

Alumni Reunion Weekend Service

SERMON by the Rev John Caperon
(Wills Hall 1963-65 BA 1966)

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Monica Wills Memorial Chapel 4th July 2010:
Beyond Christendom: loss, gain and opportunity

We all owe a debt to our past, to the people and places who have shaped us. So returning to Bristol for the first time in 40-something years, I ask myself, 'What did this place do to me and for me? And I think the answer is that the departments of English, theology and education helped form and shape me quite profoundly, with their emphasis on the personal and spiritual dimensions of life.

Let me mention two instances of influential people. Lionel Knights, Professor of English, regularly filled the large lecture theatre at 9.00am on Mondays - simply because, I think, his profoundly humane explorations of literature brought the personal to the fore: literature was about 'the individual case', the imaginative presentation of personal dilemma and decision. And Basil Cottle, the robustly Anglican reader in English, illuminated the heart of Old and Middle English literature with real love and spiritual depth. Such people leave a mark!

1963, the year in which I came up, was ironically hailed by Philip Larkin as 'Annus Mirabilis'. The year sex was invented, Larkin suggests, 1963 lay 'between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP'. That is a remarkably astute socio/cultural observation. The trial of Penguin Books under the Obscene Publications Act - their alleged crime being to have published uncensored D H Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* - had taken place in 1960, a year in which it was still possible for the chief prosecutor Mervyn Griffith-Jones, to ask if this were the kind of book "you would wish your wife or servants to read". That perhaps was a last flourish of the old, paternalistic, deferential English culture. The Beatles' first LP - *Please Please Me* - came out in March 1963, and stands as a symbol of the energetic, unrepressed, self-expressive youth culture of the 60's onwards. Things, as Larkin spotted, were changing in 1963, and not just in the socio/cultural sphere.

For in 1963 the religious world was also experiencing a 'shaking of the foundations' as a result of Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*. In an attempt to share and popularise some of his own theological reading Robinson brought to a huge audience - three quarters of a million copies were sold in nine months - some of the ideas of New Testament scholar Bultmann, and the theologians Bonhoeffer and Tillich, challenging, even outraging, traditional understandings of God and faith. 'Our image of God must go', said the headline in 'The Observer. The sheer ferment of religious ideas and debate of 1963 is hard to imagine happening now: and arguably it marked the last gasp of conventional, traditional religion in this country: things have not been the same since.

And Philip Larkin had perhaps already seen this coming, in an earlier poem of his, 'Church Going', of 1954. After a tour of the church, the embarrassed visitor - 'hatless, I take off my cycle clips in awkward reverence...' - reflects finally on what churches are for: 'When churches fall completely out of use/What we shall turn them into' is his question; and it is as if he foresees the inevitable, creeping secularisation of the coming years. Now secularisation is the subject of intense sociological debate; and there are those like Grace Davie who assert that the story of religion in Britain is about 'believing without belonging', and who see a continuation of

deep belief. I am however more convinced by the thesis of Calum Brown in *The Death of Christian Britain* that a terminal decline in large-scale religious adherence and practice set in from about the 1950s. Events such as the Soham murders and the Cumbria shootings may highlight the fact that there remains a place for the Church and its ministers in national life at times of crisis, but in everyday life they remain marginal. We are, we might say, beyond Christendom, radically de-Christianised.

Since the 1960s we have lost huge swathes of earlier Christian culture. It would be interesting to know how many undergraduates coming up today, for instance, know any of the gospel stories of Jesus, or - say - the Lord's Prayer. These days, at a funeral of anyone but an older churchgoer, my experience is that the Lord's Prayer has to be printed out if anyone is to join in. So there has been loss: a loss of our corporate Christian cultural inheritance; a loss of religious knowledge and awareness; and faith appears to play a vastly smaller part in people's lives than it did in the early 1960s.

But it isn't all loss; there has been gain. I would not myself want to go back to the paternalistic days of the 'wives and servants' remark, nor to the pre-Chatterley days of strict censorship. I would not want to re-inhabit the repressed sexual world of the 1950s, though I do have huge anxieties about the hyper-sexualisation of our culture, our electronic media and our children. Nor would I want to inhabit a pre-Robinson world where tired religious formulae were trotted out and 'believed' or accepted simply because the Church said so. The various liberations of the 1960s - social, sexual and religious - have I believe brought gains: gains in honesty, in intellectual freedom and some degree at least of gender equality, and in personal responsibility: we have in some respects, as Bonhoeffer suggested, 'come of age', but together with our new freedoms comes the huge responsibility of using those freedoms rightly.

And it is here that we come into the realm of Christian opportunity. In the newly 'open' world of 21st century secularity, the Church now encounters a surrounding culture not that markedly different from that which surrounded the earliest Christians: an inter-cultural world of mingling nationalities and outlooks; a world of many beliefs, many gods and sexual licence; but an open, secular world into which the Christian gospel can speak freely - now, thankfully, without the kind of fear of universal repression that stalked early Christianity - with candour and with courage. And we still have very much to say.

Addressing this post-Christian, secular world, we can argue that the teaching of Jesus as it is recorded in the gospels remains a continuing, powerful resource for meaningful living. Against the materialist 'affluenza' of our acquisitive society, as Oliver James has called it, we can assert the spiritual truth that 'man cannot live by bread alone', that 'where your treasure is there will your heart be also'. We can argue that the true virtues in life remain faith and hope and love. We still have a vision to share: that we live in a world of given grace, that living itself is an experience of the gracious love of God, and that in this one world we have the severe but joyous task of pursuing justice and peace for all. Our vision is still one of death, decay and time being overcome by new life, of being 'born again to a living hope' as St Peter puts it. And, in John Betjeman's simple formula, we can still say '... that God was Man in Palestine, and lives today in bread and wine.' We are as ever called again to new life, called again to speak 'heart to heart', as Cardinal Newman puts it, to share with those beyond the Church the ever-new gospel of God's generous love in Christ.

I have spoken of gratitude. My chief gratitude to this university is that there was here the opportunity to explore faith, to consider the relation of faith to life and literature, and to develop with the support of university chaplaincy - I recall Hugh Farley with affection and thanks - an understanding of life, a stance for living life, which has proved able to sustain me. And at the heart of a university, it seems to me, must be that openness to the exploration of fundamental values, that profound respect for the wisdom of the past as well as for the

discoveries of the present, which can support all its members in their own spiritual journey. The university stands for the life of the mind; but, as my old school motto reminds me, *nisi spiritu dei nihil* - without the spirit of God, there is nothing. We might well pray today that the university continues to mediate the 'best that has been thought and said', and to explore the horizons of new knowledge and understanding; but - crucially - that it also enables its members to grasp something of the sacredness of the human person, made in the image of God, the human indispensability of the life of the spirit, and something of the love of God made incarnate in Christ.