

Edward Bouverie Pusey

A Sermon preached at S. Laurence, South Hinksey, Oxford and S. John the Evangelist, New Hinksey, Oxford on the 3rd Sunday of Advent 2010 as part of an Advent Course on significant figures of the Oxford Movement by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library, Pusey House, Oxford

“Dr Pusey was not in the least a picturesque or tremendous character, but only a sickly and rather ill put together English clerical gentleman, who never looked one in the face, or appeared aware of the state of the weather.”¹ His appearance struck another contemporary as having “always ruffled hair ... exceeding slovenliness of person, dusky always, as with suggestions of a blunt or half-used razor.”²

This unprepossessing academic, scholarly figure, who is the subject of this third sermon in your Advent course on significant figures of the Oxford Movement, died full of years and greatly beloved, revered and respected by vast numbers. His pall-bearers at his funeral in Christ Church Cathedral included three theological professors, among them Edward King, later the saintly Bishop of Lincoln, Charles Wood, later Viscount Halifax, the Earl of Glasgow, the Warden of Keble College and the Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone. A future Prime Minister, the Marquis of Salisbury was to head the appeal committee which raised funds for a permanent memorial in Oxford, Pusey House from which I have come this morning and which is known to many of you. But Dr Pusey also died as one of the most controversial and abhorred men of his age. To his detractors he was a traitor to the Church of England, a fifth columnist intent on its subversion, a radical and stubborn reactionary.

Pusey remains something of an enigma, a man of paradoxes, if not contradictions. He was much misunderstood in his lifetime and has been much misrepresented by hagiographer and opponent since. A remote and cloistered academic but one who tended cholera victims in Bethnal Green. An unnatural and reluctant leader but one to whom many looked for leadership and guidance on public and private matters. An establishment grandee by background, upbringing and temperament but one of immense humility and one who denied the authority of the state within the sphere of the spiritual and ecclesial life. An academic insider constantly at odds with the University which he served piously and diligently. He sought to avoid controversy but was one of the most controversial men of his age. A prose writer of stunning prolixity but one who could rise to a pitch of prophetic, ecstatic abandon. Painfully shy and retiring but who lived the most public of lives. A life marked by tragedy, sadness and grief but one whose every “sentence was instinct with his whole intense purpose of love, as he struggled to bring others into communion with the truth and person of him who had purified his own soul.”³

His longevity, if there were nothing else to count, ensured that his influence on the Catholic Revival was profound. He was at the heart of the Oxford Revival for forty-nine years, whereas the other two of the great Tractarian triumvirate, Blessed John Henry Newman contributed twelve years and John Keble thirty-three years. After Newman’s conversion to Rome in 1845, by which time Keble had retired from Oxford to his exemplary life as a parish priest in Hampshire, Pusey became by force of circumstance the leader of the Oxford Movement for the next thirty-seven years. He was a reluctant leader

¹ John Ruskin, *Praelerita* [1978 Edn] Vol 1 Ch 11 p 190

² William Tuckwell, *Reminiscences* pp 136, 138

³ *Op Cit* Liddon Vol II p 61

and his shy reserved nature made his political and controversial involvement a personal pain. Yet he had an innate authority that came from his personal connections and an influence over several generations of undergraduates in Oxford. He had about him an unworldliness and was undistracted by worldly or material things. He was unfailingly generous of his time, learning and wealth, a wealth and “massiveness and immovability” that allowed him to stand alone if necessary. While he lived Anglo-Catholics could not act without him and they could not act against him. What was obstinacy to his opponents could prove equally frustrating to his friends and supporters. But throughout he articulated the terrible candour of insistent orthodoxy and was ever anxious to bring “to the vivid consciousness of members of the Church of England, Catholic truths, taught of old within her.”

Pusey’s particular spiritual contribution to the Catholic Revival was the call to the holiness of life, to the assiduous cultivation of a devout life, of a structured life of daily devotion and self-examination. It was a regimen that eschewed the pursuit of pleasure and stressed the virtues of humility, of lowliness, self-effacement, self-denial, and one that held duty, obligation and responsibility in high esteem. This, allied to meditation on the shortness of life and the inevitability of death and judgement, heaven and hell, themes that run through this Advent season, emphasised the seriousness of the need to see every day as potentially the last day and to set the necessity of daily self-denial within the context of the light of eternal joy and which placed a premium on the seriousness of moral choices made in everyday life, its encounters and relationships.

The call to the holiness of life was the great imperative that sprang from the two great spiritual themes that concerned Pusey and the Tractarians, Incarnation and the mystery of the Cross. For Pusey the Incarnation and the Cross were two aspects of the same divine reality. His emphasis on the Cross (to which he had a particular devotion as he was baptised on Holy Cross Day) was no mere pietistic slogan but was a serious and challenging theological stance learned from his study of the Catholic tradition and ratified by his own experience. The imitation of the crucified Christ and the efficacy of his Precious Blood are themes which run through his writing and preaching. “Our life from Baptism to our death should be a practice of the Cross, a learning to be crucified, a crucifixion of our passions, appetites, desires, wills, until, one by one, they be all nailed, and we have no will, but the will of our Father which is in Heaven.”⁴ And that is so for us. This Advent leads us to innocence lying in the wood of a manger, as Lent will lead us to innocence hanging on the wood of the Cross. “It were a dream ... to think that we could love the Passion of Christ and not engrave it on our lives; that we could be melted by his sorrows ... and ourselves not sorrow or suffer with Him ... The sufferings of Christ cannot be real to him who never suffers.”⁵ He wrote, “As the two mysteries to which God gives most power to draw and melt the soul, are the Incarnation and the Cross and by them He pours into it a superhuman, a divine love, Advent may ... work by His mercy a reverent love for His Divine Infancy, as Lent should nail us to His Cross.”⁶ The directness and violence of that image still has the power to shock but it is from there that Pusey draws out themes of adoration, imitation, union and prayer.

The world and human souls were the spheres of God’s activity. That is why the doctrine of the Incarnation was at the very heart of the Oxford Movement and of Pusey’s life and witness. Holiness of life, individual sanctification was part of a more expansive

⁴ *Parochial Sermons III* [1878] p. 50

⁵ E. B. Pusey, *Leeds Sermons* p. 176

⁶ Avrillon, *A Guide for Passing Advent Holily* (Edited by E. B. Pusey) [1847]

sanctification of the world and humankind, itself the consequence of the Incarnation. At its most elevated this is expressed in the glinting poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" or as he put it in a sermon: "All things ... are charged with love, are charged with God and, if we know how to touch them, give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him" – the sense that God is not only reflected in nature but that he is sacramentally present within it. The reality of that apprehension is as vivid and urgent for us as it was for Pusey. Our Lord's Incarnation and Nativity radically altered the covenantal relationship between God and man. History, human life and being could never be the same again.

Advent reminds us that as a consequence of the Incarnation and Nativity, the Passion and Cross, the Resurrection and Ascension our lives can never be the same again. We are caught up in the cosmic Christ that changes and transfigures us. And that is the effect of the Sacrament in which we are now engaged. Pusey preached the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood; he encouraged the frequent celebration of the Eucharist and played a significant part in securing the centrality of the Mass in the worship of the Church. He was ever engaged, for himself and others, in the pilgrimage to the perfection of holiness. In his work and life, there is to be found the beauty of holiness and a generous Christian spirit, compassionate and Catholic. He brought together the theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation where faith, experience, knowledge, and love all cohere. The sanctification of the world and of man, the holiness of our living is the essential way to express our entry into the life and the love of the Holy Trinity. Man is restless until he finds his rest in the love of God and in the Holy Trinity. Man is made for God. And in a few days time we will be reminded that God became man.

These foundational principles, at the heart of Pusey's ministry, remain at the heart of what we seek to do in the House erected as his memorial in St Giles. We seek to pursue Christian scholarship and learning. We seek to inform and sustain the Catholic Tradition. We seek to articulate a Catholic moral and social theology. We seek to recall the Church of England to its right mind, which is a Catholic mind. We seek to convert the unbeliever, sustain and encourage the believer, pursue Christ's command that we shall all be one as he and the Father are one. We seek to inculcate the living of a life infused and permeated by sacramental grace. We preach the urgent call to the holiness of life. And we do what you do. We proclaim the Catholic Faith in the midst of the disintegration around us. There is an urgent need to seek out the sad and lonely, the broken and impoverished, the wounded and the seekers after truth, the unlovely and the unloved, and to bring them to the temple of God's love. For that love will not forsake them but will transform them. The lonely will find friendship, the sad will find joy, the broken will find repair, the impoverished will be enriched, the wounded healed, the seekers after truth, will find the truth of Christ risen, ascended, glorified, the unloved love beyond their wildest dreams, and all will know the peace that passes understanding.

We are not unlike Pusey who was "a man living through a series of tempests, intellectual, spiritual, psychological ... often seen as constrained by rigidity of intellectual reflection, fossilised in convention, imprisoned by upbringing, background, intellectual and moral temper [yet] ... remarkably creative and original in many aspects of the spiritual life and in response to direct pastoral need."⁷ If Pusey has been eclipsed by Blessed John Henry Newman and remains little known and if he remains to be re-discovered, and if his presence still disconcerts and disturbs, if he is neither the hero once thought, nor the villain once traduced; if he troubles our sceptical age with the violence of

⁷ A. M. Allchin, Pusey, Servant of God, in *op cit Pusey Rediscovered* p 369

his consciousness of sin, equally with the violence of his joy, by his intensity and his unrelenting insistence on the claims of God on human lives, he also “gives us hope that our human life may not be doomed to ultimate frustration and absurdity and waste but may find its unimaginable fulfillment in the knowledge and love, the presence and the joy of the one by whom and for whom we were made.”⁸

⁸ *Ibid* p 388