

THE PROBLEM OF WOBBLY SPELLING

You will remember no doubt that there is an on-going issue in the stories of Winnie-the-Pooh . It is, if I may use the expression, spelt out clearly in the incident of Eeyore's birthday. Pooh decides to give his friend a pot of honey - what else? But as so often happens in these stories, somehow the honey finds itself in Pooh rather than in the pot. So he has the brilliant idea of washing the pot and giving him that instead - a Useful Pot to Keep Things In. He meets Owl, and asks if he would write Happy Birthday on it. The reason for this request I will quote in full. He needs help, he says,

because my spelling is Wobbly. It's good spelling, but it Wobbles, and the letters get in the wrong places.

This is at the heart of the great issue of communicating difficult things. For Pooh, writing Happy Birthday is a tremendous problem. He thinks Happy Birthday and he can say Happy Birthday, but somehow when it gets put down in black and white, it doesn't seem to work - it wobbles.

That is another issue for Good Friday, and has been for the whole of Christian history. We can think 'Jesus died for us', and we can say 'Jesus died for us', but when we try to make it concrete, and put it down in black and white, as it were, then all sorts of wobblinesses emerge. Let me risk boring you with some of the main theories of atonement which have run through Christian history. There has been the idea of the 're-run', if I can popularise a Latin expression like that. Adam disobeyed, the second Adam obeyed. In doing so the things that had resulted from the first Adam - death, sin and evil are defeated. Athanasius, whose name we know from the name of the Creed if nothing else, talked of the death of Christ paying a debt to meet the just claims of God's law. Origen talked of a sacrifice propitiating the Father. This concept of a ransom being paid finds its way in many of the hymns we sing. But it raises enormous questions - to whom was the ransom paid, and what happened then? Was it paid to the Devil, or to God? I think we are heavily into Wobbly Spelling when we talk in this language - but we can't avoid it, because it is rooted in some Biblical language as well.

The Middle Ages majored on theories of merit and satisfaction - ideas often associated with St. Anselm. This is really a commercial image - Christ owed no debt for sin, because he was sinless. So in dying, he stored up an infinite source of excess merit, which was available to be tapped by others who needed it - 'through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord' - again an expression which has familiar from prayers we all know. Others followed on from that to a theory of Substitution - that Jesus died 'instead of us'. He bore the punishment due to us. He was the replacement for me. Again, an idea we are familiar with from hymns. But there are enormous questions about the morality of that way of looking at it - God inflicting suffering on his Son in order to get round the problem of men's sinfulness. Wobbly Spelling again.

There are so many ways in which what happened on this Good Friday has been perceived. What we have mentioned so far are what might be described as ‘objective’ ways of describing the atonement. Peter Abelard, on the other hand had a more subjective approach - the death of Jesus is the ultimate demonstration and declaration of the eternal love of God for mankind. I could take far more of your time and patience than is fair to put forward and evaluate all the many ways in which people have tried to pin down in words what Good Friday achieved. It would not be unfair to say that when you look at them, they all display distinct evidence of Wobbly Spelling.

So let me return to the story - Owl, having been asked to write the Birthday greeting first of all asks anxiously whether Pooh can read. It is only when he is sure that Pooh *can't* that he proceeds to write. As you probably know what he writes is

HIPY PAPY BTHUTHDHTH THUTHDA BTHUTHUDY

Pooh is very impressed by how much pencil it has taken to write ‘Happy Birthday’. Realising that he may be under suspicion, Owl explains that really he is writing ‘A very happy Birthday with love from Pooh’ And with this Pooh is happy and satisfied.

Owl is wrong, but he has got the general idea - we can see what he is driving at, even if not a single word is correct. It bears a real relationship to what he is trying to say, but is totally incorrect. And maybe that is the way we have to live with trying to pin down the truth of Good Friday. When people have spelt it clearly, it is wrong. We have to accept it is Wobbly Spelling, but we can get the general gist. But we would be on dangerous ground to build too much on Wobbly spelling- which is of course what some have done, and continue to do. I am simply putting up a health warning - but we can still learn much from the great minds who have found the Good Friday produces Wobbly spelling. As it says in the story of Rabbit’s busy day

..he respects Owl, because you can’t help respecting anybody who can spell TUESDAY, even if he doesn’t spell it right; but spelling isn’t everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn’t count.

Good Friday is one of those days.

There is a good example of this issue of how people can build whole edifices of dubious truth on Wobbly Spelling in the beginning of the story of the hunt for the Woozle. Next to Piglet’s house is a board which says TRESPASSERS W. Christopher Robin asks Piglet what is meant:

he said it was his grandfather’s name, and had been in the family for a long time.

Christopher Robin said you couldn’t be called Trespassers W, and Piglet said yes you could, because his grandfather was, and it was short for Trespassers Will, which was short for

Trespassers William. And his grandfather had two names in case he lost one - Trespassers after an uncle, and William after Trespassers

An edifice built on an insecure foundation, to say the least. But the church has not been without that. We happily have sung for hundreds of years in the Te Deum 'Make us to be numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting', without realising for a moment that some inept scribe at some point in times long past misread the Latin word munerari 'to be rewarded' as numerari 'to be numbered'. It makes sense, but it is quite wrong. That isn't of real importance. We recognise the extreme versions of this problem - building on a wrong idea. We call them heresies. But there is an extent to which we are all guilty of it. We make the facts up to fit what suits us - but hopefully only in minor ways. It says of Owl's spelling that..

wise though he was in many ways, able to read and write and spell his own name WOL, yet somehow it went all to pieces over delicate words like MEASLES and BUTTEREDTOAST.

Our theological spelling easily goes to pieces over the events of Good Friday. But as with so many of the notices found in Winnie the Pooh -

PLES RING IF A RNSER IS REQIRD

GON OUT BACKSON BISOY BACKSON

- we get the idea, and communication happens. Before the mystery of the Cross, we offer our Wobbly spelling, and pray that its message is getting across, in however rough and ready a way.