

This is a personal reflection rather than an academic commentary on the connection between Shakespeare and the Bible. In his biography of Shakespeare, Peter Ackroyd shows how little we know about his faith. Shakespeare was probably a closet Roman Catholic, even after the Elizabethan settlement which made life difficult for Catholics. He would have attended Church of England worship on public occasions sufficiently frequently so as not to be noticed. But his religion apparently meant little to him – or, at least, it does not appear clearly in his writings. He was fully immersed in the culture of his day, so there are numerous references to Bible stories and characters which would have been familiar to the vast majority of the population. Shakespeare seems to have been a humanist in the tradition of Erasmus: someone who pondered and admired the complexity of human life and relationships, and who saw this life (rather than whatever may lie beyond) as the stage on which great tragedy and comedy is played. This sort of humanism does not exclude God; but reference to God can be distracting. Indeed, it could be said that they both place so much importance on human living because human life is so precious (because it is ultimately God-given). Over the following 200 years, a humanism developed that was essentially secular (including a rejection of all religion). But it is Shakespeare's reticence about flaunting matters of faith combined with his passionate love of character, knowing that humans can create great good or ill, that is very attractive to me, and to many English Christians.

So, here is one of my favourite Shakespearean quotations (Hamlet 1.3) which is consonant with many aspects of our faith that I hold very dear:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

These few lines have a rhythm that make them easy to remember and recall. One of my hopes for this anniversary year is that we all learn and carry within ourselves more such phrases from the Bible. For one of the gifts of such memorising is that not only can we draw on their strength in times of difficulty, but also that such words will rise unbidden. It is that experience that can be so precious: when truth is given to us, coming without an effort of will on our part.

These lines are condensed truth, each phrase meriting attention. The more you understand the passage, the more you realise there is to understand. I experience that also when reading the best passages of the Bible, say, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapters 5-7). So what do I find here:

- “to be true to one self” can sound individualistic, selfish and modern; but I hear the words in a different way. Paul instructs the Corinthian Church that they must hold together as the Body of Christ; though each member has different gifts, no one person should seek more honour, recognition or power than is appropriate. The same pattern can be applied to how I live my own life. Each person has many talents and needs; unbalanced unhealthy living can happen when these are not held together in proper proportion. Actually, the same emphasis on balance

can be applied to the Bible itself, which is often better referred to as a library of books, rather than as a singular book. Theology goes awry when it draws strength from a few biblical passages without giving due regard to the whole Bible: the most obvious example being those groups which concentrate on the book of Revelation alone. They are led into focussing in an unhealthy way on the Second Coming, to the detriment of growing lives that are simple and Christ-like.

- “To be true to one self” can sound like encouragement to choose one’s own path through life and follow it – but, contrary to that, I see the self as given rather than chosen. I have been made by God in a certain way and I simply cannot be anything I choose: I do not have the body, the talent or the desire to be a dancer, a footballer, or a lawyer. Finding my vocation is about listening for how the universe is calling me to live, it is not about choosing any path I want. Finally, it has to be said that “my vocation” relies on active participation from others too: I have been a better Rector here, because you are a good congregation, which includes helping me be what I am called to be. The same will be true, for example, of teachers, doctors, and mothers: each more fully realises their vocation with the active help of those they serve.
- “It will follow as the night the day”: the goal of moral progress is that our good behaviour becomes automatic. One aspect of sin is that we are at odds with ourselves. Paul names that as evidence that God’s spirit has not yet fully transformed us into the person we could be. We long to live well; we long to know we are living well; beyond that, there is a stage of moral growth that appears to involve no effort: from competence, to conscious competence, to unconscious competence.
- That quality of automatic godly living is what Jesus points us towards when he urges us not to be anxious, not to let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. On most days this state seems completely beyond me, but it is what God is calling us to. It is not just that we will not be false to our neighbours, but that we *cannot* be false to anyone.

In Hamlet 1.3, Polonius appears as a rather fussy old man saying farewell to his son Laertes, finishing his good-bye with these words. Yet in them he condenses an aspiration to godly living that reminds me of the verse that lies at the heart of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.