

# Reverence

LENT 3C 2019

It is very unlikely that the contents of this reflection would go down well as an interval talk during the Last Night of the Proms. However, I would like to think that in a more reflective spirit we would recognise some of the issues it raises worthy of consideration.

There's no escaping the fact that Rudyard Kipling, as good a writer and story teller as he is, was also a product of and at times an apologist for British imperialism. Kipling was born in India and grew up in an atmosphere in which the British dominated huge populations, drew inordinate wealth from the natural resources and human labour of other nations, and imposed Western "values" on ancient and venerable peoples, civilisations and cultures. Meanwhile we deluded ourselves into believing our own propaganda that we were all the while acting with benevolence.

As we look around the world today some would suggest that we are still reaping the fruits first sown when European powers carved up the globe to their own economic advantage. Many current conflicts

involve disagreements over borders imposed for our convenience while ignoring indigenous arrangements that evolved over hundreds of years.

You could say that imperial powers acted in ways that lacked reverence for others, denied their rights, compromised their futures and left a legacy of bitter memories.

Rudyard Kipling lived and wrote when this phenomenon was at its height so his writings, as good as they may be; need to be read in this context. It is with this caveat that I will shortly be sharing one of his very brief poems called, *The Prayer*:

I imagine I must have come across this poem before but on this occasion, I found flicking through a book exploring the philosophy of Reverence. The main thrust of the book is that Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from which grows our capacity to be in awe of whatever we discover to be beyond our immediate control. It might be God, Nature, truth, justice, love and even death. Such reverence puts us in our place; reminding us that we are not omnipotent, our opinions can be flawed, our insight incomplete and our sympathies unfair.

When we live with Reverence we recognise these limitations, we live with humility and we seek to align ourselves with all that is good, just and beautiful. Furthermore, we expect our leaders to do the same. We hold them to account when they lack such reverence for ourselves, for other peoples and for our planet.

Reverence is a necessary quality for a fully human life; Moses discovered this in a most unexpected situation. He was minding his own business, or more accurately the business of his father in law, Jethro, when the epiphany of the burning bush required him to show reverence: *“Take off your sandals, for the ground on which you stand is holy.”* This reverence was broadened when he learnt that God cannot be captured by a name.

So, Moses was well placed to lead the Israelites on their own journey to freedom during which they too were required to learn reverence as Paul attests in today’s second reading.

And in the gospel, Jesus’s response to the news about an act of human cruelty demonstrates the same insight. The victims were not at fault for their suffering, Jesus says. They died because Pilate and the

Empire he represented showed utter disregard for their dignity. There is no reverence where there is cruelty. And referencing the collapse of the tower of Siloam, perhaps during an earthquake, we learn that humans deserve reverence even when they suffer the consequences of natural disasters.

Such reverence is at work in the parable in the person of the man tending the fig tree. In the face of the vineyard owner's brutal demands, he pleads for patience and shows the same patience in caring and nurturing the tree to fruitfulness.

Just imagine how different things might have been in recent times if in place of the racist and hate filled attitudes that resulted in the slaughter in Christchurch, we all showed real reverence to those who are different to ourselves. Imagine too if we had come to our senses sooner and shown reverence to the natural world, some of the natural disasters now plaguing our planet might have been less destructive. And we could do with a good dose of reverence closer to home too.

Kipling may have been a product of British Imperialism, but his experience in India drew some degree of human sympathy and reverence out of his

soul; and it found expression in the poem. He came to understand that beneath the surface of our different beliefs, cultures and stories runs a deeper connection and a shared yearning for a better world:

*My brother kneels, so saith Kabir,  
To stone and brass in heathen wise,  
But in my brother's voice I hear  
My own unanswered agonies.  
His God is as his fates assign,  
His prayer is all the world's--and mine.*

Whatever our beliefs, however we pray or indeed whether we pray at all; we have a shared identity and common nature as human beings. We share vulnerabilities, we dream similar dreams and yearn for a peace that would pervade all humanity.

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