

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak on a modern Prophet. The one I have chosen, Bishop George Bell, is especially apt for the Remembrance season, not just because he had a humane and principled view of war, but because his vision for the church and the world, forged in his lifetime during two wars and the reconstruction which followed them, has such resonance today, and holds good even as we today remember wars of which he knew nothing, in a world changed beyond recognition.

I never knew George Bell; unlike many of my Chichester contemporaries, I lived elsewhere, was not confirmed by him, do not remember his particular acts of friendship and human concern, nor, personally, his example of courageous speaking out. I got to know him more recently when, shortly before the 50th anniversary of his death in 1958, I was asked to produce a study course for the diocese, so that people could share memories, or learn afresh, of one of the most significant bishops of our time. But that is itself a paradox: George Bell is not well remembered today, but that, I believe, is partly because what he worked for in many fields has been realised, or seen at least as an aspiration, so well that it has been absorbed into the mainstream of the open thought which he sought to represent. His monument is the church, the ecumenical movement, the Welfare State, art and culture, as well as many features of education and society. His work may seem old-fashioned and unaware now; at the time it laid the foundation for growth in areas we are now proud to be part of.

So what did I discover? George Bell was born in 1883. After a conventional education and ordination training, he began work as a curate in Leeds, and then returned to Oxford as a chaplain and teacher. Nothing odd there. But gradually you detect various influences on him which changed him from the standard Anglican parson in the parish to something different. The **first** of these was Ecumenism – organised co-operation between denominations. Not a novelty today, but few ordinands then were leading prayers for other Xns in their College chapels, and carrying that principle into hopes for the world. The **second**, especially from his experience at Leeds, was a deep concern for the poor, and a determination to bring them education and opportunities: so, in Christ Church, he took classes for adults who had had no chance of education beyond the minimum, about 12 years old. Fairly radical, and political, for a clergyman of his time. These two factors, ecumenism and concern for justice, were to govern his actions thereafter.

In 1914, he was invited to become Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson. Davidson was a good Victorian prelate, who liked to have a finger in the political world beside the monarch and the Prime Minister; but he too had convictions which chimed with Bell's: he had played a part in some of the earliest international **ecumenical** negotiations and was committed to developing these; and, during the first world war he became convinced of the need for **justice** in the conduct of war, setting ethical limits to already bloody armed conflict. Both these gave Bell the opportunity to work and gain experience he was later to put to use.

In 1924 Bell became Dean of Canterbury, and in his five years there transformed the Cathedral into an institution we easily recognise today, though we don't realise how novel it then was. The main Sunday service was shortened to become a Sung Eucharist, with the help of King's School pupils delighted to advise on a long and boring service; admission to the Cathedral became free; a new Friends organisation supported it with money and enthusiasm: and, most significant of all, the Cathedral and Close became the setting for an annual festival of music and drama, bringing into the church colour, interest and spectacle often seen as alien and inappropriate in that solemn context. The idea spread and flourished so that now we expect Cathedrals to sponsor and foster such things – witness your own spectacular Passion. It was different then. And throughout, in the turbulent days of European inter-war politics, as a delegate to international ecumenical meetings, he developed a vision and built up a series of friendships which gave him an international insight and convinced him that only through shared Xn faith could God's will be done on earth.

In 1929 Bell became Bishop of Chichester. That diocese proved stonier ground than Canterbury, but soon he again established drama and music and acted as patron for artists and works of art, opened up the Cathedral, and made the palace the centre of encounters with artists and writers, political figures of many faiths (including Gandhi) and people searching for a juster society and a fairer life in this country. Already plans were afoot for improvement in health provision, education, and Trades Union arrangements, which would later take shape as the Welfare State, and Bell was there. Most significant, of course, was his work in Germany, which you will have heard about last week. His ecumenical work had brought him close friendships with German church figures, and after Hitler came to power in 1933 they looked to Bell as their churches were forced to comply with Nazi ideals and appointments. While many church people in Britain saw Hitler at first as no threat, and some even admired him, Bell's constant interest and ready support gave strength to those who resisted, even when direct contact became impossible as war drew nearer.

You will have heard of his friendship with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of the German hopes that Britain would support plans to remove Hitler and Bell's disappointment when that hope was dashed, and of the failed plot of July 1944. Throughout the 30s and the war years he held to the view that the German people were not all corrupt, and many shared Christian hopes and ideals and deplored Nazism. This idea, obvious now, seemed to undermine the message of the war leaders fostering patriotic opposition – and drew on feelings developed in the first World War only 25 years before. Bell's most memorable intervention came in February 1944, when the Allies proposed the wholesale bombing of German cities, as had happened to Coventry in 1940, in a decisive bid to bring the war to an end without further losses. No, said Bell to the House of Lords and the country beyond: there must be limits to the conduct of war. No army is at liberty to destroy whole civilian populations, to reduce the fruits of art, science and learning to rubble, to destroy historic civilisation and communities. Such conduct disables the very Peace and Law the Allies are seeking to defend. His colleagues acknowledged his principles, as did many in Britain; but

many deplored his practice. Chichester people still remember their parents' outrage at what seemed like treachery and disloyalty.

The War ended, and gradually Bell came closer, in public, to fulfilling the prophetic model. The Welfare State embodied some of his ideas on social justice; the foundation of the new World Council of Churches, in which he played a leading part, brought triumphantly into being his vision of Xn co-operation to further the Kingdom and end wars; his many artistic commissions had encouraged individual artists (including Hans Feibusch, a German Jew) and enhanced Cathedral and Sussex churches with God-given beauty. His hidden work for Jews from Germany and for famine relief (he was involved in the founding of OXFAM) showed his humanity and modesty. At a time when the Church enjoyed popularity and support across the board he provided concrete and personal ways to belong and give it new life. In the Diocese he became a beloved and memorable pastor, bringing the Church to bear in educational and social fields, setting an unforgettable example to many, and realising his principles on the local scale, in the parish and as well as in the national and international contexts in which he moved securely. His monument reads:

*George Kennedy Allen Bell, Bishop of Chichester 1929 – 1958
A True Pastor, Poet and Patron of the Arts
Champion of the oppressed
and Tireless Worker for Christian Unity.*

So far, a heroic man deeply involved in the Church and the World, and using his position to pursue a vision for Xn society in a world without division and cruelty. I suppose those of us with any memory of those days look back with some nostalgia – new Elizabethans, the Festival of Britain, plans for church unity – and benefit from the plans for society, National Health Service, Grammar schools, all that. But look more closely at Bell's own vision, and you see two things. The first is the clarity of the vision, optimistic, hopeful, full of a new society where wrongs will be righted and tears dried. And the second creeps in behind it: how cynical we have since become! It all looks too naive; we know that kind of thing doesn't work; we have seen too much pain, too much more war, too much conflict and division, to be able to repeat that optimism for ourselves. And yet. . .

Ecumenism (2 on the sheet). The WCC is still there, doing a difficult job and quietly breaking down barriers. But for many it is a spent force, caught up in political causes, no longer fulfilling the purpose for which it began. Its formal local manifestations seem depressed, and recent news has little good to say about unity, certainly for Anglicans. But look at Bell's words – 'waves of prayer' – 'support across frontiers' – 'life-giving', 'reconciling' through the Spirit and the Word. That could be another rallying call. Look at your local scene, where churches get together, where we work and pray with an for one another, and know one another far better than churches did in more complacent days. Look at the WCC website, and its goals of unity, witness for mission, service, and worship together. Bell was idealistic, and his vision for Europe and the world was took too little account of other faiths – but that conviction has never become obsolete and never should.

Look at War (3): again, perhaps a shade over-optimistic, and of its time – but on Remembrance Day, again a vision to hold on to. We have all learned from those European wars, as many decades of formal peace attest. We are actively engaged now with these crucial questions, about civilian populations, lies, enslavement, the destruction of morale – read any paper or join any conversation about the places where conflict continues. Terrible though present wars are, we do at least approach discussion of them with honesty and awareness. Perhaps there is more regret and less triumphalism about? and perhaps some of that is down to Bishop Bell?

And what about his commitment to the Arts (4)? In Chichester he was not, it is generally felt, the greatest patron of the greatest manifestations of the arts. It was his successor, Walter Hussey, who carried on his work to present in our Cathedral the feast of the art of the mid-twentieth century that we have today. Bell's interests lay primarily with people; so his support for Hans Feibusch, the refugee Jew whose paintings hang in our Cathedral; for the Bloomsbury painters, Duncan Grant, Clive and Vanessa Bell (no relation!) who decorated the church at Berwick with local people and scenes to tell Christ's story; the painter whose vision it was to adorn the chapel at Bishop Otter College, even though it turned out not quite as was intended – all these spread a powerful message about the integration of art, community and the gifts of God. Greatest of all is his patronage of T S Eliot for *Murder in The Cathedral* in 1935. Bell was already Bishop of Chichester, but was still involved in Canterbury commissions, and it was he who backed Eliot there. And there are others – for example his affection for Gustav Holst, whose ashes lie in Chichester at Bell's request through their friendship; we have just erected a new memorial to him. And beside those, there is the wider legacy, perhaps, of all the plays and pageants which followed his determination to link artist and church.

The passage I quote, from his Enthronement address in 1929, shows the passion of his commitment to a whole view of the Church, which its 'instinctive sympathy' with art makes up the 'conception of Xn worship' and the many 'forms in which the Xn teaching may be proclaimed'. He saw it all as the realisation of a whole community, in which artistic skills join with practical ones, and the artist plays a part with those who print the parish magazine, repair the paths, make altar linen, mend hymnbooks and embroider kneelers. Total use of talents, if only it could be realised.

When he retired, Bell summed up his own work in a kind of 'apologia' in his final sermon (5). He begins with Milton, who, in his prose work *Areopagitica*, insists that virtue cannot be seen in the abstract ('fugitive and cloistered'), but only in the activity and dust of the world beyond the cloister; raw and muddy experience is essential to the realisation of ideas, the 'race' that is the image of the Xn life. Bell transfers the idea to the Church: it does not, for him, belong in the shelter and safety of the sanctuary, but in the world, in the middle of wars, arguments, disputes, poverty, deprivation and suffering. That mirrored his own engagement, between the wars and still continuing, with the great problems of nations. But he was speaking in Sussex, which then had a large number of religious communities, largely founded by devout high-church Anglicans in the nineteenth century and now almost gone – so

he adds the other side of that coin, the need for the contemplative life to complement the active one. It's a telling and subtle introduction, setting the traditional opposition between active and contemplative, with a clear indication of where he stands himself and a generous acknowledgement of the other. If you look to Bell for a vision of the ideal Church, it's beginning to come clear.

But the rest favours the active. It may have been a surprise to the congregation to hear Trades Unions mentioned, or Young Farmers (then a powerful group for both young men and women and those hoping to marry them). Social Welfare and Education were familiar – many recalled his work at Bishop Otter College, in promoting Church Schools, in uniting groups of social workers, those newly confirmed and others in guilds to sustain faith. In his work with housing and local authorities other would remember the new churches he had founded, the new communities he helped in places like Crawley New Town, his attention to detail in personal dealings, in confirmations (astonishingly large numbers of people recall him at their confirmation, his smile, a comment, a view) as a friend and a pastor.

Then he turns to the wider stage – Church Unity, International Justice. He brought about the WCC, the living evidence for his work for principled unity with the German churches, and saw beside it the United Nations, still fulfilling what must have looked impossibly optimistic at times.

He is probably best remembered for his wartime work and his prophetic voice at that time, but it may be that his legacy is far wider than that. As I began, his legacy is the church, the ecumenical movement, the Welfare State, art and culture, as well as many features of education and society.

Is there a downside? To the critical eye his vision, however inspiring at the time, lacks a few features we should look for today. Where are the Other Faiths? – especially at a time when Britain ruled, and was gradually ceasing to rule, millions of people throughout the world of different faiths. Why did his broad ecumenical vision not extend to them? I don't know. Certainly his aspiration was to do God's will through united Xty, and he does not discuss the possibility either of converting or including others. As a Churchman, perhaps that was simply not in his purview.

What, more significantly, about Roman Catholics? Bell did hope for closer unity with RCs, and although his own ventures did not bring them in it was not for want of trying. There are records of his wish to join with RCs in resisting war in 1940, and receiving RC tributes later on. The wheels of ecumenism grind slowly, and he would rejoice that now they are part of the WCC and of local groupings.

What about women? Again the lack of comment is noticeable to a modern feminist eye. Already there were people in the Church looking for a greater part for women. Maude Royden strove for women's ordination, which had been a concern since at least 1909; by the end of the war Joyce Bennett and Li Tim Oi had been ordained in the Far East, though it was possible to see those ordinations as temporary. Bell

seems not to have discussed that. He and his wife Henrietta had no children, so he was not pestered by a rising generation with a vision for new roles and opportunities; so beside his vigorous speaking out for justice and equality elsewhere one might see his attitude here as complacent and patriarchal. I don't see this as a failing in him. In those days people looked for a fair society, of course, but also for a return to a transformed society which now escaped the glaring faults of the past. It was possible to see this Utopia in terms of rosy children and happy fulfilled mothers, as well as of a world of expanded opportunities – contrasting visions, perhaps, but in their terms understandable. Certainly there is little evidence of Bell's moving landmarks on this, though his work for teachers and social workers shows a considerable respect for their professionalism and no sense at all that they should redefine their roles to the domestic. He left the next step to the next generation, and for one who grew up in his vision of Church it soon became timely and obvious.

Perhaps a prophet is as important for the seeds he sows as for his own achievements, considerable though Bell's were. He set a vision for the Church which has endured, and which some may feel is being lost under other pressures. So look at his hymn (6):

We sing this quite often in Chichester, as you can imagine. It has a good tune and goes well with large congregations. Bell is first remembered on his monument as a Poet, and his verse has a robust and rhythmical quality which makes it satisfying to read and sing – the product of his rigorous classical education in metre and scansion. He composed a witty and telling autobiography; but this is what brings him most fame:

The effects are not accidental. I have always enjoyed the inclusiveness of 'Brothers and sisters', 'Christian women, Christian men'; and the words go on, restating a simple message – praise, hope, the Way, service and Love. It is sprinkled with arresting images – 'your choice', 'scattered companies', 'new lamps' and 'new tasks', and the steady march to the conclusion of Unity. Under what seems to be conventional language it prompts reflection and commitment – or simply another declaration of faith.

So there is Bell – a hero? someone who spoke out for justice against opposition? a transformer of society? a founder of a significant instrument of church and international unity? someone with a vision to revive the Church? or just a bishop of his time, doing his job?

For my part, I see him, though secondhand, as the layer of a foundation to which I belong, the promoter of a dream I have shared, and the exponent of principles by which I stand.

Rachel Moriarty,
Chichester,
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