

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

OCTOBER 2nd 2002

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Choir

Monday's Child

Rutter

The human condition is the journey from birth to death, from infancy to old age; the knowledge, as soon as we can know it, that we are born to die; that as Shakespeare put it in Macbeth;-

“Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.” (5:5)

In between birth and death, the 'hour upon the stage' can be full of incident, rich in experience, fun and laughter, laced with sorrow, but also a true vale of soul-making. Shakespeare again described it in terms of the seven ages of man:-

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.

As You Like It 2:7

Choir

The Infant King

Basque Carol arr Willcocks

Shakespeare begins with the infant, who grows into the school-boy 'creeping like snail unwillingly to school'. Isaac Watts wrote about the laziness of youth and the temptations to while away the time unprofitably, in his poem entitled *The Sluggard*:-

'Tis the voice of the sluggard; I hear him complain,
 'You have waked me too soon: I must slumber again.'
 As the door on its hinges, so he on his bed,
 Turns his sides, and his shoulders, and his heavy head.

'A little more sleep, and a little more slumber'-
 Thus he wastes half his days, and his hours without number;
 And when he gets up, he sits folding his hands,
 Or walks about saunt'ring, or trifling he stands.

I passed by his garden, and saw the wild brier,
 The thorn and the thistle grow broader and higher.
 The clothes that hang on him are turning to rags;
 And his money still wastes till he starves or he begs.

I made him a visit, still hoping to find
 He had took better care for improving his mind.
 He told me his dreams, talked of eating and drinking,
 But he scarce reads his Bible, and never loves thinking.

Said I then to my heart: 'Here's a lesson for me;
 That man's but a picture of what I might be;
 But thanks to my friends for their care in my breeding,
 Who taught me betimes to love working and reading.'

The Sluggard; Isaac Watts

Youth gives way to the responsibilities of adult life, and that early sense of freedom and wonder, and the myriad possibilities of life, becomes blunted. We lose our innocence as we gain maturity, and many poets and writers have reflected on this poignant fact of human experience: Here Wordsworth, in lines from his *Ode; Intimations of Immortality*:-

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
 Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
 Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar;
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing boy,
 But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,

He sees it in his joy;
 The youth, who daily farther from the east
 Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
 And by the vision splendid
 Is on his way attended;
 At length the man perceives it die away,
 And fade into the light of common day.

Wordsworth: Intimations of Immortality

Choir

Set me as a Seal

Walton

Even when the schoolboy becomes the lover, he can find it to be a bitter-sweet experience, for as W.H. Auden memorably reminds us, when we love we make ourselves vulnerable, give away something of ourselves to someone else. So when that bond is broken by death, something of us dies too, and the world, for a while, becomes an alien place;

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
 Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
 Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
 Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
 Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
 Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
 Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
 My working week and my Sunday rest,
 My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
 I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
 Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
 Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
 For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W.H. Auden; Twelve Songs (9)

And so we move through the passions of love to the wisdom of middle age, with its material success and prosperity, and beyond that to the privations of old age when infirmity of body and mind loom large and constrict our world once again into the physical limitations of early childhood. Are we to give in and meekly surrender to this 'last scene of all'? Dylan Thomas says a resounding no!

Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Finally some lines on a clock in Chester Cathedral. They make a fitting conclusion to our theme of the human condition, interpreted as Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man:-

When as a child, I laughed and wept,
Time crept.
When as a youth, I dreamt and talked,
Time walked.
When I became a full grown man,
Time ran.
When older still I daily grew
Time flew.
Soon I shall find on travelling on –
Time gone.
O Christ, wilt Thou have saved me then?
Amen

Choir

By and By

Negro Spiritual arr. Tippett