

Comfortable Words

As I walked along the long corridor in the University College in Cardiff, I approached a cassock clad priestly figure. My heart missed a beat. I had always respected and feared such august figures; being nurtured as a God fearing member of the Anglican Church in Wales. It was 1956 - my first year as an undergraduate. Wrestling with the complexities of Differential Calculus and Newtonian Physics was my daily task. Seeking comfort and absolution from the church was my solace. The lecture which was advertised for this evening at the 'Anglican Society' was entitled 'Naught for your Comfort'. It was to be delivered by Father Trevor Huddleston who was from South Africa.

"You must be Father Huddleston" I ventured to say with an enquiring tone rather than a statement of fact. "Oh, certainly not" came the reply from the lips of the saintly apparition; "Father Huddleston is a far more Holy looking man than I am". He spoke with a rich Rhondda Valley accent which immediately made me feel at home with him. The apparition now took on a human form. I had met none other than Father Bruce Davies, the University chaplain, who was to become a great friend to me and to my family in years to come. He duly escorted me to the appointed room where my thoughts of 'comfort' were to be severely transformed.

Father Huddleston was a member of the 'Community of the Resurrection' whose mother house was situated at Mirfield in West Yorkshire. The community had asked him to return to England in 1956 due to the controversy he was creating in speaking out against apartheid in South Africa. In that year he had published his seminal work, *Naught for your Comfort*, and began work as the master of novices at Mirfield. His visit to Cardiff was part of an extensive tour of the UK raising awareness of the evils of apartheid and publicising his book.

My formation as a young lad growing up in the Rhondda was very sheltered. My earliest memories of churchgoing were limited to singing in the choir for Evensong with Brylcreamed hair and surplice, occasionally pumping the organ for my sister Paddy, who was the youngest church organist in the valley, and extinguishing the altar candles after the third collect which strangely began with 'Lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord'. The vicar was never addressed as 'Father' and was not in favour of laughter in church – not even the occasional smile! In my mid-teens my sister and I attended the 8am service of Holy Communion. I enjoyed the poetry of the Book of Common Prayer, but had little understanding of what was going on with the 'body and blood' bits. Even in those early days Paddy and I had intense discussions about the Thirtynine Articles of Faith and the Nicene Creed. Paddy eventually went to Sheffield University to study modern languages and became a Roman Catholic. I followed her steps in a sense but preferred the sciences. Hence I ended up at Cardiff reading Maths and Physics. My encounter with Father Bruce and Father Huddleston proved to be a turning point in my spiritual learning curve.

'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ says to all who truly turn to him: come unto me'; these words echo down the ages and bring a warm hearted feeling to all 'who receive him'. One priest I knew always referred to them as the 'comfy words'. I assume that Cranmer intended us to use the word 'comfort' as meaning 'with strength' rather than

connotations of armchairs! Nevertheless these words which precede the confession in the Book of Common Prayer Communion service have always engendered a feeling of divine relaxation in me. Not so after meeting Trevor Huddleston. For him the word 'comfort' meant 'with strength for the conflict ahead'. As St. Paul said 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' (Phillipians. 4:13).

Of course I had realised before, that to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth meant that it was our duty and our joy to give help to the helpless and to identify with the outcaste. What shocked me about 'Naught For Your Comfort' was the political dimension of the struggle for peace with justice in South Africa. I was taught as a boy that 'you don't mix politics and religion'. Caring on a personal basis was what we are about. Changing society for the better, was for politicians to deal with. And yet, what do we pray for in the Lord's Prayer when we say those words 'thy Kingdom Come, on earth'? Is not this a challenge to all political establishments? Is not this very challenge which brought about the execution of Jesus?

As I walked away from that meeting across Cathay's park to catch my bus to my digs in Gabalfa I thought 'this is the way the truth and the life'. My valley had been exalted and the horizon had become 'a new heaven and a new earth'.
