

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE TREASURER AT THE ANNUAL
COMMEMORATION OF JONATHAN SWIFT, DEAN OF SAINT PATRICK'S
CATHEDRAL 1713-1745**

Jonathan Swift was mad. This is not an original assertion about the Dean of St. Patrick's. That he was mad was a very popular opinion about Swift throughout the nineteenth century. It is in the writings of such well-known figures as Macaulay and Thackeray, Sir Walter Scott, the author of such novels as *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*, made direct reference to Swift's "incipient mental disease". What was it about Swift that brought about this judgement? Why did so many people come to the conclusion that he was mad?

There is no single answer. In part it has to do with Swift's apparent willingness to change his mind on matters of significance. He was, for example, in the early part of his career aligned to the liberal political wing but later became what was effectively the Tory party spin-doctor. Similarly, he could at one moment describe himself as "a Teague, an Irishman, or what people please, and at another as "an obscure exile in a most obscure and enslaved country". A Whig and then a Tory, an Irishman and then an Englishman, such gargantuan leaps in perspective signal a restlessness, a refusal to be corralled, perhaps even an instability.

Then there was the matter of his health in general. There is no doubt that in 1742, at the age of seventy-five, Swift's friends protected him by legally declaring that he was *non compos mentis*. Three years later he was dead. Perhaps as early as 1691, when only twenty-four, Swift began to suffer nausea and dizzy spells. This physical affliction would remain with him for the whole of his life. In an effort to relieve his symptoms Swift took to horse riding: when writing about his time as Dean of St Patrick's he declared, "I ride every fair day a dozen miles, on a large Strand, or Turnpike roads". Whether all this gadding about did him much good, I'm not sure, but it is clear that Swift was well aware of his own suffering, and his need to find some means of alleviation.

To this we must add his choice of literary style, his way of telling a story. Swift chose not to use conventional novel writing techniques but instead to employ satire. Nowadays satire and irony lurk in every corner, and we are accustomed to reading authors who appear to say one thing but mean quite another. The danger is – and it is a real danger – that the author may be misunderstood. Queen Anne, having read the deeply satirical *A Tale of a Tub* decided that Swift was not an appropriate person to serve as an English bishop. On a separate occasion an Irish bishop who made his way through *Gulliver's Travels* pronounced that the "Book was full of improbable lies, and for his part, he hardly believed a word of it". Mistaking satire in this way is a significant blunder and one that did Swift no favours. It lost him Episcopal preferment within the Church and gave his critics the opening to pronounce that such writing could only be the result of a deranged mind.

On top of his physical condition, his lack of positional constancy, and his use of satire, we must finally add his apparent misanthropy, his alleged dislike of human beings. Not long after Swift's death, the Earl of Orrery wrote that Swift "has indulged a misanthropy that is intolerable. The representation which gives us of human nature, must terrify, and even debase the mind of the reader who views it". We need to remember that this was a time when many thinkers – the Earl of Shaftesbury amongst them – were arguing that

human beings were not so much sinful as benevolent creatures. It is no surprise then that Swift's darker portrayal of humanity, as seen for example in *Gulliver's Travels*, was greeted with raised eyebrows. And once again the conclusion drawn was simple: such mistrust of humanity had to be the product of some kind of madness.

So it was that a clear picture emerged: Jonathan Swift was mad.

Is it a fair picture? Hardly. It is true that Swift vacillated between allegiance to the Liberal and Tory parties, but that was more a matter of convenience than ideology. It is also true that his not finding preferment in England caused him a certain amount of disillusionment but he remained loyal and faithful to the people of Ireland. Indeed he could proudly refer to himself as "absolute Monarch in the Liberties, and King of the Mob". This was neither bombast nor self-delusion: there are records of him arriving back in Dublin following a trip to London, when he was greeted by boats adorned with streamers, the ringing of bells, bonfires on every street, and his grateful countrymen crying out 'Long live the Draper'. In these parts of Dublin he was well known as 'the Draper' because under that title he had fought the Irish cause against an ill considered English plan to introduce a new copper coinage in Ireland. And in his *Modest Proposal* he once again sided with the Irish as they endured the famine of 1741. He blamed not only the great frost that brought such horrible devastation but also the effects of English trade restrictions. To that witness we might add his founding of a school for the poor children of the liberties and, of course, his extraordinary legacy that resulted in the founding of St Patrick's Hospital. Swift in death, as I live, took on the cause of the oppressed; he was the supporter of the underdog, the champion of liberty.

As to his physical symptoms there are only two things to say. First, is it a fact that Swift grew old and with increasing age came decreasing mental faculty, not necessarily madness but a slow tedious deterioration. Second, the nausea and dizziness that he experienced is now known to have been the result of Meniere's disease. It is a disease of the inner ear; it affects hearing and balance and results in vertigo and precisely the kind of symptoms suffered by Swift. It is, mind you, a disease that was only discovered in the 1860's, more than one hundred years after the onset of Swift's symptoms. That might explain how some of Swift's critics arrived at their misdiagnosis.

In fact Ehrenpreis, writing his twentieth century biography, reassures us that Swift was "fundamentally rational and self-possessed". This is certainly true in relation to his writing style. Swift knew exactly what he was doing, when he chose to write satirically. He knew that he would leave himself open to misunderstanding. This is clearly seen in the opening to the final chapter of *Gulliver's Travels*, where he has Gulliver say:

Thus, gentle Reader, I have given thee a faithful History of my Travels for Sixteen Years, and above Seven Month; wherein I have not been so studious of Ornament as of Truth. I could perhaps like others have astonished thee with strange improbable Tales; but I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style; because my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee.

That paragraph alone assures us that Swift was in control of his material and his mind. *Gulliver's Travels* was exactly the opposite of what he here outlined: it was not a history; it was an amusement. But an amusement with a sting. Swift knew full well that satire might amuse but his intention was to use the cover of satire to prod, to poke, to ask the reader questions. And why? Because he wanted the reader to become the judge of his or

her own behaviour. For Swift satire is the means of bringing about self-judgement; and through self-judgement comes the possibility of change. Satire judges; satire changes. So for me, that Swift's satire and his understanding of humanity are inextricably linked. Certainly he held a view that was fast losing ground. In fact in less than a decade after Swift's death, writers of the strength and influence of Rousseau were teaching about the core goodness of humanity. But while he had breath, Swift argues to the contrary. He would have been much happier sitting down with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who argued in his *Leviathan* that human beings are naturally wicked. That Swift should have agreed with Hobbes is a matter of no surprise. Swift may well have been a champion of liberty but he was also an orthodox Christian, or at least what passed for an orthodox Christian in late seventeenth century terms. Anglican faith was laid out, he believed in the thirty-nine articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Creeds. And Christian truth, whatever else might be said of it, was sufficiently revealed through Scripture. Given these parameters, Swift will have felt his opinions on humanity, well supported. In the Prayer Book service we hear ourselves described as "miserable sinners" and are invited to "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness". Indeed in the Collect for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, as we pray for the spirit to think correctly we recognise "that we....cannot do any thing that is good without thee", without God. There is a real sense in the Christian tradition, from Augustine, writing in the fifth century, through to the early eighteenth century, that human beings are fallen. Swift used other language: he preferred to say that people were not so much rational animals as animals capable of reason; a capacity they exercised less ably and less often than they imagined. Although most people consider themselves rational, they actually have very little understanding of the world around them, the people they meet, or more importantly the God they claim to worship. We human beings, Swift suggests, need to learn humility, the kind of humility that recognises the need for God's guidance. It is true that Swift has a poor view of human nature, but given two world wars, a mosaic of contemporary conflict across our globe, hunger, poverty, and the unbridled greed that has led to our current economic crisis, do we still think he's mad?

There is another way to describe Swift: a rare genius. As you might imagine Swift had a view about geniuses. Writing – obviously not about himself – he once remarked: "When a true Genius appears in the World, you may know him by this infallible Sign; that the Dunces are all in Confederacy against him". Let us not be part of that confederacy. Instead let us ask what he wants from us. The answer to that question is chiselled in stone in this very Cathedral. Readers of his memorial are clearly instructed: Depart, wayfarer, and imitate if you can a man who to his utmost, strenuously championed liberty. We are encouraged to be champions of liberty.

Of course, our reading from Mark's gospel told us of one who is the genuine champion of liberty. We meet him among the tombs, where he meets a strange man. A man who had been strong enough to break the physical chains of his captors, but a man who could never manage to break free of his inner demons. Jesus saw him, and saw him as he really was. Jesus knew what it was to be accused of madness. Just remember how his own family had tried to control him saying, "He is out of his mind". He knew about false demons but he knew also about real demons; he knew how to lead this man back to his right mind. The healing caused consternation in the local community. 'Look at this chap who until recently was the bane of our lives. Look at him, sitting over there fully clothed

and in conversation.' They had witnessed the real champion of liberty bring this man up out of the tombs and restore him to new life. It is a great story. Actually, it's not. It is gospel.

For, just as satire might provoke judgement and change, gospel does so supremely. It grabs you the listener, and insists on your attention. Look where you are sitting today: among the tombs. We all live with our inner demons and we each of us wait for our own freedom. Of course let us champion freedom, as Swift demands but let us also recognise those small encounters of grace when we get a glimpse into life in all its fullness, when we are drawn a step closer to redemption. In such moments and with humility Swift beseeches us to show, we have only one more thing to do: to follow the same instructions Jesus gave to man: Go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for you.