

THE CITY OF THE LIVING GOD

Jubilee Sermon

The Revd Professor E Gordon Rupp

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at Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London
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Psalm 46.4 There is a river, the streams of which make glad the city of God.

I was flung into circuit, as they say, at the deep end, for in the summer of 1935 I was sent, at a few hours notice, to our church in Sidcup. Its minister had, that week, published a book, *The Unfinished Universe*, in which he announced his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church, and the Chairman of the District had promptly inhibited him from preaching any more among us. The minister was T S Gregory. I found the congregation entirely on his side, and somewhat shocked to be reminded that we had a discipline, for T S Gregory was adored, a saint and a near genius. He left us, and those who thought that Methodism was about due for a mini Oxford movement mourned a lost leader in him. The Chairman was John Scott Lidgett, and both those great men were gods of my youth, both taught me the meaning of that great word catholicity, so that the time in which your Fellowship was born was really rather profoundly, for some of us, an 'identity crisis' in the life of our church, bringing home something of the poignancy and pain of catholicity, of separation and division. Catholicity was Lidgett's great word.

In the first half of this century the Free Churches had at last emerged from the cultural and religious apartheid which had confined them for centuries. A first fruit was that great blaze of Nonconformist scholarship – Oman, Farmer, Dodd, Manson, Rowley, and, in our church, Vincent Taylor, Maltby, Lofthouse, Howard, Newton Flew, who lit a fire the ashes of which still faintly glow among us. They had crossed the tracks of an introverted denominationalism into the ecumenical age.

'We are here,' Lidgett told the Conference, 'humbly yet confidently to affirm our share in the catholic inheritance of the past. Who save ourselves can separate us from it?...

'As we look out upon history and upon the world it is with the same vision of all things in Christ which dominates the perception of all believers without distinction of age or race or Church. Not a saint, not a thinker, a hero or a martyr of the Church, but we claim our share in his character, influence and achievement by confessing the debt we owe to the great tradition which he has enriched by saintly consecration, true thought or noble conduct.'

The great tradition. It is one of the bonuses of talking to this Fellowship that one does not have to explain that tradition is not a dead thing, but is alive, that it flows with the stream of history. It is always moving, always pressing on, always pressing forward. Smetana's lovely tone poem, *Vltava*, is a true picture of that image. But perhaps I

might repeat myself after thirty years, and add this.

‘The Methodist tradition is not something which the antiquarians, church historians, theologians and romantics can recapture for us, by ferreting among books and liturgies, or by re-thinking, re-stating, re-assessing Methodist doctrines. We cannot go back to Wesley or to some reconstructed original Methodism. If we try, it will be with us as with those men who tried to find the invisible man by removing his clothes one by one until they took off the last layer, and with that made him completely disappear.’

That way lies dilettantism and antiquarianism and the peril of making John Wesley into a ventriloquist’s dummy, into whom we simply read our own opinions. Be warned by the sons of Gibeon in the book of Joshua. You remember how they dressed up in old garments, put old sacks upon their asses, old wineskins rotten and mended, provisions dry and mouldy, and said to the men of Israel, ‘We have come from a far country. Make a covenant with us.’ But God’s people, who are not so easily conned or kidded as some people suppose, recognized them for Johnnies-come-lately from down the road. And so, when we have our proper discussions about stocks and stoles and scapulars and pectoral crosses (and perhaps it is an advantage that, from being blackbirds for two centuries, we now begin to look like budgerigars), when we do those things, quite properly (and I dare say that it is all an improvement), let us remember that, to the great majority of our fellow countrymen we are just a lot of dropouts, walking along Dover Beach, from which the sea of faith has long since disappeared. Let us also remember Samuel Johnson’s ‘O let us not be found, when our Master calls, ripping the lace off our waistcoats, but the spirit of contention from our souls and tongues.’

Ben Drewery recently, at his farewell dinner, told how he learned, as a student, that there is a language even more important than Greek or Hebrew, and that is the language of the centuries. ‘All history is contemporary,’ he says, ‘in the sense that Athanasius, Ambrose, Luther, Wesley, Newman are not characters in a dead past, but living and vital personalities whom it is a pleasure and privilege to know and to converse with.’ There are those today who would have us think that the fathers of those distant centuries and of the Reformation were too conditioned by their own language and their own world view to be able to speak to us. The truth is rather that, in every generation, men and women have seen new truths and new insights from their encounter with God in Christ, and these are communicable.

One of the great turning points in church history was when Saint Augustine entered into such a living dialogue with Saint Paul, and began a kind of nuclear reaction, which took in the Reformers Luther and Calvin, the Catholic Reformation and the Evangelical Revival, a dialogue the end of which is not yet.

Augustine’s great phrase, ‘*Totus Christus* – Christ in Head and Members,’ reminds us that this flowing river of the great tradition is not just a set of ideas, but is grace.

Grace which, like the Lord, the Giver,
Never fails from age to age. (HP 817)

So we are not thinking of some purely spiritual, invisible church hidden in the skies. It is all well and truly earthed,

It is plugged-in in real times and places and buildings. You will find it there deep down below the high altar of Saint Peter’s in Rome in that little third century alley, the *Clivus* of pagan tombs, but at the end of it the house of the Julii, and Christ himself in

the green and gold mosaic, sitting at the right hand of God, and clutching the world in his hand.

It is here today, earthed for us in this hallowed ground. This half mile around us encompassed an explosion of grace, the fallout of which has touched the ends of the earth – this half mile bounded by the Foundery and Whitfield's first Tabernacle and Whitfield's Moorfields and on the other side by Bunhill Fields.

In 1933 T S Gregory preached a magnificent sermon in this pulpit on our theme, 'The City of the Living God,' and in it he said,

We have saved all mankind, but we have not claimed all salvation.

Salvation into glorious bliss,
How great salvation who can tell?
But all he hath for mine I claim:
I dare believe in Jesu's name. (*MHB* 483)

We need to expect salvation, not only as deep as hell but as high as heaven... for the church is not a religious association founded to enable men to live well in this world and answerable to the known needs or standards of any particular age. It is the kingdom of the apocalypse before the world's foundation, and it IS when the world has passed away, having its own time, history, organization, body and bread of its own.

So from 'Catholicity' to Wesley's 'Catholic Spirit,' to the hymns of Charles Wesley, in which by grace we confess the glory of the eternal Trinity, and, in the power of the divine Majesty, we worship the Unity (for, despite my friends Geoffrey Lampe and David Francis, it is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that touches my mind and satisfies my heart). It is Grace which joins the person and the work of Christ together, God for us with God in us.

The heights and depths of grace,
The wounds which all my sorrows heal,
That dear disfigured face. (*HP* 184)

Grace which is always evangelical, always converting. When, in a few moments, we handle those sacred vessels, let us remember the message from the mother of us all across the road as she sleeps, Susanna Wesley, and how here

The Father then revealed the Son,
Him in the broken bread made known,
She knew and felt her sins forgiven
And found the earnest of her heaven.

And Grace which is always reconciling. I remember how, in 1968, our eucharist here was attended by Cardinal Jan Willebrands and two eminent members of the Society of Jesus, how they sang our hymns, and how, afterwards, Cardinal Willebrands said that nobody could doubt that here were Christian people devoutly receiving their Saviour.

Catholic Spirit? Where was it in the eighteenth century? Leaders of the Church of England, with incredible smugness and arrogance, dismissed one thousand years of rationality and spirituality. Bishop Stillingfleet dismissed the Lady Julian of Norwich as 'blasphemous tittle tattle.' Archbishop Herring thought that all that mattered about Saint Anselm was that he was a traitor to his king. John Smith (perhaps an archbishop) told Wesley that Saint Augustine was 'a flighty and injudicious author,'

and that Saint Bernard was ‘enthusiastically inclined.’ Bishop Lavington spoke to Wesley of ‘those nasty, ridiculous, crackbrained, wicked saints – Saint Francis, Saint Dominic and Saint Ignatius.’ But turn to John Wesley’s Christian Library – fifty volumes of every century and every communion, touching the heights and depths of grace itself, and you will say, ‘There in the eighteenth century was catholicity. There was the catholic spirit.’

‘There is a river the streams whereof make glad the city of God.’ And so we come to the end of the river, to that glorious and celestial city of God’s faithful people, which is seated partly in the course of these declining times, but chiefly in that solid estate of eternity.

To gloss that, let us heed our friends across the road, our Free Church ancestors. First there is John Bunyan, who reclothed Augustine’s Tale of Two Cities, bringing one of them terribly near to our own time, the City of Destruction.

I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven, in which fearful overthrow both myself and thee my wife and you my sweet babes will miserably come to ruin, except some way of escape be found, which I see not whereby we may be delivered.

And Bunyan’s happy band of pilgrims, not one of them, not a single one of them, in ecclesiastical dress, any more than were the first apostles. We have to guard the apostolate of the laity in our time. I have always said that what Methodism has to offer the ecumenical movement is not buildings or music or liturgies or theologies, but good Christian people, thousands and thousands of humble Christian men and women, and I hope that we shall remember that at a time when, if I mistake not, there is a rapidly widening gulf between the clerisy of our churches (the ministers and leading laymen) and the men and women, the people in the pew.

A few yards away from John Bunyan is William Blake, who calls to mental fight, who talks about Jerusalem, the city of God, being built in England’s green and pleasant land. Down to earth. The divine *justitia* as Augustine said, the righteousness of God’s holy city, coming down and really rooted in this earth in sacrifice and in compassion. For that, too, is part of catholicity. I remember, as a young minister, going to see Scott Lidgett in his great age on his little old iron bed in that cell of his in the Bermondsey Settlement, that great inspired one man gesture to the inner cities of half a century ago rooted in his compassion. And I can remember with that too our dearly beloved brother, Lord Soper, and how he too came from Cambridge to Bermondsey to Oakley Place and Tower Hill and all that.

Mental fight? What Luther called *Anfechtung*. The pain of catholicity? As that great mediaeval hymn (omitted, of course, from our new hymn book) says:

And now we watch and struggle,
And now we live in hope,
And Zion in her anguish
With Babylon must cope. (*MHB* 652)

And it is a real Babylon, make no doubt about that, a sick and decaying culture, which perhaps only Solzhenitsyn and Pope John Paul II have begun to analyse for us.

But this morning we will not talk of agony. We are here to rejoice. As you ponder your role for the next half century, or rather, the tasks which his wisdom has assigned to you, whether you think of yourselves as called to be a kind of Waffen SS of the

church, or, perhaps, a swashbuckling company of musketeers full of spirit and panache (Oh, that you were!), or as a mixture of pirates and policemen, we must in spirit put those things behind us today, and simply relax in the wonder of the gospel. We turn to our programme, which is still there for us in the Magna Carta of catholicity which is the Epistle to the Ephesians, *Totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Christ in head and members. And so we finish with dear old Lidgett's words:

We are here today humbly yet confidently to affirm our share in the great catholic history of the past. Who save ourselves can separate us from it?

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