

FACT Service of Fellowship & Encouragement

St James, Piccadilly

17 March, 2018

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All of us, I imagine, feel that we have in many different ways tumbled into this - and now we find each other on very uncertain terms indeed. I feel I have tumbled into this address too. The reason that I am here is simply because I was kindly invited and I accepted.

On the twenty second of October 2015, an organisation called the 'Church of England', made a statement that it had achieved an out of court settlement concerning an allegation of sexual abuse laid against Bishop George Bell, of Chichester. Who died in 1958. The statement was devised in such a way as to incite a public judgment. This shocked all of those who knew something of George Bell, as he was a man regarded once as one of the great, compassionate and courageous figures of the twentieth century Christian Church. He had been the constant friend of refugees from tyranny. He had saved many lives, an honour unknown to any other Anglican Bishop. He had befriended those who had sort to resist Nazism in Germany and stood by them as they paid the price.

This statement was an assault, premeditated and deliberately calculated, against the integrity of a man who was wholly absent, undefended, unrepresented. It was an assault against a particular Christian civilisation now virtually extinct in this country, which had lived by the highest moral standards and possessed the character to withstand the onslaught of totalitarianism abroad. It was an assault against the reality of knowledge itself, for no scholar who knew anything about this man, his patterns, his age, had been consulted: such knowledge evidently possessed no authority at all. Those of you who followed the story over the last two and half weary years will realise that it has now reached an interesting stage. All I can say today is that trying to rescue the figure of George Bell from this extraordinary situation is rather like trying to rescue a hapless British national who has fallen into the hands of a despotic foreign state.

My stock in trade is teaching history and writing history and I often ask myself the question, 'What actual use can a historian be now?' What use can I be to you today? Many obvious things might well be said: political historians are predictable, after all, in pointing out that something apparently new has happened at least several times before. Social historians are familiar with denunciations and accusations: they are part of the currency of social life. They also know how a climate of public dread, inspired by all kinds of institutions, might foster such things.

Historians are well placed to tell us that the integrity of a society is to be found in the testing of such things and not the making of them. The historians of oppressive states may offer little consolation. For them, by and large, the individual in any age makes their way as best they can through an ocean of arbitrariness, cruelty, irrational power, self-serving ambition, corporate indifference. There is little assurance of justice or vindication to be found in these places. Yet to any historian it is also clear that no individual is wholly alone: they can never be wholly isolated. They are always a part of a bigger picture and that is where the weight of judgement falls.

The psalmist asked, "When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" [Psalm 11:3] This sense that the ground on which we tread daily has evaporated beneath us in many ways expresses the crucial moral crisis of the twentieth Century, a crisis in which the individual and society meet. It was an age which George Bell knew at very close quarters indeed. Many of those who were his friends knew it for themselves. In January 1943, three months before he was arrested, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked if there had ever been any a generation with so little ground beneath its feet?

We might well ask ourselves what has become of the Christian Church in such a world as this? Certainly, we cannot be sentimental. The Church, however we may try to define it, is certainly not a unique repository of righteousness. Since October 2015, I have often been struck by how people outside the Church of England have expressed dismay and anger at what has been done to George Bell. But there has been very little of this inside the Church itself, a church now with many official positions, all of them filled by people with a public responsibility.

Only the other day, I heard from a Roman Catholic priest who had been approached by a woman after a Holocaust Memorial Day event in Westminster. 'Are you Church of England?' she had said to him. 'No', he

replied, 'I am a Roman Catholic priest.' 'Thank goodness', she said, 'George Bell helped to save my parents. He is our hero. It is shameful what has been done to him.' Perhaps such a reproach hardly matters.

That statement of 22 October 2015 was made to the press on behalf of a corporation. Any questions that were subsequently made were answered by an anonymous 'spokesperson' of the Church of England. Since then I have heard a succession of bishops speak on the matter, and they have always claimed to present the view of the Church itself. It is hardly surprising that many Christians have become sceptical about the church as a public corporation. The Roman Catholic priest, Peter Carr, whose trials and imprisonment and death seem to me as authentic a Christian martyrdom as anything I have seen in this country for the last half century, wrote towards the end of his shortened life, 'Institutions have an amazing tendency to protect themselves. If an individual has to be sacrificed for that end, then so be it, justice and fair hearings for the individual take the back seat.' I am not sure that anybody here today would feel able to challenge such a perception. But what is the Church? And who is the Church? Any historian knows that the Church is not a corporation, even if it is led by people who are prepared to proceed on the principle that it is. The Church is something greater and deeper, and something far more diverse. No authority, however it sets itself up, can in any meaningful way claim to represent this with a policy or a statement. It is irreducible to a simple formula or a doctrine. It is something known only to God. Today you are as much a part of the Christian Church as anyone else.

There is an immeasurable reality at work in the Christian Church to which we must we must hold, because it is the reality which we find our own place. And this is fundamental, as it was fundamental to George Bell in his own lifetime. Those who sought to maintain the Christian faith in the context of National Socialism seldom looked to bishops, senior clergy and Church bureaucracies for any consolation or support. They knew they were on their own. But what this produced was precious and rich with significance. The historian Klemens von Klemperer has written of an intensification of devotion and understanding, a 'piety of resistance'. It was not a piety of the institution, but a piety found whenever two or three, men or women who pursued righteousness were to be found together. It was, at the last, the single possession of the man or woman who was betrayed, abandoned and abused, before execution.

Then what has become of our sense of Christianity? How and where is it to be found? I am more than ever struck by the greatness of what we are all given in the wisdom of our scriptures, and in the prophetic life of a canon of ancient literature which was not given to a Church alone, but given to the world itself. It remains before us, whatever church authorities and the like may do. It is part of the birth right of every man or woman we shall see as we leave this church today. No one can define, or confine it. It is at large in the world. I once found myself sitting in a stall in the choir of Westminster Abbey between two elderly ladies. They had been widowed for half a century; both their husbands had been executed by the Nazi state. Neither was a regular churchgoer, or conventionally religious. We were attending a service of choral evensong. As the psalm of the day was sung one of them, Freya von Moltke, would simply nod in silent acknowledgement as a particular phrase touched her own experience and moved her.

The source of Christianity is still to be found where it has always been, in the story of an innocent, wrongly accused man, abandoned by respectable company, tried by a secret political tribunal, judged by a class of arguments which no one with any independence of mind could credibly maintain, cast before crowds and taken away to be crucified. This stark narrative remains, perhaps, the central, crucial contribution made by Christianity to civilisation altogether. Because of it no one can really argue that such things denunciation, trial and judgement are merely peripheral matters and they can never be regarded with simple indifference. They are always fundamental, essential and inescapable. And the figure of Christ remains with us even when the corporation of the church disowns us. Father Peter Carr may have lost his ministry as a priest and been ejected from his Religious Order, but he knew that what lay before him was not oblivion but what he called 'the Way of the Cross'.

Those who endured the disaster of National Socialism chose their company very carefully after 1945 and remained very wary indeed of trusting anybody in public life. But in these years Freya von Moltke once wrote to Bell, 'You are one of us'. Bell would certainly have cherished this. After his death, the German pastor Martin Niemöller, who spent seven years in a concentration camp, remarked on a radio programme that Bell was 'a Christian who was led and driven by the love of Christ Jesus himself. He couldn't see somebody suffering, without suffering himself. He could not see people left alone, without becoming their brother.'

George Bell today may well be claimed as a patron saint of those who are falsely accused, not simply and merely because he has been falsely accused himself, but because this figure offers so much that remains eloquent, resonant and encouraging. There is no doubt at all in my mind where to place him. He would readily have taken his place with us here with us today. He was one of those very rare individuals who are somehow able to hold together those disparate realities which are so rarely found in harmony: the dimensions of authority and powerlessness; the public word and the private intervention; an established religion and a confessing Christianity, the possession of privilege and security but the use of those things, daily, on behalf of those who knew only danger.

W H Auden once wrote:

‘True, love finally is great,
Greater than all, but large the hate,
Far larger than Man can estimate.

What is the price of such hate, in such a world as ours? And when we are failed by every principality and power, secular or ecclesiastical, to what assurance, if any at all, can we still lay claim? Bell certainly saw the destructive power of hatred; and he knew it for himself. But he also found what lay beyond it. In the Autumn of 1945 he visited two elderly people in a suburb of the ruined city of Berlin. They had never met before, but he had known one of their sons well and had loved him. In fact, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer had now lost two sons and they had also lost two sons-in-law, all of them executed by the Nazi state. For years they had not seen once a daughter who had in earlier years married a Jew and who had lived safely, under Bell’s keeping, in exile. This must have been an intense, profound moment. The bishop and the bereaved couple spoke together only for half an hour but when Bell left they gave him a book which had belonged to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.

In *The Imitation of Christ* I find these words:

Let not therefore thy heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Trust in me, and put thy confidence in My mercy. When thou thinkest thyself farthest off from Me, oftentimes I am nearest unto thee. When thou judgest that almost all is lost, then oftentimes the greatest gain of reward is close at hand.

All is not lost, when a thing falleth foul against thee. Thou must not judge according to present feeling; nor so take any grief, or give thyself over to it from whencesoever it cometh, as though all hopes of escape were quite taken away. Think not thyself wholly left although for a time I have sent thee some tribulation, or even have withdrawn thy desired comfort; for this is the way to the Kingdom of Heaven.'