

A Lesson in Harmony

This play was written for St Aloysius College Glasgow
for Christian Unity Week 1996

Dramatis Personae

John Knox

John Ogilvie SJ

An Angel

KNOX In truth, I cannot get the hang of the instrument.

(Enter John Ogilvie. He is dressed in a white robe and carries a harp)

OGILVIE I perceive that you are having difficulty mastering the harp. I, too, am encountering a few problems in that area. How long have you been practising?

KNOX It's really difficult to say. How can you mark the passage of time when you exist in an eternal "today"? I think I have been in here for about 400 years. I do recall that I was born in the 16th century after our Lord's nativity.

OGILVIE Why – so was I. How interesting! I also was born in the 16th century and in spite of having been up here so long I still can't play. (*He plucks his harp discordantly.*) Perhaps I would be blessed if it were the bagpipes.

KNOX Did you say "bagpipes"? Don't tell me you were born in Scotland?

OGILVIE Indeed I was. Are you hinting that you too are a Scot? (*Knox nods*) How remarkable! I should have known by your accent, but of course in Paradise we all talk in the tongue of angels not of men.

KNOX Yes. Accents are out. But as you guessed – my native land was Scotland. And I agree, it is an amazing coincidence. It was a challenging and exciting time back then.

OGILVIE So much religious controversy. It was indeed a dangerous period in our history.

KNOX To be sure. As I matured and began to think deeply I decided I had to change my religion.

OGILVIE Amazing! Astounding! I also came to that decision and served my new faith in Holy Orders.

KNOX Again – an incredible co-incidence! I, too, ministered to Christ's flock. I can scarcely believe that we had so much in common. You will tell me next that you, like I, travelled widely on the continent and met some of the great religious figures of the time!

OGILVIE I sure did. Exactly!

KNOX That you faced persecution and suffering for the Gospel.

OGILVIE Precisely. As you so correctly stated – we have so many things in common. In fact

we seem to have interchangeable autobiographies.

KNOX It seems too good to be true – that we should meet like this after all this time. Why, I feel as if I've known you all my life – or do I mean death?

OGILVIE You obviously converted to the true faith and as a result have been received into Paradise as the Lord promised.

KNOX And you also, brother – er – what is your name, by the way?

OGILVIE My name is John. Don't tell me – you are also called John. Good Lord, I can scarcely believe it.

KNOX As you said – it's amazing, not to mention astounding, but it's true. My name is indeed John. This whole business is extraordinary. As a matter of interest – now that we are such firm friends – what made you become a Protestant?

OGILVIE Don't you mean what great faith from God impelled me to embrace the Holy Catholic faith?

KNOX I certainly DO NOT. I think you're becoming a bit muddled. Wait a minute! Wait a wee minute! Are you telling me you deserted the true Reformed faith to ally yourself with the idolatrous, corrupt Church of Rome?! Why you traitor -

OGILVIE Don't shout at me, you heretical windbag!

KNOX Be quiet, son of perdition!

OGILVIE No! You be quiet, you serpent of hell. It's because of people like you that Scotland's in the state it's in. Scotland was once a proud, Catholic country –

KNOX You don't know the first thing about Scotland, you pernicious papist. Scotland was once a proud Protestant land, a beacon of Reformation enlightenment.

OGILVIE Rubbish, you Calvinist crank.

KNOX Roman reptile!

OGILVIE Creep!

(Duet: Knox & Ogilvie sing to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic)

KNOX When I was preaching down on earth I thundered loud and long:
My sermons shook the sinner like a trumpet lasting strong,
For I was always right, of course, and you were always wrong –
Yes, you were always wrong!
Glory, glory Reformation
Like a mighty revelation,
End of Roman domination – and you were always wrong.

OGILVIE When Scotland was in Darkness sunk I brought the Gospel light;
I risked the wrath of rulers as I fought the Master's fight
For you were always wrong, of course, and I was always right!
Yes I was always right!

Martin Luther's constipation – that's what caused the Reformation,
Bringing darkness to my nation.
Yes I was always right!

(Enter Angel, carrying a trumpet)

ANGEL (Softly) Excuse me, gentlemen.

KNOX & Heretical, idolatrous traitor!

OGILVIE

(*The Angel blows the trumpet loudly*)

ANGEL I said, EXCUSE ME. Gentlemen.

(*They both notice the angel for the first time*)

If you pair of loudmouths don't mind, there are people here trying to rest in peace
(*The Angel indicates the congregation*). Let's have a little hush.

KNOX But the renegade –

ANGEL Enough!

OGILVIE But this villain –

ANGEL Hush! Enough! Cool it, both of you. Please, remember where you are. Now calm down. Just take a nice, big, deep breath and relax. Come on, now – a nice deep breath. That's it; that's better. Make with the alpha rhythms.

KNOX Excuse me, sir, but you are making as much noise as we are with the trumpet's loud clangour.

ANGEL That's completely different, man; this is a very special instrument:
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die!

KNOX Are you, perchance, St Michael?

ANGEL Michael Shmichael! Don't tell me I have that Marks and Spencer's air about me! No – I'm one of those ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation. But enough about me. I want you two to offer each other a sign of peace. (*They are reluctant*). Make an effort. (*They shake hands in a rather hostile fashion*). A lot of holy and unholy water has flowed under the bridge since you two were around in Scotland. People do not strangle each other anymore thinking that they are doing a service to Go.

OGILVIE But –

ANGEL No "buts". It's a pity you couldn't pay a flying visit to modern day Scotland.

KNOX I trust it is still free from idolatry; I trust we have godly schools where the faith once delivered to the saints is taught.

ANGEL Well – (*Introducing Knox*) there is a statue of you in Edinburgh and there is a school

named after your compatriot in Glasgow, where, I am assured, religion is indeed taught.

OGILVIE I suppose there is a fancy sepulchre for this fellow (*Indicating Knox*).

ANGEL Actually, there is some doubt about the whereabouts of his earthly remains – rather like your own missing body in fact. Something else you dudes have in common. I don't suppose you two have been properly introduced. John Knox – meet John Ogilvie. John Ogilvie – meet John Knox. You are both quite illustrious back in your terrestrial homeland, and in your own distinctive ways represent two Christian traditions which are deeply rooted in the culture of Scotland.

KNOX No doubt after 400 years things will have changed.

ANGEL True. For sensible folk this is the age of dialogue not slanging matches. And you two do have so much in common.

OGILVIE Yes – we did have one of two things in common.

KNOX Quite a lot, in fact. Of course, there can be no surrender of principles.

OGILVIE I agree wholeheartedly – we cannot compromise the truth as we see it – but we can respect each others sincerity.

KNOX And use what we have in common as a basis for dialogue.

ANGEL Spot on! Respect one-another's belief and you've taken the first step out of the ecumenical Stone Age.

KNOX If we keep on like this we'll reach the space age!

ANGEL I like it when you say "we". In this place there is no "us" and "them" – only us.

OGILVIE I forgot we were "in this place". God forgive me!

KNOX He has, John. He's forgiven us all!

ANGEL Well – I'll leave you now.

OGILVIE Wait a minute; there is one other thing we have in common. Something we need help with:

ANGEL And that is?

OGILVIE Neither of us can get the hang of these darn things. (*He holds up his harp*)

ANGEL Do you know why that is? It's really quite simple: You lack harmony, heavenly harmony. Come along with me. I know a cool sharp harpist called Cecilia. She specialises in that kind of thing.

(Exeunt omnes)