



17th May 2009
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiastes 9 vv. 9–16
Luke 10 vv. 38–42

The Opus of the Soul

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor, The Dean

Several years ago I was at a dinner and sat next to a man in his eighties -we'll call him John. Just before the starter arrived he lent across to me and said in quiet voice: *'I've had a miserable life, but I won't tell you about it'*. Well - not everyone, as we know, keeps their promises.

The man in question had in fact been pretty successful in his career, well off, had been able to enjoy reasonably expensive hobbies and was untouched by the tragic or premature loss of people he had loved dearly. If satisfaction or happiness could be judged on any rational tariff system one might devise, he should have struggled to veer out of the zone of 'occasional unhappiness'. But he clearly was, as he observed, miserable. John was miserable because he had achieved nothing in which we seemed to be able to take delight or pleasure in, nothing he could identify as a meaningful 'life's work' and much of his unhappiness focused around his choice of career and work as a solicitor. A path he had taken for which he still blamed to some degree his long dead father, and himself, for lacking courage to take a risk and follow his desire to be, if memory serves me correctly, a photographer - or maybe it was an artist - my memory is hazy, because his once fierce passion had been reduced to a single throwaway remark in the course of a three and a half hour dining experience.

Another 'John' I have known had a good deal more to reproach life for: Wonderful with children, he and his wife could not have kids a disappointment which over time led to them leading separate lives in different cities. Life deepened his disappointment and frustration: for he wanted and was accepted to be a priest in the Church of England but after the war simply couldn't get the money together to enter training. So instead he became a verger at a large civic church in an industrial town. A job which brought him into contact with everyone from the Mayor and Councilors to plenty of work with drunks, glue-heads, homeless people, the distressed and the psychotic. Devoted to the church but not unaware of its shortcomings, a charitable and shrewd observer of life, John exercised an extraordinary and far-reaching ministry, was deeply admired by those who knew him well and even in his seventies he could still handle quite dangerous people with a calm authority that eluded many others. I shall never forget visiting him in hospital a few years before he died to be asked by one of the staff, after the constant stream of visitors over several weeks (the most recent an Orthodox bishop), who enquired in hushed tones; *'I know he's important, but who is he?'*

The nature of law or verging is of course irrelevant, rather such simple vignettes remind us powerfully that the art of living a good life and the role of one's employment within that is a mysterious and complex business, it entails a curious alchemy; its creation has something akin to the production of a work of art in its transcendence of calculation or rational expectation: The raw material may be unlikely or unpromising, the circumstances difficult, yet beauty can still emerge in unexpected places and remain undeveloped where we might have every expectation of it. And our work, our employment can be an important component in shaping the sort of person we become, it can mould our soul, deepen our character and help to produce a



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richer and more complex person, if, as George Herbert puts it in the hymn we have already sung¹, we can find ourselves alongside he *'who sweeps the room as for thy sake'*.

The poem adapted to form that famous hymn, *The Elixir*, takes as its central metaphor subject a work, with which we are, not unsurprisingly, ill-acquainted: that of the alchemist amongst whose goals was the production of that *'famous stone which turneth all to gold'*. This year sees the anniversary of the death of one of the most famous of alchemists, Dr John Dee², a member of the College, advisor to Elizabeth I and both a scientist and an alchemist at the point at which the former was emerging and displacing the latter.

A curious blend of philosophy and practice, alchemy was practiced over a wide area (China, India and Europe) for a period in excess of 2000 years. Unlike science it sought both wisdom and immortality by changing not just the material world, most obviously through its search for the Philosopher's Stone, immortality or gold, but also, more interestingly, the practitioner him or herself: It was intended to transform the person who practiced it; intended to be a work of and for the soul. Whilst its practical aspects have generated many of the basics of modern inorganic chemistry - it is this other side I want to explore for a few moments in relation to what lies beneath the surface – within our working lives³.

¹ Teach me, my God and King NEH 456

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dee

³ This sermon draws on a book by Thomas Moore, *A Life at Work*, Piatkus, 2008

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The basic process of alchemy is well known: Alchemists employed a variety of different substances (liquids and solids, the everyday and the exotic, refined and rotten) and subjected this raw stuff, the *prima materia* to heat, of different intensities and durations, in the hope that it would be refined, purified, transformed. They noted the changes that took place in colour - blackening, whitening, reddening, yellowing and related these changes to transformations that might take place within themselves. For many it was the process, the Work itself which became entirely preoccupying.

One of the key insights of the alchemist's worldview - like that of the psychotherapist - is that we all have stuff to work with. For the alchemist that raw stuff looks pretty unpromising; unattractive; unformed; chaotic. Likewise if we have the courage to turn off the tape with the story we have running telling ourselves about ourselves and have a good hard look within what we see is pretty unformed: our emotions, desires, fears; our memories, the continuing influence of our childhood and our parents upon our values, attitudes and behaviours; the impact as Ecclesiastes puts it of *'time and chance'* upon our histories. In short we are what we have been: We carry with us our history, that which is known to others and that which is within. Despite the aspirations of some philosophers or social systems, this past cannot simply be dispensed with: IT IS; It isn't *'...a problem to be solved'*⁴ still yet blithely ignored or blindly fought, but rather it is our own personal mystery that needs to be worked with, to be actively contemplated. And rather like the current revelations of Parliamentarians, poking around in it isn't a very pretty process - painful memories, the experience of failure, dreams and promises that have gone unrealised, rejections that have wounded. None of this is easy, yet if we are to discern our path, our way in the world, all of these need to be placed in the open and contemplated, otherwise we will simply repeat the same patterns, the same stories, blame the same institutions and the same people (who are so clearly at fault) and feel the same frustrations throughout our lives.

The alchemist was equipped with a range of elegant vessels in which to place this raw stuff. Perhaps the most elegant vessel available for the cultivation of the soul, the most precious gift any one can give to another person is their undivided and active attention and the opportunity to tell their story with an open heart.

Perhaps it is this that lies behind our gospel account of Martha and Mary. Martha, running around concerned with so many matters and tasks is rebuked by Christ, because she lacks the *'one thing needful'*: attentive listening. Perhaps Mary is commended because she knows that she needs to attend to his words to sort out who she is, to attend to her inner life. Perhaps she is serving her Lord exactly because she is listening to his words; perhaps he is telling his-story, telling the story of how the Messiah will be taken in Jerusalem and die for the people, perhaps he speaks of apprehension and fear and impeding doom; her listening, her gift to him.

Telling our stories openly, completely, fully is one of the key ways in which we sift through the raw stuff of our lives - it is one of the ways in which our memories, emotions and hopes come to the surface, can be acknowledged, can precipitate out, be isolated, discerned – the good separated from the bad; the healthy from the dysfunctional. Telling stories about who we is but one way and there are of course many vessels for such a process - friendships, husband, wife, community, a dinner, a walk with someone, a diary – or indeed the various techniques of contemplation and silence and meditation which have been fostered in the religious traditions of both East and West.

⁴ Moore p 55



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The raw stuff; the vessel; and then finally; there is the heat: The passion, the drive, the urges we experience as human beings which bubble up from beneath, which despite our rational selves push us in certain directions, make us yearn for certain things, encourage us and challenge us to take risks. We often labour under the illusion that the rational life is the ideal. I suspect Carl Jung was right in his view that the self lay at the midpoint between the conscious and the reasonable life and the life of passion and the unconscious on the other⁵. If we wish to live productive authentic lives we need not just to acknowledge but also harness the transformative passions within.

The artist Eric Gill, a fierce critic of what he saw as the soulless work culture of the industrial age⁶ argued that in their life's work *'every man is called to be an artist'* for an artist is simply *'someone who makes things well'*. For us to make things well, to compose a fruitful, challenging and harmonious life, a work of real value and integrity we need the time for rumination and contemplation of the past; the time to pay attention to the fires within and the space for the work of dissolving, purifying, resolving.

And of course within all this there is that essential, the magic ingredient (if you will) identified by George Herbert, of which *'all may partake'*, the free enabling gift of the Artist, the Great Alchemist Himself, which helps us to have the confidence and courage for the task, to know that we are completely and unconditionally accepted just we are - the Golden touch of his transforming Grace.

⁵ Moore p 133

⁶ See *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism*, John Hughes, Blackwell, 2007 for a stimulating Christian evaluation of work.