

Shakespeare and Immigration Assembly

Shakespeare is by far the greatest writer in the English language and has a claim on being the greatest writer ever. His influence is immense and continuing. He redefined what literature could be. In doing so, he created more than 2000 everyday words, which appear for the first time in his writings, including such commonplaces as **cruelhearted** (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) and **vulnerable** (*Macbeth*), both of which concepts are central to the assembly today.

More importantly, Shakespeare was a man whose mind has shaped both his own age and every age subsequently. Yet for all his immense influence, he remains a somewhat shadowy figure. We know he wrote about 38 plays, 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems. We know Shakespeare was born and brought up in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. At some point between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor and writer. At the end of his career, he retired to Stratford around 1613 at the age of 49, where he died three years later. But apart from that, few records of Shakespeare's private life survive, and there is uncertainty about such matters as his sexuality, his religious beliefs, and even what he looked like.

However, rather wonderfully, we do have an example of his handwriting. It comes from an early play, *Sir Thomas More*. The manuscript is the work of five writers; as with modern screenplays, it was not unusual to collaborate then. Three pages are in Shakespeare's own handwriting, written when he was just 25. Here we have the handwriting of the greatest writer that has ever lived, thought lost forever. What is fascinating is that in this draft we can see his corrections, his second thoughts, a hint of the way he worked.

It allows us to understand his colleagues' comment that 'his mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. In the scene Shakespeare wrote More faces an angry mob on the so-called 'Ill May Day' of 1511, when London was gripped by an anti-immigrant riot. More confronts the crowd with an appeal to reason, to God and to their common humanity. I think that the words which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Sir Thomas More have as much resonance now as they did when the play was written in 1590. Then, the religious fear was of Catholics and we faced a wave of immigration from Europe. Now, we have similar challenges and, with the rise of UKIP, we are increasingly becoming a more isolationist country. Politicians chasing cheap votes again pick out immigrants and the most vulnerable— demonising the different and punishing the weak to satisfy the mob. The Observer newspaper put it very well in their editorial yesterday, when they wrote: "In tough times it is easy to turn on 'the other', the foreigner in our midst. As long as the Eurozone remains in crisis and the world is divided between the aging and relatively affluent and the young and impoverished, there will be immigration. How we respond is a mark of the values we uphold as a country that believes in fairness, justice and prosperity for all, not just for the few."

As a guide to those values – hear the words of Shakespeare – the only words we have in his own handwriting and thought lost for so long. They are refreshing:

Imagine that you see the wretched strangers
 their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage
 plodding to th' ports and coasts for transportation
 and that you sit as kings in your desires
 authority quite silenced by your brawl

and you in ruff of your opinions clothed
 what have you got? I'll tell you, you had taught
 how insolence and strong hand should prevail
 how order should be quelled, and by this pattern
 not one of you should live an aged man
 for other ruffians as their fancies wrought
 with self same hand self reasons and self right
 would shark on you and men like ravenous fishes
 would feed on one another.

What a powerful image – that the mob, in getting what it wants by cruelly forcing the weak and dispossessed out of England, would open the door to their own repression – that once you allow the mob to set the rules, the rules are forever after written by the sharks. The next victim will be the weakest element of the mob that is currently baying for others' blood.

Shakespeare offers a counter argument for empathy, caring and understanding – what he calls the 'stranger's case'. This is the idea of putting ourselves in the shoes of the persecuted, and feeling for the suffering of the downtrodden victims of prejudice and violence. Here Shakespeare follows in the example set by Christ.

He asks us to see beyond the immediate prejudice and rivalry. It is a lesson we, as a species, have still not learned; in our news bulletins we have all seen the wretched strangers with babies at their backs in Syria or Africa. And in our own country we hear voices calling for us to discriminate against immigrants and build fences rather than bridges.

Shakespeare has Sir Thomas More finish his speech by asking the mob to consider where they would go if they were in the strangers' shoes, what they would do if *they* were thrown out of England.

Why you must needs be strangers. Would you be pleased
 To find a nation of such barbarous temper
 That breaking in hideous violence
 Would not afford you an abode on earth,
 Whet their detested knives against your throats,
 Spurn you like dogs, and like as if that God
 Owned not nor made not you ...
 ... What would you think
 To be thus used? This is the strangers' case,
 And this your mountainish inhumanity

This is the strangers' case. It is not one that will be trumpeted by UKIP. It is not a popular case at Westminster or in the tabloid newspapers or on the doorsteps of England. The strangers' case is born of empathy and understanding, of the capacity to imagine ourselves in the shoes of another, to ask what we *should* do rather than what our selfish desires call for. I hope that we are not a 'nation of barbarous temper'. I hope that we can avoid 'mountainish inhumanity.' I hope for a world in which men do not 'shark upon one another' or 'men like ravenous fishes do feed upon one another.' I hope for a little more of the strangers' case.

How wonderful that such a message should be the only words that we have in Shakespeare's own handwriting, and that our greatest writer should find his fullest expression, on such a relevant and topical subject, and echo Jesus' timeless message of 'love thy neighbour'.