

Girton Parish News - July/August 2001

John Bunyan and The Pilgrim's Progress

Some years ago Mr John Wright, a Girton resident, gave a series of talks on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire on the Something to think about programme. He presented readings from his abridged version of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Several listeners asked for the background to the author and his famous work. And here it is. Mr Wright has also presented some parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in St Andrew's Church.

The Pilgrim's Progress has been one of the bestselling books of all time. When it was first published in 1678 it was an instant success, was reprinted within a few months, and again the following year. By the time that John Bunyan died 10 years later, 12 editions had been printed amounting to 100,000 copies. The book has since made its way to every corner of the globe. It is printed in over 200 languages and dialects, and has touched the hearts of men and women in every land and in every age.

As a young man, John Bunyan underwent a spiritual crisis. He came through it a transformed man, who saw his life's duty clearly before him - to preach the word of God. But under the Act of Conformity of 1660, preaching by anybody but the established clergy was strictly forbidden. Bunyan carried on preaching. He was sent to Bedford Gaol where he remained with occasional periods of restricted liberty, for 12 years.

In 1672 he was released, but in three years he was back in prison. It was during this spell of imprisonment that Bunyan transformed his own life-story into *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for his book is in reality a record of his own journey through what he called "the wilderness of this world" of his own lifelong pilgrimage in search of grace.

John Bunyan had grown up in the heart of Puritan England, and the spirit of that time was everywhere about him. The Puritans lived their lives and ruled the country as men who were never far away from God. But their God was the stern, unbending Judge of all the Earth, who would have nothing to do with a man who played tipcat on Sunday, or danced on village greens, or loved church bells.

Bunyan's native Bedfordshire was particularly affected by the Puritan spirit. He was a full-blooded buoyant lad, loving life as a child finds it, a natural leader in games and playing them with gusto, who found suddenly that all this was wrong. It was sin, and he was saturated with it through and through. He became haunted by the thought of some terrible danger that lay in front of him. He felt that God was angry with him. In his teens he served for about 2 ½ years in Cromwell's army, and in the siege of Leicester a soldier who had taken Bunyan's post was killed by a shot from the town. Young Bunyan saw this as Divine Intervention to save his life, and it influenced his outlook.

At 20 he married a good poor woman who brought with her to their home in Elstow two religious books which set him thinking, and had the effect, together with his wife's influence, of making him begin to attend church twice each Sunday. In 1653 he joined the church of St. John's in Bedford and was baptised. Within three years he was preaching to congregations hanging on his every word, and as his reputation as a preacher spread people would flock in multitudes to listen to him.

With him in Bedford Gaol Bunyan had the Bible and a copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, the Tudor account of earlier Protestants who suffered for their faith.

It was these two books that inspired him to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In his story the good and evil influences which had affected Bunyan's life were given human personalities as the people met with by the hero Christian as he followed the narrow road which would lead him to the Celestial City. Even the symbolic landscape of Christian's journey was based on the workaday world — the undramatic hills and valleys of Bedfordshire which Bunyan knew so well. A muddy part of Watling Street between Hockliffe and Dunstable, for example, was transformed into the Slough of Despond. The story charted Christian's progress through the world. The temptations and trials of life, its spiritual dangers and triumphs, all came into fanciful figures and experiences such as might be encountered on a journey in those days. Every human failing took the form of a human tempter. Though Christian's progress was often illuminated by hope, he was driven forward by the same fear of ultimate damnation which had afflicted Bunyan in his youth.

With nothing to work on but his own experience and the little world about him, Bunyan had made a book that lives. Its all too human characters are eternal and universal.

We all know some of them: they are in every morning paper. *The Pilgrim's Progress* seemed true then, it seems true now, and it will be true for ever, because it is a piece of Life itself.

After his release from his second spell of imprisonment Bunyan was able to continue his pastoral work. He preached not only throughout Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire but across Hertfordshire and Essex, and even made several visits to London. He also continued to write, and in 1684 was published the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

When his preaching and writings brought him fame, he was not so worldly as to be beguiled by success. He remained the simple countryman. He had no vanity. He was just John Bunyan the Bedford preacher, and wanted nothing more.

He died in London in his 60th year and was buried in the Dissenters' Cemetery at Bunhill Fields. A friend of his in London, the Baptist preacher George Cokayne, wrote a tribute summing Bunyan up as one "who had tried the smiles and frowns of time, not puffed up in prosperity nor shaken in adversity, always holding the golden mean".

John Bunyan had had a 60-year journey of hard work, emotional strain and spiritual anxiety, his journey in all its traumas and in its sheer dogged determination to reach the Celestial City bearing much resemblance to Christian's pilgrimage in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

With *The Pilgrim's Progress* John Bunyan left to posterity his greatest memorial. It may be read or listened to as a tale, but woven into it is deep thought and rich experience. It has romance, heroism, satire, pathos, humanity, pity, humour, the tenderness that brings tears, and beauty that stirs the soul. It is one of the classic and eternal things in literature and religion; "the best allegory", according to the historian Macaulay, "that has ever been written by man".

John T Wright