

Grundtvig's Vartov Sermons: An appreciation

By A. M. Allchin

Professor Donald Allchin utters a shout of appreciation, congratulation and gratitude to the editors of the latest series of Grundtvig's sermons [*Grundtvig Prædikener i Vartov*, vol. I-III with commentaries, 1839-1842, Copenhagen, 2003], for progress in the fulfilment of a long-standing *desideratum* – access, both scholarly and *folkelig*, to the remarkable record, virtually coextensive with his working life, of Grundtvig's preaching. These most recent volumes affirm that the sermons are a treasure-store for students of the theology which Grundtvig developed in and taught through both his sermons and the hymns which were generated alongside them [editorial comment].

It is difficult now to realise, difficult even to remember that it was only in the 1980s that the systematic publication of Grundtvig's sermons was begun. Only in 1983 did the determined effort to get this major body of Grundtvig's work into print get under way. Here are his weekly sermons, Sunday by Sunday throughout the year, from 1811 in Udby until the last week of his life in 1872 at Vartov. For more than sixty years Grundtvig was steadily teaching the Word of God, taking the Gospel for the Sunday or the feast day concerned and expounding it to his congregation wherever it might be, in Copenhagen or Praestø or in Udby. Of course, in the early years there were periods when Grundtvig had no pulpit from which to speak. But after the intermission from 1826-32 these periods came to an end. As Holger Begtrup points out in the introduction to the selection of Vartov Sermons (1839-1860) which he published in 1924, of the sixty-one years of Grundtvig's ordained ministry there were only fourteen when he had no regular possibility of preaching. For the remaining forty-seven years he was almost always actively and methodically engaged in this work.

However, this great body of teaching, surely a major resource for studying the development and growth of Grundtvig's understanding of the Christian faith, has remained in large measure inaccessible. It was still possible in the 1980s for a leading authority on Grundtvig to write an introductory study of his life intended for an international readership in which the sermons are dismissed in less than a page as works which no longer greatly concern or interest us. It is only in looking back to that period that I myself have seen how vital for the growth of my own understanding of Grundtvig was the publication of

Christian Thodberg's new edition of the sermons of the 1820s and 30s a publication which eventually extended to fourteen volumes.

Of course Grundtvig was not only a great and consistent preacher. He was also a great hymn-writer. Indeed it is surely as a hymn-writer that he is at his greatest. But to understand the whole substance of the hymns they need to be taken in conjunction with the sermons, as Thodberg has never ceased insisting. Indeed it is the interaction between these two bodies of work, both situated at the heart of the Church's worship, which is finally of supreme importance, not only for understanding Grundtvig's faith and theology but for understanding Grundtvig himself, Grundtvig with his unique combination of imaginative genius and theological insight. In this context we can see how valuable the continuing publication of the sermons is going to be for another great project which awaits us in the twenty-first century, the construction of the first full biographical study of Grundtvig to be made since 1913.

Meanwhile I come back to the recent publication of the first four volumes of the new series of the Vartov sermons. This brief contribution of mine to the pages of *Grundtvig-Studier* is not at all the thorough detailed survey and evaluation of that project which it deserves. Ideally, I should have wished to undertake such an exercise but lack of time and unexpected hindrances made that impossible. What you have here is something altogether simpler and more basic: a *SHOUT* of appreciation, congratulation and gratitude, coming from the other side of the North Sea, to all of those engaged in the project in Denmark and especially to the director and inspirer of the whole, Professor Christian Thodberg and the group of friends and collaborators who are working with him, Jette Holm, Elisabeth A. Glenthøj, Lars Toftdahl, Leif Kallesen and Johannes B. Glenthøj. To you all there comes this heartfelt shout of gratitude for all the work you have undertaken.

Looking at the new volumes one is struck first of all by their attractive and beautiful format; they are a delight to handle and a delight to read, though not well adapted for reading in bed! The editorial work continues with the same style and method and with the same skill and expertise as it had before in the volumes produced during the 1980s. The content too shows signs of continuity. The preacher is certainly the same man. But of course in the teaching itself there are signs of difference. We have reached a new era in Grundtvig's life. These are the Vartov years; Grundtvig has his own church; not only is he the preacher, he is also the one who presides at the two great sacraments, at baptism, at communion and also at

confirmations. Here he is able to expound his fully developed theology of the crucial place of the sacraments in the life of each believer and in the life of the whole Church, past and present. Here in the context of the prayer of the people and the development of hymnody we find the place where the risen Christ makes himself known in the power of the Spirit, the risen Christ who gathers his people into one, renewing them with the gift of his life which has overcome death, and renewing them with his creative and redeeming love which has broken down all the barriers which can divide them from one another and from God. Here again the personal and the corporate are indissolubly intertwined.

One has the impression that as the preacher is getting older, looking back over a worshipping life of so many decades, he comes more and more to value the temporal dimension of the Church's existence, to see more clearly the power of the Church's anamnesis, that anamnesis in which through the active presence of the risen Christ we find ourselves at one with the words and events of the Gospels themselves and also with our own earliest memories of the first discoveries of childhood. In Grundtvig's case that includes the earliest experience of the joy of the Church's festivals, the powerful impetus of the age-old hymns of Christmas and Easter, the unfeigned jubilation of the village congregation. It is no surprise that the little church at Vartov in the middle years of the nineteenth century became the heart of a whole renewal of prayer and praise which spread out across Denmark.

All this was the result of the coming together of human and divine, of simplicity and depth, of solemnity and joy, of what is local and particular with what is universal and all-embracing. One sees something of this in the way in which on the Second Sunday of Epiphany in 1840, Grundtvig insists on bringing together the memory of the marriage in Cana in Galilee, with the thoughts of the people about the death of King Frederik VI and the accession of King Christian VIII with the cancelled golden wedding of the one and the celebration of the silver wedding of the other. There are realities here which should not be kept apart, which come together in the thanksgiving and prayer of the Christian people.

There are other aspects of this coming together of things too often kept apart, which we can see in these sermons, for instance, in relation to the presence of Mary in the Gospel narratives, and more generally the whole Marian element in Grundtvig's teaching. Simply to ponder the Annunciation sermon for the year 1841 opens up a whole variety of perspectives, about the complementary roles of men and women in society as a whole, about the possibility of mutual understanding and

exchange between separated Christian traditions and about the inner reconciliation of thought with feeling and heart with mind. We know from sermons published shortly after Grundtvig's death that in his last years he was still pondering these themes, still pondering the mystery of "the divine marriage-bond between heaven and earth which was first joined, then broken and in the end restored for time and for eternity".

There is much more that needs to be said about the sermons already published in this new edition. Meanwhile we must wait with both patience and impatience for the volumes which are next to come. Surely they too will be eagerly welcomed and will prove fruitful in all kinds of unexpected ways.