

Charles Gore, 2025

We're commemorating Pusey House's first Principal, Charles Gore, and I can't imagine he will thank us. He'd say that our business should be with God, not with Gore. Yet the things of God are frequently communicated to us by other people, and that was certainly the case for many who met Charles Gore, so a story is in order.

Many years ago, I was talking with a retired priest who was in Oxford in the 1920s as an undergraduate and then a graduate student of physics. At that time, he considered himself a firm atheist, but one Sunday morning he went to the Sung Mass at St Barnabas'. The reason for this uncharacteristic behaviour was that the preacher was to be Charles Gore, and in those days the rule was that if Bishop Gore was preaching, you went to listen, whatever your religious convictions or lack of them. You knew that you wouldn't be fobbed off with sentimental pieties, or be threatened and emotionally bullied into belief. Instead, you would hear a highly intelligent man grappling, sometimes with almost frightening intensity, with the teachings of the Christian faith and the consequences of holding that faith.

The encounter with Charles Gore certainly began the process of change in that young man. Naturally, I asked him what Gore had said that had such a profound effect on him. He replied, "Oh, I don't remember now what he said – but I remember *him*." That was not an uncommon experience, especially in Gore's later years. He led people, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to think that Christianity needed to be taken seriously; and it was not simply a matter of what he said, but of who he was.

There are many lenses through which we can view Charles Gore: scholar, teacher, philosopher, theologian, controversialist, Churchman, Principal of Pusey House, Bishop (the Bishop who created the Diocese of Birmingham), founder of a religious community (the Community of the Resurrection) in this house, Socialist (he founded the Oxford branch of the Christian Social Union in this house.) In his time, please note, Pusey House was considered by some to be a worryingly radical place, witness the rumpus caused by Gore's essay on scriptural inspiration in the collection called *Lux Mundi*. This is an impressive list. But any of these qualities in him would merit a lecture, and our purpose now is different.

So let's think of him, as many did, as a *Prophet*, in the strict meaning of that word. Like the prophets of old, Gore had an almost overwhelming conviction of the Righteousness of God, and so he felt compelled to look at the world, at society, at the Church, at human responsibility under the scrutiny of that Divine Light.

This made him an uncomfortable man. (Most prophets are uncomfortable.) What he saw and thought, he said, even if it disturbed people's cosiness. He was certainly an uncomfortable figure among his fellow bishops because he was always demanding that they act out of principle rather than out of compromise. (We mustn't omit the famous story of how he was seen standing on Westminster Bridge, shaking his episcopal hand toward Lambeth Palace and loudly declaiming, "As for the bishops, they are *hopeless!* I have done with them.") He was an individualist who never fitted entirely comfortably in any environment. Having founded a religious community, he couldn't live in it.

The truth is that Gore was not comfortable with himself. He lived with tremendous tensions which might have brought a lesser man to breakdown; indeed he came close to it at least once. There was the tension between his powerful mind and his no less powerful emotions. The Church of England has never had a more convinced or faithful member, so there was the tension between his love of the Church and his anguish at what that Church so frequently chooses to be and to do. There was the tension between his aristocratic, indeed his autocratic nature and his socialist beliefs. There was the tension between his profound Catholic faith and love of liturgy and his determination as a bishop to rein in Ritualistic departures from the Book of Common Prayer. Evangelicals ignoring the BCP also received short shrift.

All this makes him sound a pretty formidable character, and he could be; so it's comforting to know that he had a saving sense of humour, though sometimes rather a mordant one. We have to love a bishop who, when he was offered a cup of tea by a known fanatical teetotaler, replied, "Thank you, no. I drink only alcoholic beverages." And to the end of his days he retained a youthful spirit which attracted the young to him. They were the ones who most easily noted at his deepest level an "obvious happiness" in him, despite his tensions and discomforts.

Because Gore would want us to keep our eyes on God, there's a lesson for us in his life. He said, "The purpose of God is to do in us and through us more than we imagine, but He can only carry out His purpose if we are responsive." To which we should add the fact that for his purposes God uses the material which is in each of us, including what might be thought to be our flaws. Charles Gore is a prime example of the important truth that Godliness is not necessarily the same thing as psychological integration. Men and women wholly committed to God may have awkward facets and unreconciled conflicts in their nature, but those don't prevent them being servants, perhaps outstanding servants of God. That's a necessary lesson to the Church at the moment, where the chief qualification for ministry is seen to be having no jagged edges to your personality which might cause disturbance to anyone.

Gore can also teach us the importance of tradition, something downplayed in Church and society at present. For Gore, tradition was the received inheritance of faith and doctrine and worship which provides the foundation on which we build. It must not become concrete in which our feet are immobilised. Tradition is stabilising, but not complete. More than many of his contemporaries, Gore knew that we can't simply invoke the past to provide knock down answers to present day questions. The challenges of new insights from the natural and human sciences, for example, must be met honestly, and celebrated when they disclose to us the ever-greater creative work of God.

Gore also reminds us that Anglicanism rests on a solidly Catholic understanding of the nature of the Church, its Creeds, its structures, its hierarchy and its sacraments, combined with an acknowledgement of the importance of the scriptures.

For Gore, the Creeds were absolute. He knew that different generations may need different emphases on the Creedal faith, but as a bishop he would not tolerate any clerical diminishing that faith. At the centre of his own faith was a full-blooded doctrine of the Incarnation.

Similarly, he knew that the scriptures are vital to the Church Catholic, but he believed that honest and reverent scholarly study of those writings should hold no terrors for us. The failure to teach orthodox doctrine, coupled with a fundamentalist biblicism which are infecting our Church at

present would earn his withering contempt. Christian faith must engage and satisfy the mind, as well as the heart.

Add to this Gore's conviction that the Church is here to witness and to serve, not to preserve its privileges or to act as a kind of supplementary Parliament. Being a prophet, he was clear that if the Church fails to teach the faith, if it fails to minister the sacraments, if it fails to unburden penitent sinners, if it fails to care for the poor and the victims of injustice, then like society it stands under judgement from God's righteousness. In this he is in a clear line of succession from Dr Pusey. Given the situation in which the Church of England stands at present, Gore's voice needs to be heard; though were he here, in the eyes of Church authorities he would still be about "as popular as an electric eel in a pool of flat fish."

I'm aware that I stand under Gore's judgement for talking about him too much and about God too little. But the clue to his entire life is his unswerving devotion to God revealed in Christ. Whatever Charles Gore's character flaws and even faults of outlook, he was absolutely truthful when he said, "Nothing matters, in heaven, earth, or hell, but that I should realise God's claim upon my life, and shall respond to it." Can we say that?

And he earned his reward. In 1932, when Gore was dying, the Archbishop of Canterbury hurried to his bedside. Gore was hovering on the edge of consciousness, but the Archbishop heard him say twice, very distinctly, the words "Transcendent Glory." It seems that the vision he longed for was opening before him.

Let's end with the words of the Regius Professor of Divinity at Gore's memorial service in Christ Church: "God lent him to us for seventy-nine years, and that was much longer than we deserved. May he pray for us still!" Amen.