

Jeremy Taylor 1613-1667

We start this evening in the 17th century, at a time of civil war, of the continuing religious and political upheavals begun at the Reformation, affecting both the lives of individuals and the communities in which they lived.

Jeremy Taylor was born in Cambridge in 1613. His father was a barber, which in those days meant bloodletting and toothpulling, not haircuts, not a rich man but an educated one, and one who made sure his son received as good an education as possible. Young Jeremy attended the Perse School, and had the usual classical education of the time, including much Latin and Greek. He continued his studies at Gonville and Caius College and was ordained at the uncanonically early age of 20 in order to become a Fellow of the college.

His 'big break' came in 1634, when he stood in for a friend who had a preaching engagement at St Paul's Cathedral in London, and so Taylor came to the attention of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. As a result of Laud's patronage, Taylor became a Fellow of All Soul's, College, Oxford, and this brought him into contact with a group known as the Great Tew Circle, led by William Chillingworth, a group arguing for 'latitude' when it came to theological controversy - we might call them 'liberal catholics' these days, although labels don't transfer easily - and some of whom actually found Taylor somewhat opinionated. He married for the first time in 1639 and held livings, first at Uppingham in Rutland and then at Overstone in Northamptonshire, an impoverished parish, where he was much engaged in pastoral ministry, as well as promoting Laud's ideas about liturgy - the importance of ceremonial, of the altar, of the sacraments and of the ordained

ministry, and, like most of his time, he was convinced of the importance of preaching¹.

In 1638, he preached a sermon on 'Gunpowder Day' which firmly nailed his colours to the mast as a royalist, and, following this up with writing 'Episcopacy Asserted' in 1642, became even more firmly associated with the cause, arguing the case from biblical and patristic evidence that bishops are a separate order from the priesthood². He served as a chaplain to the king's army when conflict moved into actual warfare, and was captured by Parliamentary forces at the siege of Cardigan Castle in 1645.

He then entered into a phase of what was effectively internal exile, living on the estate of the Earl of Carbery in Wales, and this was his most productive period of writing, on subjects such as the importance of set liturgy for public worship, on baptism and the Eucharist, against religious persecution in 'The Liberty of Propheying' and in 'The Great Exemplar' looking at the life of Jesus and through this examined the human condition and how we can deal with it through faith and salvation³. He also wrote works for which he is best known, 'The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living' and 'The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying', as well as a great many prayers and devotional works. It was also a significant period for him personally: his wife died, and he later remarried, to a lady who was according to some sources an illegitimate daughter of Charles I⁴.

But perhaps the most significant piece of writing, one that certainly got him into a great deal of trouble and clouded his reputation as regards theological orthodoxy ever

¹ D MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*, London: Penguin, 2004 p. 515-6

² W Marshall, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: a selective view of Anglican theology through the centuries*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2010 p.95

³ K Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his Writings*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011 p.5

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Taylor , visited 4/5/2012

afterwards, was 'Unum Necessarium, or The Doctrine and Practice of Repentance'. This expressed an idea about original sin that was seen to be at odds with the Augustinian model which the church had almost universally agreed with for long. Taylor argued that, although all people shared the consequences of Adam's fall, they do not share his guilt. We are naturally sinful but are able to choose to live holy lives. It's a far less pessimistic view of human nature than had been expressed for many years, if not centuries. His friends felt it necessary to get him out of the way and packed him off to a chaplaincy post in Ireland, at Lisburn near Belfast. He didn't stay there all the time: in 1660 (just before the Restoration) he visited London, to catch up with friends who included the diarist John Evelyn, to whom he acted as spiritual director, and the dramatist Katharine Phillips who inspired some of his writings on the subject of friendship.

When the Restoration, of both monarchy and episcopate⁵, came, Taylor might well have hoped for a bishopric. He got one, but not in England but in Ireland, the Diocese of Down and Connor, and was part of the effort to re-establish Anglicanism in Ireland. The history of England's involvement in Ireland is not a happy one, and, like all Anglican clergy, he found himself in a minority church, trying, in their view, to 'civilise' the native, largely Roman Catholic population. In addition, in the north, there were large numbers of Presbyterian clergy who had come across from Scotland. Neither of these groups wanted English bishops and an English Prayer Book imposed on them, and Taylor, along with his colleagues, was engaged in constant struggles in their attempts to bring the English pattern of church order and liturgy to what was to all intents and purposes, a foreign culture. He tried to hold to his principles of toleration over controversial issues, but did write what might be seen as a polemical work against Roman Catholicism, 'A Dissuasive Against

⁵ D MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*, London: Penguin, 2004 p. 530

Popery', in 1664. Alongside this, he continued with pastoral work amongst his clergy and people. As a result of this, he contracted a fever after visiting the sick during August 1667, and died a couple of days before his 54th birthday.

Taylor was not a 'systematic' theologian but a practical, moral and ethical one: his main concern was to help people find a way of living the Christian life in the midst of the traumas of war, as well as the ordinary, everyday tragedies of life. His writings are for the devout layperson as well as the ordained and the scholarly, and see the choices we make in every part of our lives as part of our movement towards our life with God in heaven. He argued for toleration at a time when religious persecution was a cruel reality, believing that the absolute requirements of the Christian faith were summed up in the Apostles' Creed⁶. He wanted to resource people to deal with the issues of conscience that come upon us all when we are forced to take sides in matters of public debate. The whole process of how we make those decisions was important to him: we can see not just the use of scripture and tradition in his thinking, but of his own, God-given, reason, and he encourages his readers to do likewise, giving due weight to past ideas but also being open to new questions that arise. But he is also aware of the limits of human intelligence: the mysteriousness of God is a theme in his writings on liturgy, especially the Eucharist. In this he draws on the Platonic idea of the physical world as an imperfect copy of a perfect, heavenly realm⁷, but, through God's grace shown in Jesus Christ, the two can be made one. He writes:

"Now what Christ does in heaven, He hath commanded us to do on earth, that is, to

⁶ W Marshall, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: a selective view of Anglican theology through the centuries*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2010 p.103

⁷ Compiled G Rowell, K Stevenson, R Williams, *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, Oxford: OUP, 2001 p.193

represent His death, to commemorate this sacrifice, by humble prayer and thankful record ... the church being the image of the heaven, the priest the minister of Christ; the holy table being a copy of the celestial altar, and the eternal sacrifice of the lamb slain from the beginning of the world being always the same ... it is wonderfully represented in heaven, and graciously represented here; by Christ's action there, by His commandment here."⁸

But he is very clear on one great issue of the day: the Eucharist is not just a memorial - there is a 'real presence' in the bread and wine after its consecration - but it is not a physical presence as argued by the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation, which he condemned as reducing a mystery to mere metaphysical mechanics. The presence is a spiritual one, but no less real for that:

"... the symbols become changed into the body and blood of Christ, after a SACRAMENTAL, that is, in a SPIRITUAL, REAL manner; so that all who worthily communicate do by faith receive Christ really, effectually ...; the wicked receive not Christ, but the bare symbols only; but yet to their hurt, because the offer of Christ is rejected ..."⁹

Here we see also another concept that runs through Taylor's thinking, one common in Reformation thought, that of covenant. This is usually linked very much to the idea of election - God's chosen people - and predestination, either to heaven or to hell. What Taylor draws from it is the idea that God reaches out to us in grace, and we are called to make a response to this grace. All are called in this way, and all are capable of being

⁸ J Taylor, *The Worthy Communicant*, quoted in K Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his Writings*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011 p.131

⁹ J Taylor, *Real Presence*, *ibid.* p.119

perfected, but it depends on us growing and developing in the Christian life to draw nearer to God. It is about being brought into a relationship with God, one that starts with our baptism, but continues to operate on us beyond it. He writes:

“...in the gospel the covenant was established upon faith and repentance, but was consigned in baptism, and was verifiable only in the integrity of a following holy life according to the measures of man; not perfect, but sincere; not faultless, but heartily endeavoured.”¹⁰

This develops his ideas on original sin: we are not called to live according to a set of rules, or to just passively rely on God’s grace, because we can do nothing either way. We can be perfected by God’s grace, by giving it the opportunity to work on us, and work on us not just in consciously ‘religious’ activities like prayer and the reception of the sacraments, but ‘doing theology’ in our daily lives. Much in the manner of the laws of the Old Testament that give expression as to how the Israelites are to live in covenant with God, Taylor’s famous work on ‘Holy Living’ sets out all sorts of areas where our relationship with God affects how we go about things. The book is based on three principles¹¹: firstly, the proper use of our time, in other words, getting our priorities right, and working on this by self-examination, looking closely where our desires truly lie, for:

“He that is choice of his time will also be choice of his company, and choice of his actions: lest the first engage him in vanity and loss; and the latter, by being criminal, be a throwing his time and himself away, and a going back in the accounts of eternity.”¹²

¹⁰ J Taylor, *The Great Exemplar*, *ibid.* p.57

¹¹ Ed. G Mursell, *The Story of Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Lion, 2001 p.261-2

¹² J Taylor, *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living*, quoted in K Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his*

Secondly, purity of intention: we have to want what God wants and find our fulfilment in doing his will and work to his standards in our dealings with others, in areas such as marriage, as business and trade, in issues of worldly justice, in our attitude towards those in authority. Some of his advice is extremely practical. For example:

“In making contracts, use not many words; for all the business of a bargain is summed up in few sentences: and he that speaks the least, means fairest, as having fewer opportunities to deceive.”¹³

The final, and most important principle, is what can be called the ‘practice of the presence of God’. If all these rules and principles about prayer and the Christian life make it all sound too much like hard work, this is where we find the key which makes it all worthwhile: God is to be found everywhere, if we look for him:

“But if we seek for Christ, we shall find Him in the methods of virtue and the paths of God’s commandments, in the houses of prayer and the offices of religion, in the persons of the poor and the retirements of an afflicted soul: we shall find Him in holy reading and pious meditation, in our penitential sorrows and in the time of trouble, in pulpits and upon altars, in the word and in the sacraments. If we come hither as we ought, we are sure to find our beloved, Him who our soul longeth after”.¹⁴

One Jeremy Taylor’s many contributions to religious life was in the art of the funeral

Writings, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011 p.75

¹³ J Taylor, *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living*, *ibid.* p.82

¹⁴ J Taylor, *The Worthy Communicant*, *ibid.* p.124

sermon, and so, to sum up, I quote from the sermon preached at his own funeral by his friend, George Rust:

“This was the spirit of this great man; he weighed men's reasons, and not their names He considered, that it is not likely any one party should wholly engross truth to themselves; that obedience is the only way to true knowledge; that it is impossible that a pure, humble, resigned, godlike soul should be kept out of heaven ... that the design of heaven is not to fill men's heads, and feed their curiosities, but to better their hearts, and mend their lives. Such considerations as these made him impartial in his disquisitions ... and contend for truth and not for victory.”¹⁵

Bibliography

D MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*, London: Penguin, 2004

Ed. G Mursell, *The Story of Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Lion, 2001

W Marshall, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: a selective view of Anglican theology through the centuries*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2010

Compiled G Rowell, K Stevenson, R Williams, *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, Oxford: OUP, 2001

K Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his Writings*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Taylor , visited 4/5/2012

¹⁵ quoted in K Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his Writings*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011 p.216