

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Robert Stephen Hawker.

By F. SMITH, B.A., B.Sc.

THE traveller who goes on foot down the enchanting coast of North Cornwall will not go far without meeting many memories of the Rev. R. S. Hawker, formerly Vicar of Morwenstow, the most northerly of Cornish parishes. "All down the thundering shores of Bude and Boss" the man is still remembered both for his faithful "care of souls" and for a wonderful personality of which all his words and acts were eloquent proof. In the literary world he is still remembered, and claims the devoted allegiance of a few who love his strong ballads and enchanting legends of Cornwall; but to many of the present day his name has little meaning.

Yet Morwenstow, the most isolated parish of Cornwall, is a place of singular beauty. There is the wildest of shores, which low tide shows to be studded with sharp-pointed rocks that would tear all shipping to pieces; and then dark cliffs rising to a height of over 400 feet, proudly challenging the mighty Atlantic, whose billows have been engaged in ceaseless conflict there since the dawn of life. On the land side the cliffs are clad in heather—big, clean, and joyous—where multi-coloured butterflies flit contentedly from place to place, and the gay grasshoppers leap about as though all life were a game of leap-frog. Down below, in response to sun and cloud above, the sea is a mosaic of blues, greens, and purples—the whole forming a picture of incomparable loveliness.

But there is nothing in the sacred associations of Morwenstow, or in its literature, that can replace the actual sight of this wonderful man as he tramped about his parish in the indescribable brown cassock, fisherman's jersey, brimless hat, and wading-boots; for the love of his admirers is built on the man himself—the strange and wonderful personality who was content to live amid those lonely rocks, weaving strange fancies, seeing wonderful sights, speaking unaccountable things. If one

word may be used in its fullest significance, we may say his charm lies in his humanity. In all his acts we see proofs of it. Sent to be Vicar of Morwenstow in the days when wrecking was a common pursuit and smuggling an honourable means of livelihood, he denounced those who followed such callings—though at considerable risk to himself. Working amongst parishioners who refused help to the shipwrecked sailors, lest they brought disaster on the house which sheltered them, Hawker's care of the unfortunates who were washed ashore alive was something to be remembered. His anxiety for the ships driven within reach of the greedy cliffs was such as to send him off at all hours to Bude or Clovelly for the lifeboat. He often urged them forth when the dangers were such as to make brave men hesitate, and his noble desire to help the helpless often made him too impatient of delay. Many a sailor owed his life directly or indirectly to the Vicar's assistance. If Hawker had not been there, many a wreck would have been added to that long list recorded at Morwenstow, the most dangerous part of the coast. To the unfortunates who came ashore dead he gave decent Christian burial. To sorrowing relatives he sent letters of consolation, repeating where he could the last brave deeds of the noble dead. But all this work was done at tremendous cost to his nervous strength. In one of the most pathetically tragic letters ever written he describes the awful days following a wreck, when the corpses were being washed ashore slowly on his cruel coast. He concludes: "You will understand the nervous, wretched state in which we listen all day and all night for those thrilling knocks at the door which announce the advent of the dead." There is no doubt that much untold suffering in his last sad years came from the memory of the harrowing scenes he had witnessed on the shore.

The same humanity which marked such quiet heroism is also the keynote of his whole life. He hated dissent fiercely, but he lived on friendly terms with Dissenters. He denounced the devilish trade of wrecking, but he probably enjoyed the company of a wrecker. He condemned smuggling, but his

accounts of the smuggler, Tristram Pentire, show that his heart warmed to the man himself. He abhorred the sin utterly, but the sinner had generally some redeeming feature to love and esteem.

It was his humanity which showed him the humour of the world. Nobody enjoyed a tale better than "the parson," as his parishioners knew, and few ever told better ones. Humour broke into most of his activities, and we feel that his laugh often rang out on those silent cliffs. He is said to have asked a Dissenter once about his reluctance in coming to the Vicarage to arrange about the funeral of a relative. "Well, sir," was the answer, "we thought you might object to burying a Dissenter." "Not at all," returned the Vicar, "I should be pleased to bury you all." To reach his pulpit he had to scramble through a small aperture in the rood screen. It was a difficult process, so he called it "the camel going through the needle's eye." Leaving the pulpit was more difficult, because it was necessary to go backwards. This often embarrassed stranger-clergymen, to whose rescue Hawker came with the words: "It is the strait and narrow way, and few there be that find it." He held daily service in his church, and his wife was frequently the only other person present. The Vicar would therefore begin the service: "Dearly beloved Charlotte, the Scripture moveth us," etc. He visited London in his old age, and was remonstrated with on account of his dress. "Would you have me dress like a waiter?" was his retort.

Hawker and Morwenstow are still strangely united, for it was the one spot in all England which was suited to him. He loved solitude, and this sea-washed parish is solitude materialized. He was eccentric and superstitious, and the place found room for his eccentricities, and gave support to his strange beliefs. He lived in the past, and here was a church with associations dating back to the dim beginnings of Christianity in England. He drew no distinction between legend and fact; he saw in realities the symbols of eternal truths, and here was a church whose riches could never be exhausted for such a mind. He

loved his fellow-men, and here was a neglected parish which had known no resident clergyman for a century. He had a true affection for children, and here was a school that required building. He had a special tenderness for all animals, and here was a valley that required a bridge over the dangerous stream. He was brave, strong, pure, and tender-hearted, and Morwenstow provided him the occasion for the practice of all these qualities, like a wise mother developing her child. What wonder, then, that Hawker's admirers, when they visit the place, feel more than a thrill of emotion when the church spires, backed by his beloved Hennacliff, first come into view? For to them, at least, it is holy ground.

It is the most difficult of places to reach, for Bude, the nearest station, is about eight miles away. The few shrubs by the road are stunted and miserable-looking—a silent witness to the strength of the winter wind that ravages these lonely shores. On the way is Coombe Valley, where Hawker wrote the famous Trelawney Ballad, and where he bade farewell to Tennyson after the one memorable day the two poets spent together. At length the Bush Inn is reached—a dilapidated-looking hostelry, the very centre of Morwenstow. There is nothing to be called a village. The inn and an ugly farm or two cluster together in an unpicturesque group, the ground sloping away to hide all other views. A small descent towards the coast suddenly brings us into view of the church, with the heather-clad cliff beyond. A hundred memories start into being! There is the lych-gate, and, near by, the shed where the poor mangled corpses of the drowned awaited burial. Inside the churchyard stands the tall, white figure-head of the wrecked *Caledonia*, and around it are the unnamed mounds which cover the remains of the unknown dead, interred reverently by the warm-hearted Vicar.

Standing on these high cliffs and overlooking the far-reaching Atlantic stands the church in proud solitude:

“The storm—the blast—the tempest shock,
Have beat upon those walls in vain.”

Both inside and outside, the church seems a symbol of strength. Old oak pews, dating from the sixteenth century, five or six inches in thickness and beautifully carved, agree well with the strong Norman pillars on the north side. Beams of oak support the roof. The font is a misshapen block of stone, dating from the tenth century, and carrying little ornamentation. The chancel is dark, but, alas! the old screen has given place to a modern one.

Near the church stands the vicarage, built by Hawker himself, with his inscription over the door :

“ A House, a Glebe, a Pound a Day,
A pleasant Church to watch and pray ;
Be true to Church, be kind to Poor
O Minister, for evermore !”

Out on the cliffs is something which seems to give a closer touch of the man than either church or vicarage—it is a small hut, which he built of the wreckwood which came ashore there. It looks over the mighty sea, and, sitting inside, one can see naught but the limitless ocean and the edge of the cliff in front. It was here he wrote much of his later poetry, and where he spent much of the sorrowful year following his wife's death, when he composed his mightiest poem, “ The Quest of the Sangraal.” In this hut he spent many hours, not alone, for he spoke with the angels.

Morwenstow has still the same air of loneliness and repose that Hawker knew. It may be that his spirit still haunts the place, for one feels strangely near him while there. And fortunately it is only visited by the few who seek the charm of its sacred associations.

Of his literary work we may say that it is small in bulk and unequal in quality. In a volume of prose he gathers up much of Cornish legend and folklore that would otherwise have been lost—writing with remarkable skill and in excellent style. His poems fill a companion volume, and vary from the early and mediocre “ Tendrils ” to the wonderful fragment, “ The Quest of the Sangraal.” In ballads he is very often successful ; and

one of his earliest, "And shall Trelawny Die?" has achieved a unique reputation. His religious poems have a mystical atmosphere and symbolical suggestiveness almost unique. But our final judgment of his poetry must be given on his greatest work, "The Quest of the Sangraal." He was strangely suited in temperament and belief to the theme. To him legend was more significant than fact. He distrusted the scientific and commercial growth of his century, and knew nothing of the new social conscience. His mind was steeped in the distant lore of symbolism and ritual. His poetical temperament and religious aspirations alike were satisfied by the creed and ceremonies of the Anglican Church. Christianity was for him a great epic which his imagination coloured into new life.

Living as he did on the Cornish coast, with the grey heights of "wild Dundagel" in sight, it is no wonder that he meditated on Arthurian days, and at length began to write "The Quest of the Sangraal." He was unable to finish the work, but the fragment compares more than favourably with Tennyson's better known "Holy Grail." The latter is an excellent piece of finished art: it is musical, and like the ripple of wavelets wafted shorewards by a scented breeze; whilst Hawker's poem is unfinished, broken, and rugged, but it has the strength of the great Atlantic waves as they break on the place of its birth.

Nor is Tennyson's inferiority surprising when we remember that he was essentially modern in outlook, influenced by scientific discovery, and in full touch with the thought of his own time. Indeed, he questioned his fitness for writing on such a theme in a letter to the Duke of Argyll: "I doubt whether such a subject could be handled in these days without incurring a charge of irreverence. It would be too much like playing with sacred things. The old writers *believed* in the Sangraal." In Tennyson the zeal of the mediæval and the devotion of the mystic were alike lacking.

A few extracts will show us the excellence of the poem. In such a legend symbolism is all important, for the Holy Grail is so precious that its discovery typifies the union of the seeking

soul with Christ, and, indeed, the Symbolic Cup is not always closely distinguished from Him. Hence Hawker often speaks of it with awe :

“That awful Vase, the Sangraal!
The Vessel of the Pasch, Shere Thursday night,
The selfsame Cup wherein the faithful Wine
Heard God, and was obedient unto Blood.”

Each drop of Blood contained therein is priceless :

“Sweet Lord! what treasures! like the priceless gems,
Hid in the tawny casket of a king,—
A ransom for an army, one by one!”

To Tennyson, on the other hand, it is an ordinary cup with an interesting association :

“The cup . . . from which our Lord
Drank at the last sad supper with His own.”

The Crucifixion and other sacred themes are treated in an equally distinct manner.

Metaphors of the two poets show a characteristic difference, Hawker's being more in keeping with the spirit of the poem. Thus, in describing the knights, Tennyson uses a very apt reference to a coin :

“For good ye are and bad, and like to coins,
Some true, some light, but every one of you
Stamped with the image of the King.”

But to Hawker the knights, by their very shape, suggest the awful mystery of the Cross—a likeness which shows completely how Hawker's mind works from the material to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal :

“See! where they move a battle shouldering kind!
Massive in mould, but graceful: thorough men;
Built in the mystic measure of the Cross:—
Their lifted arms the transome: and their bulk
The Tree, where Jesu stately stood to die.”

Again in the “Holy Grail” the King is unfavourable to the quest, and tries to keep back many of his knights :

. . . “Ye follow wandering fires
Lost in the quagmire.”

But in "The Quest" Arthur is in very truth the real leader and inspirer of his men :

" Comrades in arms! Mates of the Table Round!
 Fair Sirs, my fellows in the bannered ring,
 Ours is a lofty tryst! this day we meet,
 Not under shield, with scarf and knightly gage,
 To quench our thirst of love in ladies' eyes;
 We shall not mount to-day the goodly throne,
 The conscious steed, with thunder in his loins,
 To launch along the field the arrowy spear:
 Nay, but a holier theme, a mightier Quest—
 'Ho! for the Sangraal, vanished Vase of God.' "

All other glory is nothing worth if God be left out of the life :

" Ah! loathsome shame!
 To hurl in battle for the pride of arms:
 To ride in native tourney, foreign war:
 To count the stars; to ponder pictured runes,
 And grasp great knowledge, as the demons do,
 If we be shorn of God."

The eulogy of Cornwall, the descriptions of north, east, south, and west, and the occasional expressions of a personal sadness, are all worthy of a great poem. The last quotation shall be the wonderful description of the mighty sea and cliffs of Tintagel, the last lines of this strong poem. No more striking figure could have been used with equal brevity :

" There stood Dundagel, throned : and the great sea
 Lay, a strong vassal at his master's gate,
 And, like a drunken giant, sobb'd in sleep !"

The poem is strong, beautiful, and vivid, tinged with a noble sadness which is due to the days of his mourning. It is outside all literary movements, and its author is an anachronism in literary history. But he was perfectly equipped to deal with his theme, and our only regret can be that not more than one book of the projected four was completed.

Hawker claims our affectionate remembrance by his noble humanity, his grace of humour, his faithfulness of life, and his sweetness of song.