

## SHEEP AND GOATS

All Saints

Sung Eucharist

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, November 1st 2015

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Earlier this year saw the passing, just short of his hundredth birthday, of Professor Owen Chadwick. Chadwick was something of a legend in his own time. One of six sons of a barrister, three of whom would be ordained, and one other who was a diplomat, he was the brother of Professor Henry Chadwick, another outstanding theologian and historian. Owen was remarkable both for his scholarship and for his graciousness as a human being.

Alongside his remarkable output on the Victorian church, Chadwick wrote, in the 1970s a ground-breaking book titled, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. It is an acute analysis of the shifting influence of the Christian religion in Europe in Victorian times. Reading the book is fascinating also because throughout, Chadwick's humanity breathes through the prose. He was, after all, alongside his academic work, a Church of England priest with a pastoral heart. All this is very clear as you read so many of Chadwick's works. One incident in his book on *secularisation* says it all.

The year is 1941 and Owen is a curate in Huddersfield, in West Yorkshire. In the early hours of the morning of October 31<sup>st</sup> he was woken up and told of a deadly fire raging in nearby Booth's woollen mill. The fire was nothing to do with hostilities. Instead a building almost entirely wooden framed and tinder dry caught fire. Someone had left their smoker's pipe burning inside their raincoat on arrival at work. Full of cartons, paper and so on the place was ripe for conflagration. The fire took hold very swiftly and there were no alarms. It's remembered still. There are even now survivors. Indeed, just three years ago, I blessed a plaque, blessed on the side of the Tesco supermarket which now fills the site.

On that fateful autumn morning, Owen went out, and was there at the building all day and all night. 49 people died. He recalls that he returned home, well after midnight, wretched and exhausted. He opened his office book to say his daily prayers. The book fell open at the passage which we heard first today:

'The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.'

What an extraordinary coincidence and irony that the passage was set for that day.

It is a powerful tale and always moves me when I read it. I suppose it's particularly ironic too, that the fire happened on the eve of All Saints' Day, that is, All Hallows' Eve or Halloween as it's popularly known. For Owen, these words from the Wisdom of Solomon were a reminder of the everlasting and inexhaustible mercy of God – even for those who die unprepared or through accident or catastrophe. But this leads us to the nub of today's celebration and commemoration.

You will have seen on the pew leaflet that I have styled our eucharist today *All Saints with All Souls*. In the past, these two days were chalk and cheese. All Saints, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, celebrated that multitude of the blessed who had no special festival of their own – rather like a tomb for countless 'unknown saintly warriors' – or a Menin Gate but without the names. All Souls, on the next day, was for *all* who have died but certainly *not* for saints. The liturgies themselves

pointed to the sharp contrast. All Saints meant white vestments, grand mass settings, all bells ringing and so on. All Souls meant black vestments, a requiem mass and a pleading for the souls of last year's departed. God's mercy seemed uncertain – one had to pray hard for these souls, if they were to make it into Paradise.

Now in other churches, where there are more members of the congregation living locally, there will still be services on both days. There will still be contrast, but not so great. However, set in the heart of the City of London we don't have that luxury: if we had a requiem mass tomorrow, few or none would come. So today, I have included something of both traditions. This is undoubtedly a great celebration of unknown saints, but I shall also read a list of all those who've died in the past year and who we've prayed for in this church. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention! We've little choice but to keep these two commemorations together here. However, this highlights an unavoidable and deeper ambiguity

For even with the saints about whom we know quite a lot, there's often an ambiguity. They certainly would not be saints had they not glowed with the Spirit of God. But other aspects of their lives may have been anything but easy, acceptable or flawless. Francis, then, one of the most popular and remarkable of all saints was by many accounts pretty impossible to live with. St. Jerome was a tricky and cussed individual. More recently, in this past week, George Bell, one of the greatest Anglicans of the twentieth century for whom there is an annual commemoration - Bell, a fighter for peace, a campaigner for justice, a remarkable ecumenist has now been said to have abused a young person – perhaps seventy or more years ago – goodness knows how one can prove this – it rests on one person's word only. But anyway there it is.

However, even if it is true, it does not negate the exceptional contribution to humanity made by Bell. Back in the 1930s, another great Anglican, Charles Williams, published a number of books on that shadowy world that some believe follows death. One of them was indeed called *All Hallows Eve*. Williams was an editor with Oxford University Press. He was a scholar – he wrote on Dante; he wrote brilliantly on the Holy Spirit. He wrote novels, as I said, about the afterlife. His novels, still in print, are worth reading. He was married fairly happily but also had a muse. What do we make of that? How does God take us – what does God make of us - warts and all – when we die?

I've mentioned just four or five great luminaries, saints even, who had other parts to their lives which were less holy, I could have mentioned many more. All these remind us that even the greatest saints were also sinners, Perhaps the nearer God we stand the more difficult we are to live with! Jesus, at the very heart of our faith, could not in any way be tolerated by the establishment of his time. So it was by humanity that he was crucified, but by God he was vindicated, raised from the dead and placed above all creatures – the Pantokrator, the king of all creation: 'The souls of all the righteous are in the hands of God. They are at peace.' Amen.

### Readings

Wisdom 3. 1-9.

Revelation 21. 1-6a.

John 11. 32-44.