Celebrations of human worth

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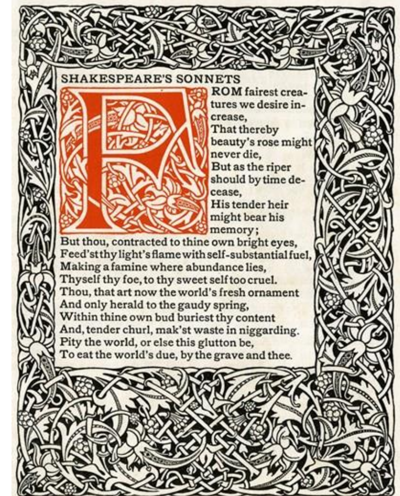
Mark Oakley brings the lens of faith to bear on Shakespeare's sonnets


SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

FROM fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the riper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory;
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou, that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

IT WAS a priest, Francis Meres, a man well acquainted with the literary scene, who, in his *Wit's Treasury* of 1598, praises Shakespeare as a poet as well as a playwright, referring to his "sugared sonnets among his private friends". It was not until 1609, however, when Shakespeare was 45 and a well-known author of about 30 plays, that his sonnets were first printed as a collection.

We don't know how well they went down, sonnets by then being perhaps a little out of fashion, but, over time, they became (though sometimes difficult) deeply loved, admired, studied, stored, and recited by generations. Written over 20 years of Shakespeare's life, although groups of the sonnets have overlapping themes or echoes of each other in sound or focus, they do not form one continuous sequence. Each can be enjoyed in itself: invitations into the intimacies of humanity's relationship with time and with itself; with the human heart, desire, and sexuality; and the range of passions and confusions that fill our restless nights and hidden days.

Some casually think that the sonnets are only about love — and the sonnets are, indeed, about love, from many angles and in many forms — but they are about so many more things, also.

IT IS debated whether the sonnets are transparently autobiographical and — as Wordsworth believed — were the key with which Shakespeare "unlocked his heart". What is very clear, however, is that they remain a key that can unlock our hearts. As we read them, again and again, sometimes struggling to comprehend, we persist because, although we can't always make immediate sense of them, we know that they are making patient sense of us.

So close do they intrude into both the far corners and the horizons of our hearts that they remain worthy of whispering — words and breath in mysterious partnership, making ourselves visible to ourselves; meditative exercises for a distillation we so often long for and yet can't find.

Similar things, of course, are often said of the parables of Jesus. One in Luke's Gospel (12.16-21) is about a man who has forgotten that the best things in life are never things. Like many of us, he seems to have been taken over by the addiction to accumulate, possessed by possession, leaving him with plenty to live with but not so much to live for. He addresses his soul: "Soul," he says, "take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry." Book that cruise.

Sonnet 146 also addresses the soul, but, you feel, further down the line, after it has learned that life is not for beginners and that its losses — whether of love, health, or the people we love most — hurt; and provide a different lens to see through. Shakespeare addresses the soul, but now it is "Poor soul". He registers the "pine within"; sees how, although life is "so short a lease", he paints the walls of himself while inside he crumbles apart.

For God's sake, you can almost hear him say to himself, get your act together: "Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross; Within be fed, without be rich no more." The insight is shared by the Gospel: "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

ONE of the many things that we have learned from the pandemic we are living through is that the virus does not discriminate; it has left low-paid workers in makeshift mortuaries, and the monarch herself isolated in her pew of mourning. Shakespeare's contemporary dramatist, Thomas Dekker, noted the same about the plague of their time. In the grave, he wrote, "Servant and master, foul and fair One livery wear, and fellows are." Husbands, wives, children, old and young, are led to the grave, "as if", he says, "they had gone to one bed".

Sonnet 60 has its eyes and heart open to the fact that life is fragile and short. In Jesus's parable, it is at night that God requires the man's soul; in the 1609 publication of this sonnet, the second line "so do our minutes hasten to their end" sees "minutes" spelled with an extra "i", playing with a French pun, perhaps, turning minute into "minuit(e)" — midnight. So do our midnights hasten, and our souls are required. We have been given the gift of our being. The gift we can give back is our becoming. So, the bell strikes and we are asked just that: "Who have you become?"

In the sonnet, we "crawl to maturity", and then Time "feeds on the rarities of nature's truth" and takes away the gift it gave to us. But it is the sonnet's couplet that gives us something we need urgently to believe, in our own bruised times, and which also, for me, summarises something of the very gift of Shakespeare himself. That sonnet is, we think, addressed to the "fair youth". And yet it is not outrageous to read it as addressed to us all: "And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand." Or, "To futures only yet dreamed of, this poetry remains, Voicing your worth despite all the cruelties of time."

SHAKESPEARE's work — his plays and poems — always, it seems to me, praises our worth as human beings, celebrates our dignity in all our mystery and mess; and, though only too aware of the cruel hand, both of time and of many tortured human beings, he never gives up on us, but, often against the odds, still praises our worth. We have seen this worth: the elderly lady touching the hand of her daughter through a window; the man saying goodbye to his family as a nurse holds his phone; the sacrifice made by the carers and healers; the tireless work of the scientist; the son in India desperately looking for oxygen to save his mother; the wide, unstoppable hug that reunites parents with their son with learning disabilities at his care home. All tell us, and all praise our worth — your worth — as the person you are.

I thank Shakespeare for many things: the beauty and adventure of language; the door he props open in our psyche; that sixth sense of his; the point precision; and the layered ambiguities of his diagnosis of our human condition. But, most of all, I thank him that he praises and upholds and celebrates our worth — despite everything. Our moment needs his monument, but, "to times in hope", it needs his compassionate imagination and his humane sympathies more than ever.

This is an abridged version of the sermon given at this year's Shakespeare service, A Moment's Monument, *in Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon, by Canon Mark Oakley, Dean of St John's College, Cambridge.*