Commemoration of Jeremy Taylor

Sermon preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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I pray that I may speak in the Name of the Father,
& of the Son, & of the Holy Ghost, AMEN.

> But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up the bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

That rhetorical question, from our first lesson, occupied Jeremy Taylor for the whole of his life. And Taylor's repeated answer to that question in his own writings was also the same as the epistle's:

> that we should believe on the name of … Jesus Christ and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him.

It has been many months since the Chaplain graciously asked if I would like to 'come and tell us about Jeremy Taylor'. As I prepared, though, I began to see that on the day, I would feel rather like Pontius Pilate in the Creed – delighted to get a mention, but not exactly sure what I'm doing here. Part of that is simply the uncomfortable reminder of how over-specialised research can be these days – though something approaching an expert on two seventeenth-century divines (John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes) whose lives overlapped with Taylor's, I had little more than vague, and I will confess it, undergraduate impressions of Taylor, and even those probably second-hand from pronouncements like Auden's:

> [Herbert's] poetry is the counterpart of Jeremy Taylor's prose: together they are the finest expression we have of Anglican piety at its best.

Since I have spent most of my academic career trying to

get religious writing of the seventeenth-century out from under woolly blankets like that one, it is not where I'd like to start.

Although I understand that Taylor has a devoted following here, perhaps some would be grateful for a brief introduction to him. Born in Cambridge in 1613, Taylor was educated at the Perse School, and entered Gonville & Caius as a sizar in 1626. He proceeded BA in 1631, and took both a fellowship and holy orders in 1633, though not yet 21. Preferment came from a chance turn in the pulpit at St Paul's Cathedral, which brought him to the attention of William Laud, who used his visitorial powers here at All Souls to impose him as Fellow, over the objections of Gilbert Sheldon. Chaplaincy to both Laud and King Charles swiftly followed, as did preferment to the rectory of Uppingham, where he resided and married. Civil War brought eviction from Rutland and Taylor back to Oxford, as royal and army chaplain. After capture and imprisonment in Cardigan Castle in 1645, Taylor found refuge as domestic chaplain to Richard Vaughan, Earl of Carbery, and his wife Francis in Wales. Widowed in 1651, Taylor began to frequent London, where he was one of the most popular ministers to the clandestine congregations who clung to the outlawed *Book of Common Prayer*. But London soon became too dangerous – and too expensive – so Taylor retired to Ireland under the protection of Edward Conway, and threw himself into pastoral work on his patron's estates near Belfast. He was, though, *en point* in London for the arrival of the restored Charles II, and, duly nominated bishop of Down and Connor, returned to Ireland for the last seven years of his life where he worked to re-establish the Church of Ireland, both as a diocesan, and as Vice-Chancellor of Trinity College Dublin.

You will have noticed in that potted biography that I have said nothing of Taylor's writings, which were prodigious – forty different imprints in only twenty years. It is tempting to say that Taylor wrote too much – he himself deeply regretted some of it, and even his friends acknowledged that he was garrulous both in person and print. So, any modern student of Taylor should be grateful for the still-magisterial 1822 edition of Taylor's complete works in fifteen volumes by Reginald Heber, who also gave us the hymns 'Holy, Holy, Holy', and 'Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning'. Heber's scholarly edition of Taylor should also make today's commemoration in this place a double-feast, because to remember Taylor should be to remember Reginald Heber, Fellow of All Souls, 1804–7.

Taylor is perhaps most remembered now as a 'devotional writer', or author of works of 'practical piety', a reputation based mainly on the two works judged as 'classics', his *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651). To ecclesiastical historians he is perhaps best known as the father of 'latitudinarianism', that most middle of ways in the Anglican *via media*. And it is 'latitudinarian', not as a label or a church party, but as the spirit of Christianity itself, that to me makes Taylor most startling in his day, and most pertinent in ours. For there is, Taylor said, 'a latitude of Theologie, much whereof is left to us, so without precise and cleere determination, that without breach either of faith or charity, men may differ in opinion'. This may seem reasonable enough, but it is not what one would expect from a Laudian chaplain to a Stuart king in 1647 – in a work called *The Liberty of Prophesying* – which argued for the toleration of religious dissent and the liberty of preaching. In that work, which was far more

influential in its own century than Milton's *Areopagitica* of the same year, Taylor dismantled over a century of conformist apologetic. For he asserted nothing less than a radical uncertainty about most, indeed almost all, religious knowledge. His irreducable core was only the Apostles Creed, and 'faith', which he understood to be any active response to Scripture, and that principally its call to charity. To appeal to the bare bones of the Creed and to charity was nothing new in conformist polemic, as a way to allege an eirenic consensus on doctrinal fundamentals while insisting that the Church and Crown could decide on everything else. But Taylor drastically narrowed *what* could be proved by Scripture, which he said were only the articles of the Creed. And as for matters which required any further interpretation than those, Taylor took the famous three-legged school of Anglican authority – Scripture, tradition, and reason – and said that those were not *authorities* at all, but merely more *evidence* which itself required interpretation and adjudication. To prove his point as dramatically as possible, he took the two *bêtes-noires* of over one hundred years of conformist polemic – Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism, and Roman Catholic transubstantiation – and proceeded to show how the same sources of Scripture, tradition, and reason could prove *both* sides of both questions. Having eviscerated the judging power of any kind of textual magisterium to decide disputed points of religion, Taylor is left with one thing to offer as the yardstick for what, beyond the Apostles' Creed, Christianity is and what it is not – and that is behaviour; how so-called Christians live; what we *do*: 'it is evident,' Taylor says, 'that if obedience and a good life be secured upon the most reasonable and proper grounds of Christianity, that is, upon the Apostles' Creed, then *faith* is

secured. Since whatsoever is beside the duties, the order of a good life, cannot be a part of faith, because upon faith a good life is built: all other articles, by not being necessary, are no otherwise to be required but as they are to be obtained, and found out, that is, morally, and fallibly, and humanly'. There is a profound humility in that last triplet: only 'morally, and fallibly, and humanly' can we struggle to agree, or perhaps agree to disagree, about all but the most fundamental things. Which is why, for Taylor, Christianity must have *latitude*, including a latitude for error (which he insists is not the same as sin), and a latitude for each others' views. These were startling arguments in 1647, and Taylor was not shy of their logical consequences, the most beautiful of which has to be, in the same tract, his insistence – not a mere recommendation – that all believers, regardless of sect or tradition, who can say the Creed together *should* gather together in the love-feast that is communion:

> to refuse our charity to those who have the same faith, because they have not all our opinions, and believe not everything necessary which we overvalue, is impious and schismatical.

For anyone, Taylor says, is to be tolerated, as long as their behaviour does not have a negative 'influence upon the body politic, or upon the lives and manners of men as they are parts of a community'; or, put postively, as long as they 'make best demonstration of our piety and our love to God and truth.'

Taylor also anticipated the objection that if religious difference is to be tolerated, someone or something still must be an arbiter of what good behaviour is, and for him, emphatically, that was the state, not the church. Trained as

we might be to distrust a seventeenth-century Laudian royalist when it comes the pros and cons of state power, there is a risk of misinterpreting Taylor on this point, because Taylor in fact recognised that the church, that is, especially, a *national* church, was obliged to defer to the state and its laws, and so, when, as one hopes, those laws reflect the consensus of the government and the governed, the church should reflect them, or, put another way, Church law should never be independent of, much less contradict, state law. Taylor of course articulated those views in the context of the 1640s, as bulwarks against both Roman Catholic and strict Calvinist opinion that a church's law could be superior to that of the state. But his points do bear logical extension forward in time. One of the best modern students of Taylor, the late Canon Reginald Askew, calculated the intellectual 'currency conversion' from the seventeenth to the twentieth century to point out that Taylor's views on canon law would not allow the national church to prevent remarriage in church after divorce – out of charity to individuals, and out of deference to modern behavioural realities, and the laws of the state. Even more forcefully, noting that 'a *national* Church can hardly be anything if it is not secular', Askew judged that it should be 'laughable' 'to frame state law seeking equal opportunities for women' without the Church 'making up its mind to ordain women, and to consecrate them bishops'. That was in 1997, and almost twenty years later, few in the nation have been laughing over the General Synod's most recent failure on that score. One might also extend Askew's extension of Taylor's thought to query whether some present-day bishops themselves understand the difference between matters of civil law and matters of religion with respect to changing

views on marriage; never mind whether they, as pastors of a national church, are showing the latitude incumbent on that national church to minister with inclusive compassion to all its members. And even this issue is not as far from Taylor as we might think. One of his most celebrated works, after *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, was his letter on friendship to Katherine Philips, an accomplished poet, whose relationships, both poetic and personal, with members of her female circle many scholars now accept partook of at least something that we would call 'same-sex relationships'. Philips wrote to Taylor for an answer to the question 'how far a dear and perfect friendship is authorized by the principles of Christianity', by which she meant and Taylor understood, same-sex friendship between women, since his coy opening gambit in response was 'it is not so much as named in the New Testament; and our Religion takes no notice of it'. While going on to assert nothing less than an orthodox view on marriage's superiority to friendship, though, Taylor sensitively surveyed the friendships of David and Jonathan, and even Christ and John. His concluding advice was first that friends 'must neither ask of their friend what is undecent; nor grant it if themselves be asked', but last, that

> so must the love of friends sometimes be refreshed with material and low caresses; lest by striving to become too divine it become less humane: it must be allowed its share of both.

Frank, 'humane', decent, practical. Taylor's radical equation of faith with living a good life is of course then what animates his long-admired *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, and also what for me spares them from the risk of irrelevance so potential in that term 'piety'. For they are

not about 'piety' in the introspective, individualistic sense, but piety as active practice, and practice that seeks not to better the self, but others. Taylor is about living and, yes, dying well, but is an acute observer of how any benefits which accrue to the self – the 'holiness' of his titles, what he also elsewhere describes eloquently as 'growing in grace', flows not from attending to the self first, but to others. Or, as Askew put it, *Holy Living* is 'too sharply practical to be relegated to what is called spirituality'. And practical it is, insistently ringing compassionate changes on behaviour rather than doctrine, as it commends the practicalities of companionate marriage ('better to stay up all night than go to bed with a dragon'), breast-feeding ('the first, and most natural, and necessary instance of piety which mothers can shew to their babes'); education and discipline of children; the evils of exploitative market economies, and of war; the right use of national lotteries; and the right recipients of alms:

> The best objects of charity are poor housekeepers that labour hard and are burthened with many children; or gentlemen fallen into sad poverty, persecuted persons; widows; and fatherless children … Search into the needs of numerous and meaner families: For there are many persons that have nothing left them but misery.

Taylor is relentlessly realistic. For his early nineteenth-century admirers, the natural imagery of his writing held great appeal; Coleridge, not surprisingly, thrilled to what he felt was the breeze of the countryside blowing through Taylor's prose, as in his favourite passage from *Holy Dying*: 'so have I seen a rose newly springing from the clefts of its hood, and at first it was fair as the morning, and full with the dew of heaven as a lamb's fleece; but when a ruder

breath had forced open its virgin modesty, and dismantled its too youthful and unripe retirements, it began to put on darkness, and to decline to softness and the symptoms of a sickly age; it bowed the head, and broke its stalk; and at night, having lost some of its leaves and all its beauty, it fell into the portion of weeds and outworn faces'. Far less Romantic, and perhaps more typical, is not Taylor's use of metaphors from nature to trope the realities of life, but his instinctive ability to ground – to incarnate – abstractions in natural terms, as in his startling description of the gradual growth of wisdom in the soul:

> Men at first think themselves wise, and are always most confident when they have the least reason; and to-morrow they begin to perceive yesterday's folly, and yet they are not wise; but as the little embryo, in the natural sheet and lap of its mother, first distinguishes into a little knot, and that in time will be the heart, and then into a bigger bundle, which after some days' abode grows into two little spots, and they, if cherished by nature, will become eyes, and each part by order commences into weak principles … then to order, next to usefulness, and from thence to strength, till it arrive at beauty and a perfect creature.

Any properly historical assessment of Taylor would have to include his faults and contradictions. Coleridge, for example, was alert to how, especially in contrast to Milton, he could be inconsistent, and accused of too often trying to please all men. And certainly as the Restoration bishop of Down and Connor he showed rather less latitude in dealing with dissenters than he had been willing to when in 1647 he was, implicitly, arguing for toleration for his own derelict episcopal church. So we find him in a 1660 letter

to the Duke of Ormond lamenting that

> I perceive myself thrown into a place of torment. The country [Ireland] would quickly be well, if the Scotch ministers were away, at least some of the prime incendiaries.

But in that same letter there is still that Taylorian desire to at least have the latitude to have a good argument:

> I have invited them to a friendly conference, desired earnestly to speak with them, went to them, sent some of their own to invite them, offered to satisfy them in anything that was reasonable; I preach every Sunday amongst them, somewhere or other; I have courted them with most friendly offers … but they refused to speak with me … They threaten to murder me.

Even there, in the heat and compromise of frustration and no little anger, we can see Taylor struggling to abide by the epistle's injunction 'that we should believe on the name of … Jesus Christ and love one another, as he gave us commandment.' Paradoxically, Taylor's sight was perhaps clearest ten years earlier when the outward forms of the church he loved had been stripped away, and when he had little hope that they would ever return. It is a salutary reminder to those of us who actively practice a faith in any church not to be in love with it for its own sake; and I hope is an invitation to those who do not to see the real latitude which is offered in God's love. About which, on this day when we commemorate the example of Taylor's witness to that love, I will let Taylor have the last word:

> let us take more care to consider matters that concern justice and charity, than that concern the virtue of religion; because in this there may be much, in the other

there cannot easily be any, illusion and cozenage. That is a good religion that believes, and trusts, and hopes in God, through Jesus Christ, and for his sake does all justice and all charity that he can; and our blessed Lord gives no other description of 'love' to God, but obedience and 'keeping his commandments.' Justice and charity are like the matter, religion is the form, of Christianity: but although the form be more noble and the principle of life, yet it is less discernible, less material, and less sensible; and we judge concerning the form by the matter, and by material accidents, and by actions: and so we must of our religion, that is, of our love to God, and of the efficacy of our prayers, and the usefulness of our fastings; we must make our judgements by the more material parts of our duty, that is, by sobriety, and by justice, and by charity. AMEN.

Reference

I have found the following helpful in preparing this sermon: John Spurr, 'Taylor, Jeremy (*bap.* 1613, *d.* 1667)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006; Michael Laird, 'Heber, Reginald (1783–1826)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Reginald Askew, *Muskets & Altars: Jeremy Taylor and the Last of the Anglicans* (Mowbray, new ed. 1998); Kenneth Stevenson, *A Following Holy Life: Jeremy Taylor and his Writings* (Canterbury Press, 2011); John D. Schaeffer, 'Tropical Latitude: Prophecy, Orality, and the Rhetoric of Tolerance in Jeremy Taylor's *The Liberty of Prophesying*', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), 454–70; R. Florence Brinkley, 'Coleridge's Criticism of Jeremy Taylor', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (May, 1950), 313–323; Nicholas McDowell, '"The Ghost in the Marble": Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying* (1647) and Its Readers', in A. Hessayon and N. Keene (eds) *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 176–191.