

Charles Gore: Readers on Writers
Newcastle Cathedral, Monday 16th April 2012

Charles Gore was born on 22nd January 1853, at Wimbledon in South West London. He died in London on 17th January 1932. He is remembered in the Anglican Calendar as bishop and founder of the Community of the Resurrection.

As a Bishop in the Church of England Gore served in Worcester from 1902, then in the newly formed Diocese of Birmingham which was formed partly out of Worcester Diocese from 1905. Finally, he became Bishop of Oxford from 1911.

Adrian Hastings, the historian of the modern church, sums up the complex character of Charles Gore. He was a

singularly angular and jerky character, impetuous with a tendency to histrionics when gripped by one or another crisis of conscience, he had all the spiritual masochism and odd, almost cruel, quirks as well as the bubbling, rather childish yet also highly sophisticated humour of the over-committed celibate. A natural radical, yet a natural authoritarian too, he was able to continue both throughout life because he had also the natural detachment of an aristocrat and an intellectual whose personal ascendancy within the Anglican ecclesiastical Establishment was unchallenged for a quarter of a century.¹

Hastings refers to the last few years of the 19th century and the first twenty years of the twentieth century when Gore retired as Bishop of Oxford in 1919. During this period the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England flourished and developed a confidence in its social vision, pastoral depth, learning and worship. Gore was at the centre of this transformation - so much so, that William Temple, in the frontispiece of one of his books wrote that Gore was 'one from whom I have learnt more than any other now living of the spirit of Christianity, and to whom more than any other (despite great differences) I owe my degree of apprehension of its truth.'²

We are dealing then with a very considerable figure in Anglicanism who dominated the Church of England's theology from the early 1890s to his death in 1932. His output was prodigious and I can only touch on a few of the key themes to arise from his immense contribution. I am going to do this by describing just one episode in his productive life which I hope will give a sense of his overall contribution to Anglicanism.

This episode was Gore's contribution to the publication in 1889 of a volume of essays entitled *Lux Mundi*. Gore was part of the instigating group, self-styled somewhat ironically as the 'Holy Party', a group of Oxford High Churchmen who used to go on their annual holidays together, taking over a small country parish whilst the incumbent was away and spending their spare time praying, discussing and reading together.³

Lux Mundi is the Latin for 'the Light of the World' and that immediately gives us the clue that the book's centre of gravity was the doctrine of the incarnation. The significance of *Lux Mundi* is difficult

¹ Adrian Hastings, p.83

² Cited by A M Ramsey, p.146

³ Prestige, p.25

to over-emphasise: some call it a landmark in English theological thought, others say it launched a new era of Anglican theology.⁴ In the introduction to the book the authors stressed that they were not acting as 'guessers of the truth' but as 'servants of the Catholic Creed and Church'. The authors had a common aim of interpreting the Christian faith in the light of the intellectual developments of the day. Not least of these were the rise of evolution as a scientific world view, democracy and socialism and also the emergence of biblical criticism. The authors wanted to interpret the Christian faith in the light of new knowledge and to do so in a way that new generations could understand it. They wanted the church to acknowledge and give a firm place to contemporary social and intellectual developments whilst standing on the tradition of faith which it had received and was committed to passing on.

In the preface, the editor – Gore himself – summarised the aim of the essays as 'to put the Catholic Faith in its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems'. Michael Ramsey observes that the authors did not say that contemporary problems would 'be put into right relation to the Catholic Faith'.⁵ In other words, contemporary thought is looked upon as 'an ally rather than as an enemy'. The theology involved here is incarnational. The one who became incarnate is the one from eternity, the Logos of God, who both was involved in the creation itself and now sustains the created order. One of the essayists went so far as to say 'all great teachers, of whatever kind, are vehicles of revelation'.⁶ We can see already one of the sources of controversy that was to emerge.

However, the essay that caused the greatest controversy was Gore's own. It was titled, 'The Holy Spirit and Inspiration'. I recommend it as one of the great pieces of Anglican theology. It has a wonderful introduction of the doctrine of the Spirit. The Spirit blows where it wills throughout the whole of God's creation; it is 'the first point of contact with God in the order of human experience'.⁷ Christianity is a 'present life', a life shown to us first of all in Christ and then revealed to the church which is the place where the Spirit who is the 'giver of life' finds 'His free-est and most unhindered activity'.⁸ The church is 'the special and covenanted sphere of his regular and uniform operation, the place where he is pledged to dwell and work; the centre marked out and hedged in, whence ever and again proceeds forth anew the work of human recovery'.⁹

It's a good reminder of some of the basics clearly stated, but the trouble comes when Gore moves to the main point of the essay which is to examine the doctrine of inspiration of holy scripture. Scripture has to be approached from the overall work of the Holy Spirit within the church. 'It is becoming more difficult to believe in the bible without believing in the church', says Gore. The scriptures are the record of the Spirit's work of redemption in Israel. History is key, but there are different modes of writing – there is idealised history (that we see for instance in the Books of Chronicles), there is poetry, there is drama and there is even myth which is seen in Genesis. Perhaps we might quibble over the use of the word myth, but so far, it's pretty straightforward.

Then Gore tackles Jesus' use of the Old Testament and deals with Jesus' apparently uncritical attitude to the texts he uses in his teaching. Jesus uses the life of the prophet Jonah as an illustration

⁴ Reardon, p.318ff

⁵ A M Ramsey, pp.2-3

⁶ Illingworth cf Ramsey above

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Gore, p. 231

⁹ Gore, 235

of his resurrection and he cites David as the author of Psalm 110 when he speaks about his relationship with God. Gore points out that we get into difficulties if we attribute infallibility and omniscience to Jesus who is the Son of God on the one hand whilst recognising on the other hand that Jesus appears to think that the story of Jonah was factual and that David was the author of the psalms – facts that a scientific study of the Old Testament disputes.

Gore applies to this problem what has become known as 'kenotic' Christology. Kenotic Christology talks about the process of God 'emptying himself' in becoming a human being and taking on the form of a slave. *Kenosis* is the Greek word for 'self-emptying'. In others words, God incarnate takes on the limitations of being a human being for the sake of the higher goal of redemption. Jesus therefore participated in the state of knowledge that existed in first century Palestine. Jesus did not anticipate the complexities and insights of modern knowledge.

This was how God chose to work and we have to distinguish between what God in Jesus Christ *revealed* and what he *used*. Jesus revealed God's nature, of that Gore has no doubt – he revealed humanity's need for salvation and founded the church and revealed all this 'through, and under conditions of a true human nature'. In Jesus God used human nature, 'its conditions of experience.... its limitation of knowledge'. The key sentence in Gore's essay was this:

Now when he speaks of the sun rising he is using ordinary human knowledge. He willed so to restrain the beams of Deity as to observe the limits of the science of his age, and he puts himself in the same relation to its historical knowledge.'¹⁰

Some thought that the authors of *Lux Mundi* were rebels whilst others, particularly more traditional Tractarians were distressed and angry at what they saw as a betrayal of Anglo Catholic inheritance. However, the outcomes that flowed from the work were many. *Lux Mundi* gave a new generation of liberal Catholics within the Church of England a solid basis on which to stand. The authors showed how academic theology could be done with reverence and with great respect for the tradition of the Church. The volume demonstrated how a synthesis could be achieved between very different strands both of theology and other parts of intellectual life – there was use of contemporary philosophy and science woven together with insights from the scriptures and from the church father. *Lux mundi* showed how orthodox Christianity handed down by the creed and the scriptures through the church's witness could operate critically in the modern world.

Anglican theology for many years was dominated by the contribution made by the *Lux Mundi* authors. Not least the agenda for Christology in Anglican circles was set by Gore's essay. It may have been that his remarks about the self-limiting of the incarnate Word were taken out of context but it may also be that it was not wise to expound such a difficult doctrine in a footnote and it may be that by approaching Christology through an essay that explored the Spirit's inspiration of the scriptures gave the appearance of a rather casual engagement.

Gore did however apologise if he had made Christ appear to be fallible and he did this in the preface to the 10th edition of *Lux Mundi* which was published on 13th August 1890. The fact that this was already the tenth edition of a volume of essays barely one year after initial publication tells us a great deal about the way the essays spoke powerfully to a new generation of Christians who wanted

¹⁰ Gore, p.265

to see the church taking on board contemporary insights into science, social life and philosophy. The fact that Gore went on to give a series of lectures the following year in which he explained what he meant by the self-emptying of God in the conditions of human experience demonstrates his own commitment to responsible and serious scholarship. These lectures also set the agenda for a very significant and lively debate in Anglican theology about the implications of putting the incarnation at the centre of theology and about the place of kenosis within the act of divine humility in the word become flesh. It's a debate that has continued through the theological reflections of the Archbishops of Canterbury – not least of all William Temple, Michael Ramsey and now Rowan Williams.

Out of the publication of *Lux Mundi* came the foundation of two important organisations – the Community of the Resurrection and the Christian Social Union. It is no coincidence that Gore was at the heart of these two developments as he was someone who combined thought and action in his theology. Gore was the founder of an Anglican community and this demonstrates the spirituality which was evident in the *Lux Mundi* contributors and the rooting of their theological reflections in the lived relationship with God of the individual by the Holy Spirit and of the importance of the social body of the church as a response to the Gospel. The creation of the Christian Social Union demonstrates the social conscience that permeates through the essays and also the great sense of God's work in his Spirit throughout his creation. The CSU was not so much about active protest and demonstration, much more about articles and books and its effectiveness was criticised because of its church centred operation and its middle class orientation. Nevertheless it was inspired by a passionate embrace of the incarnation which gave the desire for a world ordered justly and in which human beings cooperated in their flourishing.

G L Prestige in his biography of Gore, published just three years after Gore's death in 1935, describes how Gore's body lay in state in Holy Trinity, Sloane Street in London. 'Great crowds filed past to honour and to pray. Observers were struck by the fact that the mourners were drawn from every class of English society.' At Gore's memorial service later in Westminster Abbey, 'the Archbishop of Canterbury bid the congregation to thanksgiving for Charles Gore, bishop, scholar, thinker, teacher, prophet and saint'. Later Gore's cremated remains were laid to rest at Mirfield with a stone marking the place. On it were the words – Charles Gore, Bishop, Founder. As Prestige fittingly says, 'the epitaph is noble in its simplicity and comprehensive in its truth.'

As the church seeks to engage with the world of which it is part in a way which gives dignity, respect and meaning to contributions to human knowledge which come from the experience and skill of all human beings, perhaps we can follow Gore's example and be courageous in our theological reflection, even if we like him don't always get it right. He might not have got it right in his *Lux Mundi* essay but what arose out of his contribution was an extraordinary flowering of theological engagement, sometimes called 'critical orthodoxy', which is part of the journey we call Anglicanism.