

Devotional Paper April 2021
Wonder Women! – Then and Now

Anne Bronte was the 6th and youngest child of Maria and Rev. Patrick Bronte. She was born on 17/1/1820 and lived most of her life in the now famous Parsonage at Hawarth until her untimely death at the age of 29 from TB in Scarborough on 28/5/1849. She is probably the least known of the three literary sisters, publishing two novels; Agnes Grey in 1847 and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in 1848 and 59 poems. Her last words to Charlotte were: "Take Courage, Charlotte, take courage."

Anne had been forced to live courageously; she faced a great deal of tragedy in her life - her mother died when she was just 20 months old and at 5 she lost two sisters – Maria and Elizabeth. Branwell, her brother and Emily, the sister closest to her in age died in 1848 – just a few months before her own death. She herself was often unwell, coming close to death in her teens. She spent unhappy times as a governess.

All of these situations take courage, but where I think Anne displayed most courage was in her engagement with her Christian beliefs and the cultural norms of her day and her determination to write truthfully about such things, sometimes attracting great criticism.

At the age of twenty, Anne decided to read and study the Bible from beginning to end in order that she might make up her own mind about its contents. Her Bible which now sits in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York contains these words that she wrote: "What, Where and How Shall I Be When I Have Got Through?" Anne's determination to engage with her faith began at least four years earlier when she was just 16. She was attending Roe Head school in Mirfield, West Yorkshire when she became seriously ill. Fearing she was going to die, she requested that she be visited by a minister of religion. In spite of the fact that she was an Anglican, she requested that the minister of nearby Wellhouse Moravian Church, James La Trobe visit her. Anne had decided that she would inquire for herself when she wanted truth. Calvinism was very influential at the time – that in order to be saved, you had to be one of God's chosen ones. La Trobe wrote in a letter to a friend that he found Anne to have extensive Biblical knowledge, but that she saw salvation as more "thro the law than through the Gospel." He was able to reassure Anne of the mercy and grace of God and ease her spiritual fears. Anne came to believe that everyone would eventually get to heaven thanks to a loving and forgiving God. She expressed this belief via Helen Huntingdon, the heroine of her novel The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. A reviewer described the novel as "repugnant to Scripture and in direct opposition to the teaching of the Anglican Church."

In 1847, Anne's first novel, Agnes Grey was published to mixed reviews. It is the story of a young woman who finds work as a governess, much like Anne herself. But Anne was not a person to allow other people's criticisms to deter her from the path she felt she should tread. Only God was to be her judge. In April 1848, she wrote what is considered to be her most famous poem, The Narrow Way. The last few lines are as follows:

What matters who should whisper blame

Or who should scorn or slight?

What matters – if thy God approve,

And if within thy breast,

Thou feel the comfort of His love

The earnest of his rest?

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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was published in 1848 and was a great success, selling out in six weeks. Its theme of a woman leaving a violent marriage with her child challenged the social and legal structures of the day – until 1870 married women had no legal existence independent of her husband, she could not own property, sue for divorce or have custody of her children. Not surprisingly, the novel attracted much criticism including from her sister Charlotte. Anne was unrepentant, she wrote a new preface to the second edition in which she justified the novel's contents:

“Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use;when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it...”

Anne was not “a rebel without a cause.” Her thoughts and ideas were rooted in her deep-seated Christian faith and it was her sincere belief that it was her God-given calling to express them.

For Discussion/Reflection:

1. When Anne decided at the age of twenty to read the Bible completely, she clearly expected that this would have some impact on her life. Do we read the Bible expecting this to happen to us? Can you think of a passage which has “changed” you or impacted on you in some way?
2. Anne was not someone who could just accept the status quo, she challenged both society and established religious belief – what role do you feel we have as individuals and together as a Church to challenge the “norms” of society and belief?
3. Anne showed great courage in how she lived her life and exhorted her sister, Charlotte to live courageously. Can you think of anything in particular that you need courage to face at the moment? If you are able to share this with others, perhaps you could end this discussion with a prayer together asking God to grant you courage. If you are reading this alone, spend some time thinking and praying about the particular situation that you need courage to face.

Sr Janet Cooper.