

St Andrew's, Chesterton
900 years: the 18th century
'The warmed heart'

A sermon preached by the Revd Nick Moir on 11 October 2009

I read recently a description of a University Sermon delivered in October 1923. These observations were written by A C Benson, then Master of Magdalene College:

'I looked around. A professor's head was embedded in his chest; the Vice-Master of Trinity asleep with a look of uplifted piety; the Regius Professor of Divinity's skull-like head dangling on his neck; one of the Bedells asleep, his head pillowed on the other's shoulder. I was aroused by a sharp sound to my left: the Master of Pembroke rigid with sleep, snored and struggled... A disgraceful scene of infinite futility and grotesqueness.'

It could have been a scene from the 18th century. Indeed, it had been: 'The Sleeping Congregation' (1728) was one of William Hogarth's famous satirical engravings. Some of the congregation are packed into a box pew, heads sticking out of the top, some are in a gallery, one buxom female sits near the double-decker pulpit. All are asleep. Only two people in the picture are awake: in the top layer of the pulpit a bewigged parson reads drearily from his prayer book with the aid of a small magnifying glass and beneath him a rather portly and grumpy looking clerk frowns at the congregation.

David Edwards, in his history of 'Christian England', writes of Hogarth:

'In his vision of town life the pleasures of the rich were empty, the consolations of the poor were coarse, politics was a brawl, and selfishness reigned everywhere. One level of society saw the harlot's progress to misery; another, the rake's progress. The English prided themselves on their manly freedom but used it be cruel to each other and to animals. Public executions were popular recreations and the Englishman's favourite sport was cock-fighting (to the death, with heavy gambling).'

If in 1728 he was gently mocking of the dominant sleepy and complacent established religion, thirty years later, towards the end of his life, he savagely attacked the new and distasteful popular religion, which he labelled 'Credulity', 'Fanaticism' and, worst of all, 'Enthusiasm' (particularly hated by people of taste in those days).

But back to the University Sermon, this time one delivered on 30 January 1784 by the then Master of Magdalene, Peter Peckard. The scene is described by a current fellow and historian of the college, Ronald Hyam:

'A young student from St John's, Thomas Clarkson – who would one day mastermind the abolition[of slavery] campaign – later recalled that the preacher began nervously, as well he might, considering the explosive message he was about to deliver. And this is what Clarkson heard. There was a God-given natural "inherent right to liberty", yet, gripped "by an imperious spirit of unjust domination", the British people were, through the Slave Trade, with "unexampled tyranny" driving innocent Africans with "inexpressible cruelty to unceasing torments, and an untimely death". The Slave Trade, the preacher declared, was a barbarous iniquity, an avaricious crime, a national disgrace, "a Sin against the light of Nature, and the accumulated evidence of divine Revelation", and thus doubly rebellious against God. After this fiery and subversive denunciation, and almost equally shocking to the congregation, he abandoned the formulaic set-prayers in order to pray "for our brethren in the West Indies", so outrageously ill-used. Clarkson had heard the most galvanic sermon in Great St Mary's since the Reformation, and it inspired him.'

And you may know that it was Peckard who in his year as Vice-Chancellor set the essay prize on the 'indefensibility of slavery' that was won by Clarkson who was later joined in the fight by his fellow Johnian, William Wilberforce. It is also quite possible that it was Peckard who raised the memorial to Anna Maria Vassa on the outside of this church, and his wife Martha may well have written the verse.

Peckard came to Magdalene as a serious-minded clergyman committed to the college becoming a place not for the sons of the rich to be idle and badly behaved – as he had been as an undergraduate – but to be nurtured in a Christian vision that would lead to a renewed social order in Britain and in the world. He was broad churchman of liberal views but he had undergone a sea change in his outlook: from being a misspent, pleasure-seeking youth to an earnest and highly upright campaigner for social justice. He worked alongside the new generation of evangelicals who had undergone an even more radical change and whose influence changed the face of the church and nation towards the end of the 18th century.

These evangelicals were those who had a before and after story: before their conversion experience they may have led a highly immoral and dissipated lifestyle, like the slave-trader John Newton, or had been trying too hard to be religious, like John Wesley, or had simply been born and bred CofE and had no idea of what Christianity was and no interest in finding out, like Charles Simeon. What is common to their stories is some kind of crisis or critical moment, a sense of profound and complete unworthiness, a re-reading and reflecting on Holy Scripture and a moment of being flooded by transforming grace. It's all there in the Hebrews reading: the word of God, 'quick' (that is, alive), 'powerful', 'sharper than any two-edged sword', piercing deep within, touching soul and spirit, joints and marrow, exposing to the divine gaze 'the thoughts and intents of the heart'. The heart is laid open before God and yet we are not consumed 'for we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities' but who sympathises with our weaknesses and has gone before us into the throne room of heaven. So, the writer concludes, 'let us... come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace'. Or, as Charles Wesley put it, 'bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own'. 'Amazing grace', as Newton called it.

John Wesley heard a lecture on Martin Luther's preface to the book of Romans and famously felt that his heart was 'strangely warmed' as he realised that Christ died for his sins and saved him from the law of sin and death.

Charles Simeon came up to King's College and, required to receive Communion at the end of term, thought he'd better prepare for it. 'Satan himself was as fit to attend as I; and that if I must attend, I must prepare for my attendance there.' So he bought the only religious book he'd ever heard of. It was called 'The Whole Duty of Man' and it made him feel totally inadequate as some Christian books or sermons sadly do. During Holy Week however, he read another book; this spoke about the Old Testament figure of the scapegoat, that the high priest laid his hands on the goat so that the sins of the people were transferred.

'What! may I transfer all my guilt to another? From that moment on I sought to lay my sins on the sacred head of Jesus, and on the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; and on the Thursday that hope increased; and on Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday (Easter Day, April 4, 1779) I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips, "Jesus Christ is risen today; Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul; and at the Lord's Table in our chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.'

The universities were not altogether thrilled with the new evangelical brand of Christianity. In 1768 six students were expelled from Oxford for their evangelical opinions. The view was that the Evangelical Revival may have been good at breeding manners and morals into simple country folk

but it wouldn't do for the refined and educated. As Samuel Johnson commented, 'A cow is a very good animal in a field but we turn her out of a garden'.

Simeon's ministry as vicar of Holy Trinity Church certainly faced such early opposition: more than once he was locked out of his own church, but Peckard's Magdalene was amongst the colleges that had a growing number of evangelical students who were not just tolerated but welcomed.

And these – unlike many of Wesley's followers – were rich young men: not, perhaps, unlike the man who knelt before Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Except these men did not go away sad but entered through the needle's eye of their own unworthiness and insufficiency and passed through into a new world, born again into a life of grace and Christian discipleship. They took on leading positions in church and society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and were key players in – abroad - the abolition of the slave trade, and missionary expansion (including the protection of aboriginals) – and, at home, social reforms, care for the disadvantaged and the renewal of church life.

William Hogarth died when Simeon was just 5 years old. Perhaps if he'd lived a little longer he wouldn't have lamented quite so much that his sleeping congregation of 1728 was beginning to stir from its slumbers.