

EASTER DAY 2023 St George's Chapel, Windsor

Not so many years ago, the poet Walter de la Mare was widely read and very much appreciated. We do not hear so much about him nowadays but at least the older members of this congregation are likely to remember him as they recall the English lessons of their schooldays. This month marks the 150th anniversary of his birth in April 1873, a fact that has encouraged me to mention him today.

Walter de la Mare died in 1956. On his deathbed, just a few hours before he died, he tried to repeat a poem that he had written two or three years before it was published in 1918. His biographer tells us that he needed no more than a little prompting in order for him to recite the poem accurately. The poem was called **Fare Well**. In the course of it, he asks a question.

When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail my eyes

.....
How will fare the world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me?

"How will fare the world whose wonder / Was the very proof of me?" Walter de la Mare was not a conventionally religious person but he was sure that it is our capacity for wonder, which of course is not so very far from worship, which makes us genuinely human. "How will fare the world whose wonder / Was the very proof of me?"

Another poem that he wrote at roughly the same time is one called **The Scribe**. In this poem, a scribe addresses God and, as he surveys Creation, praises God for all the "...lovely things / Thy hand hath made." Indeed, so many are the "lovely things" that, were the scribe to use as ink the water of a mountain lake "To write of earth's wonders", the lake would run dry before he got more than a little way with his catalogue of praise and now, "All words forgotten" he would be left wonderingly silent before God.

The sense of wonder that de la Mare celebrates is of course a childlike quality. Some people, confusing 'childlike' with 'childish' dismiss the poet's verse as being silly and sentimental. Such people should look at things more closely. The two poems to which I have drawn attention were composed against the backdrop of the carnage and the tragedy of the First World War. Far from being silly and sentimental, they constituted a plea to people, never to despair of some essential and mysterious goodness at the heart of things; never to cease to wonder that that goodness might be the providential hand in whose grasp the whole universe is held.

Such understanding of course will not come through our present- day obsession with what is measurable and manageable; through the kind of hubris that smirks at the idea of mystery. It will come as we treasure the gifts of imagination and intuition, and as we trust those moments when something flashes upon the inward eye. An amalgam of such things constitutes what you and I call 'faith'. It is perhaps what Walter de la Mare is asking of us.

What then are we to say of 'faith' on Easter Sunday? Faith is of course not certainty! It does not follow on from some quasi-forensic investigation of the facts. It is primarily the stirring of the heart in recognition of a truth that, at some deep level, the heart has always known. That 'truth'

is something to which the early followers of Jesus were, by some miracle or other, awakened in those early days. That 'truth' is the truth that there is some essential and mysterious goodness at the heart of things and that that goodness (the goodness we call 'God' perhaps) will not permit the multifarious crucifixions of this world to have the final say. This, if anything, is a cause for wonder.

The poems of Walter de la Mare that I have mentioned were written (as I said earlier) against a backdrop of the carnage and the tragedy of the First World War. They are a plea to people never to lose faith in what the heart, through insight, intuition and imagination, embraces as the truth – the truth that goodness will prevail. As on Easter Sunday, we hear the hallowed accounts of the crucified one rising from the dead, we are awakened to a truth that deep down we have somehow always known, and we wonder.

For many of us, this Easter will be overshadowed by the continuing crucifixions of this life. The on-going war in Ukraine is but one example of a tragedy that looms large. Moreover, there are many more hidden patches of darkness all around us in all the sadness of sickness and loss that so many of us must endure. We cannot help but pray that the same miracle that happened in the hearts of Jesus's early followers should take place in our own hearts. It is, quite possibly, why we have come to Church on Easter Sunday – to have our 'faith', that amalgam of intuition and imagination, revived. Only its revival will give us the vision we need to work for, to wait for and to have real confidence in a better future.

Walter de la Mare believed that our capacity for wonder is the very 'proof' of us; what makes us genuinely human. This morning, acknowledging something of our true humanity, we stand in wonder before the miracle that we call 'the Resurrection'; the triumph of this world's essential and mysterious goodness, and the rising of the human heart in recognition of that wonder-full assurance.