

# Address given at the Service of Thanksgiving for the life of Bishop Peter Walker

Ely Cathedral 10<sup>th</sup> February 2011

When Peter Walker was giving his Remembrance of Donald MacKinnon in 1994 in the chapel of Corpus Christi Cambridge, he began by quoting from a poem shared with him by a nun grieving for her Abbess:

But how shall I speak of you,  
Without you?

I echo those words today, holding, as they do, so much love within them, as we give thanks for the life of Bishop Peter Walker, and seek to express our love to Jean and “our profound gratitude” to her, as John Beer said at Peter’s funeral, “for her wonderful generosity and love in being so willing to share him with us”.

In that Remembrance Peter went on to quote MacKinnon speaking of the reticence called for in that situation, -though you would have to say, as Peter did about George Bell and Chichester Cathedral, that the very stones of this Cathedral carry in them the prayers that Peter prayed here, as bishop of this diocese.

Much has already been written and spoken about his life, so Jean has asked me, in not too long a sermon, to concentrate on his thought, his theology. And re-reading his book “Re-discovering the Middle Way” and the occasional pieces of writing he used to give me, when Gesine and I visited him and Jean, has been a privilege and an inspiration.

And I feel I have Peter’s permission not to be too reticent in his case, for he has such a sense of humour, not least about himself. He describes how George Bell recalled meeting him and another young seaman for the first time in 1940: “You were so different...Peirson was so practical.”

Not that Peter was not practical in the way a bishop should be. Re-read the address he gave here at the launch of the Cathedral Appeal in 1986: straight to the point, practical, challenging, inspirational, and clearly effective.

Brian Beck provides another example, from an earlier time: Peter, Principal of Westcott, with Dennis Nineham, his Chairman of Council, in 1968, knocks on Gordon Rupp’s door at Wesley to explore the two colleges working together. Through that initiative, eventually the Cambridge Federation was born. Peter was a practical ecumenist.

When he was speaking in Chichester two years ago on “Bell The Man”, he used the one word ‘stillness’ to sum him up. If you have to sum Peter up in one word, I would go for ‘attention’ or attentiveness. Attentive to God, caringly attentive to everyone around him, and to all who knew him, attentive to the theologians, poets, artists, whose work he entered into so deeply. Michael Soulsby, priest in this diocese from 1988, and a student at Westcott when one Principal was succeeded by another, said of that change: “Ken Carey stood over us” (something to be said for that), “but Peter stood beside us”.

For ‘standing beside us’, including standing beside those whom he referred to as “The Awkward Squad”, we owe him so much –not least I myself, being bold enough, as a student at Westcott, when everyone else including Peter had gone on holiday, and I alone was left, waiting to be examined on Immanuel Kant, in the middle of the night going across the court to Peter’s rooms and helping myself to his whiskey, to help me sleep. It did the trick; I survived the exam next day. -And I did own up, and Peter enjoyed the story.

But that ‘standing beside us’ did not prevent him from helping us take tough decisions when they needed to be taken. He just helped us make them ourselves.

Which leads me to one of his celebrated and endearing expressions. I was back at Westcott as Principal, and I thought we ought to consult him as our bishop on a point (inevitably) of experimental worship. As always he was encouraging; but I had to report back that “he had just **half** a question...” about our plans. The phrase became folk-lore at Westcott.

That was not diffidence; it was certainly not timidity (after all in the war he had served on a destroyer during the Battle of the Atlantic guarding the convoys of merchant shipping). It was humility, of course; but more than that, it was attending to God in respect of us, individually and as a community. It was a looking to the future, attending, as he says so often in his book, to the direction of travel, which must be towards the future on the basis that “He who calls, is faithful”. So he was reluctant to lay down the law, or draw tight boundaries. Which brings me to one of his great mentors, Fenton Hort.

Peter’s work is famously full of parentheses and quotations, and he quotes Hort a lot. But he had taken to heart some rather fierce words of MacKinnon which he remembers from undergraduate days at Oxford in 1940: “If you haven’t **read** Berkeley, don’t **quote** Berkeley.” Peter attended deeply to those whom he quoted. His written work is much more than a collection of quotations from others: he wove the quotations into the direction of the movement of his own thinking. As George Bell had done, he recognised the Church’s need of theologians; he knew them as friends, -and he ministered to them.

In Bishop Westcott’s Preface to the publication of Hort’s Hulsean lectures (“The Way The Truth and The Life”) some twenty years after Hort had delivered

them, he had reminded his readers that Hort had said: “I’m just a learner amongst learners.” That’s Peter, too.

But for Peter, Hort was more than that. When he delivered the Hulseans, Hort was still a parish priest, and at the same time, he was examining for the Natural Sciences Tripos. Here was a man **as** versed in the world and nature outside the life of the Church, as in the theology within it. At the centre of his faith was St John’s Gospel: the Word made flesh, full of grace and **truth**. Christ the truth was Hort’s motivation for his scholarship in the natural sciences as much as in theology. Peter champions that.

And Peter records him observing how Englishmen were now pursuing their own understanding of the world and nature without any recourse to theology; and much worse than that, the Church seemed content to let them do so. One hundred and ten years later, Peter expresses his ‘*crie de coeur*’ for an Anglicanism focussed on the world and nature as much as on its own traditions. He regarded Hort’s voice as prophetic: unless the Church looks outside itself, its theology loses its credibility and vitality. And ultimately truth must be **one**, for the Word made flesh is **both** the heart of God’s revelation, **and** author of the created order.

And so to George Bell. Peter sees Bell steeped in the same *via media* of Anglicanism as Hort, and as committed to focussing on the world beyond the Church’s walls, for it is there that Christians have to live out their faith. Hence Bell’s costly speeches in the House of Lords on the obliteration bombing of German cities, to which Peter comes back again and again, as does MacKinnon. And Bell had also come to know a deeper, ecumenical, Christian unity and companionship in the Gospel through his friendship with Bonhoeffer, again at great cost. Bell the committed Anglican, but beyond that, the committed ecumenist, like Peter after him. Bell’s horizons are as wide as the needs of humankind, and that drew Peter to him. Peter could not bear the narrowing of the Church, the drawing of ever tighter boundaries, its defensiveness, its lack of the essential direction forwards into the future. As MacKinnon said of Bell: “he brought the future nearer”.

Reviewing Peter’s book, Leslie Houlden spoke of him representing a genuine “Anglican liberalism”. Peter only mentions ‘liberal’ in his book once, but he often speaks of Christian freedom. It is a freedom, Hort had said, which comes at the **end** of every process of making the faith our own, not the beginning. We have to immerse ourselves in the faith handed down to us, seeking to “unlock the truths that are hidden within it”. Peter quotes Hort’s rendering of John 8.31f, inserting the word ‘then’ twice: “If ye abide in my word, ye are truly disciples of mine, and” then “ye shall know the truth, and” then “**the truth shall make you free.**” It means going back repeatedly to the “heart of the matter”, in Peter’s words, in the circumstances of our own day. Only then will the tradition really live.

For example: the ordination of women was the occasion of Peter's moving on beyond Bell's reliance on Hooker's view of ordained ministry, to a deeper understanding of the exercise of power as seen in Christ's passion: power found in weakness, in receptivity, and in intercession. Peter is following MacKinnon in re-examining the Christian theology of power, and finding the mystery of our salvation in the powerlessness of the cross, -and that needs expression in the ordained ministry.

But attending to the world outside the Church, and re-connecting with it, was, for Peter, a bigger challenge, involving the re-awakening of our imagination. So he attended to the arts with all the attentiveness of which he was a master and he invites us to do the same, to the poetry of Auden, Eliot, and many others; supremely of Geoffrey Hill. When Gesine and I came to visit him and Jean, he would often give us a copy of Hill's latest book.

In 1989 I heard Peter give a lecture on Hill to the Cambridge Federation. His title: -a typical Peter Walker title- "Sharpened Awareness': Natural Theology and the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill: a Sighting Shot". ... The very title expresses his reticence, and his anxiety about annexing poetry for purposes of theological exegesis. He says "We speak for ourselves when we speak of how poetry speaks to us".

He invites us to attend to the poet's perception of the particularities of human life and the natural world, in order to grasp the possibility of (I quote) "approaching our theology in a whole new, dare I call it a more **tender**, frame of mind". But before we do that, we have to face the darkness of today's world. So Peter drew our attention to two of Hill's poems which go together: Two Chorale-Preludes on melodies by Paul Celan, in the volume 'Tenebrae' of 1978: Hill re-working two of Celan's poems. Peter sees Coleridge reflected in them, and behind Coleridge his beloved Augustine. So there is tradition here too, but Celan's and Hill's poetry is poetry **after Auschwitz**. In the first poem, there is a darkness of the spirit, a sense of being at a loss, of a lostness that needs **facing**.

Peter said: "The stark matter-of-fact language is deliberate, consciously adopted in the face of the fatal capacity of art to beautify." He then turns to the second poem, again modelled on Celan, and sees what he calls a "genetic moment" (a phrase he has taken from Cornelius Ernst), at the centre of which is a void, which turns out to be a 'radiant darkness', to use the phrase Peter makes his own (at this point too echoing a thought of Hort's: that the darkest moment may actually be the place where light is found).

This attention to poetry is central to Peter's legacy to us: his work in the 1970's and 80's is now bearing fruit in today's extensive exploration of theology and literature. Just one example: Malcolm Guite has described to me hearing, as an agnostic undergraduate, Peter speak on poetry at Pembroke College in 1979. That gave him a way into faith; Peter confirmed him in 1980; he was later ordained and has now produced his own book on theology and the poetic imagination.

Peter attended too to the visual arts; in 1982 he concluded his charge following a visitation of this Cathedral by pointing to the Christus sculpture by Hans Feibusch and saying: “All that the Cathedral stands for is in fact gathered into the Christ who is there represented.” And he concludes his book by pointing us to John Piper’s stained glass window in Robinson College “Light of the World”. He writes: “Piper’s poignant glimpse of the beauty of God’s so threatened world, and of a transcending radiancy, will not let me go.”

Peter’s call to us is not to glory in what he did or was, far from it, but to attend **now** to the faith we have received **and** the world in which we live, and to make that faith our own, focussing on ‘the heart of the matter’ with generosity, humility, and humour about ourselves, in the faith that we will find our freedom there.

Rupert Hoare  
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