

# **GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH**

SERVICE ON SUNDAY 1st February 2009

## **Prelude, Light Chalice and Opening words**

A few days before last Christmas in Borders bookshop, where I buy all my Christmas presents, I picked up a book from one of the crowded tables and stood reading it – as you do. It was called “The Wee Book of Calvinism”. Soon I burst out laughing, then I was chuckling and then every now and again I would laugh out loud again. As I stood there the little pile of copies of that book in front of me disappeared in the Christmas rush – like snow aff a dyke, as we would say in the Lallans, maybe in the Doric too. A great way to sell a book.

This is not really the appropriate and respectful way to begin a service with the theme of Calvin and Calvinism.

I can think of no better way to explore Scottish Calvinism than through a close examination of Robert Burns’ magnificent religious satire, his poem Holy Willie’s Prayer. As religious satire I know of nothing to match it in any language, but you may tell me better. I have never taught English literature or, alas less likely, Scottish Literature but I intend, first, to take you through the whole poem (and I recognise that at this stage most Americans, Irish, Welsh, English and other barbarians will probably understand little – and I have to say there are a shameful lot of Scots who will have many of the same difficulties). Then I will return to it piece by piece to show how it illuminates the worst of Scottish Calvinism – it was, after all satire. Finally I will look briefly at the life and teachings of John Calvin himself, one of Europe’s (and therefore America’s) mighty minds who shaped all our lives, Church of England included.

## **Robert Burns – Holy Willie’s Prayer**

**O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,  
Wha, as it pleases best thysel',  
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,  
A' for thy glory,  
And no for ony guid or ill  
They've done afore thee !**

I bless and praise thy matchless might,  
Whan thousands thou hast left in night,  
That I am here afore thy sight,  
For gifts an' grace  
A burnin' an' a shinin' light,  
To a' this place.

What was I, or my generation,  
That I should get sic exaltation?  
I, wha deserve most just damnation,  
For broken laws,  
Sax thousand years 'fore my creation  
Thro' Adam's cause.

When frae my mither's womb I fell,  
Thou might hae plunged me in hell,  
To gnash my gums, to weep and wail,  
In burnin' lakes,  
Where damned devils roar and yell,  
Chain'd to their stakes ;

Yet I am here a chosen sample,  
To show thy grace is great and ample ;  
I'm here a pillar in thy temple,  
Strong as a rock,  
A guide, a buckler, an example  
To a' thy flock.

O Lord, thou kens what zeal I bear,  
When drinkers drink, and swearers swear,  
And singin' there and dancin' here,  
Wi' great an' sma' :  
For I am keepit by thy fear  
Free frae them a'.

But yet, O Lord ! Confess I must  
At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshy lust ;  
An' sometimes too, in worldly trust,  
Vile self gets in;  
But thou remembers we are dust,

Defil'd in sin.

O Lord ! yestreen, thou kens, wi' Meg-  
Thy pardon I sincerely beg;  
O I may't ne'er be a livin' plague  
To my dishonour,  
An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg  
Again upon her.

Besides I farther maun allow,  
Wi' Lizzie's lass, three times I trow  
But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,

When I cam near her,  
Or else thou kens thy servant true  
Wad never steer her.

May be thou lets this fleshly thorn  
Beset thy servant e'en and morn  
Lest he owre high and proud should turn,

That he's sae gifted ;  
If sae, thy hand maun e'en be, borne,  
Until thou lift it.

Lord, bless thy chosen in this place,  
For here thou hast a chosen race ;  
But God confound their stubborn face,  
And blast their name,  
Wha bring thy elders to disgrace  
An' public shame.

Lord, mind Gawn Hamilton's deserts,  
He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes,  
Yet has sae mony takin' arts  
Wi' grit an' sma',  
Frae God's ain priest the people's hearts  
He steals awa'.

An' when we chasten'd him therefor,

Thou kens how he bred sic a splore  
As set the world in a roar  
O' laughin' at us;  
Curse thou his basket and his store,  
Kail and potatoes.

Lord, hear my earnest cry an' pray'r,  
Against that presbyt'ry o' Ayr ;  
Thy strong right hand, Lord, make it bare  
Upo' their heads ;  
Lord, weigh it down, and dinna spare,  
For their misdeeds.

O Lord my God, that glib-tongu'd Aiken,  
My very heart and soul are quakin',  
To think how we stood sweatin', shakin',  
An' piss'd wi' dread,  
While he, wi' hingin' lips and snakin',  
Held up his head.

Lord, in the day of vengeance try him;  
Lord, visit them wha did employ him,  
And pass not in thy mercy by them,  
Nor hear their pray'r :  
But, for thy people's sake, destroy them,  
And dinna spare.

But, Lord, remember me and mine  
Wi' mercies temp'ral and divine,  
That I for gear and grace may shine  
Excell'd by nane,  
And a' the glory shall be thine,  
Amen, Amen !

**But let us go back to the beginning and see what we can learn from Holy Willie's Prayer about Scottish Calvinism.**

O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,  
Wha, as it pleases best thysel',  
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,  
A' for thy glory,  
And no for ony guid or ill  
They've done afore thee !

**We are listening here, in examining Calvinistic doctrine, to an age which was in transition from a medieval world in which life after death was just assumed to be a fact. And the nature of that life after death was universally believed to be an eternity in which those who conformed to a psychologically oppressive system driven as much by guilt, fear and shame as by any remotest concept of love, would enjoy unending bliss (usually vaguely specified) and those who did not conform would suffer eternal torture (usually very vividly specified). That age was in slow transition towards the Enlightenment which brought the final claim for freedom of thought and action but which only really established itself some three hundred years later.**

**So, a Calvinist God is addressed:**

O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,  
Wha, as it pleases best thysel',  
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,

The teachings of Jean Calvin were, of course, filtered through John Knox, especially to us, and then corrupted by the hordes of ministers (the parallel to the Mullahs of the Islamic religious communities) but there is no doubting that for John Calvin, the deity was supreme, omnipresent and, especially, it penetrated all of life. The parallel with what has often been described as 'the white hot monotheism' of Islam, and especially with the teachings of the Ayatollahs of Iran is hard to escape.

For both Calvin and Mohammed the deity was massive, omnipresent and omnipotent. God is seen as at work in all realms of existence, including the spiritual, physical and intellectual realms whether sacred or secular, public or private, on earth or in heaven. Both Mohammed and Calvin established political powers on earth which were dominated by the religious elite – what we call theocracies. Both set up governmental regimes which were dedicated, with the best of intentions, to perfecting the morals of their citizens. For both, the regime of God or Allah penetrated all of life. There was little distinction between the sacred and the secular. Both regimes set up moral and religious courts with a spy system and a religious police which interfered with the slightest details of their subject's lives. In eighteenth century Scotland the system was run by the court of the local Kirk Session, the elders of the church backed by the minister. The spies and informers reported on the sins and failings of every cluster of cottages, every farm settlement and every back street of the parish. When the files of the East

**German secret police, the STAZI, were opened after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we found that thousands of bored spies had recorded what thousands of their victims had had for breakfast. I used to tell my friends from Eastern Europe labouring under the secret police and the East German Stasi, that we, in Scotland had lived under and had survived an equally penetrative police state a couple of centuries earlier. Burns appeared many times before the local presbytery courts. We see some extremes of this kind of penetration of a massive theocracy into every detail of life in the little Green Book of the Ayatollahs of the Iranian revolution. There, there are at least fifteen injunctions on urinating and defecating. It is especially important neither to face Mecca nor to turn ones back on it while engaged in these pleasures and one must avoid talking unless one is absolutely forced to or addressing a prayer to God.**

**Let us go back to Burns:**

Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,

A' for thy glory,

And nae for ony guid or ill

They've done afore thee !

**This expresses, in an extreme and degenerate or bastard form, the doctrine of predestination. Deeds, good or bad, count for nothing in the eternal calculations because God, in his absolute majesty, has already determined the destiny of each and every individual. They used to argue about whether the divine**

judgement was made before or after the life of the individual. Supralapsarians believe that God chose which individuals to save before he allowed their existence and that the Fall serves as the means of realisation of that prior decision to send some individuals to hell and others to heaven. In contrast Infralapsarians still hold that God planned the saving and damning of any individuals after the fall. Which ever the sequence of divine judgements, some, the elect, were predestined to an eternity of heaven and others, the reprobates, to an eternity of hell. And all this was an expression of the total majesty and power of the divinity.

The doctrine of predestination took a greater root in Scotland than in England (where, incidentally, through Thomas Cranmer and the prayer book, predominantly Calvinist doctrines still hold sway even in the Anglican churches – although not among the Methodists). James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, famously wrote the “Confessions of a Justified Sinner” in which a man, knowing he was one of the elect felt free to lead a life of totally selfish lust and crime and defy any of the potentially eternal consequences of it.

**So we now hear, with, I hope, a deeper understanding:**

O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,

Wha, as it pleases best thysel',

Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,

A' for thy glory,

And no for ony guid or ill  
They've done afore thee !

**Then comes:**

I bless and praise thy matchless might,  
Whan thousands thou hast left in night,  
That I am here afore thy sight,  
For gifts an' grace  
A burnin' an' a shinin' light,  
To a' this place.

What was I, or my generation,  
That I should get sic exaltation?  
I, wha deserve most just damnation,  
For broken laws,  
Sax thousand years 'fore my creation  
Thro' Adam's cause.

When frae my mither's womb I fell,  
Thou might hae plunged me in hell,  
To gnash my gums, to weep and wail,  
In burnin' lakes,  
Where damned devils roar and yell,  
Chain'd to their stakes ;

Yet I **am** here a chosen sample,  
To show thy grace is great and ample ;

I'm here a pillar in thy temple,  
Strong as a rock,  
A guide, a buckler, an example  
To a' thy flock.

**Burn's Holy Willie clearly believes that, although he deserves damnation because of the fall of Adam (six thousand years ago), he is one of the elect, destined for an eternity in heaven and he waxes long and proud on how his moral superiority is evidence of this. Here too, in the reference to the Fall of Adam we come across one of the salient characteristics of Calvinism, both Scottish and English, the Doctrine of Original Sin. Sometimes called the Doctrine of Total Depravity, it stated the belief that as a consequence of the fall of humanity into sin in the Garden of Eden, every person born into the world is enslaved in sin. People are not by nature inclined to love God with their whole heart, mind or strength, but rather are all inclined to serve their own interests over those of their neighbour and to reject the rule of God. Thus all people, by their own faculties are morally unable to choose to follow God and so be saved from certain damnation because they are unwilling to do so out of the necessity of their own natures. The only way out of this hopeless position is to be chosen or elected by God's grace. The poor passive victim of existence can do nothing about it. It promoted a form of spiritual learned helplessness.**

**But there are supposed to be signs through which you can tell whether a person is one of the elect or not. One of these is by**

**the evident success of the person and the material goods that go with it (in Scots, the 'gear') And another of these signs is by his or her virtue and zeal in pursuit of the moral perfection of the neighbours. So we have next:**

O Lord, thou kens what zeal I bear,  
When drinkers drink, and swearers swear,  
And singin' there and dancin' here,  
    Wi' great an' sma' :  
        For I am keepit by thy fear  
    Free frae them a'.

**Calvin, who was a rather remote intellectual, set up courts in the city state of Geneva, and specifically targeted the drinking of alcohol, the singing of bawdy songs and public dancing. Here, Holy Willie, as a zealous arm of the religious police, is asserting again the assurance that he is one of the elect.**

**But then Burn's satire begins to bite:**

But yet, O Lord ! Confess I must  
At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshy lust ;  
An' sometimes too, in worldly trust,  
    Vile self gets in;  
    But thou remembers we are dust,  
    Defil'd in sin.

O Lord ! yestreen, thou kens, wi' Meg-

Thy pardon I sincerely beg;

O I may't ne'er be a livin' plague

To my dishonour,

An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg

Again upon her.

Besides I farther maun allow,

Wi' Lizzie's lass, three times I trow

But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,

When I cam near her,

Or else thou kens thy servant true

Wad never steer her.

**Sexual sins were the meat and drink of the confessional of the medieval church, and, for all I know, still are of the Catholic church today. So Burns uses them to mock the elected perfection and moral superiority of Holy Willie. But Burns has Holy Willie use his apparent sins to justify his belief in his own status as one of the elect in a beautiful example of ego defence of rationalisation, long before Anna Freud thought of it, in the following verse:**

May be thou lets this fleshly thorn

Beset thy servant e'en and morn

Lest he owre high and proud should turn,

That he's sae gifted ;

If **sae**, thy hand maun e'en be, borne,

Until thou lift it.

**Then Holy Willie tries to use his privileged position as one of the elect to vent his spleen on his immediate opponents, like a favoured servant of a despot pleading for and against people's fates. The facts were that Holy Willie was a real person, an elder in Burns's local Kirk. William Fisher and his minister, the Reverent Auld brought a motion to the Presbytery of Ayr to have Gaun Hamilton, friend of Burns excommunicated, because (wait for it) he had failed to attend church without a valid excuse, had taken a journey on a Sunday and had not maintained family worship as expected of all. The East German form of Calvinism at its best! Aitken had successfully defended Hamilton and ridiculed Holy Willie and his minister in public.**

Lord, bless thy chosen in this place,

For here thou hast a chosen race ;

But God confound their stubborn face,

And blast their name,

Wha bring thy elders to disgrace

An' public shame.

Lord, mind Gawn Hamilton's deserts,  
He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes,  
Yet has sae mony takin' arts

Wi' grit an' sma',

Frae God's ain priest the people's hearts  
He steals awa'.

An' when we chasten'd him therefor,

Thou kens how he bred sic a splore

As set the world in a roar

O' laughin' at us;

Curse thou his basket and his store,

Kail and potatoes.

(Apparently Hamilton had set his servants to dig  
potatoes on a Sunday)

Lord, hear my earnest cry an' pray'r,

Against that presbyt'ry o' Ayr ;

Thy strong right hand, Lord, make it bare

Upo' their heads ;

Lord, weigh it down, and dinna spare,

For their misdeeds.

O Lord my God, that glib-tongu'd Aiken,  
My very heart and soul are quakin',  
To think how we stood sweatin', shakin',  
    An' piss'd wi' dread,  
    While he, wi' hingin' lips and snakin',  
    Held up his head.

Lord, in the day of vengeance try him;  
Lord, visit them wha did       employ him,  
And pass not in thy mercy by them,  
    Nor hear their pray'r :  
    But, for thy people's sake, destroy them,  
    And dinna spare.

**For some reason, which I have not had time to trace, it came to be a sign of being one of one of the elect that one prospered materially with 'goods and gear'. So finally Burns has Willie end up with a piece which must surely get him the prize for the ultimate in toadying and self love:**

But, Lord, remember me and mine  
Wi' mercies temp'ral and divine,  
That I for gear and grace may shine  
    Excell'd by nane,  
    And a' the glory shall be thine,  
    Amen, Amen !

**It reminds one of Brian's Lord's Prayer.**

Let us praise God.

Oh Lord .....

OOh you are so big, so absolutely huge.

Gosh, we're all really impressed down here.

I can't tell you.

Forgive us Oh Lord for this dreadful toadying

And barefaced flattery.

But you are so strong and, well, just so super

Fantastic.

Amen.

**So here we have the complete introduction to the worst of Scottish Calvinism, Holy Willie's Prayer:**

**But it would be a total mistake to dismiss Calvin and Calvinism through the study of one satirical poem, however, accurate and corruscating it may be about the debased forms of calvinism found in some parts of Scotland that arose from distortions of doctrine and extremes of reforming zeal. There has been some attempt to claim Burns as a theological Unitarian. He certainly was an enthusiastic mason, which is getting pretty close, but the Glasgow Unitarian church, his nearest, had only begun to meet regularly by 1791, the year that Burns wrote "Ae fond Kiss". I think even this is unlikely. If he were alive today I guess he would be firmly with the religious humanists, perhaps one of us in another way.**

**John Calvin was certainly one of the great minds of the Christian tradition. He was a humanist scholar of the first rank and he was the first to apply the textual investigatory methods of the renaissance humanists to the scriptures of the old and new testaments. This led inexorably to the higher and lower criticisms of post enlightenment and modern biblical scholarship. Many years ago I was struck with respect on reading how he saw the interpretation of the scripture as always guided by the active influence of the Holy Spirit in the mind of the reader as he or she read. Admittedly this freedom of interpretation led, in its extremes, to the chaos of the factionalisms of the theology of the Scottish churches of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. Then we had the burghers versus the anti-burghers and the new licht burgers versus the auld licht burgers.**

**But, with his insistence on education for all so everyman could read and interpret the bible for himself, Calvin through John Knox, built what was, for a century or two, the most highly educated nation in Europe.**

**Throughout the latter part of his life Calvin was attempting to restore the original community of the Christian Church without the corruptions and accretions of the middle ages and with a purer and greater perfection. It was a consistent and intelligent attempt to recreate the ideal purity of what he believed through his study of the bible to have been the original Christian Church.**

**Of course, it was something else and so became revolutionary.**

**Despite his despotic tendencies in the government of his theocracy in Geneva, Calvin set up forms of democratic church government which, in turn greatly supported secular democracy. In his dismissal of the laws of usury he helped set the banking system free and so paved the way for the work ethic and the capitalism that was to make Europe the dominant civilisation of the world.**

**But in his suppression of music and dancing he can easily be pilloried as a major influence in the peculiar culture of Scotland. There is something about the geography and climate of Fife and Angus which, melded with the suppression of all joyous and boisterous celebration in case it led to public sexual disinhibition (always near the surface), and joined up with a typical Scottish gallows humour and a cautious pessimism to produce the culture that was parodied so well that it made me laugh in the bookshop.**

**“The Wee Book of Calvin” held many delights. On the frontispiece are two aphorisms:**

**I quote: ‘Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me’ attributed to Psalm 51 and ‘Self pity never biled a haddock’ attributed to The Pittenweem Manual of Applied Psychotherapy, Volume XIII.”**

## **I continue to quote:**

Such was the North-East Scottish childhood. Guilt. Sin. Misery. Fear. Self-loathing. My Grandfather Peden, glowering out at the dark of a December afternoon, would pull his chair closer to the fire before rearranging the live coals with his bare hands, the grim set of his face demonically illuminated by the sudden leap of the flames in the darkness of the room. Skelping his blackened hands together, he would glare at me defiantly as I stared back, terrified and thrilled at the performance.

After a five-minute silence punctuated by the tick of the clock, the slow settling of the coals and the vicious hacking of his cough, matured through years of coal-dust, whisky, cigarettes and sea-spray, followed by the sizzle of his spit as it hissed against the grate, my Grandfather would pour himself a generous measure of his favourite whisky. Raising the glinting amber to his lips, he resumed his scrutiny of the flames, sharing with me his precious repertoire of Northern doom:

'Aye, laddie. It's a gey queer wey o daein. Mak nae mistake.'

Or:

'Mind now. What's comin for ye will no go bye ye.'

My Grandmother in the kitchen, hearing the familiar squeak of the cork, the slow trickle of liquor and sensing the acrid taint of 'Old Damnation', would pause from her endless duties: darning a sock, eviscerating a halibut or, in a rare moment of leisure, studying the Bible:

'Wan day yell see the Devil's fais at the bottom o thon gless.'

Or:

'You mark my words. Drink and Death are near neighbours.'

Grimacing fiercely, my Grandfather took the disembodied voice as a prompt to replenish his glass. Returning his gaze to the fire, he would intone for my benefit:

'Bliddy wummin. A fais that wid turn a funeral up a side street wi a voice that wid shell a prawn wi wan screech.'

The scorching invective of these images and structures represents a crucial strand in the oral culture of the North-East at its most vivid and precise, all the more so for its uncompromising starkness.

Poetry and art come low down in the hierarchy of life's essentials, yet some of my Grandmother's utterances encapsulate an austerity and economy of expression reminiscent of Beckett:

'First braith beginnin o yer daith.'

**Glorious parody and it is the witness of my freedom from post traumatic stress of an Edinburgh manse upbringing that I could laugh so loud and long that Christmas!**

So: geography, climate and religion all play a part, with Death and the Devil never too far away. Many of the expressions have deep roots in

a stoicism or fatalism engendered by an outlook which sees hardship as an inevitable (and sometimes desirable) part of life. Conversely, idleness or leisure may be viewed as a form of unworthiness or even Sin. So work hard and don't complain. “

Let me quote again:

“Perhaps the ultimate testimony to the vigour of the tradition is the extent to which these expressions, many of them centuries old, defiantly resist the status of cliché. The thrill of hearing a saying in an unpredicted context is an especial joy. Recently I sat in the anonymity of a Kirriemuir hostelry. In a moment of quiet, I overheard two patrons involved in the following exchange:

‘Him? He's as twisted as twa intertwined corkscrews.’

‘Aye. An his name's doon in the book o no rubbin out.’

**Of course, “The Wee Book of Calvinism” is glorious parody.**

I came to see the Calvinism of my mother's side of the family as an Old Testament religion. While my father's people were happily jumping up and down shouting that they were saved by a New Testament Jesus and singing their heads off in choirs, my mothers side were strictly observing the Sabbath (no whistling on my childhood Sundays), singing nasal psalms, clutching – no worshipping - their Bibles, distributing their Bible tracts and proving by their hard work, by their material prosperity and by their respectable ways that they were destined for eternities in heaven.

It is an over simplification – but not much of one. Yet both were undoubtedly descended from those Ayrshire Covenanters who defied the King's dragoons and died by the sword and the musket as they worshipped unyieldingly in their own Calvinist way on the cold, wet and windy hillsides of south west Scotland. No English bishops or prayer books for them but a grim, stark and harsh religion like the Scottish winter weather.

So when some one greets me with a polite "How are you?" and I reply "Could be worse", all the time knowing that I am actually very much OK, then I know that the spirit of my ancestors is alive and well within me.

## SILENCE

Our Unitarian worship never has rested on belief. We can become aware of the divine mystery around us, beyond us and

**within us without interference from creeds and without the necessity of emotional conversion experiences or dramatic rituals**

## **SILENCE**

**May we come to understand better what HAD HAPPENED IN OUR OWN PAST TO SHAPE US UP AS WE ARE TODAY. May we make good choices as to what of our past can be allowed to drop away and what is precious and we need to preserve in some form. May we understand better what is happening among the people of Britain and in so much of the rest of the religious world today. May that understanding help and strengthen our special shared religious fellowship here and in other Unitarian churches**