

Seeing the Invisible: Ordinary people of extraordinary faith

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William Darney: 'Scotch Will', pedlar and preacher

William Darney, a Scotsman, was born around 1710, and became one of the earliest itinerant preachers of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival. A pedlar and shoemaker by trade, he combined his daily work with his preaching. Beginning in 1741 in the Rossendale area of Lancashire, he continued to preach for almost forty years, mostly in the north of England.

The people listened intently as the old Scottish preacher, his long white hair flowing to his shoulders, urged his congregation to remain steadfast in the faith, no matter how severe the sufferings they must endure. 'Take courage!' he exhorted. 'Christ will soon return "in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God.'"

At that very moment the clamour of an approaching mob drowned the preacher's voice. In rushed the deputy constable of Almondbury, holding his baton aloft and closely followed by an enraged crowd. 'I charge you,' cried the constable, 'in the name of King George, to come down.'

'I charge you, in the name of the King of kings, that you let me go on with my sermon,' was William Darney's swift reply.

'Pull him down,' commanded the constable to his waiting henchmen.

Glad of an opportunity to demonstrate their hatred of the new preaching which was having so powerful an effect on the people of Almondbury, near Huddersfield, the mob seized Darney by his long white hair and soon dragged the old preacher to the ground.

Although his friends struggled to save him from their hands, they were outnumbered and before long the crowd had hauled him into the street and were kicking him mercilessly with their iron-clad boots. Frog-marching the injured man to the vicarage, where they knew the vicar would readily lend his support to such barbarity, the crowd then threw him to the ground once more until it was feared his injuries might prove fatal. Only then did Darney's friends manage to rescue him from his tormentors and escort him to safety.

William Darney was no stranger to such maltreatment. For thirty years it had been his constant lot as he brought the message of the judgement and mercy of God to the people in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. 'Scotch Will,' as he was commonly known, had probably been converted in the revivals in Scotland between 1733 and 1740 under the preaching of James Robe of Kilsyth. Possibly Robe never knew of the work of God in the young man's soul, for by 1741 he had left his home country and had travelled south as far as Lancashire.

A pedlar by trade, Darney began hawking his wares from village to village, selling haberdashery and mending shoes. Advertising his goods, he would gather a crowd, but always with a dual purpose, for the passion of his life was to preach to the people, spreading the knowledge of the righteous anger of God against sin and the hope of forgiveness through Christ. A man of immense physique with a broad Scottish accent, Darney could not fail to have a traumatic effect on the people who lingered to hear him. His burning zeal and passionate denunciations of sin stirred up powerful reactions amongst them: many were converted to God, while many others were incited to fury.

The Rossendale area of Lancashire, like most other parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, had known little gospel light in the past. But William Darney's forthright preaching heralded the breaking of a new day of God's grace for the north of England. At Heap Barn, a hamlet near Bacup, in Lancashire, the response to his preaching was typical of the reaction he evoked wherever he went. Each day for two weeks peasants, farmers and pack-horse

drivers gathered to hear the message he preached, and there a group of young men were powerfully affected by his words and some were converted.

Opposition flared up as well. A woman, whose impressive size and ferocious looks could hardly fail to demand attention, lifted high her dung-fork and threatened to knock the preacher over unless he desisted from preaching immediately. Undeterred by her threats, Darney calmly continued his sermon, and when a young man named John Madin came to tell him of the work of God in his soul, Darney hugged him enthusiastically, exclaiming, 'You are the first-fruits of my labour in this place!'

Often Darney would conclude his services by teaching the people to sing verses he had composed which rendered his message into song. Doggerel poetry it might have been, and crude to a refined ear, but it was an effective means of retaining his words in the minds of the people.

As news spread from one community to the next of the pedlar-preacher whose sermons could both terrify and console his hearers, the people gathered in even greater numbers.

Nor was it adults alone who were affected. One small boy living near Rochdale was given the irksome task of rocking the baby's cradle so that his mother could be free to listen as Darney preached in an adjacent room. Ingeniously, however, the lad devised a means of tying a string to the cradle and then creeping to the edge of the crowd. Now he could both rock the cradle and hear the preacher at the same time. In later years he dated his conversion from the words he heard that night.

As converts multiplied Darney, whose livelihood depended on travelling from place to place, would band them together into small societies which could meet regularly for mutual fellowship in his absence. Whenever he himself returned to the area he would then minister to these scattered groups of believers.

Gradually Darney began moving further east into Yorkshire, selling his wares and preaching, until by the summer of 1744 he was on the outskirts of Haworth. William Grimshaw, curate of