

October 2014

To thee, O Jesu, I direct my eyes;
To thee my hands, to thee my humble knees;
To thee my heart shall offer sacrifice;
To thee my thoughts, who my thoughts only sees;
To thee my self, – my self and all I give;
To thee I die; to thee I only live.

attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh, 1552?-1618



This is the sort of prayer to offer at a moment of decision, when what happens next will make a difference. Sir Walter Raleigh must have used such a prayer constantly, as he found himself in one life or death situation after another. He recognises that God sees beyond the external circumstances – ‘who my thoughts only sees’ – to the ultimate reality we live in. A possibly impending death focuses the mind, and makes us think about what is of lasting value.

Walter Raleigh, son of another Walter Raleigh was born in Devon around 1552. Not much is known about his early life, though he spent some time in Ireland, taking part in the suppression of rebellions and two infamous massacres, at Rathlin Island and Smerwick. Later he became the landlord of properties confiscated from the Irish. He found favour with Queen Elizabeth I, and was knighted in 1585. In 1591 he secretly married Elizabeth Throckmorton, one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, without permission, for which he and his wife were consigned to the Tower of London. After they were released they went to live at Raleigh’s estate in Sherborne, Dorset. In 1594 Raleigh heard about the fabulous ‘City of gold’ in South America, and sailed to find it, publishing an exaggerated account that contributed to the ‘El Dorado’ legend. After a further period of imprisonment in the Tower, for allegedly being involved in a plot against Elizabeth’s successor, James I, he set off to look for El Dorado again, in 1611. This expedition was unsuccessful and his men ransacked a Spanish outpost. When he returned to England, he was arrested to appease the Spanish and executed on 29 October 1618. He is best known for introducing tobacco to Britain.

Colin Lunt