

Funeral Address – the Right Reverend Eric Kemp

Here, in this cathedral which for over twenty-six years was his cathedral church, we are united in the work of committing the soul of Eric Kemp into the care and keeping of God. That is our sacred task. When we die, we stand naked and unadorned before God, shorn of all accidentals and accoutrements, simply the person whom God has created and loved and redeemed. So, as we remember Eric before God and offer the sacrifice of Christ for the repose of his soul, it is right that we should think first and foremost of Eric as a person. The question forming in our minds should be “What manner of man was this that he was enabled to accomplish so much in so many fields of the Church’s life?”.

“In my beginning is my end” wrote T.S. Eliot in East Coker, and again “Home is where one starts from”. If this is true of each of us, it was unquestionably and decisively true for Eric Kemp. The farms and fields and family networks of North Lincolnshire were the world in which he was born and passed boyhood and adolescence. They were formative of his character, giving him a unity and wholeness, a certain indivisibility, as well as a dogged determination and a persevering application to the completion of any task. They could also give him occasion for dry humour, as when one time he and I were taking a hasty meal in a pub in Hove and I ordered cockles. “Huh,” said Eric, “anyone brought up in Grimsby wouldn’t touch a cockle on the end of a bargepole.” I expected to be struck dead at any moment of some awful disease.

But Lincolnshire also gave him two other things. It gave him his shyness and it gave him his first intimation of the Catholic inheritance of the Church of England. His shyness, as his own well-named memoirs make clear, was a major element in his being, and one which at times could be all but disabling. His recording of the fact that in his three years as an undergraduate at Oxford he never once entered his college Junior Common Room illustrates this powerfully. Whilst his shyness was no doubt instrumental in conserving his intellectual energy, it could also at times lead him to be suspicious of the unfamiliar. I once had the temerity to ask him “Are all Lincolnshire people suspicious?” and back came the immediate reply “No, only when they meet the outside world”.

His first encounter with the Catholic tradition of the Church of England came by way of discovering the Tractarian movement as part of his historical studies at school, aided by his having as his own parish incumbent a priest who had been ordained by Edward King. King, a winning and loving and compellingly attractive figure, had been recognised as a saint in his lifetime, a recognition which we renew now every March 8th. Eric’s burgeoning sense of history recognised something authentic and appealing in the Tractarians with their own strong sense of historical continuity and their holiness, whilst King’s incarnation of their ethos was still present and powerful in Lincolnshire years after his death. In later years Eric’s study would contain no fewer than three photographs of King.

Eric always marked with gratitude in his memory those who had inspired and nurtured and encouraged him in the Catholic faith. After Edward King, pre-eminent amongst those was Freddy Hood, Principal of Pusey House, the first to befriend him when he arrived in Oxford, who truly introduced him to the Catholic faith and practice which were thereafter to be the heart of his life. There was also Father Harold Douglass Caesar, his first vicar in Southampton when he was ordained at the beginning of the war. Together with Arthur Couratin, his Principal at St. Stephen's House and Eric's best man at his wedding, it was these priests who fostered Eric in the Catholic tradition. Hereafter he would be a true man of the Church, with the Church providing the setting and the *raison d'être* of virtually all his activities.

And what activities! The range and scope of the contacts and developments in which he was involved and played an increasingly significant part grew and grew. But at the root of all his involvements there was a solid rock of scholarship. Fundamentally he was always pre-eminently an historian, wanting to know what had happened as a basis for discerning what should happen. It was the historian which drew him to the specialised study of canon law. It was the means of discovering how the Church had ordered and regulated its life in so far as that could be done by codes and canons. So into the counsels of the Church, whether they were governmental or ecumenical, he brought a very special knowledge of the Church's tradition. He allied this to a quite astonishing memory. He seemed to hold an endless array of the acts and facts of the past in the forefront of his mind, to be produced without seeming effort. And there were few who could gainsay what he put in front of them in the shape of historical precedent. Something of this same power of memory was evident when he became a bishop, not least when, lamentably but inevitably, there was a parish row. He would be able to recount it step by step, who said what and so on, from beginning to end. I was once the recipient of one of these recitatives – it was about something which had happened in the far reaches of East Sussex, and we were standing on the lawn of the Theological College at a College reunion. Unfortunately the band was playing, which combined with Eric's less than penetrating tones, gave something of a surreal feeling to the whole episode. There had to be a lot of sage nodding.

For twenty-three years, almost a quarter of a century, he was Chaplain and Fellow of Exeter College Oxford. Here he combined his teaching of both history and theology in an old-fashioned way, so that he tutored his theology pupils in all parts of the syllabus instead of farming them out elsewhere. He was not an inspiring teacher but he was thorough and conscientious. But Exeter was also the base for his involvement in the wider Church, notably as time went on in the Anglican-Methodist negotiations, in the course of which he caused disturbance to some fellow-Catholics in the Church of England. There was also the movement towards synodical government. By the time that the Anglican-Methodist scheme was rejected by the newly established General Synod, Eric had moved to Worcester cathedral as Dean, soon to have the ebullient Robin Woods as his bishop. He enjoyed Worcester and the opportunities which it gave both for liturgical improvement and re-ordering and also for involvement in the community of the city. He had never lost sight of that part of the Catholic tradition which lay in concern for the poor and underprivileged. And with him to Worcester went Pat and their family, because in 1953 Eric had married Pat, daughter of Kenneth Kirk, the renowned scholar-bishop of Oxford. It was a telling choice, with her vivacity a splendid counterpoint to his more subdued style and her

intelligence matching his own. Five children ensued, Sarah, Katharine, Alice, Harriet and Edward, variously talented and making for a vigorous family life.

And so, in 1974, to Chichester as Bishop. There were many in the Church of England who felt that Eric should have become a bishop sooner. Certainly he took to it as easily and naturally as if he had been a diocesan bishop for years. He took quick and firm decisions about archdeaconries and deaneries and held a visitation of the cathedral. The diocese soon learned that there was a firm if unobtrusive hand on the tiller, and the members of the clergy found that if they were in a tight spot he was supportive. He continued to work phenomenally hard without appearing to suffer from it. It was natural that he felt most at home in churches of Catholic tradition, but there was no discrimination. It was in the evangelical parish of Broadwater that he once went to confirm only to discover the Rectory family in an acute state of grief through the death of their pet goat. For so shy a man he was strangely good in such circumstances. But of course, a watershed came with the decision of the General Synod that women could be ordained to the priesthood. Eric had found support in the Church's tradition for the making of women deacons, but his historical understanding and his ecumenical concern made him a firm, even passionate, opponent of the priesting of women. Nevertheless, within the limits imposed by this, he made every effort to deal justly with the issue and with those who held different views from his own. If neither he nor his suffragans ordained women as priests, it was not impossible for women priests to function and hold office in the diocese. At the same time he was looked to as the figure amongst the bishops to give lead and encouragement to those opposed to the priesting of women. It was the consciousness of his role in this matter which was beyond doubt chiefly responsible for his decision to prolong his tenure of the see of Chichester far beyond the limit which had become mandatory after the date of his consecration. No doubt also he felt that having waited so long, he would wish to exercise an episcopate of more than eleven years, buttressed by the fact that his powers of work and concentration were still those of a much younger man. He was continually effective upon the ecumenical scene, valuing the link with Chartres and the honour which it brought him and much concerned with the Old Catholic Church. But his prolongation of his episcopate into undeniable old age brought encomium and opprobrium, praise and blame, in equal measure. He himself had no doubt that he was acting rightly.

So, as we come to this solemn moment of committing and commending Eric Kemp to the love and mercy of God, how shall we think of him? He was in truth not less than a phenomenon, with many marks of greatness about him. It was impossible to mistake him for any one else and his uniqueness was palpable. He touched and influenced the life of the Church at many points and in many ways, and he was honoured far beyond the boundaries of the Church of England. His great store of knowledge made him a resource in many obdurate circumstances so that he was rarely looked to in vain. He had a strong sense of justice and endeavoured to act according to its dictates. He had a deep love of music and a wide knowledge of it, and it is fitting that his body will be borne from the cathedral to the strains of Wagner's Meistersinger. When he was relaxed, he could be the merriest of company and a captivating raconteur and he could frequently have great charm. There was joy at his heart even if sometimes he found it difficult to convey. What was beyond all doubt were his wish and will to serve God and his Church. Long ago, as an ordinand, he had resolved to place his life and gifts wholly at that service. He did not fail in this

resolve, and to enable God to bring this about he kept his discipline of prayer and devotion right through his life, so that very few days started without silent prayer, Mattins and Mass. So it was until old age and frailty took hold of him and he became increasingly reliant upon Pat's wonderful care. We salute his memory as a man of God and a true pillar of His Church. May he come to the mansions of the Father's house and be welcomed and embraced by the One who makes all things new, and may he rest in peace.

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