

Sunday 15th May 2011

Easter 4 – Canon Barry Naylor

Father Lewis Donaldson

The Donaldson Centre at St Martin's House is named after Lewis Donaldson, Vicar of St Mark's, Leicester from 1896 – 1918. This Centre witnesses to the Church's commitment to the poor and the marginalised; it, currently, acts as a base for the City of Sanctuary and Welcome Project, responding to some of the most vulnerable people, fleeing from injustice and violence. It also acts as a base for the City Centre Street Pastors who go out, weekly, to show God's love to those on the streets at night-time – including homeless people, clubbers, the lost and the confused.

Why is it so appropriate that these particular expressions of ministry are focussed in a place commemorating a Vicar of St Mark's?

Lewis Donaldson was always known as a champion of those he perceived to be underdogs in society. He was part of a contemporary movement in the Church of England, which made a close connection between Christian orthodoxy, catholic liturgy, and a commitment to the poor and vulnerable.

In their affirmation of orthodoxy, they placed particular emphasis on:

- the importance of the **Incarnation** and its implications for the dignity of every human being;

- the implications of the doctrine of the **Trinity** with its equality of relationship and lack of competition
- the priority of proclaiming the **Kingdom**; the Church being a means to an end, not an end in itself.
- the centrality of the **Eucharist**, sacrifice and meal, where there is no social distinction about who can sit at the table;

This orthodoxy was seen as having revolutionary social and political consequences – reference was made back to the passage from Acts we heard today, of communal living and eucharistic devotion. Rowan Williams has written that “orthodoxy always has something to do with discovering what the conditions are for hope”; this movement aimed to do precisely that. Donaldson, a convinced Socialist, wrote that “Christianity is the religion of which socialism is the practice”. Poverty and miserable living conditions were viewed as the fruit of an ungodly society; he wrote “our industrial system is chargeable before God for the massacre of the innocents” and of the need to substitute “a co-operative commonwealth for competitive anarchy”.

This movement was also linked to the revival of ritualistic practises in the Church, an offshoot of which was to bring colour, drama and music into some of the most disgraceful slums of the time.

Donaldson wrote of the “almost complete absence of beauty and a dire lack of graciousness and the glory of life” in his parish, which represented “the tragedy and

pathos, shame and horror of social conditions” of the time. He commissioned large panels around the Altar, entitled “The Triumph and Apotheosis of Labour”, to be an inspiration to his parishioners, a portrayal of the “redemption of the poor and oppressed from their poverty and misery”. (still seen today).

Donaldson is remembered for his part in arranging, and supporting, a march of the unemployed to London in 1905. He worked alongside local activists, with whom he had established credibility. Shortly after arriving, he welcomed into St Mark’s, and its precincts, 2,000 striking engineers, protesting about working conditions. He, and others, provided practical support to them and their families. Unemployment was a serious issue but many said that this was because of innate idleness and work could be found, if only the men were more committed. Donaldson believed the problem was more to do with the way that industry and society were organised; he believed the class system was to blame, that there was need for better distribution of wealth and greater democratic participation. He sought to raise the profile of the unemployed by arranging, with others, a march to London, to present a petition to the King and meet the Archbishop. Both the King and Archbishop refused to meet the men. Davidson was criticised by many of the pillars of society, in Leicester and elsewhere, and by many in the Church. The strikers were, however, warmly received at St Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, where Donaldson was to end his ministry, as a Canon.

Such direct action on the streets helped raise awareness of the plight of the unemployed and of the need for political change; it influenced the legislation of the Liberal

Government of the time, even though it had aroused the wrath of political and ecclesiastical Establishments. This is an example for us today, as we seek to build the Kingdom in a world that can be, alternately, apathetic and antagonistic to the values of the Kingdom. Look at recent criticisms of the Archbishop of Canterbury for his Christian reflection on the extra-judicial killing of Osama bin Laden.

Father Donaldson spoke of the great problem of indifference to social concerns, in both church and society. He described such “indifference”, apathy, as the chief enemy of the Kingdom of God. Samuel Butler wrote that “he was seen as an oddity in the Church, by those who would have been equally horrified at seeing Christianity doubted, as they would at seeing it practised”.

He was a pacifist during the First World War and he led a delegation to Prime Minister Asquith in support of women’s suffrage. He was a man with a heart for justice, in various spheres, and he was ecumenically minded, longing for a bringing together of Anglicans and Wesleyans.

We are challenged by the example of Lewis Donaldson, today, to make real God’s particular love for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society; to do so by getting alongside them, in incarnational ways, as he did on the March of the Unemployed and in his parochial and pastoral ministries.

There are so many issues today – relating to exploitation of the earth’s resources, equality, poverty, sanctuary and asylum, globalisation and corporate wealth, imperial lust

for hegemonic control, prisoners, young offenders, war and terror. This week marks the beginning of Christian Aid week and the launch of a campaign by the Church Urban Fund and Church Action on Poverty to ensure all workers earn a living wage. The list could go on and on.

Orthodox theology of Creation, of Incarnation, of Trinity, of Eucharist, and of the Kingdom creates an imperative that we, like Donaldson, must act for justice, and manifest an option for the poor, as a spiritual priority.

Benedict XVI wrote recently that “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in our Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty - - - the option for the poor is not ideological but is born from the Gospel. Situations of injustice and poverty in today’s world are numerous and tragic – it is necessary to understand them and fight their structural causes”.

These sentiments would certainly have been shared by Father Lewis Donaldson. We are challenged, and encouraged to use our resources, including St Martins House, to serve God in the poor, to be evangelised by the poor, and to confront the structures of society (and, if necessary of the Church) whenever they place a stumbling block to their advancement, as we seek to advance the Kingdom of God

the Most Holy Trinity in Unity, to whom be ascribed all might, honour and majesty, this day and for all eternity.