

25<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## BURNS

**"The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,  
Is king o' men for a' that."**

*Robert Burns, A Man's a Man for a' That*

In 1788, on his application for a post as an exciseman, our national poet, Robert Burns, listed his religious affiliation as "Church of Scotland". Yet all his life he had rejected the Calvinist theology, piety and hypocritical social attitudes that were predominant in Church of his day. That same year he wrote about religion in these terms: "It becomes a man of sense to think for himself." A friend addressed Burns in a letter as "Christless Bobbie."

I worked in the hospice with a man who'd had the same experience of the Church as Burns. A train-driver all his life and a Union Official with the NUR, he'd been brought up in a devoutly Christian home. But in his late teens he began to question some long-held beliefs and the attitudes of the Church to social issues, and arranged to speak with his minister. But, far from his minister listening and creating a helpful dialogue, he "flew into a rage", and told him that "no good Christian man should be asking questions like these". From that day, he never darkened a church's door.

Now in his 80s, he asked me two questions: "Is my cancer a punishment for me rejecting the Church?" and "Has my life been any good?" The answer to the first question was a resounding "No!" – though it took longer to explore than a simple one-word answer. And the answer to the second question was an emphatic, "Yes!" And I said, "Anyone who gives a life's work for better conditions for working people, and whose passions are for equality, fairness and helping those in need, seems to me to have done good with his life." He died three days later, and at peace.

What would *I* say to Robert Burns on this "Burns' Night"? Exactly what I said to that man. Anyone who gives a voice to working people and who highlights imbalances in society has done good with his life. A "Christless Bobbie"? I don't think so, not someone who can give me this:

### **Prayer for today**

*Then let us pray that come what way (As come it will for a' that),  
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth, shall bear the gree for a' that.*

*For a' that an' a' that, it's comin' yet for a' that*

*That man to man, the world o'er, shall brithers be for a' that.*

(Bear the gree = Have the first place)