

BELL

Born on Hailing Island and bishop of Chichester from 1929-1958, George Bell was a pioneer in the movement for Christian reunion of churches, one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches and a promoter in a big way of the relation between the church and the arts - without him *Murder in the cathedral* would not have been written nor would there be so much beauty in the cathedral and other churches of the diocese; witness the painting of the baptism of Christ by Hans Feibusch in the baptistery. Yet he was a man who despite being the writer of no great book and a dull speaker, is one of those figures whose closeness to the difference of Jesus Christ, that compassion for the world which will not be taken from its path becomes more impressive, not less as the years go by. I say closeness to the difference of Christ, for what makes Christ different is a quality not natural, namely compassion and Christian discipleship is the way we are drawn closer to that same compassion. He deserves to be raised to the altars

On 9th February 1944, he stood up in the Lords and not for the first time, criticised the policy of the deliberate bombing of German civilians. 'I desire to challenge the government', he said and he did, gently and without exaggeration, a speech based on the principles of Christian morality which take into account the reality of war but seek to limit its obscenities. It was a combination of vision and practicalities, typical Bell. 'The House held him in the greatest respect, in complete disagreement', commented another peer, although in fact there were others who backed him, Lords Cecil and Lang. Bell spoke all but of what the law of God calls for amid the weakness and hate of his fellows.

A friend of Bell's (Peter Walker) sums him up in this courageous moment with a line from one of Bell's early poems:
only I /hear the lank eagles crying up the sky

Bishop George had consistently objected to the demonising of the whole German nation which was part of the atmosphere of the country in that time. His consistent, indeed obstinate refusal to demonise people who were different is characteristic of him. He had done this before, he did it during and he did it after the war. After the war he was persistent in seeking help for refugees and then for the church under communism; it was not a popular thing to be concerned for starving and homeless people – if they were German. Before the war, he had with great application sought support for Jewish refugees. This was likewise not popular. When challenged by a Nazi official what business was it of his, he replied that "It is our business because we are human beings. If humanity means anything it is impossible to shut our eyes. It is equally impossible to refuse to take action"¹. And he ended a speech made in 1938 with the words "the problem of the refugee is the problem also of humanity"². This is something to bear in mind now, when the problems of refugees are so great; they are our problem because they are the problem of humanity.

In his diocese Bell was famous for being a 'flock master', a true shepherd and it is because of this, not in spite of this that he was often on his own. His stance on behalf of the vulnerable in war earned him much abuse, terrible abuse. This was bizarre and unjust because before the war he had been among the first English churchmen to realise the iniquity of Hitler and he tried to raise awareness and also funds for Christians whose Jewish ancestry made life difficult from them in Nazi Germany. This was thankless work in a country like ours which was unwilling to think too badly of the new and neat regime. There were others who gave mild protest with one hand and took it back by anti-Jewish utterance with the other – Headlamp of Gloucester for example. Not Bell, not Bell and there were many who found not only help in theory but real practical help in Bell, Feibusch among them.

None more famous than the young Lutheran from Berlin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Bell met in at 1931 and then on other occasions before a last meeting in Sweden on May 31st 1942. At that meeting Bell received intelligence of the plot to replace the Hitler regime through the assassination of the chancellor, and to sound out the British government who as it turned out would not play ball...

On his return to Germany at the outbreak of the war, Bonhoeffer who had been organising the movement of resistance in the Church turned to Bell in anguish and Bell suggested they pray together using the Beatitudes; Bonhoeffer, who many regard as the greatest Protestant theologian of the last century, wrote how much he owed to

¹ Cited Robertson p53

² Ibid p55

the shared prayer with Bell, across time and space. It has been said that it was to Bell alone, that Bonhoeffer opened his soul.

Bonhoeffer, executed on April 9th 1945 in a concentration camp, directed his last words to Bell. “Tell him”, he said, “that this is for me the end but also the beginning – with him I believe in the principle of our Universal Christian Brotherhood which rises above all national hatreds and that our victory is certain – tell him too that I have never forgotten his words at our last meeting.”

Bonhoeffer derived much of his strength and support from Bell who was more than twenty years older, very much the father to the son. It is one of the great Christian friendships and it marks Bell out as one of the figures, knowledge of acquaintance with whom continues to usher in a silence. That same friend I mentioned earlier tells of a conference in Berlin a few years back, the conference all busy with chat and he was introduced. ‘This is Peter Walker who knew George Bell’; there was an immediate and awed silence.

Why Bell was never moved to either London or Canterbury has never been explained satisfactorily; too much a Christian of the whole church perhaps? If so it is an indictment of the church of the time. In the public memory Bell’s pale blue eyes, welcoming and basically smiling face commend him to many; but it is not perhaps a good picture of Bell I think. That picture is a picture of one who while remaining attentive to the presence of Christ, to every detail which must be seen to, has also seen into the heart of this world’s evil; you will find that portrait by Cold stream which hangs in the Pallant House Gallery, originally rejected by the diocese as being too severe. His wife thought it caught him accurately.

A Methodist minister – Gordon Rupp - accompanied Bell to Berlin after the end of the war; the place was a wreck, refugees everywhere, and as Bell, with little German, moved among the cold and hungry families in the ruins, Rupp was profoundly moved at the sight of this man with poor German, touching and greeting the desperate folk; he used the phrase “obstinate compassion”, which issues not only in little acts, but in the business of Christian Aid or such bodies. “Obstinate compassion”, the compassion that will not be swayed from its path and will gladly bear the cost. In Bell we see that real reflection of the difference of Christ.

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