

Synod Sermon

The Synod sermon was delivered by Dean A E Talbot on 4 April 1933.

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. (Acts VI., 3.)

Here we have the appointment of the first deacons. They constituted the lowest order of the ministry, and their duties principally were to minister to the material needs of the church's poor, yet their appointment became a model to the church for the appointment of all its ministerial officers, the highest as well as the lowest. So, to this model we may well turn our minds, as we meet together today, as representatives of the church in this diocese, to elect a chief pastor, to fill the seat left vacant by our late Archbishop, of revered memory.

It is worth our while, then, to observe with some care the procedure of the church at Jerusalem, in the appointment of the Seven.

In the first place, the Apostles referred the matter to "the multitude of the disciples," and they charged them to choose out men, qualified for the work. They were, in effect, if not indeed formally, elected by the whole Christian community. Then those chosen must have the necessary gifts, for the work was God's work, though principally of a material nature; they must be "men of honest report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom"; they must combine Apostolic zeal and wisdom, tempering one with the other. In the third place, when the community had made its choice of fit men, it set them before the Apostles, who, with prayer and the imposition of hands, commissioned them for the work. God, acting through the community, chose them, and acting through the Apostles, commissioned them. The result of this development of church life was a great revival at Jerusalem. "The Word of God increased," we read, "and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly."

That a Diocese should possess the right of electing its Chief Pastor is a great privilege. The Church in England does not yet possess this privilege, the Bishops there being nominated to the King by the Prime Minister, and the election by the Dean and Chapter being little more than a matter of form. The Church in Australia has not always possessed this privilege, for in earlier days the Sees were created and the Bishops appointed from England by letters patent, but when the Church here was sufficiently organised to manage its own affairs, then the right of electing the Bishop was assumed as in other Dominions, by the Diocesan Synod. Thus the Church in these lands leads in the van of progress, in matters of self-determination and self-government.

The Church, in electing its Chief Pastor, has reverted to the policy of the early Church, and this forms a link in the chain of continuity with the church of apostolic and primitive times. We have seen how the first deacons were elected by the whole Christian community at Jerusalem. In the "Didache," or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," a Christian document recovered in the last century, and to be dated probably to the beginning of the second century, the Christian communities are exhorted to "elect for themselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, and who are true and approved." The Greek word, which I have translated "elect" is very significant, for it literally means to, "stretch forth the hand for the purpose of giving a vote, or to express approval." According to Cyprian the bishops were the representatives of the churches, elected by the people's suffrage. Cornelius, Bishop of Rome, had thus "been made bishop by the judgment of God and His Christ, by the testimony of nearly all the clergy, by the suffrage of the people then present, with the consent of the priests, aged and good men." The judgment of God was supposed to be expressed by the voice of the whole church, for there was no conflict, where the people exercised their suffrage as the servants of God, seeking only to do His Will, and relying on the guidance of His Spirit.

"Our wills are ours, we know not how,
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine."

We must have the spirit of the early church; we must be emptied of all unworthy motives, and drawn together by the bonds of Christian charity in brotherly concord; we must seek only the glory of God, and the good of Christ's Church and people.

The great privilege of electing our Chief Pastor lays upon us as great a responsibility. The early Christian communities relied entirely upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and it was this that made them look, as was the custom in their day, to outward signs, as an indication of the Divine will. Thus Eusebius, the Church historian, relates how the Church at Rome, being assembled together to elect a bishop to the vacant See, saw a dove alighting upon the head of Fabian, and taking this to be a divine omen, cried out, "he is worthy," and at once placed him upon the episcopal throne. We are also told how a Divine voice singled out Ambrose to be Bishop of Milan.

Today we shall look for no such outward signs; none the less we shall look for the Divine guidance within.

But we are not left entirely without guidance from without, for we have the apostolic epistles, that set forth the gifts necessary to perform the functions of the episcopal office, and we must remember that the apostle so deals with first principles, that his words are as helpful in our day as in his time. First, the apostle informs us that the Bishop is a "steward of God"; that is, he is a manager in the Church, which is the Household of God. Therefore he must possess gifts of administration, and he must have shown himself possessed of these gifts. The apostle enforced this in a very homely and practical manner. "The Bishop," he says, "must be one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity, for" adds the apostle, "if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?" Then the Bishop is a teacher; so, says the apostle, he must be "apt to teach"; he must "hold fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." Much is involved here. He must have his feet firmly on the rock of truth, but he must so present the truth that it will meet the needs of his day; thus he must confirm those within, and win those without. Above all, the bishop must set forth a Christian character. The greater number of qualifications for the office of a bishop enumerated by the apostle, have to do with personal character. A bishop must be "blameless," "holy," and "just"; he must be "temperate"; that is, he must exercise self-control in all things; he must be "of good behaviour" and he must be "given to hospitality"; he must "not be covetous," nor "lifted up with pride," and to this end he must be "no novice"; he must "not be self-willed, nor soon angry", and he must be "patient". Character is all important in Christian work, for great gifts without it may become a snare and a temptation. But a bishop, according to the apostle, has a duty not only to those within the Church, but to those without, and therefore: "he must be a lover of good men," and "he must have a good report of them that are without, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." And why must the bishop have a good report of them that are without, except that he may have influence with them, and be able to help them in their problems and difficulties?

The episcopate has ever stood for the Unity of the Church; this was made much of in the early Church, and it is of great importance in the movement for Reunion today. Ignatius thus wrote to the Ephesian Christians: "For your famous presbytery (worthy of God), is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp; therefore in your concord and agreeing charity, Jesus Christ is sung, and every single person among you makes up the chorus; that so, being all consonant in love, and taking up the song of God, ye may in a perfect unity, with one voice, sing to the Father by Jesus Christ." The Church of England is comprehensive, embracing several schools of theological thought; the bishop, even if he belongs to a particular school, must know no school in his administration, but within the proper bounds of comprehension, govern all with absolute impartiality and equity. The Bishop is not the bishop of a party or a school, but of the whole Church in the Diocese. Thus only can the Ministry, with its various officers, be "for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the Body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

The Episcopate is a centre of unity for the Church; it is also in a special sense representative of the Church to those that are without. The Incarnation, as Bishop Westcott taught us, embraces all creation; it is meant to bring under the influence of Christ all human affairs, for it was the purpose of God to sum up all things in Christ. This led Bishop Westcott to give himself, great scholar as he was, to the social problems of his day, which gave him such influence on the coalfields of Durham, so that he was able, early in his episcopate, to settle a big industrial dispute in the North of England. Dr Westcott pointed out on one occasion how priests in the ordination service promise "to maintain and set forward quietness, peace and love among all Christian people," and how this, in the order for the consecration of a Bishop, becomes a promise "to maintain and set forward quietness, love and peace among all men." The change, the Bishop said, seems to suggest that the bishop has a wider obligation, as the representative of the whole Church. The Church has a duty to the nation, of which it is the spiritual organ, and the life of which it should form and fashion. From the Church the English people drew the idea of national unity, the principles of freedom, and the form of representative government. Lecky has said that the Church is the soul of the nation, and "soul is form and doth the body make." Our Christian religion is not meant to be simply an appendage to life, but the inspiration of all life. The Bishop is thus the shepherd of his people, and the leader of the Church to extend God's Kingdom in the world.

We saw how, as the result of the appointment of the Seven, the Church at Jerusalem enjoyed a revival of spiritual life. "The Word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly." If we use

our privilege and exercise our responsibility as the early church used and exercised its, may we not expect a like result, a revival of church life amongst us? The world is unsettled as in the days of Jesus and His Apostles. This provides a great opportunity for the preaching of the Word of God and the extension of the Divine Kingdom, which alone can give security and stability of life. In the days of His ministry, Jesus said to His disciples, "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest." If the fields were white to harvest in the days of Jesus, are they not white to harvest now? The change of a Chief Pastor marks a stage in church life, and this should be a real development and progress. God buries His workmen, but carries on His work, and we are all fellow workers together with God.

Our responsibility will not be discharged when we have elected our bishop, for we must support Him by prayer and loyal sympathy. We may have different preferences today, but when elected, the bishop will be the chief pastor of all in the diocese. That we should ask anyone to fill an office of such dignity, and of so great responsibility, surely pledges us to support him to the utmost of our power. May God Almighty guide us, one and all, at this time, that the Church in this Diocese may, in the future as in the past, go from strength to strength, and from victory to victory, for His great Name's sake. Amen.