

Baird Trust Lectures Conference

What should they know of preaching who only preaching know?

My title, *What should they know of preaching who only preaching know?* echoes a Kipling poem. The theme of the poem is that you only understand The English Flag when you have seen it fluttering over junks on the Hoogli and among icebergs in the Hudson Bay just as often as on a village green in Suffolk. There has always been a subversive tradition in Scottish theological education which suggests that you learn very little about preaching by learning about hermeneutics and rhetoric and other preachy things. You have to learn about the world and about life and about the human soul.

That seems to me the most worthy explanation of the odd fact that, of the five books which the Baird Trustees think are about preaching and have sent me to read, not one is about preaching! The least worthy explanation of that odd fact is that Johnston McKay, who selected the books, made a mistake. Now I have known Johnston McKay for over forty years, and in that time... Well, it is certainly possible that he did make a mistake! This, of course, is merely a device to allow me to pay tribute to Johnston: other Trustees have told me that he has done most of the work for this conference and deserves most of the credit.

Another possible reason for the remarkable fact that not a single one of the Baird Lectures is actually about preaching is that another famous series of Scottish Lectures, the Warrack Lectures, almost concurrent with the Baird Lectures, is exclusively about preaching. And it might be foolish for one series to duplicate what the other was doing. However, I once had to read all of the published Warrack Lectures on preaching: to say that they might have cornered the market in intelligent Scottish Lecturing on Preaching is to be excessively generous to them!

The most attractive, and the bravest, explanation of the complete absence of homiletical literature on the shelves of the Baird Lectureship is the Kipling one: that preachers should be concentrating on learning about all sorts of other things rather than the science of putting together a sermon: King Lear and Robin Jenkins and Michael Moore are the best teachers. When my grandfather was learning to be a minister at Trinity College (that is in Glasgow!) there was no teaching of preaching at all. On the other hand they did have as one of their professors Henry Drummond, whose task was to teach the students Natural Science. At Union Seminary

in New York I remember the professors were invited to recommend three or four new books that every student should read. John Macquarrie was at that time perhaps the best known English-speaking theologian in the world: his recommendations were along these lines “There are some really good books in the new biology, such as....; and a couple of studies of the American Civil War must not be missed; and then there is a new biography of Mozart”.

In that spirit, let us say, the Baird Lecturers who speak to preachers are making them better preachers; but it is not by talking about the craft of writing sermons. To find the common theme of the books chosen under the heading “Preaching” is beyond me. What I can do is to tell you what the books are and to suggest what might be their importance to preachers.

The 1913 Lecture is called “Christian Freedom”, by W. M. Macgregor. Preachers should know the Bible. Indeed, “Christian Freedom” is almost exactly Alison Jack’s title, for it is the New Testament, inspiration, transmission and interpretation. The whole book is about the Letter to the Galatians; and it remains true to its title. The argument is that freedom is the key to Galatians and that Galatians is the key to Paul.

Macgregor was Professor of New Testament in Glasgow after being a parish minister in Edinburgh. William Barclay said of him that he had more influence on him than any other person outside his home; and my father would have said the same. This despite the coldness of his personality. One of his colleagues said of him, in a phrase I have found useful about several ministers I have known, that “he had a difficult nature to manage”!

The introduction says that the Lectures were “addressed to popular audiences”. Clearly in 1913 popular audiences were pretty partisan in their views on the South Galatian theory, of which Macgregor says quaintly that “the evidence is so evenly balanced as to require a verdict of *non liquet*.” Indeed, if there is one clear deduction which can be made from the Baird Lectures I have read it is that popular audiences are not what they used to be!

There are countless books on Galatians which expound Paul’s defence of his own apostleship and Paul’s attack on the Judaisers. This one is clear and competent in these areas; but unlikely, a hundred years on to sound original. It is the third part of the book which make it a good book; and one which preachers do need to hear today. Macgregor is vigorous in

promoting Paul as the apostle of freedom. What he finds in the ethical sections in the last two chapters of the letter may include a recognition of the dangers of antinomianism and of the value of the community of the church; but the spirit is of the individual liberated Christian responsible before God and the slave of no principle or system or church.

I confess that I was surprised to find a minister of Macgregor's day and church and reputation so enthusiastically setting out the gospel as experience of joyfulness and liberation. Would there be many UF ministers in Edinburgh in 1913 who stated so clearly that the Galatians are completely wrong to think that the formal observance of their religion matters? That all that matters is the grace of God? And that that is the central message of Paul? That the authentic Christian experience is redemption, justification, adoption, life, freedom, blessedness, the indwelling of the Spirit; and that all of these are synonyms? I suspect that Macgregor was never called "happy-clappy". But the prevailing note of Macgregor's careful and thorough exegesis is of the gospel of joy. Maybe so much contemporary preaching is dull, not because of inadequate preparation but because of inadequate theology.

No doubt there are times – in my student days it was all the talk - when we need to hear warnings against individualism and in favour of community. But in these dreary days when so much preaching seems to be telling people what to do and enforcing rules of sexual morality, we need especially to hear St Paul calling us to, in Macgregor's words, *the law of Christ, which is not an alien thing to which in slavish dread a Christian man submits himself; it is the character of his Lord whom he loves and who lives in him; and as he learns more deeply to know that character, he seeks more eagerly that it may be repeated in his own.*

The Baird Lecture for 1932 is "The Riddle of the World" by D S Cairns. Preachers need to know grown-up theology. Indeed, "The Riddle of the World" is almost exactly Gilleasbuig Macmillan's title "Defenders of the Faith". For it is a book of apologetics in the sense of its sympathetic examination of what philosophers of the day were saying and in the sense of its patient, scholarly and comprehensive account of what Christianity might be saying in response. To borrow from another title, this is a defence of Christianity addressed to its cultured despisers.

Cairns was Professor of Dogmatics and Apologetics at Aberdeen; and he was an important figure behind the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. Did you know that he is the only Scottish theology professor to be commemorated by a plaque on the wall of a restaurant? Before today, my

only connection with Principal Cairns was that I won The Principal Cairns Scholarship when I was a student; and I am therefore predisposed to think well of him! But from now I have been enriched by him in another way; for “the Riddle of the World” is a very good book indeed.

The two criticisms of Christianity which Principal Cairns hears from the intellectual world of 1932 are that science has made God superfluous and that the existence of evil has made God incredible. These two arguments have been confronting readers of the Letters page in “The Herald” for months; and they are arguments confronted (in slightly different wording) by St Thomas in the 13th century. The philosophers who interest Cairns, Dewey, Julian Huxley, Russell, Krutch, may not be much read today, but the substance of the apologetic argument of the book is by no means old-fashioned.

I am not able to express the thought of the book in a sentence. Indeed, Cairns’s argument is that it is the whole Christian faith as expressed in the whole witness of the Bible, which is needed to deal with the weight of the challenge of the problem of evil; and not merely a slogan here, a quotation there. But the defence of Christianity is powerful. *Within this interpretation of the universe alone, I believe, can we include and explain the salient realities of the riddle without ignoring or blunting any of them, the baffling mixture of good and evil in the world, the sacredness of human personality, the sinfulness of man, the glory and tragedy of human life, even the reassuring blend of comedy in it, and finally the astonishing beauty which accompanies and blends with it all* (316)

From that excerpt I hope you capture the range and the seriousness of Cairns’ interest. What you cannot capture in a sentence or two is the quality of the thought. I have often wondered how justified is the old assumption that Scottish people are naturally interested in theology and naturally good at it. But this book does our reputation – historically at least - much good. It is not the easiest of reads; but the carefulness and the clarity of the theology are exemplary.

I hope that there are preachers who are thinking about some well publicised recent attacks on Christianity. One of the arguments used by both Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens is that Christian faith is mischievous and wicked. There can be few better places to begin to consider the right response to that than the chapter on “Providentialism” in “The Riddle of the World”, 75 years old as it may be.

Today's preachers need to recapture for the pulpit the spirit of D S Cairns's engagement with the thinking of his day. It is a spirit which is generous and confident and learned. So much of preaching today, when it takes any account of what is being thought outside the churches, attacks secular humanism at its worst. The task which Cairns sets preachers is to take the very best that is said by the opponents of Christianity and to show, carefully, patiently, honestly and profoundly, that Christianity is more satisfying, more reasonable and more likely to be true. If there is a competition for the best book to number among the Baird Lectures then I trust that Cairns's 1932 Lectures will be one of the finalists.

The Baird Lecture for 1946 is "New Forms of the Old Faith" by James Black. Preachers needed to know what other people believed. It is an account of ten sects, heresies or deviations from orthodox Christianity; and it does not go out of its way to be polite!

James Black was minister of St George's West in Edinburgh; and the third and last of my group of Baird Lecturers to be Moderator of the General Assembly. His successor there, Murdo Ewen Macdonald, described his ministry (and ministers are not usually prejudiced in favour of their predecessors!) as *one of the most brilliant ministries in living memory in Scotland*.

He was a famous preacher; but this is not a book about preaching. Its purpose is to provide the knowledge to help church members to deal with the unsettling effects of the cults and sects. It is not surprising that Black is quite aggressive in his criticisms of American movements like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons; but his chapters on Plymouth Brethren and on the Catholic and Apostolic Church are equally robust confrontations.

Each chapter begins with a historical account of origins and spread. That is followed by a description of core beliefs, as far as possible expressed in the words of the cults themselves. Black then attempts to find what is best in the different groups and what lessons they can teach the churches: he does not always find this easy! The last part of each chapter is more theological: Black attempts an assessment of the chief doctrines of the group and a rebuttal of their key criticisms of the established churches.

The world has moved on since 1946 and some of the groups which challenged the church then hardly do so today. I have met members of the British-Israel movement, for example, but not for many years and even then I could not have said, as Black does, *Many good Christians whom I*

know and respect do keenly believe it (277). And I am baffled by his sympathy for Spiritualism – unlike him, I do not think I could ever bring myself to attend séances. When he writes of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons or Christian Science he says exactly what I think and says it better than I could. On the other hand his experience of, for example, 7th Day Adventists is clearly different from mine. I still remember a terrific sermon preached in St Andrew’s and St George’s by our church cleaner, who was an African Seventh Day Adventist minister. What he said that Sunday (note!) was entirely orthodox; and seemed to me a good deal better than most of the sermons being preached in that place around that time!

The world has moved on and not many people went to church last Sunday worrying about Theosophy. But the questions of relating to people who believe differently are hugely contemporary and hugely important. Certainly hugely important when lifted into the interfaith dimension: Hans Kung famously said that there will be no world peace without peace among the religions. Hugely important still in the old ecumenical questions which still divide Protestant and Catholic. And more important than many preachers think in the shadowy world at the edges of religion, where New Age books fill the bookshops: have you noticed that what used to be called Religion is now always called Body, Mind and Spirit” and that most of the books sold in mainstream bookshops in this section are at best zany and at worst completely loopy? What is the right response for a Christian chaplain seeking to meet the needs of a prisoner who declares himself a follower of pagan religion? James Black’s book may be of its own day; but today’s preachers need to be asking the questions he asked. His is a good book.

The Baird Lecture for 1971 is “Ethics in a Permissive Society” by William Barclay. Preachers need to know how people should behave. The book is a transcript of televised lectures: it is therefore to be expected that its “popular audience” was not quite as theologically sophisticated as the popular audience addressed sixty years before by W M Macgregor. It seeks to examine certain ethical questions in the light of what the Bible says and the teaching of ancient Greek philosophy.

William Barclay was one of Macgregor’s successors as New Testament Professor at Glasgow and the only one of my five Baird Lecturers whom I have known. He had an immense influence on me; even although I soon came to disagree with most of what he taught me. Television made him very popular; and his books made him famous. My favourite story about the spread of his influence was told by his successor in his Glasgow chair.

In Paddy Best's first week in his new office he picked up the phone and heard this enquiry. "Could I speak to Professor Barclay, please? This is the Pentagon"! It was fashionable to disparage him in academic circles. All I can say is that he was by far, by far, the most stimulating and impressive teacher I ever had. There were three of us in his Honours class; and at the end of it Willie told us that he had designed a tie for the class: the motif was to be – a closed book and a cup of tea!

But this is not his best book: indeed it is a real disappointment. He is at his best amassing evidence about the ancient world – the section on racism on Greek culture is vintage Barclay; and he is at his best setting out the Biblical evidence. He lists 12 characteristics of the ethics of Paul; and each of these characteristics has four or five divisions. But I fear that even here, where he is at his best, this book is unsatisfying. For what Barclay does not do, when he presents the evidence for the ethics of the Hebrew Bible or of Paul or of Jesus, is to work out what it means. There is no attempt to analyse, to interpret. Here are 12 things that are important in the ethical teaching of Paul, but so what? The reader is a great deal better informed, but no wiser.

It makes me sad, for I still remember his first year lectures on the Sermon on the Mount, in which he set out different ways of thinking about the ethics of Jesus; and different ways of relating the teaching of Jesus to contemporary morality; and of relating the ethics of Jesus to preaching. This book would have been much better with some of that in it.

At its best the book does not succeed; and some of it is not its best. In nearly all of Willie's books you can quickly discover the last book he has been reading. He came to write these lectures just after reading a book which was very influential in the sixties: *Situation Ethics*, by Joseph Fletcher. There is a whole chapter devoted to this book; but it does not deal fairly. Barclay recognises the strength of Fletcher's argument and then sets out his own position without reference to Fletcher, as if he had not read the book. Nor is the book at its best in dealing with contemporary moral problems. The chapter of *The Christian and Money*, for example, is trite and tired (all the more disappointing since Barclay actually held quite radical views about Christianity and money, which are scarcely hinted at here). Today's preachers will be reminded by this book of how much questions of war and work and pleasure matter; but they may need more stimulating guidance for their sermons about these matters than Barclay offers them.

The Lecture for 1975 is “Message, Media, Mission”, by Ronald Falconer. In choosing this subject the Baird Trustees thought that preachers needed to know the world in which people live. Again this is a transcript of lectures prepared for broadcast to a studio audience. It is an examination of the history, the achievements, than challenges and the possibilities of religious broadcasting.

Ronald Falconer was parish minister in Coatdyke; and for quarter of a century after that he was the head of Religious Broadcasting for BBC Scotland. It is said that in 1962 he refused appointment as Controller of BBC Scotland on the grounds that it was alien to his ordination vows. The production of religious programmes, however, he clearly saw, and the Baird lecture is full of evidence of this conviction, as the fulfilment of his ordination vow. The underlying theme of the book is the value of radio and television as “the handmaid of the churches”.

Indeed it is no surprise that Falconer points to the Radio Missions of the early 1950s as the most important contribution made by religious broadcasting to the life of Scotland. These radio missions were closely linked to the “Tell Scotland” movement and were explicitly and unapologetically evangelistic, inviting the local church to participate by *reaping the parochial harvest of the seed which broadcasting had sown*.

Apart from the televised lectures of William Barclay, the programme of which Falconer speaks most affectionately is “Songs of Praise”, of which he produced over 200 editions. My friend Ian McCrorie, whose Toad Choir was made famous by “Songs of Praise”, made 12 of these programmes with him. He told me that in the very first of them, in the Greenock church of which I was later minister, led by my predecessor James L Dow, the organ broke down 20 minutes before broadcast. They did their best on a feeble old piano, and nearly every letter expressed thanks for the “lovely piano instead of the dull old organ”!

Of the Baird Lectures which I have been given to read, this is the most determinedly contemporary. It seeks to tell an audience of church people (for these lectures were delivered before an invited audience) what the modern world is really like: a world of Outside Broadcasts and video-tape and studio make-up artists. The most determinedly up-to-date, today it reads as the most old-fashioned. There are three changes to the world in the last thirty years which make this book sound very dated.

First, it contains no hint of the multi-faith environment in which we now live and of which religious broadcasters are rightly so conscious. I had

the privilege for some time of being the chairman of the Scottish Religious Advisory Committee of the BBC: the best inter-faith conversations I have ever had took place in that context, a context entirely absent from this book. In today's context a description of religious broadcasting as the hand-maid of the churches sounds offensive. Second, the change in the way we listen to radio and watch television is enormous. Channel choice, programme content, the advent of new media mean that nearly every lesson Falconer wants to teach about how radio and television might develop is now not true. Third, and most important, the Christendom assumption which lies behind the whole book is no longer tenable. It is not true today that viewers and listeners are "hidden Christians" waiting to be aroused from their slumber. I suspect it was not true thirty years ago, but this book certainly assumes it was.

Unhappily, then, "Message, Media, Mission" is not a strong book. I say "unhappily" because I am sure that the instinct of the Baird Trustees was right: preachers do need to know about the world in which people live in general, and about the influence of radio, television and other forms of communication on us all. My son works in television; and I am astonished by the stories he tells about the eagerness of people to appear for any reason – to show how dirty their house is or how badly they cook or how dysfunctional their family is – just so that they can say they have been on TV.

I think watching "Big Brother" is bad for you. When, in the course of my daily work, I talk to Scotland's prisoners, I am uneasy about their craving for violent television. So I no longer think that religious broadcasting is where the greatest challenge faces Christian faith, although I am very grateful for the intelligence and dynamism which has guided religious broadcasting in Scotland in my time. The challenge is rather in the content and the effect of all broadcasting. How can the Jerry Springer society hear the words "Blessed are the pure in heart"? hear them and know their benefit? If the Baird Trustees, who have served the common good for so very long, can take up that challenge, then they will help us all in the future as much as they have helped those who have gone before us.