

The Lych Gate

In the previous lecture I dealt with my experience, looking back to the 1960s, of ministry in the steel industry and the conclusions I have come to about it. In this lecture I wish to make some general observations and to do so I need a peg upon which to hang my thoughts. So I have decided to tell you about lych gates.

The covered entrance gates to churchyards commonly called lych gates are familiar features among the ancient churches of these islands. The word lych is a Saxon word for corpse, from which we may deduce that these structures first appeared before the Norman Conquest. However very few have survived from the Middle Ages; most of those we see these days are 19th or early 20th century restorations or replacements. Their purpose was quite practical. In preindustrial times, before the advent of funeral directors or telephones, when a death occurred the practice was for the corpse to be wrapped in a shroud and taken to the churchyard. There would inevitably be some time to wait while the sexton was found and asked to dig the grave; the priest also had to be found, for he might be working on the field, tilling his own glebe, and asked to conduct the burial office.

This time of waiting could be stressful for the mourners and so the lych gate was built to enable them to rest and shelter. It was a pitched structure, probably, in the Middle Ages, with a thatched roof, the line of which was a right angles to the churchyard wall, it stood on four posts and often had a gate at the front end to keep sheep out of the graveyard. On each side there would be a wooden or stone bench for the mourners to sit and wait. Meanwhile the corpse would be put in the parish coffin and rested on a bier, also in the lych gate shelter. In some churches this purpose would be served by the south porch, which might also be fairly deep and have benches on either side. Ancient churches having such porches do not usually have lych gates, and churches with lych gates do not have such large south porches.

In the Middle Ages these structures were very much the responsibility of the local parishioners and throughout the land they had the same basic design. In later times the church authorities tended to rebuild them in a more sophisticated architectural style. One of the most beautiful is that attached to Brecon Cathedral, this is a fine example of a lych gate in the neo-gothic style of the late 19th century. In Cardiff there is a lych gate at St Margaret's Church, Roath, having in its roof a loudspeaker through which the service in church can be heard by the passers by. At Eglwysilan, near Caerphilly, there is a large stone lych gate, which reflects the Romanesque style of the church building itself.

Contact with death always evokes serious thought and emotion. In literature one of the best examples is Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard":

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o' er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

The poet meditates on the lives of those buried in the churchyard of Stoke Poges - a quiet rural village in those days. I remember well some verses from my schooldays:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfatho'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village Hampden that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mure inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

I recall the teacher asking the question: "Was the poet right to call Milton inglorious?" and I said to myself: "He wasn't calling Milton inglorious, he was saying that this villager buried here might have had the talent to be a great poet, but because he was poor and uneducated there was no way that he could have developed his talent, he died and was forgotten, and in that sense he was an inglorious Milton". Of course at the tender age of fourteen I did not have the courage to say that to the teacher.

Thomas Gray's thoughts in the country churchyard were, in part, about the fate of the thousands who die and are forgotten. But the view from a lych gate is different. In that situation we reflect not on those who have died and have been buried in the graveyard and are now forgotten, rather we wait for the cortege to arrive, we observe its passing, we know the deceased and the mourners, we reflect on the significance of the event. I am suggesting that here we have a peg on which to hang some reflections on the situations of our time. In my life I have, as it were, witnessed a number of such events. Consider for example the death and burial of the British Empire.

A hundred years ago Rudyard Kipling was the darling of the British people. He had the same sort of place in society that we accord to pop stars or film actors. This, of course, had nothing to do with his looks. Wherever he went the crowds feted him. His writings, his books, his regular poems appearing in the daily press, the attitudes he expressed and promoted all gave him a unique place in society. He was a close friend of King George the Fifth and often dined at the palace, he was an imperialist. It takes an effort for us to realise that in those days the British Empire was regarded as wholly good and successful, a matter of divine vocation and blessing for the British people and the world. No one said it better than Kipling:

Take up the White Man's burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild
Your new-caught, sullen people,
Half devil and half child.

Take up the White Man's burden
Ye dare not stoop to less
Nor call too loud for Freedom
To cloak your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your Gods and you.

This poem was written in 1899 when the British Empire was at the height of its power. We might regard some of the sentiments expressed as totally wrong, its racism and arrogant superiority are undeniable, but at the time it reflected the opinions and feeling of the great mass of the British public. Yet all was not well in the mind of Kipling, he had a feeling that it was all going to come to a sad end; the seeds of its decline were already germinating:

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget - lest we forget!

Far-called our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire;
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet
Lest we forget -lest we forget!

Robert Baden-Powell was a great disciple of Kipling, and in his founding of the Boy Scout movement he had a conscious desire to do something for the Empire. Consider this passage from "Scouting for Boys":

"Every boy should prepare himself, by learning how to shoot and to drill, to take his share in defence of the Empire, if it should ever be attacked. If our enemies saw that we were thus prepared as a nation, they would never dare to attack, and peace would be assured"

(Camp Fire Yarn No. 26 - Our Empire)

It is a measure of the power of imperial ideology that when I joined the Boy Scouts in the early 1940s I saw nothing wrong with this aim of the movement. It is, perhaps, ironic that it was through scouting that I came to observe one decisive step in the decline of the Empire. In 1947 I attended the World Scout Jamboree in Moissons, France, as a member of the Welsh contingent. On 15th August, in the middle of the camp programme, we were marched off to the Indian sector to witness the hauling down of the Union Flag and to see the flag of the new Republic of India being raised with great cheering. Later I heard a recording of the majestic words of Pandit Nehru:

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time has come for us to redeem our pledge. At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India will awake to new life and freedom"

I didn't realise it at the time but that was what we may call a lych gate moment, I was observing the funeral rites of the British Empire. Of course, the obsequies were quite long drawn out; in the years following we saw the granting independence to Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and all the rest. Each time the Union flag was lowered it was as if another shovel of soil was being thrown upon the coffin of British imperialism.

To those who sneer at the achievements of British Imperialism I would make the point that it is surely a mistake to judge the past by the values of the present. The British people did what they thought was right and good at the time, although it was accompanied by huge violence, exploitation and injustice, typical of the whole world and of which we are now ashamed. Had they desisted from this policy no doubt others would have stepped in; consider the possible fate of India had it been colonized by Belgium or Russia? Many of the seeds of India's present power and success were sown during the long years of British rule.

The reason why I refer to this in a course of lectures on radical orthodoxy is that throughout the time of the British Empire there was a strong religious dimension. The nation really believed that it was doing God's work in bringing civilisation and religion to the Empire.

*"O'er heathen lands afar
Thick darkness broodeth yet
Arise O morning star
Arise and never set!*

As we wait at the lych gate we see, in our mind's eye, another cortege arriving. The bearers lift the coffin off the hearse and make towards the place of burial. We draw near to see the inscription on the top - "The Ten Commandments".

There can be no doubt that if we look around us we shall see that these have been long buried in the Western world. I think it could be demonstrated that not one remains unsullied in modern society. To be sure they are venerated in the Church. In the liturgy of the Church in Wales, for example, a summarised form of the Ten Commandments is provided for optional use at the beginning of the Holy Eucharist, and I have used it myself on many occasions. Of course, we have our own understanding of the commandments and in our own way we intend and hope to obey them. But the point is that obedience to the Ten Commandments is now considered to be a private, lifestyle choice.

In the public life of the world the idea that we should give official recognition to God's commands in the ordering of our society has long gone. But more than that it seems that the very idea that there can be an official and absolute moral standard for the world today has been lost and it is in that moral atmosphere that the Church must try to make its message intelligible. In his book "Godless Morality" Bishop Richard Holloway argues that it is best to keep religion out of ethics. His chief point is that religious systems of ethics rest upon absolute principles which make it impossible for them to respond to the ethical demands of a society in rapid and radical change.

The other lych gate moment in my life has been what has been called the death of God. From the Enlightenment that is from about the middle of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century philosophers have been telling us that the old God of metaphysical objectivity is no more. The certainties of the classical and mediaeval times have gone. This was well expressed by Matthew Arnold (1795-1888) in 1867 in his poem called "Dover Beach":

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

The image of the tide going out as expressing the gradual loss of the old certainties of faith is one which has evoked a response in popular thought, but it does not quite fit in with my idea of a lych gate moment. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) wrote a poem coming much nearer to this. It is a strange and dark creation, not very well known, and evoking emotions of dread and sorrow:

I saw a slowly-stepping train-
Lined on the brows, scoop-eyed and bent and hoar
Following in files across a twilit plain

A strange and mystic form the foremost bore.

And by contagious throbs of thought
Or latent knowledge that within me lay
And had already stirred me, I was wrought
To consciousness of sorrow even as they.

We can be sure that he is speaking of a funeral, indeed the poem is called "God's Funeral" but he cannot bring himself so use the word God in the poem itself. He identifies the deceased in the sixth verse:

'O man-projected Figure, of late
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?
Whence came it we were tempted to create
One whom we can no longer keep alive?

'Framing him jealous, fierce, at first,
We gave him justice as the ages rolled,
Will to bless those by circumstance accurst
And long suffering, and mercies manifold.

These verses tell us who is dead and they encapsulate much of the philosophical critique of the previous two hundred years. Hardy then turns his attention to the onlookers of this sad scene

Some in the background then I saw,
Sweet women, youths, men, all incredulous,
Who chimed: 'This is a counterfeit of straw,
This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!

I could not buoy their faith: and yet
Many I had known: with all I sympathized;
And though struck speechless, I did not forget
That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

While Hardy sympathizes with those who cannot accept this loss of absolute certainty in an objective and "real" God, he, nevertheless, identifies himself with the mourners. He dismisses those who think they see some hope in the distance, and decides to join the mourners:

Whereof, to lift the general night,
A certain few who stood aloof had said
'See you upon the horizon that small light
Swelling somewhat?' Each mourner shook his head

And they composed a crowd of whom
Some were right good, and many nigh the best
Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom
Mechanically I followed with the rest.

It seems to me that Hardy addressed this poem to the intellectual elite of his day. It was obviously of no interest to the ecclesiastical and political establishment of the late Victorian period, nor, I think, would it have been understood by those ordinary folk who, at that time, attended church and chapel every Sunday. It was the First World War that saw the turning point.

Churchgoing from then on began to decline in England and Wales and it has never recovered in those European nations that endured the vast casualties, the futility, and the horrors of the trenches. The decline in church attendance since the First World War is a subject in itself that I hope to pursue in a future course in this Centre.

It is important to emphasise that the God who died, in the minds of these writers, was the God of the public life of society. No doubt many people still held in their minds an image of God, and that, in their own way they worshipped and obeyed Him. So we are not saying that God does not exist. What we are saying that in today's world our idea of God is different from that of our forefathers. We shall be looking at what that means further on in this series of lectures.

Another example of the loss of divine power in today's world is weather forecasting. Very few Christians pray to God to change the weather these days. For example in the middle of the torrential rain and flooding in the summer of 2007 the lead given by diocesan bishops and other church leaders was to evoke the compassion and sense of duty in the rescue services and in the good neighbour. The changing weather was left to the forecasters.

This in turn enables us to comment on the power of computers in today's world. This give to us immense powers of global communication and information retrieval, but they are based entirely upon the application of mathematical logic. God does not appear in the situation.