

THE ANNE SHAKESPEARE SERMON 2025

August 3rd, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In being here this evening, we are all responding to a call.

The readings for today from the *Song of Solomon* —chapter five, beginning at the second verse— and from the *Second Epistle of Peter* —chapter one, verses one through fifteen— tell us about our response to God's call; about how in order to answer His call effectively one must be awake, ready, alert. In the *Song of Solomon*, the beloved's hesitation in responding to the lover's call serves as an allegory for how we, too, often respond to God's call. We hear the knock on the door, but, as we are often surrounded by distracting noise and confusion, we are unable to hear it. Before we can realise, it is too late to respond; we can no longer act successfully.

In August 2023 Stratford's commemorative sermon tradition was greatly enriched with the delivery of Professor Katherine Scheil's sermon in memory of Anne Shakespeare on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of her death on 6 August 1623. It is a true privilege for me to be here today before all of you, delivering the third sermon in commemoration and celebration of Anne's life. I am honoured and profoundly grateful for the invitation.

In 2015 I came across Archbishop Rowan Williams's 2006 Shakespeare sermon, delivered from this same pulpit, on poetry and prophecy. He revealed the literary nature of prophecy and established an insightful link between the epiphanic nature of poetic creation and the prophet's interaction with God's word. Reading Rowan Williams's Shakespeare sermon became a turning point in my life as an academic. During the last ten years, I have devoted much of my research to the immense religious, cultural, and social significance of the Shakespeare Sermon. This tradition started in the nineteenth century, and I have come to cherish and appreciate it. I understand the love and respect of Stratford-upon-Avon for its most famous son's work, life, and family, which for more than a century and a half have evoked the principles of Christian love in this church

There has been much speculation about what Anne's life might have been like. Earlier this year, Professor Matthew Steggle identified new evidence suggesting that her marriage to Shakespeare was not, as many have insisted, a distant one and that she may even have lived in London with her husband, playing an active role in his financial affairs. My research identifies the role Anne plays within the tradition of the Shakespeare Sermon. Most of them have placed her in a marginal position. But it is precisely from there that she can in spiritual terms become central.

A considerable number of Shakespeare sermons focus on the life of the author. Shakespeare's connections to Stratford-upon-Avon are frequently emphasised after recounting the different stages of his life and his experience as a playwright in London. His time in the capital is described in these sermons as a hectic, bustling life, one with no room for pause, silence, or introspection. Anne begins to appear in several sermons during the first half of the twentieth century; she becomes an essential part of Shakespeare's turning back to the stillness of Stratford-upon-Avon necessary for concentration and reflection on oneself and others.

In his Shakespeare Sermon of 1904, the Reverend William Holden Hutton, Fellow and Lecturer of St. John's College, Oxford, anticipated the bucolic, romantic view of Shakespeare's relationship with his wife that he would later portray in his 1914 work *Highways and Byways in Shakespeare's Country*. In his sermon, Hutton's romanticised view acquires profound spiritual overtones. He presents different stages in Shakespeare's life and concludes that it was in his mature years that he 'turned back to the love it had never lost, to the great trees and shady lanes of Warwickshire, to the soft murmuring streams, the flight of birds across the fields at evening, the simplicity of kindly country folks, the love of wife and home. These he remembered, and to these he went back'; he left 'the busy turbid London life to come down there to the quiet resting place of home and wife and children...' 'he came back to the sweet land he had never ceased to love'.

In the Shakespeare Sermon of 1916, the Reverend Anthony Charles Deane, the Vicar of Hampstead, stressed Shakespeare's constant 'hope', when he was in London, 'of returning' to Stratford-upon-Avon, 'the home of his wife and children'. Deane questions the narrative of a troubled relationship between Anne and William, and presents the playwright as a devoted and faithful husband who did not take Anne and their family to London since 'he never regarded the city as his real home'. Instead, continues Deane, Shakespeare bought and renovated New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon as his family home.

Both Hutton and Deane's sermons evoke the poetic voice that we hear in Shakespeare's sonnet 109, who, despite his 'absence' and 'travels' feels the beloved's breast as his 'home of love' to which he 'return[s] again'.

Deane concludes that 'the most potent, the most significant of all [motives] that brought Shakespeare back home', was 'the desire for thought, for composure, for the making of his soul'. '[H]e brooded over the eternal mysteries ... What of the Power unseen? ... he felt the need of solitude, of calm thought, and ... of prayer'. In Stratford-upon-Avon, 'nature spoke its sacramental message to this nature-lover, and touched him with the peace of God.'

Anne becomes a symbol of certainty, truth, and goodness. The reunion between the author, Stratford-upon-Avon, nature, home and, ultimately, Anne is, metaphorically speaking, a reunion with the deepest part of one's faith in God. The space that Anne presides over is a space of faith, a divine realm. Going to Stratford-upon-Avon, going to Anne, to his family, becomes Shakespeare's answering the call of both human and divine love.

The effectiveness of anyone's response to God's call depends on our capacity to listen to God's voice. In order to do so we need, in the words of the Reverend Deane, 'periods of retirement to think, and pray, and be still'. That peace is not, he continues, 'sterile' but, on the contrary, it helps us 'to think thoroughly' which is the 'only path to acting successfully'. This becomes especially necessary during periods of humanitarian crises and global turmoil, like those being endured in 1916, at the height of the First World War—when Deane was preaching here—and, unfortunately, similar to those we are facing today.

Hear again the call of that great love poem of the Bible, *The Song of Solomon*:

I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.

Egotism, fear, doubt or mere laziness prevent us from being vigilant and ready for the call. But God always gives us another chance, and whenever we seek Him we can always find Him, if we are willing to listen to His voice, which renews itself constantly. In order to hear His voice clearly —or His divine knocking on our soul's door— we need to return to a state of peace, away from distractions, as Shakespeare did. Free from the noise of London, he came home to Stratford-upon-Avon.

From a very young age, I was blessed to understand that God reveals Himself in every generous response to the call of another; that God's love is found in every act of love we witness, every act of love we receive and, above all, in those we offer. God's call is the call of the other in need. God inhabits the call of the other who asks for our help, our presence, our companionship. Delaying our response to that call —out of fear or uncertainty about its origin or meaning— distances us from God. God's call, then, triggers a constant tension between distance and proximity, fear and courage, absence and presence, uncertainty and faith, anxiety over and joy in the eventual reunion with God's love.

In order to celebrate such reunion, we need to be always able to remember, as the Second Epistle of Peter tells us, that we have to make every effort to respond to God's call and election by adding to our faith goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and, above all, love. God's call is a privilege that allows us to know Him and therefore endows us with grace and peace, and draws us away from the frivolity and superficiality of the material world around us. If we are called and we are ready to answer, we will receive, says Peter, 'a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'

In placing Anne at the centre of this Christian message, her relationship with William becomes one of stillness where one can hear God's voice. Imagining this spiritual dimension of Anne offers us a new portrayal of her, not as a marginal or incidental figure in her husband's life journey, but as someone who symbolises the rediscovery of human spirituality, the reconnection to Christian love. The Song of Solomon becomes Anne and William's love poem, about a relationship of absence and presence, of distance and closeness, of longing for union and final encounter. Anne Shakespeare is a subject to remember and celebrate, Shakespeare's focus of love, to turn back to, where the union of faith and love, that call from God, can be accomplished.

Amen

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