

## 4. The Tradition of Christian prophecy in Britain: a hundred years & more

### The Challenge ...

At the beginning of his mission, Christ proclaimed, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people" While they marvelled at his eloquent words, within a short time the crowd were so offended that they were planning to kill him, but "he walked through the middle of the crowd, and went his way." Luke 4, 18-19, 22, 29-30. The Good News was often not seen as good. So how do you proclaim the gospel to hostile audiences? Our Christian churches have too often fallen down on the job: blind to an evil status quo (the excesses of empire, slavery, world poverty), oppressors of the people (slave owners, exploiters of workers), or silent in the presence of evil (during the Nazi era in Germany, military dictatorships). Nevertheless, a powerful tradition of witnessing to Jesus' proclamation down the centuries continues to inspire our church communities today.



### The Christian prophets in the nineteenth century

Each age and each country has had to rediscover the Spirit of God in its own time, and this is nowhere more clearly seen than in the nineteenth-century Christian response to the growth of industrial Britain, which was built, as we now know, on the profits of empire and the iniquitous slave trade. Modern London bears many traces of that Christian response.

### What needed reforming?

The nineteenth century began in a time of war, with the threat of a French invasion. At home, war-wounded lined the streets, begging, while African slaves, freed or escaped, struggled to make a living. Agricultural labourers flocked into towns, their livelihoods destroyed by enclosure of common land, while industrial invention changed the face of cities. In this social upheaval, the prisons were overflowing; prostitution and street crime were rife. By 1900, while still prosperous, Britain was being overtaken by Germany and the US in production, and was once again at war, now in South Africa. The rights of poor people were, however, rising on the country's agenda, and the early twentieth century would see the birth of the Labour Party, and the beginning of universal benefits. In the ferment of social ideas, secularists such as Marx, Engels and Robert Owen stood out, but so too, did the very practical "hands-on" Christian reformers.

### Setting the oppressed free ....

The nineteenth century started with the Anti-slavery lobby, led by William Wilberforce, an evangelical Christian MP, and others, including freedman Olaudah Equiano. Wilberforce brought an abolition bill before Parliament 18 times before finally succeeding in forcing the repeal of the slave trade.

### Giving liberty to the captives

Meanwhile, a young Quaker, Elizabeth Fry, would be seeing Newgate Prison for the first time, and beginning her prison reform. She fought for separate conditions for men and women, female matrons, and better conditions for prisoners being transported to the colonies.

### When I was homeless ....

Larger cities meant more housing, with the outrageous slums we know about from the novels of Charles Dickens. He was a Unitarian, who believed 'that the New Testament was not only the "best book" ever written, but also the "best" guide to living a moral and just life'. Later, Quaker Joseph Rowntree would survey The Life and Labour of the London People, and begin his own housing reforms.

### Recovery of sight to the blind

Were poor people poor because they were bad? Charles Booth, another social researcher, thought not: "The words, 'give us this day our daily bread' have not much meaning to us; do we ever think what they mean to the poor? I am constantly impressed with the different aspect of our life compared to that of those who live on daily wages, from day to day, from hand to mouth. Some of my friends will say, 'you mean the difference between the thrifty and the unthrifty', but I do not think I do."

Poverty came from an unjust system of labour rather than from personal immorality. Christians began to see more clearly:

### **Go out into the highways and byways ...**

William Booth was called to address precisely this moral issue, and began his work by tackling evil and poverty together, wherever he found it, establishing homes for the homeless, farm communities to train the urban poor in agriculture, help for alcoholics. In a prophetic declaration, he asserted that if the state failed to meet its social obligations, it was the task of each Christian to step into the breach. In founding the Salvation Army, William and Catherine Booth contributed in no small way to the spirit of the twentieth century welfare state.

### **When I was hungry**

The Irish Potato Famine had driven millions of Irish families overseas, many to England, where they were swallowed up in the flourishing industries of mill towns, coal mines or transport building. The Catholic Church, though mainly a fragile immigrant Church, was in a strong enough position by the end of the century to speak out. Cardinal Manning took an active part in the Dockers' Strike of 1889, in the quest for the "Dockers' Tanner", as the mediator between the striking workers and the dock owners. He was seen as fair and impartial by both sides. With his letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pope Leo XIII affirmed the centrality of the human being in the production process, and the right to form trade unions. Modern Catholic Social Teaching had made its debut. Another feature of London life was growing Catholic emancipation, and the mushrooming of new or immigrant religious congregations, who set up schools and hospitals in London and throughout the country, to minister to the urban poor, with such orders as the Faithful Companions of Jesus, the Sisters of Mercy, the Servites, and the De la Salle Brothers, to name a few.

### **The contribution of women**

With neither the vote, nor the right to own property, Christian women contributed to social reform out of all proportion to their status. Florence Nightingale, performed spectacular nursing service in the Crimea ("On February 7th, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to his service") and came back to found nursing schools, while mixed-race Mary Seacole broke racial taboos by nursing the troops in the Crimea also. Octavia Hill, a Christian Socialist, pioneered improvements in housing, taking over management of properties, including repairs and maintenance, as well as rent-collecting. Anglican Josephine Butler campaigned successfully for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, and against child prostitution.

### **The Christian Impact**

Taken all together, the Christian response to the evils of the Industrial Revolution was arguably the biggest factor in the social improvements seen in London in the nineteenth century.

### **The twentieth century**

We could continue with this history of outstanding Christian social reformers, which becomes a global story in the twentieth century. The martyrs of the Second World War, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Franz Jägerstätter and Maximilian Kolbe; the champions of freedom, such as Martin Luther King, or Mahatma Gandhi (a Hindu who drew some inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount); and the Christian social vision of Archbishop Temple, made the story of reform a much wider phenomenon. Mother Teresa became an icon of the compassionate Christian, while Oscar Romero was murdered for speaking out on behalf of the poor. Such became the speed of communication, that events in one continent began to impact on those of another much faster than previously.

### **The challenge for Christians in Britain in the twenty-first century**

We are part of this continuing tradition of prophecy. The message is clear, whatever the century, whatever the city. We continue to be called "to give good news to the poor, liberate the captive, to proclaim the time of the Lord's salvation." Two centuries on from the days of slavery, we have different and even more daunting challenges. Differentials between Britain's rich and poor are growing; we have half a million undocumented workers. Our climate is threatening to destroy our entire way of life, and our government continues to build weapons of mass destruction. Our wealth is built on exploitation of overseas small farmers. Overwhelming? As we read in the Spirituality section, Jesus says that if only we had faith as small as a mustard seed, we could "say to this mountain, 'Be moved', and it would be thrown into the sea."