

## **Ann Griffiths – a reflection**

‘One of the best guarded secrets of the Island of Britain’ is how a leading authority on Christian spirituality, Donald Allchin, once described the hymns of Ann Griffiths, a tenant farmer’s daughter from mid-Wales who died in relative obscurity in 1805, aged 29, leaving just over 70 stanzas in the Welsh language which contain some of the great Christian poetry of Europe. ... ‘Despite the limitations of her work,’ says Canon Allchin, ‘her stature is to be measured against the great and unquestioned figures of the Church’s history.’

I approach my task of reflecting on Ann Griffiths with some unease, for as I became better acquainted with her work in preparation for today I became increasingly aware of the huge gulf between myself and her

To start with our personal circumstances are very different

She was a woman, and in case you haven’t noticed, I am a man!

She died at 29, two weeks after her only child died. I am not much less than twice her age and childless

She was a tenant farmer’s daughter who barely traveled outside the Tanat Valley in which she was born. My father was a university lecturer and I have traveled to many different countries and lived for 25 years in the cosmopolitan diversity of London

She, although obviously a highly intelligent woman and from an intellectually capable family, had a very limited formal education. I, on the other hand, have been educated at a number of English universities

She was a master of Welsh poetry and, although probably knew some English, was, in all likelihood, not very fluent in it. My Welsh is limited to say the least.

She lived in a significantly oral culture. She didn't write down her verse, for she considered them to be only for her own personal use. They were only recorded because she shared them with her illiterate friend Ruth Evans who then shared them with her fiancé who wrote them down and so they have been retained for posterity. I live in the computer age where we are flooded with endless megabytes of text and images.

She lived in a time of religious revival. The Methodist revival had spread to North Wales, it was growing at a rapid rate and becoming the dominant force in Welsh culture. I was born in the 60s and have lived all my life with a church that has been declining numerically, and in terms of its power and influence.

She changed from being an Anglican into a nonconformist Calvinistic Methodist, even if at the time Methodism was more like a movement within Anglicanism than a formally separate church. I on the other hand was brought up as a Baptist nonconformist and have become an Anglican in later life.

Ann Griffiths was theologically an evangelical Calvinist. She had a firm belief in substitutionary atonement and spoke freely of

humanity's 'total depravity'. I generally find myself at odds with Calvinist theology and find the language of substitutionary atonement and total depravity uncomfortable.

There is, therefore, a great distance between myself and Ann Griffiths and a great distance between her times and our times. As I read her work I did not find it immediately inspiring or, even, very approachable. She seemed to have such different attitudes and such different aspirations. And I was very aware of the linguistic distance between her Welsh poetry and my English prose... was it a gulf which could be crossed?

To start with I was aware that there are connections between us. My mother's family's roots are in North Welsh nonconformity, not so far from where Ann lived and thoughtful, evangelical religion is something I grew up with. Secondly, living here and having visited the Tanat Valley I am familiar with landscapes she would've known – the kites she writes about have even returned to our skies! We also, most importantly, share a common Christian heritage, there are theological and chronological differences, but we are part of the same Christian story.

So as I began to immerse myself in the Ann's verses and letters. I found myself making further, deeper connections. One of the remarkable things about Ann Griffiths is her theological sophistication. In the letter we had read to us she struggles in a very fresh and vivid way with the doctrine of the Trinity. She comes to realize that she had had a flawed understanding of the Trinity. Rather than treating the Holy Spirit as the co-equal third person of the Trinity she had been treating it as a kind of impersonal force. Actually this is something which is very common today, in recent

years some theologians have noticed this tendency in Western theology and have strove to reassert the personhood of the Holy Spirit. This Welsh peasant woman with limited education was centuries ahead of her time! In her verses she grapples with serious ideas and isn't afraid to stretch the erotic spiritual language we find in the Song of Solomon into powerful and striking images – one of which we will encounter in our final hymn. Intellectually she is very vigorous, unafraid to push and explore ideas but in a way which is always self-critical and rooted in personal experience rather than dry academic theorizing.

Ann Griffiths is therefore worth reading, even in translation, for her vigorous spiritual intelligence, but I think there is also another, even more urgent, reason to engage with her in 2013. That is the challenge she brings to discover anew, a heartfelt, and spirit filled religion.

RS Thomas, her successor as a Welsh religious poet, in his poem entitled Ann Griffith describes what he saw as the contemporary religious landscape of Wales:

... these people know me  
only in the thin hymns of  
the mind, in the arid sermons  
and prayers. I am the live God,  
nailed fast to the old tree  
of a nation by its unreal  
tears. I thirst, I thirst  
for the spring water. Draw it up  
for me from your heart's well and I will change  
it to wine upon your un-kissed lips.

RS Thomas is criticizing a religion which has become thin, arid and unreal. He imagines God yearning for the passionate religion that welled up within Ann and gave birth to her poetry like new wine on un-kissed lips. I think this very well describes what Ann Griffiths achieved. Using the resources which she had at her disposal, she gave expression to an authentic Welsh spirituality which was the heart beat of the evangelical revival that changed Wales forever. This revivalism is described by Ruth Bidgood in her poem *Banquet*, which explores the experience of two old North Breconshire women caught up in a revival

That was the start of it – their banqueting-time,  
wine of God, and gold, and bath  
of sweetest milk, damask tent  
and bed of silk, lemon-grove,  
low-hung moon, summer, subtle song,  
their rest, their dawn, their piercing love

The tough, harsh life of these women was transfigured by an encounter with love. Although it doesn't make them different people, it did transform the community of which they were part. It became safer and less violent. The schools and education which sprang from the revival gave people a way out of poverty. It was a genuinely grassroots movement which changed lives.

I believe Ann Griffiths's writing, almost miraculously saved from oblivion by her illiterate friend Ruth Evans, can put us back in touch with this life changing potential of Christianity. For it locates Christianity not in the power of institutions and an established church, not in intellectual arguments and brilliant ideas, not in the

laws and restrictions of morality but in the depths of the human heart.

If we wish to experience that revival of spirituality which inspired Ann Griffiths to sing like a lark on the banks of the river Tanat

If we wish to know that renewal of the way of Christ which moved Ann so deeply

If we want to know for ourselves that reinvention of the church which followed in the wake of revival

Then it must begin in our own hearts, otherwise we will always be groping about in the dark. As she herself says

Way by eye of kite unnoticed

Though it shine as noonday sun;

It is hidden and untrodden

Save for those with faith aglow...

May we find ways to reignite our personal faith and our shared faith, so that we can embrace once again that Way in which Ann Griffiths put her trust, that Way which raises the dead to life and, which straight though tangled, leads to the heavenly city.