

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 2, 2011

**“IT IS A GREAT ART TO DIE WELL”:
REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF
JEREMY TAYLOR (1613-1667)**

It is a peculiarity of this year’s calendar that Christmas falls on Sunday. By that same peculiarity the special days appointed for remembering several important Anglican Divines also fall on Sunday this time around. That is a happy circumstance that led us to reflect on Lancelot Andrewes last Sunday and E.B. Pusey the week before. A third such Divine is Jeremy Taylor, whose day fell on Sunday, August 14th, but on that day we were finishing up the Foundations of Faith series. It is fitting to remember him today and so complete a sort of mini-series lifting up three of the most important of a great number of churchmen who helped shape that rich and reasonable form of the Christian faith that we call Anglicanism, a *via media*, or middle way, “between Popery and Dissent” as some have put it, or Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as popularly conceived. I think that there are better ways to put it, but rather than belabor the point at present we have instead several real-life illustrations of the Anglican way in the life and teaching of Andrewes, Pusey and Taylor.

Jeremy Taylor was once a household name, held in the greatest esteem. Samuel Taylor Coleridge placed him in the great foursome of his time together with Shakespeare, Bacon and Milton. His epitaph named him “erudite theologian, renowned preacher and faithful pastor.” He was all three. He led an interesting life in a critical period in the Church of England, impacted by such church-shaking events as the infamous ‘Gunpowder Plot,’ which occurred before he was born, the English Civil War, and the martyrdom of King Charles I, which occurred when Taylor was in his thirties. It was thus a period of great, indeed violent, struggle with Roman Catholics on the one hand, and Puritans or Presbyterians, on the other. Taylor was imprisoned briefly and then retired for a while in Wales, where he served as chaplain to Lord Carbery at Golden Grove. That period of exile proved to be a time of great fruitfulness for him, for there he penned many of his most important works, chief among them that pair of devotional books upon which his later fame largely rests: *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* and *The Rule and Exercise of Holy*

Dying. They were often published together in one volume, and Florence may recall my joy a number of years ago at coming upon a lovely leather-bound copy in a used bookstore in Maine, one published exactly a hundred years before my birth. (You can take a guess as to when that was.)

Holy Dying is the better known and better written of the two books. It was composed especially for Lady Carbery, the wife of his patron, a deeply religious woman. In the course of its writing, Taylor lost both his wife and his patroness to death, and yet there is not a touch of morbidity in its pages. We noted last week that Bishop Andrewes prayed regularly, “A Christian close, without sin, without shame, and, should it please Thee, without pain, and a good answer at the dreadful and fearful judgment-seat of Jesus Christ our Lord, Vouchsafe O Lord.” That spirit was, if anything, even more dominant in Taylor, and his words even more beautiful. C.J. Stranks noted, “Taylor’s sentences lie like a handful of jewels, each one complete in its own beauty, neither borrowing nor lending to its neighbour. . . . In the first chapter of *Holy Dying* [he] reaches the height of his literary glory. He did few things as well and nothing better in his after days. The grandeur of his theme is matched by the exaltation of his language and the range and beauty of his imagery. To read it for the first time is like turning into a tropical valley; one is overwhelmed by hitherto unimagined luxuriance.”

It is, of course, not the beauty of the words, but their power for which they are noted. It was John Wesley’s reading of the book while at Oxford that led to the spiritual awakening that eventually resulted in the Methodist Movement, which is where I was first touched by its spirit. John Keble read it at the beginning of the Oxford Movement and wrote, “Surely that book is enough to convert any infidel, so gentle in heart, and so high in mind, so fervent in zeal, and so charitable in judgment, that I confess I do not know any other author . . . worthy to be likened to him. Spenser I think comes nearest to his spirit in all respects. Milton is like him in richness and depth, but in morality seems to me as far below him as pride is below humility.”

One might not be surprised by the fact that the book made an impact on John Wesley or John Keble, but it is surely notable that John Keats, as he lay dying of consumption in Rome seeking solace from the “malignant being” whom he thought had power over him, asked not for the Bible, which he did not fully trust, but Taylor. On Christmas Eve he said to his companion, Severn, “I feel the horrible want of some faith—some hope—something to rest on now—there

must be some book.” Several weeks later he asked Severn to find him a copy of Taylor. Searching all over Rome the doctor attending him finally found a volume of Taylor containing both *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, and his companion, Severn, read it to Keats every night until his end.

The Rule and Exercise for Holy Dying was not written primarily for the end of life, however. Already in the earlier book, *Holy Living*, Taylor had repeatedly attacked the idea that death-bed repentance was good enough for one who had deliberately and consistently led a Godless life. He wanted *Holy Dying* to be read by men and women in the prime of life. The Psalmist said, “Lord, teach us to number our days that we apply our hearts to wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). In the Dedicatory Preface to his book, Taylor wrote to his patron, “My lord, it is a great art to die well, and to be learnt by men in health, by them that can discourse and consider, by those whose understanding and acts of reason are not abated with fear or pains; . . . he that prepares not for death before his last sickness is like him that begins to study philosophy when he is going to dispute at the [university].”

Part of preparing for death is obviously to live our entire lives as we ought, obedient to the faith, in communion with Christ in his Church, and in reliance upon her sacraments. But it is also to have a Christian understanding of death. The understanding of death that prevailed in the late Middle ages and up to Taylor’s time was of “a great pale tyrant, an executioner, a headsman concealed behind a curtain. He was ‘the unsparing pursuivant with eagles’ wings’; he was even the grisly, cynical humorist, waiting to pounce on the king as he ascends his throne, or to strike down the beggar as he reels out of the tavern” (Gosse). Edmund Gosse writes that this notion “was cast out of court, and relegated to a place among things childish and outworn, by the *Holy Dying* of Jeremy Taylor, and never again could this conception of death, as a gymnastic skeleton with a dart springing from the tomb, be put forward without danger of awakening a smile of disgust.”

“When we die,” wrote Taylor, “we shall find the state of affairs wholly differing from all our opinions here.” He did not find it a fearful thing and said that he desired to die a “dry death.” By that he meant that his family and friends should not mourn him unduly. Oh, that did not mean necessarily a “dry funeral,” he said, and “some flowers sprinkled upon my grave would do well and comely, and a soft shower to turn those flowers into a springing memory or a fair

rehearsal.” This is akin to the words of St. Paul, who said, “We weep, but not as those who have no hope.” “What is to be faulted in this particular,” Taylor continues, “is when the grief is immoderate and unreasonable.”

Just take away the pomps of death, he writes, the disguises, the acting, and all that accompanies so many funeral services, “then to die is easy It is the same harmless thing that a poor shepherd suffered yesterday, or a maid-servant today. And at the same time in which you die, in that very night a thousand creatures die with you, some wise men, and many fools; and the wisdom of the first will not quit him, and the folly of the latter does not make him unable to die.” Death is a part of life, he implies, and we need a large perspective. “Death,” he wrote, “is nothing but a middle point between two lives.”

Again, he says, death is like sleep. With each setting sun, a day is gone, not to be relived, never to be retrieved. It is a small dying. Do we not teach children to pray confidently, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take”? Each night a death; each morning a resurrection. Taylor wrote, “And what is sleeping and waking, but living and dying? And what is spring and autumn, youth and old age, morning and evening, but real images of life and death, and really the same in many considerable effects and changes? . . . That life is not best which is longest: and when they are descended into the grave, it shall not be inquired how long they have lived, but how well.” (“Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”) We should prepare our hearts for death, and live our lives in the light of its certainty, but we should not fear it. “When God sends His angel to us with the scroll of death,” said Taylor, “let us look on it as an act of mercy . . . and lay our heads down softly and go to sleep without wrangling like babies and froward children.” As Job said, “The Lord giveth; the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

We have not said everything that ought to be said concerning a Christian understanding of death. We have not even said everything that Jeremy Taylor had to say. But I hope that we have said enough to give us a notion of his advice. And I trust we have said enough to give us something to ponder. Edmund Gosse noted,

Of all the writings of Jeremy Taylor, the *Holy Dying* achieved the most direct and durable popularity. Twenty authorized editions of it appeared before the close of

the seventeenth century. It produced an instant effect in humanizing the piety of English readers, which controversy had bitterly exacerbated. Taylor's attitude, his philosophy of action, was holy, but it was neither morose, fanatical, nor uncharitable. It was inspired by a gentle sobriety, a brooding tenderness and pity. On some points it displayed an extraordinary liberality, and in its melancholy it was marvelously wholesome. The curious morbidity of the age found no support in Taylor's healthy sweetness.

Like Andrewes and Pusey, Jeremy Taylor brought a moderating and conciliatory spirit to the bitterly exacerbated controversies of his age. There is time here only for one quotation from his first work, *The Liberty of Prophesying*, which was about toleration. He wrote,

For if it be evinced that one heaven shall hold men of several opinions, if the unity of faith be not destroyed by that which men call differing religions [he was referring to Roman Catholic and Presbyterian positions], and if an unity of charity be the duty of us all, even towards such persons that are not persuaded of every proposition we believe, then I would fain know to what purpose are all those stirs of great noises in Christendom. . . . All those mischiefs proceed not from this, that all men are not of one mind, for that is neither necessary nor possible; but that every opinion is made an article of faith, every article is a ground of a quarrel, every quarrel makes a faction, every factions is zealous, and all zeal pretends for God, and whatsoever is for God cannot be too much: we by this time are come to a pass, we think that we love not God except that we hate our brother, and we have not the virtue of religion [Christianity] unless we persecute all [understandings thereof] but our own.

Last week we spoke of Lancelot Andrewes as a man of prayer. So was Jeremy Taylor, and I close with one of his. He prayed to God, "O relieve my spirit with thy graciousness, take from me all tediousness of spirit, and give me a laboriousness that will not be tired, a hope that shall never fail, a desire for holiness, not to be satisfied till it possesses a charity that will always increase." St. Paul wrote, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity."