

Westcott House Benefactors Eucharist, Revd. Angela Tilby
Thursday 30th October 2008
Hebrews 12.18-24; Mathew 21.12-16

‘You have come to Mt Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering’

Benefactors’ services in the University of Cambridge are rather odd events. There is usually a list of the great and the good with their great and good works on behalf of the college or institution concerned commemorated and celebrated. It is perhaps a thing to be proud of that Westcott’s benefactors are rather more reticent. They are also fewer, Westcott has the widow’s mite rather than the rolling millions. But we can give thanks for all. And do so at this Eucharist. The one person though, for whom we can justly and rightly give thanks for and name as our benefactor is Westcott himself. That is, Brooke Foss Westcott, Regius Professor of Divinity and founder of the Clergy School in Cambridge which became Westcott House. I have to admit that when I was on the staff of Westcott I found the presence of B.F. Westcott in portraits and photographs rather uncomfortable. He has a very ‘manly’, bearded, unsmiling Victorian stare. Nor did I rate his views. He was opposed to giving women the vote. He also had a dread which the House cheerfully enacted some years ago. Westcott’s dread was the reservation of the sacrament which he thought a mistaken and very regrettable practice.

But there are aspects of his legacy which we are right to celebrate.

Westcott was above all a scholar of scripture. He loved the technicalities of scripture study, the minute weighing of variant readings, the struggle to pin down the missing or obscure word, and then to press the text until it yielded its secrets. Like the 3rd century scholar Origen, whom he greatly admired, Westcott passionately believed that, ‘Every syllable has its force’. A difficult text was not, for him, a reason to close the book, but a gift to be untied, unwrapped and opened with reverence and delight. And while he was critical of narrow and over rigid interpretations of scripture he was not a *liberal* in any sense that we might recognize. The liberty of faith was a liberty of *faith* – a liberty and liberalism within the limits of creed and scripture.

This challenges us. We tend to hug our scepticism to ourselves, we take refuge in the secular perspective when Biblical faith baffles or upsets us. What do we do with the offensive text; the text of judgment or destruction, the text that denies or rebukes things we truly value? Westcott asks us not to give up on scripture at this point but to stay with it, to be patient with it, confident that the glory of God is indeed hidden within and it is our task to labour to find it. He wrote, ‘Scripture offers no wisdom to the careless, and no security to the indolent’. And that in the end is why you wrestle with your Greek or Hebrew, or translated text, and why you drag yourself to the office every morning and evening.

Westcott deplored narrowness in any form. Christianity for him could be seen as a series of progressive and widening circles in which each sphere contains that in which it rests: so God was in Christ, Christ reveals the unity of each sacred human life, and each human life reveals the all, the unity of the human race, and this unity widens out beyond society to the whole creation. There is a progression, a purpose being unfolded through time and history in which the coming of the Word made Flesh is the key. Yet Westcott knew how strange this coming was, how it questioned so much that we assume. He wrote, ‘the world is not what I should have expected, nor the Church, nor the Bible’. The temple must be cleansed, not least of our own prejudices. The wind and winnowing of the Spirit drives us to a deeper faithfulness, or more trusting obedience. ‘I dare not then rest’, he wrote, ‘on this side of the glory’.

So wide were his horizons that he not only deplored a closed reading of scripture he also distrusted any over intense interest in churchy matters. He would have deplored the contemporary fascination with ecclesiology; because for him the Church was God's instrument of grace; not the end purpose of human life. 'We have come to Mt Zion, the city of the living God'; not to a museum or even a music-hall; and in our age, not to a cinema or a cosy home group. A little discomfort in Church, hard pews, a less than ideal temperature might actually keep us awake. (That's me not Westcott).

Westcott would have wanted us to not only to love scripture, but to be deeply engaged with society, with politics, with nature, with music and art, and television and the internet, with the experiments at Cern, and in conversations with believers of all faiths. His great commentary on John's Gospel expressed the conviction that the same Word which was from the beginning was to be discerned within Hinduism, and by implication, in the other faiths. Each in its own way reflects the one true light which lightens every person. One of the pupils of the great Origen offered tribute to his teacher in words which would have been applied to Westcott as a theological educator:

"No subject was barred, nothing was kept from us...we were allowed to make ourselves familiar with all kinds of doctrine, from Greek and Eastern sources, on spiritual or secular subjects, ranging freely over the whole field of learning...he (that is Origen) kindled in our hearts the love of the divine Logos, the supreme object of love, who by his unspeakable loveliness draws all irresistibly to himself'.

So where does that leave us?

Well, hopefully we *are* learning through our study and worship and common life to love the divine Logos, Christ himself, who draws all to himself. Westcott never attempted to set the syllabus or the agenda; nobody who comes here has to sign up to a declaration of faith and practice. The mould he leaves is a light one. So light that there is plenty of room for rebellion. Grahame Leonard and Alistair McGrath both trained at Westcott House. And Westcott himself was a rebel in his time. He rebelled against rigid approaches to scripture, he rebelled against cosy complacency in church and society, he rebelled against over easy assumptions about where real human freedom lies.

I hope that as you move towards ordination you will take from him a love of scripture; deep, penetrating, unsatisfied, ever more open and searching – for if you don't no one else in the Church will. The rigid and the bland will rule.

I hope you will engage with the great issues of society; communication, poverty and debt, race, the environment; science and the arts, from a standpoint of faithfulness – if you don't no one else much will. Pietism and bullying will win.

Westcott's great gift to us is that he did not try to make us in his own image. He was bigger than that. He expects us to change, and expects the world and the Church to change. All he asks is that we stay faithful to Christ, with daring and devotion and lightness of touch, to the faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic creeds, and to refuse to rest this side of the glory.