

BREAK EVERY YOKE

St. Michael, Cornhill

Epiphany V

Sunday January 29th 2017

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Back in the 1920s, there had been a meeting in Church House, Westminster which had to be adjourned because of an explosive discussion. Bishop Gore, successively Bishop of Worcester, Birmingham and Oxford, a noted theologian and founder of the Community of the Resurrection, had completely lost his rag. Outside on the steps, cooling off, he talked with William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury, known for his equanimity. Gore was remorseful and said to Temple: 'There's nothing worse in the world than a bad temper', but then after a moment or two's pause, and with humour honouring Temple, he said: 'Except, perhaps, a good temper.'

Temple's impact upon this country is often not realised. His *Penguin Special, Christianity and the Social Order* went into thousands of copies with a new edition and with an introduction by Edward Heath in the 1970s. In it, he argued that the Christian gospel required a proper social ethic. Once the Second World War was over there should be a new order. He set out a pattern for which to aim: education for all up to 18, housing for workers near to their work, a proper living wage, 2 days off in 7, family allowances, employees represented on boards of directors – even free school milk. Some of these still await implementation! It was also Temple who coined the phrase *welfare state*. It meant, he said, a state that served the welfare of its citizens and was not there simply to serve itself.

Now I begin there, since our three readings this morning are remarkable, in different ways, in setting out a call to action. Christianity and the Christian faith ought to make a radical difference to the life of the world. Just a brief extract from each reading sets the agenda. So, beginning with Isaiah, the oracle of God is very direct:

'Is not this the fast I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke.'

It's powerful stuff, but where might the theological root of this be? Well, St. Paul offers one answer to this in our second reading:

Paul talks of a wisdom which turns upside down the values of this world:
'For I decided to know nothing among you
except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.
And I came to you in weakness and fear
and in much trembling. . . .'

Then he continues:

' . . . among the mature we do speak wisdom,
though it is not a wisdom of this age
or the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.'

Finally, Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, our final reading, tackles it differently again:

'You are the salt of the earth
but if salt has lost its taste
how can its saltiness be restored?
. . . no one after lighting a lamp
puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand...'

So again it's a challenge to action. Let me return to where I began – notably with William Temple. Temple's own background is interesting. He'd had a traditional enough upper class English education. He was at Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford. But what would one have expected of the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury? Except that Frederick Temple, his father, was an ordinary lad from Devon who done well at school. Frederick spoke still with a broad Devon accent and could often be curmudgeonly in manner. Young William still knew of another much less privileged world.

William was universally liked – even by those who disagreed profoundly with him, but he knew from his background of another world. Temple was without a doubt the key person in building a proper tradition of Anglican social theology which survives and prospers to this day. It was not a *theology* in the sense that sometime Prime Minister, Harold Wilson meant it. Wilson used theology deprecatingly to mean irrelevant.

More perhaps than any other recent Anglican leader, Temple produced a *theology with teeth* – no lights under bushels, no salt without savour. It was Temple, above all, who gave the Beveridge Report its most significant base. Those proposals I catalogued earlier formed part of the essence of the report. Lord Beveridge had been commissioned by the wartime coalition government under Churchill and Attlee to bring forward plans for a fairer society. The report listed five giants who needed to be slain. They were *want, disease, ignorance, squalor* and *idleness*. These corresponded fairly nearly to the requirements Temple had outlined in his great book.

So, think of what followed: Rab Butler's Education Act, the National Health Service, Pensions, Housing and social security all followed. These were not either the sole property of any one party. Attlee's remarkable Labour government from 1945-51, remarkable since it inherited a bankrupt country established the NHS, proper benefits and so on. Butler, a Tory, pioneered universal education. Macmillan, a Tory too, built more houses than any housing minister before or since. It was what became known as the post-War consensus.

Now, I recount all this not to make political points – although the gospel is ineluctably political - albeit not in a *party* sense. I recount it because it was Temple, ruminating on the Christian gospel, on the pattern lived and proclaimed in Jesus who had been the inspiration behind all this. That is rarely seen. That means that the readings for today are as imperative for us as ever they were

We still proclaim a gospel rooted in the foolishness of God, an upside down world:

'Is not this the fast I choose:
to loose the bands of injustice,
to break every yoke.'

Or, to establish the kingdom of God, as Jesus himself proclaimed it. It's still down to us! The world needs the imperative of the Gospel more than ever!

Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 58. 1-9a

I. Corinthians. 2. 1-16

Matthew 5. 13-20