

23rd July 2024

Renown

**"O vain renown of human enterprise,
no longer lasting than the greenery of the trees."**

Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, 'Purgatorio'

As I touched on yesterday ... in his 18th century comic ballad, *The Diverting History of John Gilpin*, William Cowper describes the poem's central character as "a citizen of credit and renown". Whatever John Gilpin did to earn such "credit", I hope he didn't get too hung up on "renown".

I watched a TV detective drama recently, in which the principal character, a somewhat eccentric but successful detective, had been summoned by the Chief Constable to receive an award for outstanding service. It appears to her colleagues and the wider community, therefore, that she is worthy of "renown", and public renown at that. But she takes a different view, and, absolutely in character, this detective chooses not to attend the ceremony. Instead, in the drama's closing scene, she elects to use the time in helping a young family who had been struggling to cope.

Renown may have its day, but she knew well enough the truth of Dante's words – that it would always be a transient thing, "no longer lasting than the greenery of the trees". Instead, helping a needy family could have a lasting, life-changing effect, beyond anyone's imagining.

The cosmologist, Fred Hoyle, once warned the Nobel physicist, Murray Gell-Mann, about the perils of fame and renown. "If you ever accomplish anything important in life," he said, "the world will conspire to keep you from doing anything else again. Everyone will want you to give a speech, write an article, serve on a committee." If that's renown, I can see why Fred Hoyle would discourage people from basking in its glow.

St Matthew records Jesus as saying this:

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

There's your renown, right there, outlasting the greenery of the best of trees, even if Dante might consider things to be different.

A prayer for today

Lord, let me be rewarded by knowing I'm doing good. Amen