

**SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE GOSPEL ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH
OF ALAN PHILIP FREDERICK SELL
at THE CHURCH OF CHRIST THE CORNERSTONE, MILTON KEYNES
3 MARCH 2016**

For me, it was an honour, tinged with much sadness, to be invited by Alan to preach the sermon at the service of thanksgiving following his death. Alan was wary of publishing his sermons 'because sermons are performed events prepared for particular people in particular circumstances' and in written form much of the 'performance' is missing: 'the context is removed, the variations in pitch, tone and volume cannot be heard, the twinkling of the eye cannot be seen, and the pauses cannot be registered'.¹ I share this reticence, and these concerns, but have, on this occasion, been persuaded otherwise because, after the service, I received a number of requests to make the script available. It is important that the sermon is read with the context of the service in mind. Alan planned the service, and I used his order as I prepared the text. The order of service is outlined below so that any readers of this document might at least be aware of its context. I have provided references where I have quoted directly, or indirectly, from Alan's writings (and elsewhere).

Introit: Sanctus (Thomas Attwood)

Call to worship and Sentences of Scripture: John 11: 25-26; Psalm 46: 1-2; Romans 8: 38-39)

Opening hymn: Jesus lives! Thy terrors now can, O death, no more appal us (C. F. Gellert, tr. F. E. Cox)

Prayers of Adoration, Confession and Supplication

Anthem: Nature with open volume stands (Adrian Boynton)

Readings: Psalm 121; I Peter 1: 3-9; John 14: 1-3

Second hymn: Give me the wings of faith to rise within the veil and see (Isaac Watts)

The Sermon

Prayers of Thanksgiving, Intercession and Re-dedication

Closing hymn: My gracious Lord, I own thy right to every service I can pay (Philip Doddridge)

Blessing (sung)

Sermon

The words we have heard from scripture, and the words we have sung, affirm the glorious message of the Christian gospel. The verses from the opening of the first letter of Peter tell us that through Christ's resurrection we have been given a 'new birth into a living hope' (v.3). This hope is secure, that despite the trials we now face, whatever happens in the world around us, whatever happens to our loved ones, whatever we face

in our own lives, we can live with the assurance, known by faith, that God loves and God saves. Or in the words of our first hymn:

Jesus lives! Thy terrors now can, O death, no more appal us

Jesus lives! By this we know thou, O grave, canst not enthrall us.

Our short gospel reading records Jesus telling his disciples that while he is leave them for a short time, he goes to prepare a place for them so that where he is, there also his disciples shall be (John 14:2-3). Or, again in the words of our hymn:

Jesus lives! To him the throne over all the world is given

May we go where he is gone, rest and reign with him in heaven.

As we gather today, these words encourage us not to linger in the shadow of death, but to look to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; a refuge and stronghold, a timely help in trouble (Psam 46:1-2).² And so, what we feel and know to be such a great parting is not ultimate; as final as it seems, it will in fact pass; as much as it marks the end, we look forward to, and live in hope of, a new beginning. Because Jesus, who died, was raised from the dead and through God's gracious gift, we share in what he has achieved, leaving us able to affirm with the Apostle Paul that

... there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).³

Through these words – these mysterious, powerful, inspiring words – we are drawn to the faith that where we stand at our weakest, our most vulnerable, our most helpless, God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit does everything; everything to enable us to live this life, and everything to give us the living hope that death has been defeated. We are drawn back to God's promises that the new life made real in Jesus Christ does not end at this point. And we are drawn back to God's seal on those promises, for as we approach the Easter season, we see that in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, those promises are fulfilled, and so 'sin and death and hell can never over us final triumph gain'.⁴

I find myself in something of a quandary today. My task is to proclaim the gospel message. I know this is my task, because Alan told me so, and it is contained in his styling of this service as one of 'thanksgiving for the gospel on the occasion' of his death. But we gather too to remember and to give thanks for Alan, and therefore something is to be said about him. I know this because Alan told me that as well. And yet we do not have much time, and there is much that could be said. When John Angell James, minister of Carrs Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham, preached the annual sermon on behalf of the London Missionary Society in Surrey Chapel, London, on 19 May 1819, he too had much to say. His sermon lasted for two hours, though he took pity on the congregation by announcing a hymn half way through. There will be no need for an intermission today.⁵

Alan was born in Surrey and baptized among the Godalming Congregationalists. A move to Cranleigh, the absence of a historic free church, the presence of Wesleyan grandparents, all meant that, in his own phrase, he 'fell among the Methodists', though I am not sure about the force of the verb 'to fall'.⁶ A call to ministry caused some soul-searching and a return to his roots by becoming a member of Worplesdon Congregational Church, where he found consistent rather than itinerant ministry and where he found the Church Meeting, which Alan would later affirm as a completion of the Reformation's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, of course 'corporately conceived'.⁷

Even as a youth he was studious – serious even – and he maintained copious research files. He clearly thought deeply about important matters. And so this southerner went north to Manchester to pursue theological training in the University and what was then the Lancashire Independent College because of his appreciation for the breadth of the curriculum and the catholicity of the faculty.

Ordination followed in 1959, as did pastorates, first at Sedbergh and Dent Congregational Churches, where he served on the Rural District Council and conducted adult education classes for the West Riding Local Education Authority. Ever busy, he also completed his MA thesis and began to publish. In 1964 he moved to Angel Street, Worcester, Hallow and Ombersley Congregational Churches. While there he served the County Union and was active in leading the Worcester and District Free Church Council and the Worcester Council of Churches. He also completed his doctoral thesis. From 1968 he served as lecturer, senior lecturer and principal lecturer at the West Midlands College of Higher Education in Walsall and pioneered courses in philosophy of religion, ethics and the history of Christian thought. He inaugurated a Counselling Service for students and staff and served in various roles in the West Midlands Synod of the United Reformed Church as well as on the denomination's Doctrine Prayer and Worship and Ministerial Training Committees. From 1983 to 1987 he was Executive Secretary for Theology for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches based in Geneva; he then moved to the University of Calgary in Canada to take up the Chair of Christian Thought before taking up his final position as Professor of Christian Doctrine and Philosophy of Religion at the United Theological College, Aberystwyth, stepping into an active retirement in 2001.

These bare facts give us some detail but they say little about Alan. We acknowledge that Alan was also husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother and friend – and all the other relationships which these titles entail. And it is with much love that we offer his family our deepest condolences today. It is these relationships that, more than anything else I will say, point to a life well-lived.

But we will concentrate on Alan's public life and contribution. Theology, philosophy, history, ecumenism – these were the things that mattered most. His interests were wide, his knowledge – particularly of the Dissenting and Reformed tradition in England – was encyclopedic, and his output was extensive, though even Alan did not quite match

the breadth of some of those of whom he wrote, such as Ebenezer Latham, eighteenth-century tutor at the Findern Dissenting Academy near Derby, who taught logic, physics, mathematics, history, Hebrew, theology, natural philosophy (including a discussion of the elements, human anatomy, fluids and solids, minerals, metals and rocks, the senses and astronomy); at the same time he also took pastoral charge of a local church and served the area as a physician.⁸ Thankfully this latter occupation is no longer a requirement of Dissenting ministers in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, Alan led a most productive life. As we have heard he was involved in many activities alongside his paid employment. He lectured extensively in the UK and throughout the world; he was an active member of many scholarly societies, and he was a committed supporter of the Denominational Libraries. I think he took especial delight in proving Geoffrey Nuttall wrong; his proposal to bring together denominational historical societies and cognate libraries being met with Dr Nuttall's 'it will never work'.⁹ Of course, it did, and the Association has promoted and undertaken research leading to several valuable publications.

Alongside this, he told us on several occasions, that from a young age he was an 'inveterate scribbler'. His bibliography – his list of published works (including books, chapters in books, academic and popular articles, reviews and letters to the press) – extends to 35 pages, beginning with an article to the *Christian World* in 1960 and with some pieces still waiting to appear. His work was recognized by the award of Doctorates in Divinity (Manchester University, 1998) and in Letters (University of Nottingham, 2006), while his wider contribution was recognized by a number of honorary awards.¹⁰

I guess that some will be surprised to hear that the headmaster of Pewley School, Guildford, wrote on his final school report that he was 'philosophical and abstruse'¹¹ – for others this might appear accurate! He might have been abstruse as a youth, but in later life he provided lucid accounts of intricate and subtle theological arguments: I think, for example, that his account of the Calvinist/Arminian controversy of the eighteenth century is the clearest exposition available of what was certainly a perplexing debate.¹²

There were two fundamental aspects to Alan's scholarly project. First, he sought to highlight the Reformed and Dissenting tradition of England. His knowledge of this tradition was extensive, surpassed only by his respect for and love of it. Over the years he nurtured a deep expertise, developing a profound insight and understanding of the Separatists of the sixteenth century through to Nonconformists and other writers of the twentieth century, but I think he was most at home in the eighteenth. There, in the history of Dissent, he found the major themes of systematic theology (Trinitarianism v. Unitarianism. Christology, Augustinianism v. Pelagianism, Calvinism v. Arminianism, Enthusiasm v. Rationalism, paedobaptism v. believer's baptism, church order, millenarianism and eternal punishment).¹³ But his love of the period is perhaps best seen in his choice of hymns for this service, all from eighteenth century divines and all

marked by what could be termed a particularly Reformed understanding and celebration of the Gospel.

In all this, his was a work of retrieval, resurrecting the work of those whose names are familiar but the details of whose contribution has been neglected over the decades while also drawing attention to those who, even in their own day, might have been peripheral and whose work has been long forgotten. He did this because he was convinced that this is a noble tradition, worthy of study for its own sake, but also the guardian of essential New Testament theological values. As a result, his writing is undergirded by the conviction that there is much in this tradition which is important for the mission and witness of the church today. As such, Alan saw his scholarly work as a fulfilment of his calling and as an extension of his ministry of Word and Sacraments.

The second consideration which characterizes his work is his firm belief that relentless specialisation had resulted in the divorce of partners who should always be held together: theology and philosophy, the one helping the other in the task of explaining the gospel in a hostile and disbelieving intellectual climate; doctrine and spirituality, ensuring that rootedness in the gospel is not sterile but encompasses the whole of life and the whole person; doctrine and ethics, where he would quote the eighteenth century strict Baptist John Gill 'where there is not the doctrine of faith, the obedience of faith cannot be expected ... And on the other hand, doctrine without practice ... is of no avail ...'¹⁴

All this was expressed eruditely, lucidly and wittily. I imagine he inwardly chuckled as he recorded some stories or as he quoted W. H. Auden to the effect that 'A professor is one who talks in someone else's sleep',¹⁵ or that he recorded that his first published paper 'occasioned such a resounding silence'.¹⁶

In general, Alan's method involved a careful and detailed dialogue with others in order to make his own constructive contribution. This meant that he did not belong to any 'school of thought' or 'school of theology', one of the reasons, I suspect, (though not the only one) that he was ambivalent about Karl Barth's work. If he had a mentor, it will be no surprise that I would suggest it was P. T. Forsyth, whose name and thought resounds throughout Alan's work. Though he probably would have balked at being called a Forsythian, he might have allowed a degree of pride when a fellow Reformed theologian affirmed that 'P. T. Forsyth lives again in the witness of Alan Sell'.¹⁷

His was a 'generous orthodoxy', maintaining the ancient doctrine of the church, but willing to see that even those with whom he might disagree could have something worthwhile to listen to, and that technological and scientific progress required the restatement of the gospel. Nevertheless he abhorred the sectarian tendency which he identified not among those who refuse to be shackled to establishment but those who refuse communion to those whom Christ has already united in the one church.¹⁸

Privately he could be remarkably candid and reveal frustration and even irritation, but publicly he was measured, calm and irenic – essential graces for those involved in ecumenical dialogue, especially at international levels; essential too for engagement in

theological debate when history is often considered moot and, in some contexts at least, the Reformed and Dissenting traditions are deliberately ignored.

One of my first encounters with Alan was when we both served on the URC's Doctrine Prayer and Worship Committee when he would determinedly but patiently explain to us the things he probably thought we should have known – and in hindsight we probably should have. We benefitted not only from his knowledge and erudition but also from his wisdom gained through vast experience, nationally and internationally. Personally, I acknowledge his unfailing kindness and support and a friendship greatly appreciated.

When all was said and done, at high and low points, Alan returned to the comfort, the hope, the inspiration and the challenge of the Gospel, the good news that in Jesus Christ and him crucified, God has reconciled the world to himself. Indeed, he once wrote, 'in the unlikely event of my one day having a grave stone, I should like it to be inscribed thus: "Minister of the Gospel"' and then in typical Alan fashion, he noted that this should be 'followed by a footnote numeral; and at the bottom: footnote one, "of the Dissenting sort"'.¹⁹

But what is this Gospel?

Let us remind ourselves of the words from the first letter of Peter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (I Peter 1:3-5).

In these few verses there are, conveniently, three points (non-alliterative, I'm afraid!), which encapsulate the Christian good news and which can be summed up in three words: 'grace', 'cross' and 'hope'.

First, we begin with God's mercy. The holy God, far beyond our thoughts and imagination, who dwells in light inapproachable, has, in Jesus Christ, *done* something, *achieved* something, *accomplished* something *for* us. The holy God, far beyond our thoughts and imagination, who dwells in light inapproachable, has, in Jesus Christ, drawn close to us and drawn us to himself. Though the word is not mentioned, what the author of the letter refers us to here is *grace*. Grace – the unmerited, free action of God towards his creation, made before any one of us could try to move in the Godward direction; grace – the undeserved outpouring of the love of God made real to us in Jesus Christ; grace – the unexpected, free approach of God towards us in order that we might know him and know each other and in that *knowing* to live in peace and harmony with him and with everyone else.

It is *grace* that makes the gospel *good* news. Our faith has nothing to offer if it prompts us to consider religious, civic and moral duty alone. We have nothing worth talking about if all we do is make being church a burden ourselves and each other. There is no hope at all for ourselves or anyone else if we are looking to our strength, our own

abilities, our own numbers, to seek to be bigger and stronger and greater than those we feel oppose us. But we have all we need when we are freed from the burden of trying to save the world by the knowledge that God has saved the world in Jesus Christ. As Alan himself wrote: 'The ground of the Christian's confidence, the source of solace in time of trial, is that grace is sovereign; it comes before our thought and action; when we can do nothing, God does everything.'²⁰

The Gospel begins with the sovereign grace of God, freely offered to humankind in Jesus Christ. And because God has done everything, then we, by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are released from all that burdens us – the burden of sin and guilt and fear and despair. And because God has done everything, then we, by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are freed to be imaginative and to be creative and this opens up a future of possibility.

Second, the verses from the first letter of Peter tell us that we see God's mercy and grace at work in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Though the word itself is not mentioned, the author of the letter here refers us back to the centrality of the cross. Again, I can do no better than to quote Alan: 'At the Cross, God in Christ did not merely *show* us something about his love, or our need, or both, but *acted* once-for-all for the salvation of the world by vanquishing sin and death and all that could keep us from him.'²¹

For the cross was not a matter of human nature offering its very best to God. Instead, it was God offering the very best to human beings.²² The cross does not persuade God to be gracious, it is in itself the gracious act of God. In the cross we see the God of love taking pity upon the sin-stricken world, and in Jesus Christ he visits and redeems his people.²³ It is the 'once-for-all, dramatic act of moral rescue by the holy, triune God of sovereign grace.'²⁴

Through the cross and resurrection the power of sin and death are destroyed. And so, in the face of death – the death of loved ones and our own death – the cross and resurrection are to us a reassurance and comfort.

But, thirdly, God's mercy, shown in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are for us a *living* hope. These verses from the first letter of Peter tell us that this is not simply something to look forward to; it is, through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, real for us now in this life.

In our day, the word 'inheritance' suggests to us something into which we shall enter, something which we shall possess in the future when the current owner has passed away. In the Bible, it means 'a settled and secured possession',²⁵ something graciously gifted to us and, even if not fully realized, nonetheless available now.

For through faith we do not simply have the company of Christ, but we are one with him, the one who has conquered sin and death. We are given a new birth, and 'this rebirth lifts us out of this world of space and time, out of this world of change and decay, out of this world of sin and defeat, and brings us here and now into living touch with

eternity and eternal life',²⁶ and, therefore there is nothing left of which we should be afraid.

As a result of this gracious act of God, it is Jesus Christ who is Lord because he alone has the victory over sin and death, the things which render the rest of us helpless and hopeless. And when Jesus is Lord, no one and nothing else can be. In the cross and resurrection, we are confronted by the unexpected; for the one who was dead is in fact alive. And so a whole new world of possibility has been opened up. Things do not have to be as they are, things are not always the way they seem, unexpected outcomes are possible. And so the Kingdoms of the world can become the Kingdom of the Lord *because Jesus has been raised from the dead*. All other principalities and powers which seek to hold us to ransom pale into insignificance, the evil schemes of devils and of men will come to naught, because Jesus – the crucified and risen saviour – is Lord.

This is the Gospel. This is what enables us to live life in all its fullness. Because God in Christ is *for us*, there is none that have the power to oppose and oppress us. We are put right with God and therefore none can accuse and none can condemn, for God has declared us 'Not Guilty'. This is the very power of the gospel. This is the heart of our hope for this life and for the life to come.

This hope is not a matter of misplaced optimism. It is not about being able to approach situations as a 'half full' rather than a 'half empty' person. This hope is not a matter of wishful thinking. It is not placing all our energy and resources into finding a quick-fix solution. This hope is not a matter of sticking your head in the clouds and pretending that everything is okay, or thinking that if ignored it will all go away. This hope is a desire, an expectation, a belief in its fulfilment. This is why the New Testament speaks about hope in terms of anticipating something with full assurance that what we anticipate will indeed come to pass.

We gather today giving thanks to God for Alan's life; giving thanks to God for all Alan said, all that he wrote, all that he did, and all that he was; giving thanks to God for a life well-lived. But we are all too aware of the pain of separation and standing in solidarity with those whose pain is greatest.

Nevertheless, hope cannot fail on this day, *because Jesus has been raised from the dead*, and it is he and no one and nothing else who is Lord. In the shadow of death, we glimpse the living hope which the gospel offers, a hope by which Alan lived and through which he courageously faced his own death in the faith that because his Lord had gone before him and prepared a place for him, there was a place for him in the Father's 'many mansions' of which the Jesus of John's Gospel speaks (14:1-3). And with that witness, we can glimpse for ourselves that same living hope that, in the fullness of time, and in faith in the resurrected Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit, there will be space there for us as well.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and

unfading, kept in heaven for you who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Revd Dr Robert Pope
University of Wales Trinity St David

¹ See Alan's *One Ministry, Many Ministers: A Case Study from the Reformed Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2014), p. 118, fn. 1.

² These words were read at the beginning of the Service of Thanksgiving.

³ These words were read at the beginning of the Service of Thanksgiving.

⁴ These words close the hymn, 'God is love, let heaven adore him' by Timothy Rees. It can be found in the United Reformed Church's hymnbook, *Rejoice and Sing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), no. 95.

⁵ The story is recounted at http://gracegems.org/22/James_biography.htm (accessed 29 February 2016).

⁶ The biographical details in this sermon were gleaned partly from a CV supplied to me by Alan and partly from his 'From Union to Church: Autobiographical Recollections of Congregational Ecclesiology in the 1960s', in *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 285-316 (quotation found on p. 286).

⁷ 'From Union to Church', p. 287.

⁸ Details of his career can be found on the Dissenting Academies website at <http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/sample1.php?parameter+personretrieve&alpha+187> (accessed 29 February 2016). Alan refers to Latham's activity in (for example), *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity, 1689-1920* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2004), pp. 27-28.

⁹ This is recounted in 'Geoffrey Nuttall in Conversation', in *The Theological Education of the Ministry: Soundings in the British Reformed and Dissenting Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), pp. 177-210 (quotation from p. 205).

¹⁰ These include HonDD (Ursinus College, USA; Acadia University, Canada); HonDTh (Debrecen, Hungary; Cluj/Kolozsvár, Romania).

¹¹ Quoted in 'From Union to Church', p. 286.

¹² See *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (Worthing: H. E. Walter, 1982).

¹³ This list can be found in the Preface to *Enlightenment, Ecumenism and Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers, 1550-2000* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), p. xiv. It is noteworthy that, with David J. Hall and Ian Sellers, he decided to edit the third volume of *Protestant Nonconformist Texts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015) in a four-volume project for which he acted as general editor.

¹⁴ 'A Renewed Plea for "Impractical Divinity"', in *Testimony and Tradition*, pp. 211-237 (quotation from p. 211).

¹⁵ *Testimony and Tradition*, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Testimony and Tradition*, p. 211.

¹⁷ The words are those of the UCC theologian, Gabriel Fackre, and included on the rear cover blurb for *Enlightenment, Ecumenism and Evangel*.

¹⁸ *Enlightenment, Ecumenism and Evangel*, p. xiv.

¹⁹ Quoted in 'The Dissenting Witness, Yesterday and Today', in *Testimony and Tradition*, pp. 253-284 (quotation on p. 253).

²⁰ *Enlightenment, Ecumenism and Evangel*, p. 337.

²¹ *Enlightenment, Ecumenism and Evangel*, p. 385.

²² Alan discussed this in 'May We Still Glory in the Cross?', in *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, pp. 377-399. This part of the discussion takes place on p. 384, where Alan quotes H. F. Lovell Cocks, *The Wondrous Cross* (London: Independent Press, 1957), p. 59 and P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1958 [1910]), p. 24.

²³ 'May We Still Glory in the Cross?', p. 381; Lovell Cocks, *The Wondrous Cross*, p. 7.

²⁴ 'May We Still Glory in the Cross?', p. 394.

²⁵ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Edinburgh: The St Andrew Press, 1960), p. 204.

²⁶ Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, p. 203.