

20 07 26 Downing Place URC

Last service in the Emmanuel building.

Readings: Romans 8: 28-39

‘If God is for us, who is against us ?...’ (Romans 8:31)

We are here to celebrate and give thanks. With the whole church catholic we lift our voices in praise with the saints who have gone before us, with angels and archangels and the whole host of heaven, to give thanks to God for the creation of the world, and the gift of Christ our Lord, enthroned at God’s right hand, secure in his victory over all those forces of evil that seek to destroy life, make us less than whole and threaten our very planet. We give thanks for the cross and the empty tomb, and the gift of the Spirit poured out.

We give thanks too for this place where the mighty deeds of God have been proclaimed, the waters of baptism have been administered and Christ our Lord has come to us in bread and wine. We give thanks for those who have gone from these doors to share the life of Christ in our city and to the ends of the world. We praise God for keeping his promise and being ‘Emmanuel’, God with us since our opening service on Tuesday May 19th 1874. With Paul we too have known that if God is for us, who indeed can be against us.

Before we close these doors a final time I want to pay two brief visits to our history and ask what we might learn from them as we

¹ David .M.Thompson ‘Nonconformists at Cambridge before the First World War’ in David Bebbington and Timothy Larsen (eds) *Modern Christianity and cultural aspiration* (London, Sheffield Academic Press 2003) pp. 176-200, at pp.176-8

journey on as Downing Place to our new home, the former St Columba’s building in Downing Place.

The doors were opened here on Tuesday May 19th 1874. because the world had changed. In 1856 an Act of Parliament had been passed which meant subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church was no longer a precondition of graduation. In other words, the colleges of Cambridge were now open to dissenters, as those of Oxford had already been for two years. Nearly twenty years later the Universities Test Act of 1871 removed religious tests from all other degrees, except those in divinity and opened Fellowships to all, regardless of religion.¹ The grandees of Congregationalism took note. Their young people might be coming to Cambridge as students, their young men (and in the 1860s it was young men) as academics. Building a new ‘representative’ church in Cambridge was mooted in first in 1861, re-surfaced in 1867, and became serious in 1869 when the land occupied by the Half-Moon Inn in Trumpington Street was purchased.²

The doors opened to a service attended by the great and the good, conducted by several former ministers of the Great Meeting. The preacher was Alexander Raleigh, minister of Canonbury, pulpit prince, former Chairman of the Union, father of a teenage son, Walter, later to be the founding professor of English literature at Oxford. And in that he embodied the changed world, for his son was to read history at King’s in 1881 and deliver the Clark Lectures at

² David M Thompson *Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, Ashgate 2008) p 149

Trinity in 1899 – the foundations of his great work on the Puritan poet John Milton.³

A new world, new possibilities. Emmanuel was to be a spiritual home for the denomination's undergraduates, but also a church that would bring the best of Congregationalism to the university. It marked a transition, from two hundred years of dissenting exclusion, to acceptance of a very public ministry in a commanding place.⁴ That was why a new site was needed, and a bold, arresting new church like the one James Cubbitt designed in cheeky juxtaposition to Sir Christopher Wren's first essay in church architecture across the road at Pembroke. It was a bold, creative, audacious commitment to mission, offering the insights of an alternative way of being Christian, rooted in the soil of the alternative England, the one briefly glimpsed in Cromwell's Republic, and made real in the consequences of being on the wrong side of history thereafter. It's a vision writ defiantly large in the Bond windows, which date from 1904. No bishops, no sovereign would stand between this people and God's Word in Scripture. Here, gathered around the table was a communion of saints, each equal and precious in God's eyes. That Word would flow out into Cambridge through their lives, town as much as gown, for as one historian of this place has put it, '...Emmanuel, Cambridge was still more of an East Anglian county town's leading Congregational Church than it was anything else...'⁵

³ 'Alexander Raleigh 1817-1880' *ODNB* (W.B.Lowther); 'Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh 1861-1922' *ODNB* (D.N.Smith)

⁴ B.L. Manning *This Latter House: the life of Emmanuel Congregational Church, Cambridge, from 1874-1924* (Cambridge, W. Heffer and Sons 1924) p. 3-4

So it was that this became a church of town and gown, although gown had a strange habit of marrying town, literally as well as theologically, and the two became 'one'. Here, as the nineteenth century progressed, was a church that took the Word with a seriousness that befitted its mission in a town whose trade was countless millions of them.

The distinction of her ministers bore witness to that – James Ward, whose struggles with faith led him from Emmanuel to agnosticism and the new chair of Mental Philosophy and Logic in 1897,⁶ W.B. Selbie, later Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford and a theologian of distinction, and of course P.T. Forsyth, one of the greatest British theologians. His voice was so gentle that these sounding boards were built to amplify his voice, his sermons so long that the deacons gently complained. But here he worked out what it meant to be the church of Christ - 'If I am asked why I do not belong to the Established church, I reply that my chief reason is, because I am such a Churchman – a High Churchman – with such a high ideal of the Church.'⁷ High indeed – 'Men (he wrote, today he would say 'people') unite themselves with the Church because they are already united with Christ, and because they are, in the very act of union

⁵ Clyde Binfield 'P.T. Forsyth as Congregational Minister' in Trevor Hart (ed) *Justice the true and holy mercy: essays on the life and theology of P.T.Forsyth* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark 1995) pp 168-196 at p 178

⁶ For Ward, see Thompson *Cambridge Theology* pp 150-2

⁷ Binfield *art cit* pp 193-4

with Him, already in spirit and principle organised into the great Church He created, and whose life He is.’⁸

Shortly after Forsyth arrived in Cambridge in 1894, his world fell apart. His wife Minna died, and he had to bring up his daughter Jessie amidst the hectic demands of the pastorate. He remarried three years later. Jessie shed a daughter’s light on the great theologian, remembering how a red squirrel she had been given in a cage spent more time exploring his study than living in its cage. One day a deacon was in a deeply serious discussion with Forsyth, when a little red head appeared out of his pocket and the squirrel shot up his arm and spent the rest of the interview perched on his shoulder.⁹ ‘Not a sparrow falls...’ Something of the holy grandeur of God that Forsyth so ably expounded became so very human there.

As we take our leave, we observe a church that saw a changed world, and had the courage to take the gospel to it in all its complexity and wonder.

Our second visit is to the Great Meeting in 1716, three years before the end of Joseph Hussey’s ministry. The Great Meeting was in Hog Hill, and is now part of the University Languages Centre in Downing Street. Hussey kept what he called a Church Book, which amongst other things, served as a membership roll. On October 12th he records the baptism of two sisters from ‘Little Wilbrun’, Sarah

and Mary Crabb. Sarah was twenty, the daughter, says Hussey of Anabaptist (for which read Baptist) parents. She ‘... spake a choice experience in the ears of the church with good Light & clear evidence and was joyfully received into the church by Baptism the next day at my house’. Mary, her younger sister by two years, was also received and baptised, and two days later they joined ‘...with us, even with the whole church with us at the Lord’s Table in the breaking of bread’.

It’s a telling vignette. Sarah and Mary were in all probability the great-granddaughters of Moses Crabb, the village water-miller who is recorded as holding a very small conventicle in his house in 1669. In other words, they were the fourth generation of a family in a tiny village who chose to distinguish themselves from their neighbours by their religious behaviour.¹⁰

The Crabb family experience allows us to reach back to the days after the Republic had died, Charles II had been restored to the throne, and dissenters were subject to persecution – imprisonment, distraint of goods and harassment for refusing to worship according to the Book of Common Prayer. Through the Crabb family we can reach back to the ministry of Francis Holcroft, a diminutive dynamo of a man. Son of a politician who sided with Parliament during the Civil War, Francis’s roommate at Clare was a man called John Tillotson. They were good friends, becoming Fellows of Clare together in the early 1650s. Both made their way into the Republican

⁸ P.T. Forsyth *The church and the sacraments* (London, Independent Press 1917) p. 34

⁹ Jessie Forsyth Andrews ‘The lighter side of P.T. Forsyth’ *Congregational Monthly* (April 1952) pp 44-45

¹⁰ Margaret Spufford *Contrasting Communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Cambridge, CUP 1974) p 296, and ‘Dissenting Churches in Cambridgeshire from 1600-1700’ in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* (vol LXI 1968) pp 67-96. Note that in both cases she misquotes Hussey.

elite – Tillotson married Cromwell's niece Elizabeth, Holcroft became Vicar of Bassingbourn and made a name for himself as a rising star in the East Anglian church. Until 1662, when Francis lost his job and his Fellowship, and John conformed, ending up as William and Mary's Archbishop of Canterbury in 1691. That friendship gives us an idea of Francis's intellectual and public calibre.

In 1662 he was in his early 30s, full of creative energy. He had pioneer ministry thrust upon him by the turn of Fortune's wheel, and his response was exceptional, producing something unique in England. Together with some other ejected Fellows and scholars, he created something called 'the church in Cambridgeshire' a series of linked communities of believers served by what looks suspiciously like a circuit ministry before Methodism had been dreamt of, yet all being members of the same 'church in Cambridgeshire'. It was an astonishing work of evangelical organisation.

Pioneer ministry cannot last forever, and when Holcroft died in 1692, the transition to local church structures was not easy. Joseph Hussey, our first minister, was one of Holcroft's fellow workers, yet it was not Congregationalists who called Hussey to the Great Meeting in 1691, but Presbyterians – 'not many, but they were rich' according to the earliest historian of Cambridge nonconformity.¹¹

Three years later, Hussey turned Congregationalist, and split his congregation. The point of principle was one which differentiated

the two Puritan parties. Presbyterians were content for new members simply to adhere to a Confession of Faith. Congregationalists, to use the words of the Savoy Declaration of 1658, their first Confession of Faith, expected church members to be '...known to each other by their confession of the faith wrought in them by the power of God, declared by themselves or otherwise manifested...'¹² In other words they expected a testimony. That was why it was so important that young Sarah Crabb '...spake a choice experience in the ears of the church with good Light & clear evidence.'

And so they joined John Gillam, the collar-maker, Elizabeth Walton, the grinder's wife, the servant Mary Peacock and the shoe-maker William Richardson, and a few hundred others who had confessed before the saints the movement of God's grace in their souls. Included in their number were many who like Mary Westley are simply recorded as '..formerly of Mr Holcroft's'.

And there we must leave them in 1716, in a changed world, persecution and obloquy changed to precarious security in a new world where dissent was tolerated but not yet appreciated. A brave community, gathered around the Word, sure like Sarah and Mary, that if God is for us who is against us?

Two glimpses of our heritage, amongst so much that has been given to us. We give thanks to God for our inheritance of pioneering in faith and mission. Its time now to close these doors, and travel on.

¹¹ Spufford, *art cit*, quoting Robert Robinson *Posthumous Works* ed B. Flower (Harlow 1812) at p 266

¹² 'The Institution of Churches and the Order Appointed in them by Jesus Christ' art 8, appended to the Savoy Declaration. The version quoted is from David M.

Thompson (ed) *Stating the Gospel: Formulations and Declaration of Faith from the Heritage of The United Reformed Church* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark 1990) p 113

As we move on to our new home we shall pass by Hog Hill, and remember the rocks from which we were hewn, but our eyes shall be on Christ our Lord, our minds full of the wonders of God's love, our hands ready for Christ's service. We are part of a history of pioneers – Francis Holcroft, Joseph Hussey, the Congregational Union of the 1860s – may our God who granted them discernment and courage for the living of their days grant us the grace to be pioneers in faith and mission in our day that our city may continue to know that Jesus Christ is Lord and give glory to his name.

Amen.