

## **SERMON FROM THE ABBEY**

given at Matins on Sunday 12 September 2010

by The Reverend Robert Reiss, Canon in Residence, Westminster Abbey

Ernest William Barnes

I am using the three Matins sermons I have this month to reflect on three men who were canons of this Abbey in the twentieth century and to ask what they might still have to say to us today. Last week I talked about Hensley Henson, Canon here first in 1900 who went on to become Bishop of Durham for some 21 years until 1938. Henson was a very interesting if somewhat controversial figure in his day, but the person I want to talk about this morning was even more controversial.

Ernest William Barnes was appointed a Canon here in 1919 aged 44. He was the son of a Headmaster who was then appointed Inspector of Schools for Birmingham when Ernest was only 8, and the young Barnes went to King Edward VI Grammar School in Birmingham, then as now one of the leading schools in the City, with a strong Anglican tradition. Barnes' parents were non-conformists, but he liked the Anglicanism of his school and chose to be confirmed in the local parish church and worshipped there alone of his family, independence was an early personal trait. From school he won an open Scholarship to Trinity College Cambridge, where he read Mathematics and came second in his year in the whole university in the Mathematical Tripos and he went on to win the first Smith's prize, which is considered to be the blue ribbon of the Cambridge Mathematical prizes. He was elected as a fellow of Trinity when only 24, and was shortly appointed a lecturer and Director of Studies for Mathematics in the College, in which role he directed among others the studies of G P Thompson, who went on to be Master of Trinity and who, with Rutherford, was the first to split the atom, and Barnes became a Fellow of the Royal Society. But he also decided, as could any fellow of an Oxbridge College at the time, to request ordination to his fellowship and he was ordained in 1902 by the then Bishop of London while remaining a Mathematics lecturer.

But apart from being a very distinguished mathematician and scientist he also decided before the First World War that he was a pacifist, and remained one throughout his life. This was quite a difficult thing to be in a very establishment college like Trinity in 1914, not least of all when Barnes also supported Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, in seeking to become a fellow of the College. It was a very difficult period in the life of that institution, and the fellowship was deeply divided on Russell's appointment, so when in 1915 Barnes was offered a clergy post in London by Asquith, the Prime Minister, he felt the time had come to leave Cambridge. He accepted the offer of becoming Master of the Temple, which means being responsible for the Temple Church and having a ministry to the lawyers who work in the Inns of Court. Barnes found it very congenial to minister to a very intelligent congregation, where he pursued what was an increasingly liberal approach to theological issues, a firm commitment to some progressive causes like giving voting rights to women, and continuing his pacifist agenda, which provoked the Lord Chancellor of the day to comment on one sermon he preached at the Temple 'if it did not know it was a privileged occasion I would have had that Master of ours in goal tomorrow.'

Interestingly Lloyd George, who had become Prime Minister in succession to Asquith and who had been an effective War-time Prime Minister was prepared to ignore Barnes' pacifism and appointed him as a Canon here in the year after the First World War ended.

Barnes was only here for five years but in that time he further enhanced his reputation as a public preacher who was anxious to show that it was possible to be a Christian while

also accepting the findings of science. In 1920 he preached a sermon in Cardiff Parish Church to the British Association for the Advancement of Science entitled 'The Christian Revelation and Scientific Progress'. He argued, as indeed many other churchmen at the time would have argued, that it was quite possible to accept the theory of evolution alongside the essential message of Jesus Christ, but he also said that he thought the theory of evolution did require some re-thinking of the notion of the fall of man in the garden of Eden. It was that as much as his advocacy of evolution that caused some considerable furore in the press from more conservative minded churchmen.

By 1924 Ramsay MacDonald had become the first Labour Prime Minister, and he offered the post of Bishop of Birmingham to Barnes, which Barnes accepted. The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, Randall Davidson, wrote to Barnes' predecessor at Birmingham 'I imagine there will be some protest...to his nomination, but as far as I am aware there is no real justification for regarding him as a man unsound in the Faith. On the contrary, I think he is a very genuine Christian teacher though of course on liberal lines. When people denounced...a sermon he preached about evolution, it seemed to me he was only saying what many of us have been saying for years, although perhaps he worded his contentions or arguments a little differently. The nomination was in no way mine, but I have seen no reason to protest against it and I have a very great regard for Barnes himself and I entirely approve of his acceptance of the nomination.' Later Archbishops were not quite so generous.

Barnes remained Bishop of Birmingham for nearly 30 years, and although he engaged in a number of controversial matters most people recognised him as a gracious and friendly man who did not allow intellectual disagreements to become unduly personal. That was not always the reaction of some of his opponents, most notably when he pursued a vigorous policy against what he saw as liturgical irregularities. Like most Bishops of his time he was prepared to allow the bread and wine of the Holy Communion to be reserved in a church so that they could be taken to the sick, but he deeply disapproved of the move of more Anglo-Catholic clergy to go beyond that simple reservation and develop the practice of using the reserved sacrament as the basis for liturgical acts of worship normally called Benediction. His language about the practice was not likely to endear him to Anglo-Catholics, he spoke of 'pagan sacramentalism, which had entered into Latin Christianity and pretended that it could create the Bread of Salvation by some magic of ritual and formula', which the Church Times, then the vehicle of the Anglo-Catholic movement, saw as a declaration of war. He did undoubtedly have the law on his side at the time, and the vast majority of the clergy in his Diocese supported him, but whether his way of pursuing the campaign was wise is a more open question.

But it was his liberal theological views that got him into the most trouble. Ever since his sermon in Cardiff he had been marked as a liberal-minded divine, so much so that on one occasion when he was the last to arrive for a meeting of Bishops at Lambeth Palace and when there was no obvious seat left, Henson, who personally got on well with Barnes, said to him in front of the rest of the Bishops 'Ah, my Lord of Birmingham, anticipate the judgement of the universal church – go and sit on the fire!' But the real trouble came when, in 1947 Barnes wrote a book called 'The Rise of Christianity', where he gave a very liberal interpretation of the Christian faith that essentially rejected the miraculous but much more as well. He wrote 'It is sometimes said that, if we repudiate the miracles of the New Testament we impugn the honesty of the writers. We do nothing of the sort; we impugn their critical acumen. Amid a population such as that in which Christianity was shaped, illustrations, allegories and fanciful possibilities rapidly change into plain narratives and are accepted as historical facts....Credulity in the ancient world was amazing'.

The book ran into five editions in the first year and inevitably provoked an outcry, with some calling for Barnes to be tried for heresy. Fisher, by then Archbishop of Canterbury, wisely rejected that, but he did make a long statement to the Convocation of Canterbury, with a sentence that hit the headlines: 'If his views were mine, I should feel I could not still hold Episcopal office in the church.' But many others were far more sympathetic and grateful. Charles Raven, Regius Professor of Divinity in Cambridge, while disagreeing with some of Barnes' views welcomed the book as a positive contribution to a discussion that needed to happen. And, of all people, Dame Sybil Thorndike, the actress, whose ashes are buried in the south aisle of this Abbey, wrote to Barnes 'It has given me more than I can tell you – of stimulation, of new doors opening into the most wonderful views, of real challenge too. It is such a brave book, and coming from a priest in the church is more than brave. It has been releasing for me, and I am sure it must have been for many people.' She was indeed far from being alone in finding the book helpful and stimulating.

I personally think there is little doubt that Barnes did express his views so trenchantly that he alienated some people unnecessarily, and I am certainly not sure that I personally agree with all that he said in that book. Hensley Henson, who had plenty of disagreements with Barnes but who remained on friendly terms with him, described him in his autobiographical Retrospect. 'Tall, pallid with much study, with stooping shoulders, and a voice at once challenging and melancholy, he commands attention as well by his manner and aspect as by his opinions....He is a good man, but clearly a fanatic, and in a more disciplined age, could not possibly have avoided the stake.'

But Barnes was passionate about honestly investigating the conflict between a scientific way of looking for explanations of how the world is and a biblical view that puts an emphasis on miraculous intervention by God, and, as the letter from Sybil Thorndike shows, he did keep open the lines of communication with those who found aspects of the Christian faith difficult to accept. Both of those, it seems to me, are vital things for the Church of England to continue to do today.