

Faith in the North: Inspiration for the Northern Saints for Leadership



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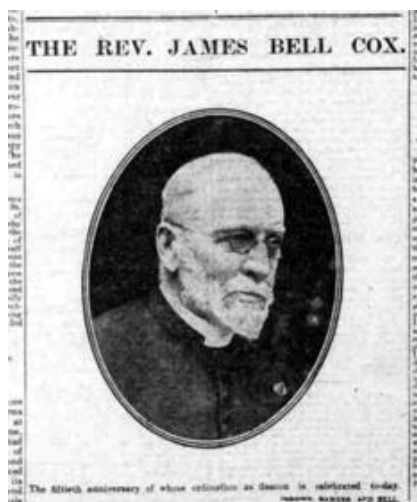


I don't mind admitting, sometimes I feel envious of the Church over the Pennines in the North East of England. I was a student over here for some time and occasionally come for retreat. And I find it much easier, at some of the holy sites dotted around this part of the country, to imagine myself in the footsteps of the earliest Christian saints of our land. It is not the same in my native home of the North West. Now, I can't be sure whether that is a function of home being the geography in which my daily life is so very inter-woven, and the North East being a land I am more free to explore and dream in, or whether it is a real difference between the places on either side of northern England's backbone. I suspect it is the latter.

And I say this as the Dean of Chester, inhabiting a Cathedral that houses St Werburgh's Shrine; at one end of the Two Saints Trail, with Lichfield, the city of Chad, at the other end. I was Rector of a church dedicated to Chad in Kirkby on the outer edge of Liverpool, understood to have been first established by the saint himself. Chester itself is a Roman City which still bears the finger prints of early medieval society and Tudor wealth. My Cathedral was founded as a Benedictine monastery by Anselm who travelled from Bec at the behest of the Earl of Chester, an ancestor of today's Grosvenor family.

The early Saxon, Mercian and Norman saints did share their faith with the people of both East and West, but their fingerprints are not so visible in the land between Kendal and Alsager, the Tudor Diocese of Chester, later also to become the Dioceses of Liverpool, Blackburn and Manchester.

So, in building on the mission of the early saints in the North, I want to introduce you also to those who did this in another day – a time of church growth that criss-crosses the new industrial landscape that emerged in the Victorian period and is so recognizable today. I was at Bishopthorpe a few months ago when Archbishop Stephen introduced the idea of learning our missiology, finding inspiration and gaining energy from Paulinus and the very earliest northern saints. And I told him that I thought that was easier on the east than the west. But there are faithful saints – I call them saints although they are not canonized – who built on their mission and whose stories are closer the story of the North West. What follows is just an example, and not a proposal for an alternative hagiography. A way we have built on the mission of the early saints of the north.



So, here we go. Let me introduce you to James Bell Cox. He is an example of a great collection of priests in the Church of England who became known as the slum priest ritualists.

Bell Cox was Vicar of St Margaret's Church, Toxteth, in Liverpool. He was first appointed as Curate there in 1869. He became Vicar when his predecessor under whom he had been serving as Curate was removed from post for inviting a Syrian Orthodox Archbishop to preach who ministered across the road. In 1887 Bell Cox was also deprived of his living and sent to Walton Gaol for twelve breaches of Disreali's Public Worship Regulation Act: use of lighted candles, vestments, elevation of the sacrament, mixing of water and wine in the chalice,

celebrating the Eucharist facing east, singing the Agnus Dei, making the sign of the cross, washing the chalice during the service, kissing the gospel book, bowing towards the altar cross, obscuring the manual acts and genuflecting during the prayer of consecration. He was in prison for 17 days before his release was ordered by the House of Lords.

Now Bell Cox is an interesting example of a priest ministering in new urban churches whose congregations grew rapidly in the most unlikely ways. These were the Fresh Expressions of their day.



The story began in two places. It began in the refined quadrangles of Oxford University where a spiritual revival was emerging among the well-heeled young men who were studying in preparation for life as parsons. They were encountering the radical and learned likes of Edward Bouverie Pusey and John Keble whose faith bore no compromises.

And secondly, there was a realisation in British establishment that cityscapes were forming where there was no church. An unchurched population was emerging that some were calling the home heathen. The 1851 public census included a religious census and the level of church attendance shocked middle-class society. A statistician, Horace Mann, had been asked to analyse the Census. He concluded, *“it must be apparent that a sadly formidable portion of the English people are habitual neglecters of the public ordinances of religion... The masses of our working population are never or but seldom seen in our religious congregations.”*

This resulted in a huge programme of church building being undertaken. It was supported by public money, especially whilst Lord Palmerston was Prime Minister, and

money from a number of very wealthy evangelicals, especially the seventh Lord Shaftesbury. In the latter part of this period, in Liverpool, J.C. Ryle, the city's first bishop, formed a vision of pocket handkerchief parishes. The slogan called for a parish church on every street corner. This extensive and energetic building programme still characterizes much of the Victorian cityscape today and left a huge legacy of church over-provision that needed to be managed throughout the twentieth century and now.

Then it gets really interesting. We have new churches being built in slum areas of cities, and a clergy population that, for reasons which may be obvious, did not want to serve in those places. That is until the spiritual renewal that began as the Oxford Movement. Clergy who had been influenced by the fathers of anglo-catholicism in Oxford University were the first wave prepared to give themselves to this ministry. Bell Cox was one of a second wave. His Alma Mater had been in Cambridge.

These clergy found themselves sailing in uncharted waters and serving in churches where there was a blank canvas. There was no inherited tradition, little decoration – just pew filled barns - and the business of building a worshipping community needed to be begun from scratch. Maybe they knew how Paulinus felt!

In their day they were called Ritualists. To many in English establishment they looked like Roman Catholic priests. Some people termed them Romish, or Popish. Those liturgical actions for which Bell Cox was imprisoned, and of which we would think nothing today, were the flags, the rituals, by which they were known. Queen Victoria compared them to Roman Catholic priests in this way:

“The one is the Frenchman in his own uniform and within his own praesidia; the other is the Frenchman disguised in a red coat, and holding a post within our praesidia, for the purpose of betraying it. I should honour the first and hang the second.”

What is interesting about the early ritualist churches in the urban slum areas is how they grew. There was a lot of energetic mission and church growth in Victorian

England, but even against this backdrop the growth of the poor ritualist churches is striking, bringing with it the emergence of a new English ecclesial tradition we now call Anglo-Catholicism.



People have sought to understand what was the driver of their mission and church growth. Three interpretations are quite common.

1. One was their own understanding of what they were doing. In the words of Charles Lowder, this was no

“mere aesthetic embellishment but the outward expression of a great reality. It exactly meets the wants of those who have been taught to value their Lord's sacramental Presence; they rejoice to see His Throne made glorious, His priests ordering themselves as His representatives, and the whole arrangement of the service typical of its heavenly counterpart.”

That is to say that they believed the beauty and drama of their liturgy may heaven's riches plain in a drab world. They believed that they were representing heaven properly on earth and as a result of this faithfulness, their congregations grew.

2. Secondly, their contemporaries, their Bishops (and some of their exasperated admirers) saw them as figures larger than life. These were, after all, the prodigy of families with privileged backgrounds and great learning who came to live in communities that had never seen the like in their midst. The Bishop of London

said of Charles Lowder, that he could *gather a crowd in a whitewashed room*.

They were big and attractive personalities whose personalities brought animation to impoverished places.

3. More recently, their biographers have described the ritualist priests living amid the slums as God's social workers. They were prepared to visit the chronically sick, even at risk to themselves. They buried the dead, including the cholera infested, and inscribed their names on communal memorials in chapels built within their churches. Robert Dolling became a vocal and learned campaigner for improved sanitation and his appeals gave impetus for the building of city sewers.

These three interpretations:

- bringing heaven's riches into our reality;
- personalities larger than life;
- and God's social workers,

have shaped the way their missional endeavours and church growth is now understood.

But there is something else often missed.

These priests suffered. They were persecuted by many in the establishment of their day who disliked their worship. The new churches in which they served had been built at great expense, some of it the personal expense of those who were to become their persecutors, in order to shape a society that more nearly reflected the values and way of life of the benefactors. And these priests appeared to be encouraging something foreign.

Their trials under the Public Worship Regulation Acts became great public spectacles – often front page news. And every time one of them appeared in court, the number of members who joined their religious society, the SSC, grew rapidly, and their congregations swelled.

They celebrated the Eucharist, Christ's sacrifice, in a way that led to their own sacrifice too. Their Gospel was personally embodied, truly credible, and authentic.

They proclaimed Jesus Christ, friend of the marginalized and disputer with the powerful, executed on the cross and present today – and they were 'crucified' themselves. They were trustworthy signs of the Gospel to those who knew them, both rich and poor, and many chose to follow in their way of worship and pattern of life. Most importantly, the urban poor knew whose side they were on.

The actions that put Bell Cox in prison will not put you in prison today: use of lighted candles, vestments, elevation of the sacrament, mixing of water and wine in the chalice, celebrating the Eucharist facing east, singing the Agnus Dei, making the sign of the cross, washing the chalice during the service, kissing the gospel book, bowing towards the altar cross, obscuring the manual acts and genuflecting during the prayer of consecration.

As someone who has been a priest working in areas of high deprivation in the North West for much of my life – and as an evangelical – these characters have long intrigued me.

Mere repetition of the mission of those who have gone before us is not necessarily so authentic, credible, trustworthy, in our day. But I tell you about these characters because they invite us into the question of how we properly represent the Gospel in society today so that people may make no mistake of the truth of Jesus Christ.

