

15th Sunday Year A Matthew 13:1-8
13/7/08 Eve of 175th Anniversary of the Oxford Movement

*“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”
Matthew 13v8*

One hundred and seventy-five years ago tomorrow, a fellow of Oriel known to many as a poet, preached the Assize, or Court, Sermon before the University of Oxford. It is entitled “On National Apostasy”, for in that sermon he accused the nation and its government of alienating itself from Christ, swapping convenience and political collusion for the central place of the church in national and constitutional life. Specifically, he was objecting to the government’s proposals to reduce the number of Irish bishoprics – a very good idea, as it happened – but the point was not the detail of the matter in hand, but whether parliament, following the various reforms culminating in the great bill of 1832, had the power to impose its will upon the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

I have produced some copies of Keble’s Assize sermon which you may take and read should you wish to. It’s not exactly racy, but it is worth a look. More interesting than the sermon, however, is the fact that, largely thanks to John Henry Newman, it has been taken as the beginning of the so called Oxford Movement, the catholic revival in the Church of England which sought to call that church back to its roots in the teachings of the scriptures and the Christian fathers. You can read on our website, or in the pamphlets available at the back, about the movement’s

origins and development, including the fact that it was really a later conference which marked its beginning. More important the movement’s insistence on the catholic doctrines of apostolic order, the authority of the church, the objective character of the sacraments, the presence of Christ in the eucharist, the inability of extra ecclesial bodies to pronounce on the truth of Christian teaching. These substantial claims marked the reassertion of High Church Anglicanism, combined with the youthful zeal of some brilliant and passionate men and women who sought to bring real change to the church and the country.

As a church proud to call itself Anglo-Catholic, we owe that epithet to the Oxford Movement, to Keble, Newman, Pusey, Palmer, Froude, and so on who fought for the catholic identity of our church. It is odd, then, that almost everything we are doing in this mass is something of which the original Tractarians would deeply have disapproved. They would have been horrified by a high mass – Keble famously said he didn’t know what it meant – by our vestments, our incense, our statues, our candles. The rediscovery of ritual was a result of the Oxford Movement but it was not intended by it. They would have been horrified to see women ministering among us, but then they would have been horrified to see women studying in Oxford, and women voting in elections. For that matter, they would have been horrified to see working men voting in

elections. They were conservative patricians opposed to most aspects of political change.

In fact, when we study the Tractarians now it is striking to note just how wrong they often were. Crucially, they were wrong about the history of the Church of England which, in the later 16th century, was not catholic but unequivocally Protestant and saw itself as such, part of the mainstream of the European Reformation. Theologically, the Church of England did not constitute a *via media* between Rome and Luther. The Book of Common Prayer is not a repository of Catholic doctrine. The statements of the Thirty Nine Articles cannot be reconciled with the teachings of the Council of Trent, as the greatest of Tractarian thinkers, John Henry Newman, mischievously argued. Newman, of course, realized that the anti-Romanism of the Oxford Movement's beginnings could not stick. The Roman Catholic church did not, and does not, teach a "Carnal" doctrine of the Eucharist; the doctrines of Our Lady are not fondly invented vulgarities without root in early Christianity; the development of doctrine is a characteristic of the church.

However, I say all this as an unashamed Anglo Catholic, without thinking it at all troubling. The Oxford Movement presents us with a series of anomalies. If we ignored every Christian who was wrong, there wouldn't be much conversation in the Church. The Tractarians were

pioneers, they were mapping out uncharted territory, feeling their way into the unknown. Their initial efforts underlie the progress Anglo Catholicism has made. They were conservatives, but they were also reformers, they objected to the moribund state of the Hanoverian church and wished to breathe more theological life into it. They sowed the seeds of revival, and many of them, and more of their successors, quickly realized that such a revival would itself bring forth wider and more noticeable aspects of catholic life – the return of the religious life, the rediscovery of the liturgical tradition, the rich mining of ancient Christian thought and writing, art and architecture.

It is sad to see the media talking of the end of Anglo-Catholicism, because the success of the Oxford Movement is most clearly seen in churches which would not think to call themselves catholic. They enjoy vestments, candles, processions, crosses, at least a weekly eucharist, communion for the sick, anointing, ancient hymns, stories of saints, the new church calendar – the list goes on and on. Clergy were imprisoned for such things in the later nineteenth century. The triumph of Tractarianism has been the fact that the Church of England has changed out of all recognition from the dry Hanoverian Protestantism of 1833.

But the other glory of the Oxford Movement is precisely that it was so wrong and yet so right, so muddled and yet so effective. The very term

Anglo Catholic is oxymoronic to some, but it tells us much that is important about our Christian lives. The church is the institutionalization of Christian humanity, and humanity is always and everywhere a mess. Christians can claim that we have all the answers. We can claim that every truth about God is plainly and directly revealed in the text of scripture and that there are no theological problems, only a failure to read. Or we can claim that all Christian truth resides in the authority of an Italian see and the historical structures which surround it, and that there are no theological problems, only a failure to hear. Or, perhaps there is another way, a Tractarian *via media* which, though not true at the Reformation, might be true today. Perhaps we can be honest about the mess which we human beings are so good at making. The church is the creation of Jesus Christ in spite of, not because of, human beings. Our attempts to live the Christian life together are largely a collection of human failures interfering with the patient grace of an ever merciful God. The Church of England has its place and its part in this life, and its adherence to the lasting truths of universal Christian teaching are the basis of any success which it can claim. To be an Anglo Catholic is not, as some would claim, to live in an unreal or fantastical world, it is quite the opposite. It is to live with humility in the knowledge that the Church of Christ is a glorious and miraculous mess, because the mess which we call humanity is the mess where we meet Jesus Christ.