to share in his determination to be obedient to the lure and call of the love of God, and if they were to share his longing for union with God, their journey could never be without its challenges. They were to be obedient to their calling, whatever the price was to be paid.

Those Pharisees who befriended Jesus had counselled him (had tempted him) to protect himself from danger. Jesus ignored their advice. And when he came to encourage the friends who had got caught up in his movement, he urged them (as those who shared the 'controlling vision' of his life) to journey on, you might say, 'adventurously', 'courageously' and 'self-forgetfully'.

So many years have passed since people first embarked upon what we now think of as the 'Christian' journey. And still those siren voices tempt us to be first and foremost self-protective. Perhaps, during this season of Lent when we ponder Christ's resistance to the temptations that tortured him, we might acknowledge our evasion of the often frightening demands that are made of us when we choose to try to follow Christ along the way, and pledge ourselves once more to be true to God's loving call to us to remain faithful and obedient within the so-called 'harsh realities' of life. So we shall pray for any courage we shall need as we voyage; as we head for harbour.

Her sails were brown and ragged,
And her crew hollow-eyed,
But their silent lips spoke content
And their shoulders pride.

Inevitably, the going will be hard. Assuredly, journey's end will bring us peace.

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