

## **EASTER SUNDAY 2019:**

### **ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL**

Notre Dame will be rebuilt; restored. Despite, initially, so much rather timid and politically correct talk about its being a 'national monument', a symbol of French or European 'culture', or even an enormous 'tourist attraction', it soon had to be spoken of as an icon of Christian Faith. News reporters simply were not able to ignore those men and women kneeling in prayer in the streets around Notre Dame, and many people, perhaps surprising themselves, found that they were praying too for the cathedral's survival. Maybe they sensed that, without such Christian Faith as it celebrated, our humanity is profoundly impoverished. Maybe the fire that has destroyed so much of Notre Dame, in years to come, will be seen to have re-kindled, brought to life again, re-awakened some deep-rooted intuition – an intuition that has been almost smothered in recent decades by our obsession with material well-being and nothing more – that all that Jesus Christ revealed of the primacy of love and of its divine origin can never be obliterated from the human story.

God's raising Jesus from the dead is God's declaration that that is so; a declaration that has been heard, and responded to, by countless people down through the ages, has called them to put their trust in the ultimate triumph of love, and has inspired them to work for a world shaped by love. Working to rebuild Notre Dame cannot be divorced from our working to build a better world. While we are here on earth, believing in the God of love, and assured in Jesus Christ of love's victory, we cannot help but labour to bring the world into conformity with heaven.

Someone who most surely understood this was the nineteenth century writer Charles Kingsley. We are very soon to mark the bicentenary of his birth in June 1819. Charles Kingsley was the author of such books as 'The Water Babies', 'Hereward the Wake' and 'Westward Ho!'. For many years, he was a country parson, the Rector of Eversley in Hampshire. While he held that post, he was, at different times, also Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, a Canon of Chester Cathedral, and a Canon of Westminster Abbey. But I mention him today because he was a founding member of the movement we call Christian Socialism. He saw that at the heart of Christianity was the challenge to do more than simply pay lip-service to the enduring power of love as shown forth in the Resurrection; the challenge was to live fully in accordance with that love. For him, this meant that he must do all in his power to alleviate the plight of the disadvantaged, the oppressed and the poor in mid-nineteenth century England, and to empower them through education as much as through economic improvement.

Charles Kingsley was also a poet. One of his poems, **Easter Week**, written in 1867, expresses his conviction rather nicely. In the first of its two verses, the poem focusses on the natural order in springtime, and sees it as mirroring Christ's Resurrection.

See the land, her Easter keeping,  
Rises as her Maker rose.  
Seeds, so long in darkness sleeping,  
Burst at last from winter snows.  
Earth with heaven above rejoices;  
Fields and gardens hail the spring;  
Shaugh and woodlands ring with voices,  
While the wild birds build and sing.

As Nature itself gives praise for the Resurrection, "the wild birds build and sing". They respond by working for the future in the making of their nests, and by rejoicing all the while.

In the second verse of **Easter Week** the poet addresses his readers directly.

You, to whom your Maker granted  
Powers to those sweet birds unknown,  
Use the craft by God implanted;  
Use the reason not your own.  
Here, while heaven and earth rejoices,  
Each his Easter tribute bring –  
Work of fingers, chant of voices,  
Like the birds who build and sing.

The wild birds, in accordance with instinct, work for the future, rejoicing all the while. Kingsley calls on his readers to offer their Easter tribute by consciously using their God-given gifts in the creating of a better future.

Each his Easter tribute bring –  
Work of fingers, chant of voices,  
Like the birds who build and sing.

Very few would rate Kingsley's poetry as being of the first order. Yet, for me at any rate, his message rings true. Though Easter is a time of promise and assurance – the assurance that God's love will never (even in death) let go of us – it is not a time for sentimental salivating at the thought of pie in the sky. It is rather a time to reflect seriously on what it means to put your faith in the primacy and power of

love; what it means to embrace that faith without which, so we have sensed chillingly this week, our humanity is disastrously diminished.

But if Easter is a time for serious reflection and commitment; commitment to the sheer effort involved in the building of this world into a better place, we should never forget the singing.

Each his Easter tribute bring – .....  
Like the birds who build and sing.

Kingley's poem was written for music to be sung on a special occasion in his Eversley parish. His call to action, that "Each his Easter tribute bring", was to be borne on the wings of joy. At the heart of all our Christian endeavour will always be joy; a deep-seated delight. That joy is rooted in our inward knowledge that nothing can defeat God's love and that if, as recipients and beneficiaries of that love, we seek to be agents of that same love in and through all the complications and entanglements of the world in which we live, victory has been guaranteed by God's having raised Jesus from the dead.

Each his Easter tribute bring – .....  
Like the birds who build and sing.

Notre Dame will be rebuilt; restored. Its rebuilding will be an act of faith, and its vocation will be, as it ever was, to remind all onlookers and passers-by of the Christian Faith.

It will awaken within people some deep-rooted intuition that all that Jesus Christ revealed of the primacy of love and of its divine origin can never be obliterated from the human story, and it will challenge us to play our part in the building of this world into conformity with heaven:

Like the birds who build and sing.

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