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Ryle for the Third Millennium

James Jones

I have in my study a picture of J C Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool. I am deeply aware of his impact on this city, and on my own life. During my retreat before my enthronement as Bishop of Liverpool I read his *Charges*, and his book *Holiness* has given me profound insights into the life of faith. For example:

No man can possibly be happy in a place where he is not in his element, and where all around him is not congenial to his tastes, habits and character. When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of the noonday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land – then, and not till then, will I admit that the unsanctified man could be happy in heaven.¹

Yet on the back of the portrait of Ryle I have a copy of *Vanity Fair's* assessment of him shortly after his enthronement: 'Dr Ryle is not a profound scholar or a learned writer. Neither is he a political orator. But he is of that energetic and earnest kind of speakers whom the unregenerate call "tub-thumpers".' The end of the article sounds like a mediocre student's school report: 'He is a good man, not at all large-minded, but very much in earnest.' Being a bishop who has found himself in the press from time to time, I know how he must have felt!

Last autumn, a year into my episcopacy here, I laid before the Bishop's Council and Synod a vision for the Diocese. Much of what it contains finds echoes in and inspiration from Ryle's own priorities, put forward in his inaugural Charge to the Diocese.²

A Diverse Diocese

Ryle described his Diocese in 1881 (a year after its creation) as 'curiously diversified':

1 J C Ryle *Holiness* (Evangelical Press 1979) p 23

2 Delivered at his primary visitation in the Pro-Cathedral of St Peter, Liverpool on 19 October 1881.

Perhaps there is hardly a district in Great Britain in which you will see such an extraordinary variety of classes. You have smoky manufactories and squalid poverty at one end of the city [of Liverpool], and within two or three miles you have fine streets and comparative wealth. In Wigan, Warrington, St Helen's, Widnes, and the districts round these places, you have swarms of people employed in collieries, iron foundries, cotton manufactories, glass and chemical works. Around Ormskirk, Sefton, Hale, and Speke, you will see admirable farming. And, though last, not least, in no part will you find such a mixture of the Queen's subjects. Out of the 1,100,000 inhabitants of our Diocese, there is reason to believe that at least 200,000 are Irish, and 50,000 Welsh. Of the number of the Scotch I have heard no estimate. But I am greatly mistaken if the Scotch element is not very largely represented.³

While the collieries, iron foundries and cotton manufactories have vanished, and the Irish, Welsh and Scottish communities are no longer distinctive, this diversity is basically maintained and the comments on the disparity of wealth could have been penned today. Moreover, there is a new ethnic diversity within the city of Liverpool with substantial Somali, Chinese, West Indian and other communities. Nor is this variety confined to the North West, but is a feature of our society as a whole.

This diversity also existed in the Church then as it does today. To the surprise of modern Evangelicals this was for Ryle a positive thing (provided, as he was quick to point out, the confines that the law prescribed were held):

I have long maintained, and still maintain, that every well-constituted National Church ought to be as comprehensive as possible. Its *necessaria* should be few and well-defined. Its *non-necessaria* should be very many. It should make generous allowance for the infinite variety of men's minds, the curious sensitiveness of scrupulous consciences, and the enormous difficulty of clothing thoughts in language which will not admit of more than one meaning. To comprehend and take in, by a well-devised system of scriptural Christianity, the greatest number of Christians in the nation, ought to be the aim of every National Church.⁴

3 J C Ryle *Charges and Addresses* (The Banner of Truth Trust 1978) p 3

4 Ryle *Charges and Addresses* pp 28-9

Similarly Ryle, whose grandfather had been a convert of John Wesley, had praise right from the start of his episcopal ministry for his colleagues from other denominations:

I would have it distinctly understood that I do not ignore the good work that has been done by our Nonconformist brethren. I thankfully acknowledge the service they have rendered to Christ's cause in Liverpool. Nor can I forget the praiseworthy zeal with which the Romish Church has provided for its adherents.⁵

In the last century, the fact that Christians subdivided into different traditions and denominations was seen as an obstacle to mission. As an RE teacher I well remember sixth-formers questioning the Christian faith on the grounds that we were all so divided. But 25 years on in a richly diverse and pluralistic culture diversity has become a key to our mission. The variety of traditions is a virtue as it provides many different ways into the Christian faith. Pluralism and diversity are not a vice in our culture, nor need they be in the church. Moreover, when you look at the patterns of the under-40s their lives are not characterized by allegiance to a denomination. In a mobile society such as ours, when people in this age-band move, they go looking for a church that suits them, rather than one with the same brand name as the one they have just left. Are we to deny this? Are we to despair at it? It is best not to ignore it. Not least because in a more mobile and more media saturated society there is greater awareness of what is on offer.

Furthermore, as we journey through life so there is a need for different experiences at different points. Sometimes we need the security of clearer definitions of faith, sometimes we need the freedom to be more imaginative, sometimes we need the space of silence, sometimes we need the exuberance of dramatic worship. This is not to deny that there are truths, absolutes and fixed points on the theological compass. It is a recognition that we should not be ashamed or dismissive of traditions other than our own, but see them as an opportunity for mission at the beginning of this third millennium.

Scripture remains authoritative in all matters of faith and conduct. It is Scripture that defines the boundaries of diversity. As the New Testament reveals, the early church wrestled over the limits of diversity. Although there

⁵ Ryle *Charges and Addresses* p 3

were some issues of primary importance, the first Christians lived with a multiplicity of differences.

A Devolved Diocese

Subsidiarity is a word that was coined first by the Church. The interface of mission lies with the parishes, the specialist ministries and in that network of the invisible parish of relationships that are not confined to geographical areas. The parochial system sees the concentration of the Church's resources at a local level. These were points that Ryle recognized all too well. He held the first ever conference for clergy and lay representatives for the Diocese of Liverpool in 1881. Just before it began he spoke of the high esteem with which he regarded his clergy:

I am deeply thankful to find so many clergymen doing solid, good work in the Diocese of Liverpool. I doubt extremely whether there are many dioceses in England and Wales where there is so great a proportion of clergymen who are 'workmen that need not be ashamed', and unostentatiously bearing 'fruit that will remain'.

I would echo such words in the Diocese today.

It is regrettable, but to be expected, that the tiny fraction of errant clergy grab the newspaper headlines, while the huge majority of excellent men and women continue working faithfully and humbly, serving the needs of their communities. This 'grass roots' approach to Diocesan structures cannot be overemphasized. A priest reacted to talk concerning the 'centre' of the Diocese (meaning the committees that operate from Church House) by saying that the heart of the Diocese was him holding the hand of a dying man and praying with him in a hospital ward. All-age services are another example. The introduction of them over the past 30 years has proved a vital growth point for the Church. But they began, not from some edict from General Synod or the House of Bishops, but out of local initiatives in the parish. All that we do from the 'centre' must be to serve and enable those at the coalface of mission.

A Discipling Diocese

As Christians we are caught up in the learning of Christ. As learners we are called to encourage others to learn Christ too.

On his appointment as Bishop of Liverpool, Ryle was quick to draw attention to some uncomfortable facts:

The population of the West Derby Hundred⁶ has grown with unprecedented rapidity during the last 180 years. Our great seaport on the Mersey has leaped with a few bounds into the foremost position in the Queen's dominions. Both inside and outside of Liverpool there has been a constant influx and immigration of people into the district. But all this time, unhappily, the Church of England, until of late years has done comparatively little for the souls who were brought together.⁷

In particular, it was the poorest areas of Liverpool where the Church was struggling most. As the introduction of his pamphlet 'Can they be brought in?',⁸ Ryle lists attendances on Trinity Sunday 1882 at 15 of the poorest (but unnamed) churches in Liverpool. Only 2.8% of the population were in an Anglican church that Sunday,⁹ thus exploding the myth that most Victorians were church-goers.¹⁰ In the last ten years in the Diocese of Liverpool, electoral roll numbers have shrunk by 20%, attendance has decreased by 20%, the number of Easter communicants is down by 25%, and the number of children who attend church has fallen by 30%. And this, all in the Decade of Evangelism.

While some argue that the Church should not be obsessed with numbers, numbers represent people for whom Christ died. In *The Liverpool Mercury's* obituary of Bishop Ryle,¹¹ he is quoted as once saying:

Ask any good clergyman, what is the chief difficulty he has to contend with [and] he would tell you it is neither Romanism nor extreme Ritualism, nor Erastianism nor Broad Churchism nor systematic Scepticism or any other 'ism' but a half dead torpid indifference about any sort or kind of religion.

6 An area of the Diocese of Liverpool.

7 Ryle *Charges and Addresses* p 5

8 Published in 1883.

9 This assumes that none of the church-goers went twice on a Sunday. Given the likelihood that many of them did, the actual percentage of people who attended is almost certainly lower.

10 Figures are unavailable for other denominations, but approx 45% of the population of these parishes was Anglican, and only 6.1% of the Anglicans attended church.

11 11 June 1900

Yet this is not the case today.

The spiritual instinct inside every human cannot be quashed for ever. In this period of our history, this instinct is coming to the fore again. Over 80% of people in England say they believe in God. In a recent survey of young people aged 14 to 18, the question was asked: 'When did you last pray – last week, last month, last year?' Over 60% said they had prayed in the previous week. Yet on the whole, they do not attend any sort of church.

In Lent this year I spent a day in each of the deaneries within the Diocese of Liverpool. I spent time with sixth-formers, teachers, church members and 18 to 30 year olds. Time and again the young people I met explained that while they had faith (albeit sometimes vague and indistinct), they did not find the church relevant to them. Two middle-aged people who had slipped into the pub for one of the 18 to 30 meetings, added their contribution to the discussion by saying that it was not just young people who found the sermons and worship inaccessible, but people of their age group too. If we are to be a Discipling Diocese, it is clear that we need new initiatives.

A Daring Diocese

It is my hope that the Diocese of Liverpool will always be prepared to take risks. We live in a rapidly changing culture. This means that there will be times when we will have to go out on a limb. This also means that we will have to absorb the tensions of our society as it changes. As different parts of the Diocese identify with different parts of God's world, so we will take to heart as we enter into the experiences of others, especially the poor and the disadvantaged, their concerns. It should not surprise us that as a Diocese we experience tensions internally as we do this. Indeed the unity of Christians begins at the point of disagreement!

Ryle, perhaps surprisingly for a Victorian bishop, was prepared to take risks. One of his top priorities on assuming the See was to increase the number of places of worship. This was much needed, given the huge increase in the population of the area.¹² Ryle proposed to establish a special 'Twelve

12 Liverpool's population at the beginning of the nineteenth century was about 82,000. By Ryle's enthronement it was approximately 650,000 – an increase of almost 800%.

Churches Fund' for the city of Liverpool. The finances of the fledgling Diocese were precarious though, and 'giving-fatigue' was possible since in the previous five years, the city fathers had raised £200,000 for the founding of the new bishopric and the University. Ryle, however, was undeterred: 'The money ought not to be an insuperable difficulty, I am certain, if there is only the will.'¹³ Ryle knew that if people could catch the vision of a project then, literally, money would be no object. History proved this was so.

Ryle was also prepared to break with convention when needs demanded it. Some churches had developed the controversial practice of having evening communion services on a Sunday. The reason was to enable wives and mothers from poorer districts to attend, when they would often be working in the mornings. Ryle enthusiastically endorsed such schemes.¹⁴ He introduced other bold, new initiatives too. Faced with a dearth of clergymen, particularly in poor areas, he promoted 'a great increase of living agents. Missionary Curates, Scripture Readers, lay-agents, Bible women and voluntary lay-helpers'¹⁵ who, under the direction of the incumbent, would go among the working classes and show the love of God in word and deed.

Such enterprises were not without their critics. In 1883 Ryle welcomed the American evangelists Moody and Sankey to Liverpool. The local *Liberal Review* was less than enthusiastic: 'The Bishop of Liverpool seeking the assistance of Mr Moody is in the position of a properly qualified physician calling in the aid of an unauthorized practitioner who, in medical phraseology, would be termed a quack.'¹⁶

We cannot afford to ignore the statistics quoted earlier about current church attendance in the Diocese of Liverpool, nor the comments I have heard from literally hundreds of young people during my deanery visits in Lent. One possibility that they discussed with me was youth churches – services that are particularly for young people. When you go into most churches it is like turning on Radio 3 or Radio 4. Even most 'modern' Christian music is really Radio 2. Are we saying that it is not possible to worship God in the style of Radio 1, or the commercial pop stations? The idea of youth churches is certainly one that I am going to take to the Bishop's Council. There are, of

13 J C Ryle *Charges and Addresses* (The Banner of Truth Trust 1978) p 9

14 Ryle *Charges and Addresses* p 15

15 J C Ryle 'Can they be brought in?' (1883) pp 14, 16

16 14 April 1883.

course, objections and pitfalls to the concept. But it seems to me that none is insurmountable. If this were to happen then they could extend the mission of the church to embrace young people.

A Diaconal Diocese

John chapter 13 would be one of my 'Desert Island Bible Chapters' (if such things exist!). The picture of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is vivid. Yet often verse 14, part of the conclusion of the acted parable, is interpreted as: 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash your fellow disciples' feet.' Jesus said no such thing. He said: 'you also ought to wash one another's feet'.¹⁷ In other words it was to be a mutual service – giving and receiving. It is true of course that in John 13, Jesus is giving rather than receiving, however, in the previous chapter Jesus himself is having his feet washed by Mary. If he needed to receive as well as give, then the same is true of us all: clergy are often the last ones to acknowledge this.

There is within the Church an unhealthy practice of independence. Ryle certainly knew how to give in his almost 20 years of episcopal ministry, and 58 years of full-time Christian service. But he also knew how to receive. There is a moving account of his last Christmas Communion before he died, told by Canon Richard Hobson, vicar of St Nathaniel's Church where the Ryle family worshipped:

As we were about to commence the 11 o'clock service on Christmas Day a tap was heard at the vestry entrance to the church, and, on the door being opened, to our utter amazement, there was the Bishop, quite bent, with his family. At the sacrament, the Bishop came to the rail followed by his children who knelt on either side of him. For a moment I felt almost overcome, which he must have perceived for, looking up at me, he said softly, 'Go on'.¹⁸

Ryle was always aware of the needs of his clergy. One of his first concerns was not only to better their working conditions but to increase their number, recognizing that they were 'overworked' and 'sadly ill-paid'.¹⁹ Within today's

17 New Revised Standard Version

18 In M Smout *A Portrait of the First Four Bishops of Liverpool* (1985) p 18

19 J C Ryle *Charges and Addresses* pp 6, 7

Diocese of Liverpool, the number of ordinands has recently increased (one of the positive elements of recent research which the media has largely ignored). Yet there continues to be a need for people willing to serve in the Diocese. I am continually disappointed to see that in the lists of Church of England ministers seeking a move only 30% of them are willing to work in the North West. This autumn I am holding a Diocesan Vocations conference for everyone who has ever thought about being ordained, with a particular emphasis on younger people. We are anticipating hundreds rather than tens. Ryle aimed at a clergy/parishioner ratio of 1 to 5000.²⁰ The current ratio of stipendiary clergy to parishioners is 1 to over 6000.

A Dependent Diocese

If we are to be a Diocese of mutual service – of giving and receiving – then our dependence must not only be on each other but on God. As a 21-year old student at Oxford, Ryle wandered into a church one Sunday afternoon. The service had already started. By the time he sat down, the reading of the New Testament lesson was about to begin. It was Ephesians chapter 2. When the reader reached the eighth verse, he laid special emphasis on each phrase: ‘By grace are ye saved – through faith – and that not of yourselves – it is the gift of God.’ The words burnt into his soul and he was converted. He wrote: ‘Nothing to this day appeared to me so clear and distinct as my own sinfulness, Christ’s presence, the value of the Bible, the need of being born again.’²¹ This ‘gift of God’ was to be his mainstay throughout his life. His tombstone, which lies just a mile from my house, is inscribed with those same words from Ephesians 2. It is for this reason – that we are utterly dependent on God – that I chose to teach on prayer as I travelled through the Diocese this Lent in our deanery services. I had considered preaching on evangelism, mission or a whole host of other subjects, but it is our dependency on God that must be put at the forefront. In prayer I am but a novice, but I know that it must be at the heart of all that we do in the Diocese of Liverpool in the third millennium.

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20 Ryle *Charges and Addresses* p 7

21 M Smout *A Portrait of the First Four Bishops of Liverpool* (1985) p 8