

The Jessie Nicholson Memorial Lecture 2010.
Lux Mundi: the liberal catholic project then and now.

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Jessie:

Tonight we honour the memory of Jessie Nicholson, for many years a member of the Australian Church Union, and a stalwart supporter of its work and the cause for which it stands. We remember and honour Jessie for her significant work in education and in the church, for her years of support as a member of the congregation at St Paul's Cathedral, and as a synod representative for the Cathedral. Jessie was always a great supporter of young people, and I remember her as an encourager of younger clergy. Of course Jessie was never an *uncritical* supporter of anyone or anything! I gather she used the term PP in her own way: for her it meant Proper Priest, and the list of proper priests was, shall we say, never quite static.

Jessie was a believer in the liberal catholic cause. There was a time when ACU experienced difficulties as the church wrestled with the ordination of women question. Some thought ACU was the preserve of conservative opinion. Jessie would have none of that; a firm believer in rightness of ordaining women, she stayed in ACU to give voice to that progressive view.

So tonight I am glad to honour Jessie's memory by exploring what we might call **the liberal catholic project** as it was first developed at the end of the 19th century, and as we inherit it today. I believe this is something in which Jessie believed strongly.

Lux Mundi.

One hundred years ago, Charles Gore was Bishop of Birmingham. He became the first Bishop of that diocese when his former diocese of Worcester was divided to make it more workable, and to better cater for ministry to the growing city of Birmingham. Gore would go on to be Bishop of Oxford in 1911, and then retired in 1919 at what was then an early age for bishops to retire (66) to write and teach, which he did until his death in 1932. One hundred years ago, Gore had just published a book called *Orders and Unity*, and in it he said, "The world's need of a liberal catholicism will surely become increasingly apparent. And what doom should we not deserve if we of the Church of England had failed to make its possibility and its reality apparent."¹

Making a liberal catholicism real and apparent was perhaps the great project of Gore's life and teaching, and it is that project I want to discuss with you tonight, both as it was for Gore, and as it is for us now who inherit what he has handed down in our generation.

The marker that Gore laid down for this project came much earlier in his ministry. It was the publication in 1889 of the volume of essays *Lux Mundi: a series of studies in the religion of the Incarnation*. Gore was then the inaugural Principal of Pusey House in Oxford, that monument to the great Tractarian leader E.B Pusey. The volume was a collection of essays written by a group of friends (clergy and theologians all) who started meeting together in 1875 for a reading party over the summer at the country rectory of one of the members. All of them at that stage had been involved in

¹ C.Gore, *Orders and unity*, London: John Murray, 1909, p.205

teaching theology and they felt “compelled for their own sake, no less than that of others to attempt to put the catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems”² as Gore notes in the preface.

The writers were seeking to present the historic Christian faith as expressed in the creeds in a fresh way, a way which spoke to the current age and presented Jesus Christ as the light of the world (hence the title of the book). They wanted their audience to look afresh at what Christian faith means, and in so doing “they will find it as adequate as ever to interpret life and knowledge in its several departments”³, and find both intellectual and moral freedom thereby. Gore suggested in the preface that the apostle and prophet are those who interpret for each age the profound formulas of the faith, which are often obscure, and yet would present them in a way which “speaks the word of God afresh in each age, in accordance with both the novelty of the age and the eternal antiquity of the truth”⁴.

So the task the essay writers set themselves is of dialogue and re-interpretation, of holding together the historic faith and the needs of their age to have that faith expressed afresh in a way which addresses its needs. They saw themselves in doing this “not as guessers at the truth, but as servants of the Catholic Creeds and Church”. For their present age was “one of profound transformation, intellectual and social, abounding in new needs new points of view and new questions”. This called forth from them a new development in theology. What set these catholic writers apart from the leaders of the previous generation was that they explicitly embraced this quest, and saw it as a life-giving possibility. So Gore says:

² *Lux Mundi*, p.vii.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p.viii

We grudge the name of development, on the one hand to anything that fails to anything which fails to preserve the type of the Christian Creed and the Christian Church; for development is not innovation, it is not heresy: on the other we cannot recognise as the true 'development of Christian doctrine', a movement which means merely an intensification of a current tendency from within, a narrowing and a hardening of theology simply by giving it greater definiteness or multiplying its dogma.

The real development of theology is rather the process in which the Church, standing firm in her old truths, enters into the apprehension of the new social and intellectual movements of each age: and because 'the truth makes her free' is able to assimilate all new material, to welcome and give its place to all new knowledge, to throw herself into the sanctification of each new social order, bringing forth out of her treasure, things new and old, and shewing again and again her power of witnessing under changed conditions to the catholic capacity of her faith and life.⁵

This is what is new in the project of Gore and his friends, this liberal Catholicism, for it gives a positive view to development, a positive theological assessment, seeing its potential for sanctifying each age, bringing the gospel truth to speak a fresh, indeed allowing the tradition to be expressed and applied in ways appropriate to that age. The project which Gore and his friends set for themselves was of holding together tradition and development, and what was their gift to the catholic movement of their time was to see these two things as not opposed to each other, but rather as able to be held in balance.

Now this was a somewhat innovative position for the 36 year old Principal of Pusey House to advance. Gore was the rising star of the High Church wing of the Church. He was seen as the coming leader, and his position at Pusey House recognised this. It was very much due to the patronage of Canon H.P.Liddon that Gore was given this important post in a sort of iconic catholic job: custodian of the study centre based upon Dr Pusey's own library, founded to perpetuate his memory, and to continue to

⁵ *ibid.*

pursue his commitments of defending the catholic tradition of and within the Church of England. Liddon was a theological conservative, as had been Pusey before him. Pusey had died in 1882, aged 82; Liddon was his biographer, a canon of St Pauls' London and a noted preacher. He was also a friend of Lewis Carroll. He died in 1890 – the year after *Lux Mundi*, disappointed to say the least that what he had laboured for at Pusey House was in his eyes being betrayed. I will come back to a specific aspect of Liddon's reaction to the book in a little while.

Gore and his colleagues were certainly inheritors of the catholic tradition that had been passed on to them by such as Pusey and Liddon and the other heirs of the Oxford Movement. Their sacramentalism was solid and remained an important part of their approach to living the faith. Their patristic scholarship was a hugely important source for what they sought to do theologically, even if they used it to slightly different ends to the previous generation in the movement. But Gore and his colleagues had been influenced by other sources as well, and it was the enrichment that these intellectual sources gave them that brought them to the creative synthesis which marked a new departure in the catholic movement. In short it was bringing together the catholic emphasis on tradition, on sacrament, on the historic faith of the church, with the more "liberal" emphases descending from F.D. Maurice, through teachers such as the great scripture scholar B.F. Westcott (who taught Gore at Harrow). Through their personal history, they were given the combination of influences which allowed them to shift from the conservative rejection of development as a dangerous trend likely to dilute the traditional faith to a positive reading of the idea of development, so that it could creatively be held together with tradition, in the service of an engaged faith, seeking the sanctification of the social

order as it changed rather than a reactive protest against political and social change in the spirit of the first Tractarians.

We could say that the early Tractarians centred their account of Christian faith and the Christian Church (and thus of the Church of England) in the sacramental life of the church as something practiced in faithful obedience to what had been handed down from the apostles themselves. Now while not repudiating the importance of the sacraments in the life of the church and as vehicles of the gospel, our friends who wrote *Lux Mundi* sought a different centre, and this theological shift is significant. For Gore and his colleagues, the pivotal point for their theology became the incarnation. For it was in the incarnation that God enters the human world to redeem and sanctify it; it was in the incarnation that God brings to a head the divine immanence in the material, created world; it was through the incarnation that God's immanence and God's transcendence are held together in tension, in the two natures of Christ.

Sacraments

We can see some of this holding together the inherited catholic tradition of sacramentalism with a new stress which transforms the view of the world and the approach to the world in the essay by Francis Paget on the sacraments. Paget was at the time of writing the Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology at Oxford; he became Bishop of Oxford in 1901, and when he died in 1911, it was Gore who succeeded him. You get something of the picture of this book being written by the rising intellectual elite of the Church, and of the rising generation of leaders in this fact: three of them became Bishops (Gore, Paget and Talbot).

Paget emphasises how Christ's life shows forth the perfection of humanity, and that this is a part of God's consecration of the whole of human life and the whole material world as a consequence. This is the very foundation of the sacramental principle: God uses material things as the vehicle of revelation and sanctification.

Thus he says:

By the Sacramental system, is meant the regular use of sensible objects agents and acts as being the means or instruments of Divine energies, "the vehicles of saving sanctifying power". ... His Holy Spirit bears into the faithful soul the communication of its risen Lord's renewing manhood; and for the conveyance of that unseen gift He takes things and acts that can be seen and words that can be heard; His way is viewless as the wind; but He comes and works by means of which the senses are aware; and His hidden energy accepts a visible order and outward implements for the achievement of his purpose.⁶

The thrust of his argument is that God works through the consecration of material things to achieve the divine purposes.

And so through Sacramental elements and acts Christianity maintains its strong inclusive hold upon the whole of life. The consecration of material elements to be the vehicles of divine grace keeps up on earth that vindication and defence of the material against the insults of sham spiritualism which was achieved forever by the Incarnation and Ascension of Jesus Christ. We seem to see the material world rising from height to height ... That the Eternal Word should be made man, and from a human mother receive our nature, so that a material body should be His body; His in birth, and growth and death; His in all its relations with the visible world; His for suffering, for weariness, for tears, for hunger; His upon the cross and in the tomb; His to rise with; and at length His at the right hand of God. Thus was the visible received up into glory.⁷

He says that there are practical and far reaching consequences from this: "in perfect accordance with this principle, the spiritual energy of the church is sacramentally conveyed for the hallowing of stage after stage in the due order of a human life as body, soul and spirit are advanced towards the end for which all are created"⁸. It has for me echoes of the great purple passage of Dom Gregory Dix that many of you will

⁶ F Paget, "The Sacraments", *Lux Mundi*, p. 297.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.309

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.310

know “was ever command so faithfully obeyed”. What’s important here is not just the theological antecedent that he provides for Dix’s great sacramental vision of life, but even more for what it shows of the practical implication of the *Lux Mundi* vision. Let’s not forget that Gore and other writers of this group had also been involved in the founding of the Christian Social Union, the social reformist group that advocated and worked for change to alleviate the poverty of a significant body of the population. This incarnational, sacramental theology gave theological weight for what the slum priests had been doing for a decade or so by 1889, and has been the theological underpinning of Christian social reform workers from Gore, through William Temple down to Trevor Huddleston, Kenneth Leech, Desmond Tutu and a host of others in our own age.

Lux Mundi sought “to put the catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems”; two of these problems were particularly significant and are worth commenting on: evolution and historical biblical criticism.

Evolution.

One outcome of the shift to see development as a positive possibility theologically rather than an inherent opening for heresy and betrayal of catholic truth is the potential it gives for embracing the theory of evolution as not being a threat to faith. Two of the essayist in *Lux Mundi* build on this foundation: Aubrey More in his consideration of the Christian Doctrine of God, and J.R. Illingworth in his essay, “The Incarnation and Development”.

Moore's essay looked at how the current intellectual context of his time actually does the Christian faith a favour in its long struggle with the reductionist tendency of Deism. The rise of science and its demands that the world and its processes be seen as a whole was seen by Moore as opposing a view of God which was held by philosophers but was opposed to the rich view of God's nature and action held by the church.

Slowly but surely that theory of the world has been undermined. The one absolutely impossible conception of God, in the present day, is that which represents Him as an occasional Visitor. Science had pushed the deist's God farther and farther away, and at the moment when it seemed as if he would be thrust out altogether, Darwinism appeared, and under the guise of a foe, did the work of friend. It has conferred upon philosophy and religion an inestimable benefit, by shewing us that we must choose between two alternatives. Either God is everywhere present in nature or he is nowhere.⁹

So Moore advocated a rehabilitation of the Christian doctrine of the immanence of God in nature, and of course the incarnation theme of the book as a whole gives further impetus.

Where Moore's chapter looked at the difference Darwin makes for the philosophical understanding of the God largely through the lens of the polarity of immanence and transcendence, Illingworth took up the issues raised by evolution in a more direct sort of way. He argued that by seeing the Incarnation as the central doctrine of Christian faith we are able to shine new light on the current category of the age, evolution. All things are now seen in the light of their development said Illingworth: organisms, nations, customs, and by seeing God at work in the world through the created world, God too is involved in a developing world. As Moore sees the shifts in scientific thinking to be positive for the Christian faith, so too does

⁹ A Moore, "The Christian Doctrine of God", in *Lux Mundi*, p. 73

Illingworth: the shift away from a mechanistic view of the creation to seeing it as an organism allows for a strong doctrine of the immanence of God.

When we see energy and atoms building up an harmonious order , we feel there is an inner secret in the energy and atoms, which we cannot hope to penetrate by merely watching them at work. And so when we see human minds and wills weaving a veil over the universe, of thought and love and holiness, and are told that all these things are but higher modes of material nature, we only feel that the inner secret of material nature must be yet more wonderful than we supposed. But though our wonder may increase, our difficulties will not. If we believe, as we have seen that Christian theology has always believed, in a Divine Creator not only present behind the beginning of matter but immanent in every phase, and co-operating with its every phenomenon, the method of His working, though of speculative interest, will not be of controversial importance. ... Our Creator will be known to have worked otherwise than we had thought, but in a way conceivable , and to the imagination more magnificent.¹⁰

So Illingworth came close to what we would call today a doctrine of continuous creation: the power of God accompanies and works with the processes of the world so that the evolution of new species is part of the continuing creative work of God.

It has been suggested that what *Lux Mundi* did in relation to evolution was not quite as revolutionary as we might think. The believing public were beginning to see it possible to combine the theory of evolution with belief in God. Owen Chadwick has said that Frederick Temple's Bampton lectures of 1884 (on science and religion) made evolutionary theory respectable. So there is a sense in which *Lux Mundi* did break new ground for the public but rather as a sign of the growing intellectual respectability of combining belief in God and a evolutionary view of the working of the natural world. What it did do, however was to ground this newly respectable popular belief in the historic statements of the Fathers of the Church, and gave an alternative to the conservative view that traditionally expressed and understood faith cannot be compatible with this new thinking. Not so say our

¹⁰ J.R.Illingworth, "The Incarnation and development", *Lux Mundi*, p. 142.

friends: the Church has for centuries taught of the involvement of God continuing in the processes of the world and on this we can build a faith compatible with Darwin's theories.¹¹

Biblical Criticism

What proved to be the most controversial essay in the collection was that by Gore himself on "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration". In an essay quite soaked in patristic learning, Gore examined the activity of the Holy Spirit in the human race. The life-giving Spirit both nourishes our individuality and also binds us together as social beings, and works gradually in the world and in the Church. It is in this context of the action of the Spirit in the Church that Gore treated the inspiration of scripture. The scriptures are the record of the Spirit at work in the history, in and through Israel, from Abraham to Christ. It consists of various genres in which that history is told, and some of it is idealised; there is drama, and myth. "The truth of inspiration includes more than the truth of historic fact, though all lies within the historical process of redemption."¹²

In this essay Gore was embracing the fruits of historical criticism of the bible, especially insofar as it related to the Old Testament. Within his own time his stance was progressive rather than radical. The problem for some came as Gore dealt with what seemed an implication from his positive reception of this critical method. The biblical critics had come to the view that the story of Jonah was a parable rather than history, and that David was not the author of all of the Psalms. What then was to be

¹¹ See P Hincliff, "The Church" in R Morgan (ed) *The Religion of the Incarnation: Anglican Essays in Commemoration of Lux Mundi*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989, pp. 140-1

¹² A.M.Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, p. 5

made of Jesus own use of these texts, using the received view of his own time? Could Jesus have been wrong in quoting David as the author of the psalms?

I suspect it's not a problem that keeps us up at night; but for Gore it needed to be dealt with, and his solution was the cause of critical outcry (from the conservatives, not the biblical critics!!). Gore said that Jesus participates in the state of knowledge of his time, and that as a man, his knowledge is limited. This creates a problem with the divine omniscience which belongs to the divinity of Jesus. Gore's solution, tossed off almost as an aside, and expounded more in the footnote than in the text, was to say that by his incarnation Jesus voluntarily limits his divine power, so as to share our human ignorance.

He never exhibits the omniscience of bare Godhead in the realm of natural knowledge; such as would be required to anticipate the results of modern science or criticism. This "self-emptying" of God of God in the Incarnation is, we must always remember, no failure of power, but a continuous act of Self-sacrifice: cf 2 Cor 8:9 and Phil 2:7. Indeed God "declares His almighty power most chiefly "in this condescension, whereby He "beggared Himself" of Divine prerogatives to put Himself in our place.¹³

Well, this was the point that convinced Canon Liddon that Gore had sold out to the radical modernisers, and that Pusey House was not in good hands. Liddon believed that every act and word of Jesus was characterised by his omniscience, and to compromise on this was to dilute the faith unacceptably. This was the final straw in a book which in general had a "rationalising and pelagian tone"¹⁴. As I tell my students, it only goes to show how careful you have to be with footnotes!

Again, what Gore said here, both in detail and in the deeper spirit of his method, proved to be what was gaining currency in his day amongst many believers.

¹³ C Gore, "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration" in *Lux Mundi*, p.265, fn2.

¹⁴ Ramsey, *op cit*, p. 7

The idea of accepting the fruits of Old Testament criticism became fairly general in the church. As time went on Gore came to seem rather conservative as he had difficulties with those who took the critical task further especially in a reductionist direction with the New Testament.

In its own time, there was a sense in which *Lux Mundi* was a sort of permission giving book, which allowed thinking Anglicans, and especially thinking catholic Anglicans to come to an accommodation with some critical edges in current thinking, to which conservative figures such as Liddon were implacably opposed. The fashions of theology, and indeed the issues with which theology is faced in any age move on, and we might well find the details of the positions of the writers of *Lux Mundi* on specific questions to be dated. Writing just over 70 years later, reflecting on this work, Michael Ramsey, who was himself a significant inheritor of their work and their task, would criticise their over-emphasis on the Incarnation as not allowing a balanced portrayal of the action of God as embracing the whole of God's redemptive activity. [Of course Ramsey united other streams with that of liberal Catholicism - in his case the theology of crisis of Karl Barth, via his translator, E.C Hoskyns.] I'm not so sure that Ramsey was entirely right; while the *Lux Mundi* writers did stress the Incarnation, it was seen as the key to the whole redemptive work in a way which parallels Ramsey's own seeing of the whole redemptive work captured in the prism of the paschal mystery.

But for me what is more important than the detail of their writing is the grammar of it: the overall task they set themselves - to put the catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems. At depth, their task was of dialogue, to bring the riches of the tradition into dialogue with the current age, to

translate that which is always true into the language and situation of their day so that it might speak afresh. To use theological language that has arisen since their time, what they were doing was in a very real way a task of inculturation. For Gore and his friends, the liberal catholic project is a project of inculturation, of translating the gospel (which is constant in its substance) into a fresh context and a new culture so that all of that culture may be brought into the realm of redemption, into the saving, transforming embrace of God.

Indeed to focus on inheriting the details of Gore's positions and statements would almost be a betrayal of the liberal catholic project! We receive the gospel, and *Lux Mundi*, in a very different context, with the issues of our age different from those of Gore's. Some of the questions he examined are settled; some still open, but perhaps looked at in different lights. The work of biblical criticism has moved in several directions; much that was in dispute or radical in Gore's day is fairly well accepted today. Some radical trends have been shown to have had their day too. To inherit the liberal catholic project is essentially to inherit the task of inculturation, and to embrace the hermeneutical task, the task of interpretation. And just as biblical interpretation was a key to that project both for the writers of *Lux Mundi* and is for us inheriting it today, so too is the incarnational centre. To inherit the liberal catholic project requires us to incarnate the catholic faith and tradition in our own lives and our own communities. [Yes, the catholic vision that it must be lived communally doesn't go away either!]

Let me just leave you with a fragmentary example which seems to me to illustrate one line of enquiry which fits within the liberal catholic project (and I confess I have no idea whether its author would subscribe to it personally or not!)

Richard Burrige is Dean of Kings College London, and he has recently written about the way in which we use the Scriptures in ethical questions, both in a lecture at Westminster Abbey in 2007 (“Being Biblical: slavery, sexuality and the inclusive community”) and in his 2009 book *Imitating Jesus: an Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. From what I have read of his work, there is a real engagement with the task of interpretation, of how we read the scriptures and the ethical teaching we take from them, not in a way which treats scripture as a rule book, seeking specific commands, but looks for our guidance as much from the whole, and from the figure of Jesus and his life as an ethical source as from the specific sayings.

Here’s a taste, from the lecture:

Jesus' demanding ethical teaching on things like money, sex and power should require very high standards from those around him, with the result that ordinary fallible human beings would find him uncomfortable. However, when we turn from his words to the biographical narrative of his activity, the converse is true. It is religious leaders and guardians of morality who found him uncomfortable, while he keeps company with all sorts of sinners - precisely the people who are not keeping his demanding ethic. He is criticized as 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt. 11.19 // Luke 7.34). He accepts people just as they are and proclaims that they are forgiven without the need to go to the temple or offer sacrifice. His healing ministry is directed towards such people and the eucharistic words at the Last Supper suggest that he saw his forthcoming death as being 'for' them. A biographical approach means that it is not enough simply to look at Jesus' words and moral teachings; to be properly biblical involves facing the paradox that he delivers his ethical teaching in the company of sinners whom he accepts, loves and heals. Furthermore, a major purpose of ancient biography was mimesis, the practice of imitation, of following the subject's virtues. This is reinforced by the Jewish habit of *ma'aseh*, precedence, where the disciple is expected to observe and imitate his master as a way of imitating Torah and ultimately becoming holy as God is holy. Therefore, to imitate Jesus, it is not enough simply to extract his ethical teaching from the Sermon on the Mount; we must also imitate his loving acceptance of others, especially the marginalized, within an open and inclusive community.

It seems to me that this approach to the scriptures is useful to consider. In his book he concludes, that “Whenever we are presented with a choice between being biblical and being inclusive, it is a false dichotomy – for to be truly biblical is to be inclusive in any community which wants to follow and imitate Jesus.” (p. 409)

- Well that seems to me to fulfil the spirit of the liberal catholic project as we
- face the questions of our day, and I think they would be words with which Jessie Nicholson would agree.