EVENSONG 26 APRIL 2020

The great novelist of the Victorian era, Charles Dickens, died on 9 June, 1870: 150 years ago this year.

He was once described as 'an extraordinary bundle of cosmic energy flung into the middle of the nineteenth century which went on creating and creating until it burned itself out'.

The mention of his name often evokes images of sordid squalor—and it is true he often wrote of the conditions under which the poor lived and suffered. But there is a great deal more than this to his writings.

The three readings below illustrate lyricism, drama and pathos: a mere taste of the scope of Dickens's genius.

- **Here is a sublime evocation of a late autumn evening in rural England.**

It was pretty late in the autumn of the year, when the declining sun, struggling through the mist which had obscured it all day, looked brightly down upon a little Wiltshire village, within an easy journey of the fair old town of Salisbury.

Like a sudden flash of memory or spirit kindling up the mind of an old man, it shed a glory upon the scene, in which its departed youth and freshness seemed to live again. The wet grass sparkled in the light; the scanty patches of verdure in the hedges—where a few green twigs yet stood together bravely, resisting to the last the tyranny of nipping winds and early frosts—took heart and brightened up; the stream which had been dull and sullen all day long, broke out into a cheerful smile; the birds began to chirp and twitter on the naked boughs, as though the hopeful creatures half believed that winter had gone by, and spring had come already. The vane upon the tapering spire of the old church glistened from its lofty station in sympathy with the general gladness; and from the ivy-shaded windows, such beams of light shone back upon the glowing day, that it seemed as if the quiet buildings were the hoarding-place of twenty summers, and all their ruddiness and warmth were stored within.

Even those tokens of the season which emphatically whispered of the coming winter, graced the landscape, and, for the moment, tinged its livelier features with no oppressive air of sadness. The fallen leaves, with which the ground was strewn, gave forth a pleasant fragrance, and subduing all harsh sounds of distant feet and wheels, created a repose in gentle unison with the light scattering of seed hither and thither by the distant husbandman, and with the noiseless passage of the plough as it turned up the rich brown earth, and

wrought a graceful pattern in the stubbled fields. On the motionless branches of some trees, autumn berries hung like clusters of coral beads, as in those fabled orchards where the fruit were jewels; others, stripped of all their garniture, stood, each the centre of its little heap of bright red leaves, watching their slow decay; others again, still wearing theirs, had them all crunched and crackled up, as though they had been burnt; about the stems of some were piled, in ruddy mounds, the apples they had borne that year; while others (hardy evergreens this class) showed somewhat stern and gloomy in their vigour, as charged by nature with the admonition that it is not to her more sensitive and joyous favourites she grants the longest term of life. Still athwart their darker boughs, the sunbeams struck out paths of deeper gold; and the red light, mantling in among their swarthy branches, used them as foils to set its brightness off, and aid the lustre of the dying day.

A moment, and its glory was no more. The sun went down beneath the long dark lines of hill and cloud which piled up in the west an airy city, wall heaped on wall, and battlement on battlement; the light was all withdrawn; the shining church turned cold and dark; the stream forgot to smile; the birds were silent; and the gloom of winter dwelt on everything.

(Excerpt from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ch. 2)

- **Here is one of the great dramatic moments of all literature.**

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer nor more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place, overgrown with nettles was a churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana, wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark, flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low, leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant, savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your

throat!' 'Pray don't do it, sir', I pleaded in terror. 'Tell us your name. Quick!' 'Pip, sir'. 'Show us where you live'. I pointed out where our village lay, about a mile from the church. 'You young dog; what fat cheeks you ha' got. Darn me if I couldn't eat 'em.' I earnestly expressed my hope that he wouldn't, and held tighter on to the tombstone on which he had put me; partly to keep myself upon it, and partly to keep from crying. 'Where's your mother?' 'There sir.' He started, made a short run, and looked back over his shoulder. "Also Georgiana". That's my mother.' 'Oh', said he, coming back, 'and is that your father alonger your mother?' 'Yes, sir', said I, 'him too: late of this parish'. 'Who d'ye live with?' 'My sister, sir—Mrs Joe Gargery—wife of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith'. 'Blacksmith, eh?' And he looked at the great iron on his leg. He thought for a moment, then: 'You know what a file is?' 'Yes, sir'. 'And you know what wittles is?' 'Yes, sir'. 'You bring me a file and wittles or I'll have your heart and liver out!' I said I would, and that I would bring them to him at the battery, early in the morning. 'Say Lord strike you dead if you don't!' I said so, and he set me down from the gravestone. 'Goo-good night, sir', I faltered. 'Much of that', said he, glancing about him over the cold wet flat. 'I wish I was a frog. Or a eel!'

At the same time he hugged his shuddering body in both arms—clasping himself, as if to hold himself together—and limped towards the low church wall. As I saw him go, picking his way among the nettles, and among the brambles that bound the green mounds, he looked, in my young eyes, as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in.

*(*Paraphrase of the first chapter of *Great Expectations.)*

- **Here is a poignant reminder of the plight of many of the poor as Dickens recounts the death of Jo, the crossing sweeper, who succumbs at a tender age to ill-usage and neglect.**

Jo is in a sleep or in a stupor today, and Allan Woodcourt, newly arrived, stands by him, looking down upon his wasted form. After a while, he softly seats himself upon the bedside with his face towards him, and touches his chest and heart.

The trooper stands in the doorway, still and silent. Phil has stopped in a low clinking noise, with his little hammer in his hand. Mr Woodcourt looks round with that grave professional interest and attention on his face, and, glancing significantly at the trooper, signs to Phil to carry his table out.

' "Well, Jo! What is the matter? Don't be frightened."

"I thought," says Jo, who has started, and is looking round, "I thought I was in Tom-all-Alone's agin. Ain't there nobody here but you, Mr Woodcot?"

"Nobody."

"And I ain't took back to Tom-all-Alone's. Am I, sir?"

"No." Jo closes his eyes, muttering, "I'm wery thankful."

After watching him closely a little while, Allan puts his mouth very near his ear, and says to him in a low, distinct voice:

"Jo! Did you ever know a prayer?"

"Never knowd nothink, sir."

"Not so much as one short prayer?"

"No, sir. Nothink at all. Mr Chadbands he wos a-prayin wunst at Mr Sangsby's and I heerd him, but he sounded as if he wos a-speakin' to hisself, and not to me. He prayed a lot, but I couldn't make out nothink on it. Different times, there was other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone's a-prayin, but they all mostly sed as the t'other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talkin to theirselves. I never knowd what it wos all about."

It takes him a long time to say this. After a short relapse into sleep or stupor, he makes, of a sudden, a strong effort to get out of bed.

"Stay, Jo! What now?"

"It's time for me to go to that there berryin ground, sir," he returns with a wild look.

"Lie down, Jo. … Jo, my poor fellow.!"

"I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I'm a-gropin—a-gropin—let me catch hold of your hand."

"Jo, can you say what I say?"

"I'll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it's good."

"OUR FATHER."

"Our Father! —yes, that's very good, sir."

"WHICH ART IN HEAVEN."

"Art in heaven—is the light a-comin, sir?"

"It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!"

"Hallowed be—thy— "

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

(Excerpt from *Bleak House*, ch. 47)