

Sunday 6 June 2021

*"We are Common Clay Pots" (2 Corinthians 4.7.)*

### **Dorian Gray**

We are in London. A very beautiful young man – full of excitement and a certain amount of arrogance – prepares to take the city by storm. His portrait has just been painted – a creation with which he is very pleased – and he proceeds to hang it in the hall of his grand mews house to be admired by his many guests. This man is clearly full of potential and he knows it. He offers to help Lady Agatha by supporting the work of a boys' club in Whitechapel but is rather overtaken by the busy social life which stretches out before him. He and some friends go to the theatre and he falls in love with a humble actress but the liaison doesn't last. Her acting is roundly criticized so he breaks off the engagement among floods of tears.

On returning home he glances at his portrait in passing but his eye is caught by a slight change in the facial features. His mouth appears more cruel. He retires to bed, thoughtful.

The next morning a friend calls to break the news that the actress has committed suicide but the young man is not bowed. However, there is another change in the portrait. Furrows appear on his forehead. He realizes that the portrait is acting as his conscience. He is so upset that he takes the portrait out of the hallway and locks it in the attic.

Life in London continues apace for the young man. His interests deteriorate; he spends more time in hedonistic pursuits – in pubs and opium dens – and at each turn the portrait continues to deteriorate, little by little. A sadness spreads across the canvas. Maggots dissect his fine features.

After a terrible shooting accident our hero resolves to be moral. He decides not to take advantage of a young girl but nevertheless is chastised by a friend who quotes the scriptures at him: *"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"* (Mark 8 36). He goes yet again to the attic to inspect the portrait and is alarmed now by the hypocritical eyes and the blood-stained hands. It is all too much. He kills himself and is later found by his servants, ravaged with age, lying alongside the portrait which has been miraculously restored.

### **The Allegory**

This story is of course 'The Portrait of Dorian Gray' by Oscar Wilde. It is a commentary on consumerism, the effects of sin and the neglect of conscience. The commentator Will Self regards the novel as an essay on the passage of time but it is impossible to read it and overlook its moral thrust and the effects of choice upon character. Perhaps Wilde wrote it wistfully.

## **St. Paul**

Wilde is no theologian or moral coach but he does neatly illustrate that division which we find within ourselves between the good and the bad. It is relentless, however old or young we are. *"We are common clay pots"* says St. Paul. He is addressing himself and the wild Corinthian community whose morals are as suspect as the seaport where they live is robust. St. Paul knows that we all have our weaknesses. We often fall down, we are diverted, seduced, dazzled and exhausted. It keeps us humble but the Spirit of God is contained within us and works away for good, sometimes in spite of ourselves. He urges us to see that dying to sin brings Christ even more alive within us and among us.

St. Paul reminds us of our goal: to be transformed, taken over, changed from glory to glory. It doesn't happen all at once: we become. Yes, the body is perishable but it is the only way we know to communicate the Spirit of God so it too is precious.

To God be the glory. Amen.