

Anniversary of John Keble's Assize Sermon 1833

14 July is a day of significance, and not just to Anglo-Catholics. A mere 44 years before John Keble delivered a sermon at St. Mary's, Oxford to mark the opening of a term of the civil and criminal courts, the *bourgeoisie* had stormed the Bastille, the fortress prison in the Centre of Paris which was a potent symbol of royal authority. This unleashed the French Revolution which changed for ever the face of modern Europe and the world. To contextualise the time difference, a mere 44 years ago today, The US spacecraft Mariner 4 returned to earth the first pictures taken from space of another planet as it flew past Mars. What, do you think, will 14 July 2053 bring?

Jesus said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

The anniversary of the Keble assize sermon is an auspicious occasion to reflect on the past, the present and on the future. We know that John Henry Cardinal Newman identified this day and that event in 1833 as the beginning of the Oxford movement. In his landmark history of the movement, S L Ollard describes its significance in heroic terms:

No story in the whole history of the English Church, since St Augustine landed in AD 597, is so splendid as the story of the Oxford Movement. It has every sort of interest. It is exciting,

*romantic, chivalrous, like the story of a crusade. It has its humour as well as its tragedy. And the actors in it were among the most spiritual men who have ever lived in England. They were men of genius besides: poets like Keble, Newman, Isaac Williams, and Faber; men of letters like Newman and Dean Church; preachers whose sermons are read today, divines and theologians whose fame will last as long as Christianity endures. So that a more interesting subject hardly exists in the whole of Church history.*¹

In a sense, the Oxford movement, by which term I describe the whole history of Anglo-Catholic resurgence of the 19th and 20th centuries, was no more than the householder dusting off old valuables from the treasure chest of church history. It was a renewal, rather than a revolution, a reminder to the Church of its continuity with its pre-Reformation history. One of the Heroes of Anglo Catholicism, Dr Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar, offered this salient observation to the Lambeth Conference of 1920.

*Why am I obliged to take my view of the Church's teaching from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Church is 1,920 years old?*²

Speaking at a Forum on Catholic Anglicanism at St James King Street in 2001, Fr Steven Salmon of St John's Dee Why offers this appreciation of the effects of the Oxford movement.

¹ S. L. Ollard, *A Short History of the Oxford Movement*, Oxford 1915, reprinted & revised Mowbrays, Oxford, 1983, p 19.

² Quoted in Geoffrey Rowell, *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism*, Oxford, 1993, p. 184.

1. *It renewed in the Anglican Church a sense of its identity as not only the heirs of the protestant reformation. It gained renewed understanding that it had retained the essentials of Catholic order, sacraments and doctrine.*

2. *It brought about a renewal in liturgy, worship and sacramental theology in the Anglican Church. The Oxford Movement taught the Anglican Church as a whole to be more Eucharistic in worship.*

3. *There was a renewal of and interest in spirituality and personal holiness, a renewed self-sacrificing ideal of priesthood and pastoral ministry, and in many lay organisations, a fostering of devotion, service and missionary outreach.*

4. *There was a revival of the Religious Life of monks and nuns, friars and sisters (along with lay societies, associations and oblates), which brought new ways of being Christian, new and prominent roles in the life of the Church particularly for women, new ways of serving the poor and needy, and new ways of reaching the 'unchurched' and preaching the Gospel.*

5. *Finally...at the heart of the Catholic Revival in the Anglican Church is the conviction that religion is fun! — that God is good, and that he loves us. Of course that is not unique to Anglo-Catholics, but it is a recognisable characteristic that needs to be fostered. If the world is to be reached with the Gospel it desperately needs Christians who can laugh at themselves. This is a sign of our confidence in ourselves and in God, and a reminder that it is always his mission we are involved in, not our own.³*

If that is our history in outline (and like every outline it leaves as much unsaid as it says), then what can we say of our present. This is, I

³<http://www.stjohnsdeewhy.org.au/pdfs/Articles/The%20Oxford%20Mvt%20&%20how%20it%20changed%20the%20Church.pdf>

fear, more difficult and certainly less rosy. At least in the Australian Church it would be fair to say that we Anglo-Catholics look tired, a bit ragged and inwardly focussed. Enormous energy has been used up fighting with each other over the place of women in ministry. My own Diocese has seen almost a decade of turmoil over this issue, and this has deflected us from the core task of mission which was the driving force of Oxford zeal. Beyond us, the Anglican Church is fomenting. The presenting issues are human sexuality (and to lesser extent women in the episcopate). The underlying problems are more fundamental; authority and hermeneutics. What is at stake is the question of Christian truth, and how we apprehend it. And we need to be heard on this, or the questions will be answered by default.

The danger in any movement which has its roots in renewal, is that it becomes a prisoner of its own history; locked in a time-warp with much to say about the past, little to say to the present and nothing at all to do with the future. The master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old, but has little or nothing of the new. Is that to be our story? That great Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple had this to say on the place of tradition.

There is always an initial presumption in favor of the tradition for it represents the deposit of innumerable individual apprehensions. None the less it must be remembered that it is by fresh individual apprehensions that the tradition has been developed, and to reject the new intimation may be, not the suppression of human aberration, but a quenching of the divine spirit.⁴

⁴ Temple, William *Nature, Man and God*. London: Macmillan. 1940, 344

Before we graft on to our Oxford roots a superstructure which they are not strong enough to carry, let's remember that much of what we are doing tonight would have been anathema to our pioneers. 'Almost everything we are doing in this mass is something of which the original Tractarians would deeply have disapproved. They would have been horrified by a high mass – Keble famously said he didn't know what it meant – by our vestments, our incense, our statues, our candles. The rediscovery of ritual was a result of the Oxford Movement but it was not intended by it.'⁵

The Tractarians would have been horrified by women in ministry, that's true. But then they would have been horrified to see women studying at University, and women voting in elections. For that matter, they would have been horrified to see working men voting in elections. They were conservative patricians opposed to most aspects of political change.⁶ We need seriously to ask ourselves, is it their incarnational theology and their ecclesiology or their sociology that we are taking as our model? Vigilance is demanded that we not confuse the treasure with the clay jars containing it.

What, then, of the future? Have we had our day? Are we Anglo-Catholics fighting a rear-guard action, the outcome of which is both inevitable and tragic? This may well be what the future holds, unless we take seriously our Matthean injunction:

⁵http://www.stmarymagdalenoxford.org.uk/files/sermons/200807_Sermon_175th_Anniversary_of_the_Oxford_Movement.pdf

⁶ *ibid*

Jesus said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

At the heart of the vision of the Tractarians was the question of mission. Oxford renewal was a passionate call to connect theology and ecclesiology with the shape of the society of the day. Its roots were, as I have argued in Tory conservatism. It soon spread its wings into the slums of the major cities and in the fight against Cholera. Some of the most inspiring stories come from the parishes of the day.

The Devonport Sisters of Mercy worked with the clergy of St Peter's Plymouth in the cholera epidemics of the late 1840s, and petitioned the parish priest, Fr George Rundle Prynne, for a celebration of the eucharist each morning to strengthen them for their work. So began the first daily mass in the Church of England since the Reformation. Similarly the clergy of St Saviour's, Leeds (a parish Pusey had endowed), laid what medicines they had on the altar at each morning's communion, before carrying them out to the many dozens of their parishioners who would die of cholera that very day.

Robert Dolling (1851-1902), may have summarized it best when he wrote,

I speak out and fight about the [broken] drains because I believe in the Incarnation. As God the Father wills to be known

in the Incarnation, so God the Son wills to reveal himself in the Breaking of Bread.

We Anglo-Catholics need to recover that sense of passion, our outward focus, our sense of mission. We also need to be radically engaged with the society around us. It was John Macquarrie who said that all revelation is an answer to a question, and if any revelation does not answer a question we are asking then it ceases to be revelation for us. To be salt and light means that we need to hear clearly the questions being asked in today's and tomorrow's world and to engage with them. Shouting ever more loudly yesterday's truths is unlikely to prove satisfying to any but the already convinced.

In 1990, Rowan Williams gave the opening address at a gathering at St Albans Holborn called Affirming Catholicism. He said this.

Our Christian past is not a boxroom or a cupboard under the stairs or the bedroom of Prince Albert preserved by Queen Victoria exactly as the dear man left it. It is a room for living, a place to spend time learning and reflecting, a place whose inner geography changes subtly and naturally as we ourselves grow.⁷

Let us remember the twin thrust at heart of Keble's call in 1833, to prayer and to protest, and see in this our mission for the future. That is if by protest we mean passionate engagement in the world around us in the light of the incarnation and with a view to saving souls. For as we are able to mediate what we have received and interpret and

⁷ Rowan Williams Affirming Catholicism quoted in Kenneth Hylson-Smith High Churchmanship in the Church of England From the Sixteenth Century to the Late Twentieth Century Edinburgh, T&T Clark 1993.

apply it to today's and tomorrows world, then will we be like Jesus' householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old to the glory of God and for the sake of God's kingdom.

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Preached at St Stephen's Richmond

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