

Calais, August, 1802

Sometime around the commencement of the year 1802 it was possible for English men and women to return to France – to vacation, do sight seeing, *in other words get out of England!* And the seaside city of Calais was a favorite vacation spot. And so the poet William Wordsworth happened to be in Calais at that time.

It seems the return of such visitors was occasioned by the worst of the French Revolution having ended, i.e. the Reign of Terror and a war between France and Britain. The settling down of events in France was attributable to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who on August 15th, his birthday, was made in effect dictator for life (he would crown himself Emperor two years later). Dictator yes – as the quick fix to political disorder.

Wordsworth, being an Englishman and committed to the momentum of a more democratic form of order, was uneasy about Napoleon's dictatorship – and at the acclamation it received. He was upset at the way all levels of society rejoiced over the event (which would eventually lead France into wars of conquest and ultimately its Waterloo as the pariah of all Europe).

And so whom did Wordsworth quote to express his concern? None other than the Jesus of today's Gospel! The poem is simply called *Calais, August, 1802*

It begins: *Is it a Reed that's shaken by the wind, / Or what is it that ye go forth to see?* It then describes those who acclaim the event: *Lords, Lawyers, Statesmen, Squires of low degree, / Men known, and men unknown, Sick, Lame, and Blind, / Post forward all, like Creatures of one kind, / With first-fruit offerings crowd to bend the knee / In France, before the new-born Majesty.*

So universal is the hope that this one fellow – good at war and a military kind of order – will save us all. You can understand this, after everything France had gone through during its revolution. Peace at any price, prosperity enforced.

Wordsworth is not convinced. *'Tis ever thus. Ye Men of prostrate mind! / A seemly reverence may be paid to power; / But that's a loyal virtue, never sown / In haste, nor springing with a transient shower: / When truth, when sense, when liberty were flown / What hardship had it been to wait an hour? Shame on you, feeble Heads, to slavery prone!*

Even so, Jesus says today; *What did you go out in the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?* [In modern parlance we might say: a wimp?] No, says Jesus – you went out to see a man of faith, hope, principle . . . a prophet who can predict the future because he can see through the present – and tell it like it is – not in simply political terms [that may even leave you more confused] but – yes – in theological language, which seems to be little respected or even understood in the public discourse of nations nowadays.

If I were living at the time of William Wordsworth and were asked who among my contemporaries refused to be a “reed shaken by the wind” – I would nominate: *William Wordsworth, for writing this poem.*

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