

~Other Speakers S-Z: Alexander Whyte:

'He sent me as a spy to see the land and to try the ford.'— Samuel Rutherford.

Samuel Rutherford, the author of the seraphic Letters, was born in the south of Scotland in the year of our Lord 1600. Thomas Goodwin was born in England in the same year, Robert Leighton in 1611, Richard Baxter in 1615, John Owen in 1616, John Bunyan in 1628, and John Howe in 1630. A little vellum-covered volume now lies open before me, the title-page of which runs thus:—'Joshua Redivivus, or Mr. Rutherford's Letters, now published for the use of the people of God: but more particularly for those who now are, or may afterwards be, put to suffering for Christ and His cause. By a well-wisher to the work and to the people of God. Printed in the year 1664.' That is all. It would not have been safe in 1664 to say more. There is no editor's name on the title-page, no publisher's name, and no place of printing or of publication. Only two texts of forewarning and reassuring Scripture, and then the year of grace 1664.

Joshua Redivivus: That is to say, Moses' spy and pioneer, Moses' successor and the captain of the Lord's covenanted host come back again. A second Joshua sent to Scotland to go before God's people in that land and in that day; a spy who would both by his experience and by his testimony cheer and encourage the suffering people of God. For all this Samuel Rutherford truly was. As he said of himself in one of his letters to Hugh Mackail, he was indeed a spy sent out to make experiment upon the life of silence and separation, banishment and martyrdom, and to bring back a report of that life for the vindication of Christ and for the support and encouragement of His people. It was a happy thought of Rutherford's first editor, Robert M'Ward, his old Westminster Assembly secretary, to put at the top of his title-page, Joshua risen again from the dead, or, Mr. Rutherford's Letters written from his place of banishment in Aberdeen.

In selecting his twelve spies, Moses went on the principle of choosing the best and the ablest men he could lay hold of in all Israel. And in selecting Samuel Rutherford to be the first sufferer for His covenanted people in Scotland, our Lord took a man who was already famous for his character and his services. For no man of his age in broad Scotland stood higher as a scholar, a theologian, a controversialist, a preacher and a very saint than Samuel Rutherford. He had been settled at Anwoth on the Solway in 1627, and for the next nine years he had lived such a noble life among his people as to make Anwoth famous as long as Jesus Christ has a Church in Scotland. As we say Bunyan and Bedford, Baxter and Kidderminster, Newton and Olney, Edwards and Northampton, Boston and Ettrick, M'Cheyne and St. Peter's, so we say Rutherford and Anwoth.

His talents, his industry, his scholarship, his preaching power, his pastoral solicitude and his saintly character all combined to make Rutherford a marked man both to the friends and to the enemies of the truth. His talents and his industry while he was yet a student in Edinburgh had carried him to the top of his classes, and all his days he could write in Latin better than either in Scotch or English. His habits of work at Anwoth soon became a very proverb. His people boasted that their minister was always at his books, always among his parishioners, always at their sick-beds and their death-beds, always catechising their children and always alone with his God. And then the matchless preaching of the parish church of Anwoth. We can gather what made the Sabbaths of Anwoth so memorable both to Rutherford and to his people from the books we still have from those great Sabbaths: The Trial and the Triumph of Faith; Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself; and such like. Rutherford was the 'most moving and the most affectionate of preachers,' a preacher determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, but not so much crucified, as crucified and risen again—crucified indeed, but now glorified. Rutherford's life for his people at Anwoth has something altogether superhuman and unearthly about it. His correspondents in his own day and his critics in our day stumble at his too intense devotion to his charge; he lived for his congregation, they tell us, almost to the neglect of his wife and children. But by the time of his banishment his home was desolate, his wife and children were in the grave. And all the time and thought and love they had got from him while they were alive had, now that they were dead, returned with new and intensified devotion to his people and his parish.

Fair Anwoth by the Solway,
To me thou still art dear,
E'en from the verge of heaven
I drop for thee a tear.
Oh! if one soul from Anwoth
Meet me at God's right hand,
My heaven will be two heavens
In Immanuel's Land.

This then was the spy chosen by Jesus Christ to go out first of all the ministers of Scotland into the life of banishment in that day, so as to try its fords and taste its vineyards, and to report to God's straitened and persecuted people at home.

To begin with, it must always be remembered that Rutherford was not laid in irons in Aberdeen, or cast into a dungeon. He was simply deprived of his pulpit and of his liberty to preach, and was sentenced to live in silence in the town of Aberdeen. Like Dante, another great spy of God's providence and grace, Rutherford was less a prisoner than an exile. But if any man thinks that simply to be an exile is a small punishment, or a light cross, let him read the psalms and prophecies of Babylon, the Divine Comedy, and Rutherford's Letters. Yes, banishment was banishment; exile was exile; silent Sabbaths were silent Sabbaths; and a borrowed fireside with all its willing heat was still a borrowed fireside; and, spite of all that the best people of Aberdeen could do for Samuel Rutherford, he felt the friendliest stairs of that city to be very steep to his feet, and its best bread to be very salt in his mouth.

But, with all that, Samuel Rutherford would have been but a blind and unprofitable spy for the best people of God in Scotland, for Marion M'Naught, and Lady Kenmure, and Lady Culross, for the Cardonesses, father, and mother, and son, and for Hugh Mackail, and such like, if he had tasted nothing more bitter than borrowed bread in Aberdeen, and climbed nothing steeper than a granite stair. 'Paul had need,' Rutherford writes to Lady Kenmure, 'of the devil's service to buffet him, and far more, you and me.' I am downright afraid to go on to tell you how Satan was sent to buffet Samuel Rutherford in his banishment, and how he was sifted as wheat is sifted in his exile. I would not expose such a saint of God to every eye, but I look for fellow-worshippers here on these Rutherford Sabbath evenings, who know something of the plague of their own hearts, and who are comforted in their banishment and battle by nothing more than when they are assured that they are not alone in the deep darkness. 'When Christian had travelled in this disconsolate condition for some time he thought he heard the voice of a man as going before him and saying, "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no ill, for Thou art with me." Then he was glad, and that for these reasons:—Firstly, because he gathered from thence that some one who feared God was in this valley as well as himself. Secondly, for that he perceived that God was with them though in that dark and dismal state; and why not, thought he, with me? Thirdly, for that he hoped, could he overtake them, to have company by and by.' And, in like manner, I am certain that it will encourage and save from despair some who now hear me if I just report to them some of the discoveries and experiences of himself that Samuel Rutherford made among the sifting and buffetings of his Aberdeen exile. Writing to Lady Culross, he says:—'O my guiltiness, the follies of my youth and the neglects of my calling, they all do stare me in the face here;... the world hath sadly mistaken me: no man knoweth what guiltiness is in me.' And to Lady Boyd, speaking of some great lessons he had learnt in the school of adversity, he says, 'In the third place, I have seen here my abominable vileness, and it is such that if I were well known no one in all the kingdom would ask me how I do.... I am a deeper hypocrite and a shallower professor than any one could believe. Madam, pity me, the chief of sinners.' And, again, to the Laird of Carlton: 'Woe, woe is me, that men should think there is anything in me. The house-devils that keep me company and this sink of corruption make me to carry low sails... But, howbeit I am a wretched captive of sin, yet my Lord can hew heaven out of worse timber than I am, if worse there be.' And to Lady Kenmure: 'I am somebody in the books of my friends,... but there are armies of thoughts within me, saying the contrary, and laughing at the mistakes of my many friends. Oh! if my inner side were only seen!' Ah no, my brethren, no land is so fearful to them that are sent to search it out as their own heart. 'The land,' said the ten spies, 'is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; the cities are walled up to heaven, and very great, and the children of Anak dwell in them. We were in their sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in our own sight.' Ah, no! No stair is so steep as the stair of sanctification, no bread is so salt as that which is baked for a man of God out of the wild oats of his past sin and his present sinfulness. Even Joshua and Caleb, who brought back a good report of the land, did not deny that the children of Anak were there, or that their walls went up to heaven, or that they, the spies, were as grasshoppers before their foes: Caleb and Joshua only said that, in spite of all that, if the Lord delighted in His people, He both could and would give them a land flowing with milk and honey. And be it recorded and remembered to his credit and his praise that, with all his self-discoveries and self-accusings, Rutherford did not utter one single word of doubt or despair; so far from that was he, that in one of his letters to Hugh M'Kail he tells us that some of his correspondents have written to him that he is possibly too joyful under the cross. Blunt old Knockbrev, for one, wrote to his old minister to restrain somewhat his ecstasy. So true was it, what Rutherford said of himself to David Dickson, that he was 'made up of extremes.' So he was, for I know no man among all my masters in personal religion who unites greater extremes in himself than Samuel Rutherford. Who weeps like Rutherford over his banishment from Anwoth, while all the time who is so feasted in Christ's palace in Aberdeen? Who loathes himself like Rutherford? Not Bunyan, not Brea, not Boston; and, at the same time, who is so transported and lost to himself in the beauty and sweetness of Christ? As we read his raptures we almost say with cautious old Knockbrev, that possibly Rutherford is somewhat too full of ecstasy for this fallen, still unsanctified, and still so slippery world.

It took two men to carry back the cluster of grapes the spies cut down at and there is sweetness and strength and ecstasy enough for ten men in any one of Rutherford's inebriated Letters. 'See what the land is, and whether it be fat or lean, and bring back of the fruits of the land. This was the order given by Moses to the twelve spies. And, whether the land was fat or lean, Moses and all Israel could judge for themselves when the spies laid down their load of grapes at Moses' feet. 'I can report nothing but good of the land,' said Joshua Redivivus, as he sent back such clusters of its vineyards and such pots of its honey to Hugh Mackail, to Marion M'Naught, and to Lady Kenmure. And then, when all his letters were collected and published, never surely, since the Epistles of Paul and the Gospel of John, had such clusters of encouragement and such intoxicating cordials been laid to the lips of the Church of Christ.

Our old authors tell us that after the northern tribes had tasted the warmth and the sweetness of the wines of Italy they could take no rest till they had conquered and taken possession of that land of sunshine where such grapes so plentifully grew. And how many hearts have been carried captive with the beauty and the grace of Christ, and with the land of Immanuel, where He drinks wine with the saints in His Father's house, by the reading of Samuel Rutherford's Letters, the day of the Lord will alone declare.

Oh! Christ He is the Fountain,
The deep sweet Well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted,
More deep I'll drink above.
There to an ocean fulness
His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's Land.