

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

Scottish Sunday
February 9, 2003

“WHAT HOLY WILLIE’S PRAYER MIGHT SAY TO YOU AND ME...”

**TEXT: “...pray to your Father who is in secret; and your
Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Mathew 6:6**

If St. Andrew were not the patron saint of Scotland, Robert Burns would have to be. A patron saint takes care of his people. America surely needs a patron saint to take care of us right now. Andrew, of course, has priority in terms of years. They say some of his relics were delivered to the town which bears his name on the east coast of Fife by St. Regulus sometime in the Second Century A.D. Burns dates from the time of the American Revolution.

It would seem peculiar to those who knew him to suggest that Robert Burns was any kind of saint. I mean he did an awful lot of pawky things, and sometimes more than those. He had a penchant for the unusual. Back at the time of the Revolution, when the whole world was looking toward new and modern things, Robert Burns was writing poetry and strolling with the ladies and planning to emigrate to Jamaica. Once they asked him if he would volunteer to serve in the British Army to fight against the rebellious Colonials in America. He said, “No, thank you. I’d rather be a poet and a lover.”

Unlike the formal, stuffy men who were writing high-fallutin’ things, Robbie wrote about the common folk, in a language they could understand. He wrote songs for them to sing, and little epitaphs to make them smile. He celebrated simple folk and the natural pleasures of this transitory life: the open fields, the hills of Coupar, the banks and braes of Bonnie Doon. He liked the ladies. He wrote about Highland

Mary, Jeanie Armour and Pretty Peg. He caught the simple cotter, the honest tenant farmer at work and at home. He immortalized The Devon River, Jessie’s Illness, Rosie May, Scots Wha Hae, Lord Gregory, Rough Roads, Comin’ Through the Rye, Fair Eliza, Auld Lang Syne – all belong to Burns.

He didn’t have much success: he died in relative ignominy, as poor as the day when he was born. He survived only to age thirty-seven, never in good health, following a father who worked and worried himself to an early death to feed and keep his family. When Burns wrote that man was made to mourn he knew what he was talking about.

But, he was a good man, even if he did not follow all the rules and rubrics of the church. He attended worship, but he didn’t have much time for all the theological harangues of the Calvinistic way. He was disappointed with the rash hypocrisy of the Christian people who were so unloving in the daily round.

Back in that day, Church Sessions brought sinners before them and inquired into their behavior with intimate detail, then to spread the news abroad. When you say your prayers tonight – that’s one more thing to be grateful for. Burns and his lady friends, on more than one occasion, were preached at as they sat up in front of the church on the cuddy stool. He was a sinner, but could not stand hypocrisy, and that

brings us to "Holy Willie's Prayer", one of Burns's best-known poems.

The Willie in the prayer was William Fisher, born in Ayrshire in 1737, twenty years older than Burns. Of a fine family, Fisher in time became an Elder in the church of Mauchline, and with excessive devotion he became a self-appointed surveyor of the people of the parish. Willie frequently informed the minister of the various misdeeds of the townspeople, an ecclesiastical snitch! I assign that chore to each of you this week; let me know what the brothers and sisters are doing on the daily round...(ha, ha.)

Oddly, Burns never printed "Holy Willie's Prayer" himself. Odd that the greatest satirical piece he ever wrote against the bigotry of the Scottish Church was printed anonymously. Willie had informed on Gavin Hamilton, whose main sin was that he played cards on Sunday, and he occasionally missed church for a golf game on Sunday. You golfers beware!

Armed with informer Willie's words, the Session of his parish condemned Hamilton, who in turn appealed to the Presbytery of Ayr which upheld Hamilton and ruled against the Mauchline Church. Burns, quite amused by it all, imagines a prayer that William Fisher might have prayed that night, angry with the reversal.

The name "Holy Willie" defines his pious character as the poem proceeds. It could be Holier-Than-Thou. Burns unveils the kind of hypocrisy involved in the doctrine of predestination. Willie is forced to be a hypocrite by what he has been told Presbyterians had long believed: if you were among the elect, your salvation was assured; if you were not you were damned to hell.

Holy Willie's Prayer opens with a deliberate parody on the Psalms. William feigns some humility, confessing his own sins, hoping he will be excused. He goes on in the prayer to rage against those who have made him a laughing

stock. And then having honored God, "Holy Willie rests content to give "a' the glory to the Lord."

"Lord, hear my earnest cry and pray'r
Against that Presbyt'ry of Ayr!
Thy strong right hand, Lord, mak it bare
Upo' their heads!
Lord, visit them, an' dinna spare,
For their misdeeds!

But, Lord, remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace an' gear may shine
Excell'd by nane;
And a' the glory shall be Thine –
Amen, Amen!"

We should note that a year later Holy Willie was brought before the Kirk Session for drunkenness and also for embezzling money from the offering trays. By the way, get this, Burns also wrote Willie's Epitaph.

Burns often exposed hypocrisy: in another poem, "The Twa Herds", Burns ridiculed the wrangling of two Presbyterian clergymen who were disputing over parish boundaries: Both of them wanted the wealthy house which lay on the border between the two. "Address to the Devil" seems to say that the company of the devil might be better than the company of the chosen. One epitaph, reads:

"Here lies Boghead among the dead
In hopes to get salvation;
But if such as he in Heav'n may be,
Then welcome – hail! Damnation."

In "The Holy Fair" Burns denounced the superstitious teachings of the church. The whole poem pokes fun at the competition between the din of the pulpit and the sound of the people snoring in the pews. (Wake up folks!)

We could go on, but our topic this morning on Scottish Sunday is "What Holy Willie's Prayer

Might Say to You and Me.” I offer three brief observations:

1. The first thing Holy Willie’s Prayer says to you and me is that we need to be careful what we believe, for action follows belief even when it happens unconsciously. Holy Willie believed that he was chosen for Heaven, and others were predestined to Hell. Feeling that, there was no way on earth he could treat other people as equals. Calvin himself never pretended to know who the chosen were, but Holy Willie did. He thought he was superior to others, just by being Holy Willie.

There is also a lingering danger when we say we believe that God has chosen us in Christ. Something sanctimonious and egotistical can creep into the heart of the faith. We sit in judgment on others. It is not what you say; it is what you do which ultimately matters. For each of us will be judged in accordance with what has been done in our days on the earth. It has to matter what we do, no matter that we can never do enough to please the Lord or to earn his salvation, but as it says in the book of James: “Faith without works is dead!” Martin Marty said not long ago that ministers should stop reminding Christians that they cannot win salvation by good works; he said “nobody is trying anymore.”

The gist of Holy Willie’s Prayer is that Willie became a sanctimonious ogre because of his faith. Take an example or two... Suppose you believe what our nation teaches, that all men and women are created equal. What would then happen with the inequalities of opportunity in the land? We would act to eliminate poverty; we would work tirelessly for prison reform; we would visit the aged, care for the poor and hungry, etc. We would strive to see that every child of every race and religion would have an equal chance. We would judge each other less, and work more to support the business and political and social community which espoused and practiced what we preach.

I know a lot of Holy Willies (and Holy Wilhemenas) who take and keep and enjoy the blessings of this marvelous American way of life, who thank the Lord of earth and Heaven for how grand and good and grandiose He has been with them, and give no thought whatever for what it took to bring it all about, and what it will take by way of personal sacrifice to keep freedom and brotherhood and peace alive. And the words of Martin Luther King ring on and on and on...“Whatever happened to the Dream?!” Christianity is what happens when the talking stops...

That, my friend, was the ultimate purpose which lay behind the Sixteenth Century Reformation. That is what Luther, Knox and Calvin were out to do. That was the ultimate controversy which brought on the American Revolution and caused the Civil War. And it is the original intention of the Gospel, the capsule summary at its fundamental best, to take the Good News of God’s love beyond the privileged few- whoever, they might be – and share it with all the people of the earth. Arnold Toynbee said that one day, down the coming centuries, we would be remembered, not for our power, not for our comforts, not even for our knowledge. “We will be remembered as the first civilization which cared about others and shared its goodness with them.” If not, we might not be remembered at all.

I am optimistic for the future. But we need to work the harder meanwhile to see that it all comes true. God so loved the world, and everyone upon it, that he sent his only Son. It matters what we believe...

2. The second thing that Holy Willie’s Prayer says to you and me follows naturally, an echo Jesus which repeats on the essential parts we play. Other sins are potent in the range and reach of their impact. But the failure to see the

part we play in walking by on the other side, in refusing to become involved...Pride prevents us from experiencing the contact and the treasures of other people's lives. It pretends that we are innocent from wrongdoing in the problems of the world.

The problem always begins and ends with someone else. That was what Jesus said about the Pharisees. That was the problem of the publican who prayed, "Thank you Lord that I am not as other people." That was the problem of the older brother when the younger son came home. That is the problem Burns was noting: others in Mauchline parish had committed sins, but Holy Willie was railing against the speck in another's eye, when a log was in his own. Burns made us laugh about it, but be careful, for we are laughing at ourselves.

Remember the lady in church, seated in front of Burns, so fine and prim and proper, so proud and pleased with her silk and lace and lovely bonnet, sure that Heaven's grace would shine and smile on such perfection. Burns noted that a louse (a creepin' ferlie) was crawling up round her collar, the common louse "who seldom dined on such a fancy place." And she, not realizing it, continued to project her grandiloquent airs. Burns said in his peculiar mixture of laughter and sadness:

**"O would some power the giftie give us
To see ourselves as others see us...
It would from many a blunder free us..."**

Proper people of the day did not like Robert Burns. He poked fun at their pretensions. Willie's worst fear was that the common folk were laughing at him. There were myriads of other sins – but the sin of pride, of pretending to be perfect, is the worst sin of all.

We each and all live by God's grace or we do not live. Each new day is a brand new gift. Not one of us is perfect. All have sinned and fall short of

the glory of God. We live by forgiveness, never by our fortune; not by our feigned excellence, but by our fallen nature now restored. And we live by the forgiveness of others who allow us to start out anew.

3. The last thing that Holy Willie's Prayer might say to you and me, is that Christian love is the first and final test of anything. They were concerned with petty factions and disputes and power. Burns was concerned with the broad sweep of what it means to be a child of God. Our world today is more than ever in need of that initial belief that truth is stronger than error and that love is stronger than hate, that goodness will prevail, and in the end, it brings its own reward. That heaven is found by a variety of roads and people. We need to do what is right, then live with the consequences. Burns had a favorite verse of Scripture in Revelation 7: "They shall hunger no more, it says, neither shall they thirst, neither the sun nor the scorching heat will strike them. The Lord will guide them to the springs of living water and wipe away the tears from every eye"...Gentle, tame, no doubt unrealistic...But then if the Lord has a design and plan for his world; if the Lord God Almighty is for us, who can be against us, who that matters anyway.

Under the name of the statue of John Knox at the Reformation Monument in the city of Geneva it reads:

"un home aven Dieu, est toujours dans la majorite" (One man with God is always in the majority)

We dare not err on the side of making Jesus too sentimental. He was not. Neither should we say he simply said we should love everybody. He said the first thing we need to do is get our relationship with God in order; repent, not

because it is good strategy or because it will make you feel better, but because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We are called upon to repent not to relax.

The Sermon on the Mount echoes what we have said about pride. Beware of practicing your piety before men. Beware of hypocrisy. They loved to stand in the synagogues and on the street corners doing their good deeds so they could be seen by men.

Who did Christ hate most – if hate could be the proper word? What ultimately caused his ire to rise and the banner of his indignation to unfurl? You know the answer. It was the hypocrite, the one pretending to be good, the one who said one thing and did another, the one with holy pretense, the one who practiced little rules and played little games. He said it time and time again: I'll take an open sinner any day before a half-hearted friend. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...Pride is the worst sin of all.

Love is the final test of all. We must become as little children. We must turn over not so much a new leaf, as a new personality, turn it away from self-glorification. In the New Testament, to love is to will God's peace and goodness to people of all ages and races and sexes and nationalities, to seek the common bond which binds us together on this whirling planet earth; and all that we do in churches or in business or anywhere else must be weighed on those royal scales alone. Love does not mean moderation. It requires that we give to the furthest boundary of our being and allow others to walk on us in the hope that we can then become a bridge to something new.

The life of Burns was one sad if noble story after another of how he threw his life and time and money away into the lives of others all around him, of how others used and abused him as he wiped away the tears from every eye he say –

helping the poor to be rich in spirit and the rich to be poor in their need of Christ's forgiving love.

And, the words of Jesus Christ still echo on and on and on...Some of you will say, "Lord, did we not believe in Thee? (Matthew 25) Did we not know the requirements of the Scriptures?" He said, "Enough; depart from me." And to others he said, "Enter...well done..." They said, "Why? We are simple, humble, struggling people who strive to be better than we are." He said, "Hush, and enter." They said, "Why?" He said, "If you helped one of the least of these my brethren, you have given your help to me." For now and forevermore. Amen.

February 9, 2003
© Copyright, Dr. Richard M. Cromie
Palm Beach, Florida