

18th January 2025

Ferries

**“A chieftain to the Highlands bound
Cries ‘Boatman, do not tarry!
And I’ll give thee a silver pound
To row us o’er the ferry.”**

Thomas Campbell, *Lord Ullin’s Daughter*

Lord Ullin’s Daughter is a ballad set in the Northwest isles of Scotland. The heroine of the poem only speaks once, and yet the entire poem is focussed on her. The boatman agrees to row across a stormy passage after seeing innocence in Lord Ullin’s daughter’s face. Crucial to the poem is Lord Ullin’s conversation with this ferryman. The lord’s daughter is at the door of death. She is the most important thing in a father’s life. Yet his possessiveness of her is encouraging the young woman to rebel.

I’ll not spoil the whole tale for you, as it’ll be better if you read the ballad for yourself. You’ll find that there are several morals and patterns of behaviour which arise from Campbell’s evocative narrative. But to me, the ferryman, the “boatman” of the poem, is the key metaphor. His task, of course, in physical terms, is to row his passengers “o’er the ferry”, from one place to another, to carry his charges safely from here to there, and to set them on their way for the remainder of their journey. But his conversations with Lord Ullin take the metaphor from the physical to the metaphysical. For what is a father, lord or commoner, but a ferryman himself for his children, seeing them across a divide, doing his best for them, and letting them go forward to whatever journey awaits them.

I have the joy of having three children, all of them now in their forties, and making their own way in life. When I talk with them in their adult lives, and hear of their values and standards, passions and abilities, interests and dreams, I rejoice. For I am proud of my children and assured that their life-journeys will continue with courage, faith and cheerfulness.

Can I choose their journeys for them? No I can’t. Will I be with them forever? No, I won’t. But the question that matters most is, “Have I been a good ferryman?” And with pride I can answer, “Yes, I have!” – and I’ve never even needed a “silver pound” as a payment for rowing them across!

A prayer for today

*God of the oceans and seas, help me steer my boat well,
because those on board are very precious – to me and to you. Amen*