

Something worth reading

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Quite often when people talk about a well known book that you may have read at school or whilst growing up, it could well occur to you that you hadn't really cottoned then to what the book was about.

I experienced this with George Eliot's *Silas Marner* which I re-read recently. I was surprised at the depth of the story - describing the way life turns corners, and yet in the end, the past and present coalescing into a well wrought plan.

The story is set in the early nineteenth century and is about Silas Marner, a weaver by trade who starts off as a committed member of a closed Christian community in a Northern town. As a man of upright standing in the community there, Silas is asked to keep vigil over a sick member of the community. Silas falls asleep briefly and when he wakes up, money is discovered missing from the room. Despite his protestations that he knew nothing about the theft, he is blamed. Silas points to his blameless conduct and standing in the church community, but the religious community decides his guilt by first praying for guidance and then casting lots. The lots go against Silas and despite his innocence, he is blamed. Understandably Silas is outraged at the injustice and concludes that there was no divine control of the world.

Silas leaves the town and settles in Raveloe (another small town) and immerses himself in his work, only taking joy in the money that he has saved stored in little bags, until one day someone breaks into his cottage and takes away all his money. He is utterly distraught.

The story progresses further, when with one day a little girl crawls into his cottage, Silas picks up the baby girl but sees outside nearby the girl's mother lying dead on the road. He adopts the girl, looks after her and his whole world changes. He discovers a definite purpose and joy in his life. The girl grows up to love Silas as her father and chooses to live with him and take care of him even when her real father is discovered.

George Eliot (whose real name was Mrs Evans), wasn't given to overt moralising, but the novel touches on complicated theological debates. How could something done with prayer come up with unjust consequences? Being wrongly blamed and then robbed of all honest earnings seems to go against our understanding of natural justice.

But these things do happen, and sometimes with all good intentions and prayers, things do not go as wished for. What can come across is that we are powerless in the face of circumstances.

That being so, our lives are not governed by the flip of a coin; both sides equally viable, heads or tail. There is value in standing in the right corner, doing what is right in all circumstances, being governed by the light of truth: as mentioned by Christ 'ye are the light of the world'. The community which made the decision to blame Silas did so knowingly, by closing their eyes to his defence.

Silas eventually did find joy and happiness in caring for the little girl who had walked into his cottage. One can also surmise that there was a realisation that his early 'religious life' was shallow in seeking contentment within a closed community, blind to wider compassion or love for the neighbour in its truest sense - as taught by Christ.

There may also have been a realisation that his love of money later had shut him to what life was really about. And perhaps the love and care he bestowed on the child was what was needed for him to be led back to church and community in the end. He may well have also pondered whether after all there may have been a higher power which had been putting things right in his life.

Learning to care for just one person can open the way to greater love. What happens in future is not for us to know but what connects our sorrows and joys, our past, present and future, is the arc of love - God's love, present in the tough times as well as in the good times. Listening to the ups and downs of Silas's life Mrs Winthrop, a plain speaking village woman in the novel comes to the conclusion that God above us is much more merciful than we think and if anything looks unclear to us it is because there are plenty of things we don't know.