

DICKENS ORATION

**PREACHER : Dr Gary Holden, Headteacher,
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Sunday, June 6th 2010
Trinity I

3.15pm
Rochester Cathedral

Can I begin by thanking you for inviting me to speak at today's service? It is a truly remarkable occasion, and, with the colourful costumes, the Cathedral looks much as it must have done in the 1840s and 50s.

But at first glance, Charles Dickens would seem to have little to say of comfort to this congregation or indeed to someone about to give an Oration in his honour. Early on in *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam remembers "the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel three times a day" and forced to listen to "indigestible sermons", while this sombre description of Rochester Cathedral from the *Mystery of Edwin Drood* could put a dampener on the jolliest of celebrations:

"gloomy shadows began to deepen in corners; and dampness began to rise from green patches of stone; and jewels, cast upon the pavement of the nave from stained glass by the declining sun, began to perish... all became grey, murky and sepulchral."

However, this dank and dismal scene is quickly dispelled by the choir and organ creating a sea of music that transforms the mood -and this use of light and shade is so important to our understanding of Dickens' writing, and is at the heart of what makes him such an important literary figure. I want to reflect for a moment on what Dickens has brought to me as a teacher and reader.

Dickens' passion for education and its capacity to transform lives and communities, as well as his anger at the exploitation of and cruelty towards children have had a powerful impact on my thinking and practice. His fury at the cruelty meted out to poor children in the infamous Yorkshire Schools finds expression in the gruesome Mr Squeers and his appalling school in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

"Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meager legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies....there were the little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone and its helplessness alone remaining...what an incipient hell was breeding here."

And he is equally acerbic about the methods employed by teachers at the time, for example, Mr Gradgrind's utilitarian obsession with facts in *Hard Times*:

"Bitzer," said Thomas Gradgrind. "Your definition of a horse."

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely: twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth."

"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind. "You know what a horse is."

But his belief in the redemptive and transformative power of education can be seen in this moving description of *Ragged Schools* from one of his *Daily News* articles:

“The name implies the purpose. They who are too ragged, wretched, filthy, and forlorn, to enter any other place: who could gain admission into no charity school, and who would be driven from any church door; are invited to come in here, and find some people not depraved, willing to teach them something, and show them some sympathy, and stretch a hand out, which is not the iron hand of Law, for their correction.”

This belief in the moral purpose of education to provide for all children regardless of social class, background or breeding has sustained me throughout my career and sustains me still.

Dickens was, like many in his and our time, passionate about social justice and community cohesion. In his journalism he frequently opened up the world of the poor to his middle class readers in order that their eyes might in turn be opened to the misery of poverty, while in an address to the Mechanics Institution in Birmingham before one of his famous readings he looked forward to:

“the fusion of different classes, without confusion; the bringing together of employers and employed; the creating of a better common understanding among those whose interests are identical and who depend upon one another.”

It is not just education and the hope of a fairer society in which Dickens puts his faith, but people. What draws most of us in this congregation back to Dickens again and again is his understanding of and tolerance for human nature in all its diversity. Like those other giants of English letters, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickens has created unforgettable characters who seem to have a life beyond the books they grace and through whom he celebrates the variety, vitality and vivacity of human nature – and many of them seem to be with us here in the Cathedral today.

Apart from his most depraved creations, Dickens’ portraits are humorous, exaggerated, but never cruel. His descriptions are suffused with great warmth, for example the wonderful Mrs Nickleby:

“Kate, my dear”, said Mrs Nickleby, “I don’t know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this with the birds singing in every direction always puts me in mind of roast pig with sage and onion sauce and gravy”

On being questioned by her daughter why this should be so she continues:

“On the day five weeks after you were christened we had a roast, no that couldn’t have been a pig either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs – they must have been partridges – roast pig! I hardly think we could ever have had one now for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops... “

and so on!!

What immortalises Dickens’ great characters is not their greatness, but their ordinariness. His characters make mistakes, muddle through, have regrets, and hurt the people they love – just like we do, and it is in this ability to reflect back to us our own lives that the true power of Dickens emerges.

This finds expression in what many argue is his greatest novel, Great Expectations. In this magnificent, late work Dickens focuses not on the world of surfaces and appearances, nor even on the social injustices that inspired his earlier novels, but on the self – perhaps himself, but without doubt on you and me - his readers, in attempting to answer the question: how should we live our lives?

For me, Great Expectations like a Pilgrim’s Progress for our and all times, and, like you, have found that it speaks in different ways at different times in my life – it is a timeless work in all senses of the word.

What is remarkable, and what gives the novel its power, is the unflinching honesty of Pip as he confronts his own pride, selfishness and delusion, and how, through this honesty, finds the path to redemption. There can be few novels that are more difficult to read, for, reflected in Pip's frailties, we see our own, and few novels in which the abstract concept of redemption is so vividly drawn and exemplified.

As the train of events that will plunge him into debt, despair and self loathing begin, Pip himself addresses us directly:

“Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.”

We wince as Pip callously rejects the comfort, love and security of the forge for the rootless life of a gentleman in London, but at the same time recognize elements of the journeys we have made and the wrong turns taken. As Pip himself concedes

“How could I, a poor dazed village lad, avoid that wonderful inconsistency into which the best and wisest of men fall every day?”

It is ultimately through acts of selflessness and reconciliation – helping Herbert, rescuing Miss Havisham from the flames, staying with Magwitch to the end, and, crucially, mending his relationship with the faithful Joe and Biddy, that he regains his self respect and loses the sense of guilt that has plagued him throughout the novel.

There is of course a pun in the title that does not become apparent until the end of the novel – Pip's great expectations turn out not to be the wealth and trappings of a gentleman, but rather his responsibilities and duty to others – the expectations *upon* him, not those he harbours.

What Dickens shows with power and passion is that redemption comes through the simple recognition that meaning and purpose in our lives come not from a futile chase for worldly trappings but from developing our own self awareness, practising altruism and adopting caring attitudes to those around us.

Pip's life is presented to us as a journey, and, throughout Dickens' work, we find references to life as a journey or pilgrimage, as here in *Little Dorrit*:

“And thus ever, by day and night, under the sun and under the stars, journeying by land and journeying by sea, to meet and to act and react on one another, move we all restless travelers through the pilgrimage of life. “

What better companion to have at our side than Dickens himself and the rich panoply of characters he created to entertain us, instruct us and light the way for us as we make our own pilgrimage through life.