

Robert Porten Beachcroft: Preacher and Pastor (1781–1830)

ARTHUR BENNETT

The Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century is chiefly known by its leading figures. What is often forgotten is that in many parts of England pockets of revival were created by the Holy Spirit through Reformed ministers labouring in obscure places. Such was Robert Porten Beachcroft, one of the lesser lights of the second wave of the movement, who ministered at Blunham,¹ a village seven miles east of Bedford, from 1806 to 1830. He belonged to the evangelicalism of the late Napoleonic age when Bishop Beilby Porteous was Bishop of London, Beachcroft's friend, and Charles Simeon's work was fructifying in Cambridge. From being a formal churchman he came to hold the Revival doctrines and was animated with the same passion for souls as other evangelical leaders. In his small sphere of one thousand parishioners he exercised a profound godly influence and saw a spiritual awakening occur amongst his people and in other parts. At his funeral it was said: 'The sobs and tears of those present, from the peer to the peasant, were mingled in one affecting and heart-felt testimony'.

The Man

Robert Beachcroft was born at Greenhithe, Kent, in 1781, his father being a merchant of moderate means who died when his son was three months old. He was his only child. In early infancy he almost died of small pox but was saved from death by the care of an aunt. In this he was like John Wesley who was snatched from fire as 'a brand plucked from the burning'. His mother devoted her life to his upbringing and spiritual development. He was spiritually fed on the psalms read to him daily by his grandmother who lived with them. When young he was given Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion*, a book that later was formative in leading him into evangelical conversion. As if he anticipated his future calling, he once as a child stood on a chair with an open book in his hand and said he was going to be a minister and preach. Schooled thus religiously from early age he developed into an affectionate, mild, and truth-loving boy.

At six years of age he attended a school at Ormond Street, London, and when eight he was sent to a private seminary at Greenford where he formed a lasting friendship with Lord Grantham.

In his youth he became an avid churchman of high morals with an intellectual understanding of Christianity, but lacked the personal experience of Christ. When he was thirty eight years of age his mother, for whom he held a deep love and respect, wrote to him of that period, 'When you arrived at manhood . . . you never gave me a moment's unease by your conduct'.

In 1798 he entered Oriel College, Oxford, and became an exemplary, unassuming, and thrifty student. He rarely missed chapel, gave close attention to sermons, and attended Holy Communion frequently, but knew nothing of Christ's atoning grace. All this commended him to his superiors as a diligent trustworthy scholar. While there he made an intense study of the first ten of the 'Thirty nine Articles of Religion', and wrote *A Tour of Wales*. He graduated B.A. in 1801 and offered himself for the Anglican ministry. He was ordained by Bishop Porteous of London, a friend of Charles Simeon, and served as a curate at Tottenham. Two years later he married Maria, the eldest daughter of a Mr. Devon, a London solicitor. She died four months later. At that time he was closely studying Bishop J. Pearson's two volumes on the Creed.

In the early days of his ministry he devoted himself to all things Anglican; clerical attire, the Book of Common Prayer worship, canonical government, and gloried in the title of Reverend. From a cerebral knowledge of Christianity he preached an ethical religion: his sermons dwelling on the nature of man as a fallen creature, his sinfulness and voluntary sins, and the need of moral improvement, by the doing of good works. He ignored the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, Justification, and regeneration as the work of grace in the heart. But his often reading of Doddridge's *Rise and Progress*, Beveridge's *Private Thoughts*, and Matthew Henry's *Bible Commentary*, in which he took great delight, gradually prepared him for spiritual conversion.

In 1806, when twenty five years of age, he was appointed by Lady de Grey of Wrest Park Bedfordshire, Rector of Blunham, a scattered rural parish within the lap of the rivers Great Ouse and Ivel. Two years later he accepted the evangelical religion and began to preach the doctrines of grace. Uplifting Christ crucified as the only Saviour of sinners, it was said of him, 'His discourses were dyed in the Blood of the Redeemer'. Having discovered Calvin's and Luther's writings, he became further rooted in the Reformed Faith. Without human intervention he had come into fulness of Christ, a transforming experience that greatly enriched an already attractive personality that shone through his sermons and pastoral work. He became known as a man of prayer, and confessed, 'I am never so strong as when I am on my knees'. He developed into a moderate Reformed evangelical other than the hyper-Calvinists and preachers of the Countess of Huntingdon's circle.

The Pastor

He was soon charged with enthusiasm, but he felt that the real enthusiasts were the wordly-minded who gave themselves solely to secular pursuits. In time his congregation overflowed his large church, a success he attributed to the Holy Spirit and to scriptural preaching. In his private hours he had two aims, to improve the mind by reading the Bible and books on it, and the Olney hymns; and to purify the heart by prayer, as outlined in his *Journal of my heart*, which he began in 1811, the entries including his Bible readings, church goings, hymns, and his written prayers.

Like many evangelical clergy of his day he was dubbed a Methodist, to which he replied he would never seek the term, but would never shun it. He was on the most cordial terms with Dissenters, particularly those at Blunham.² A Baptist congregation had met there from the 1660 Restoration of Charles II, at one time having had John Bunyan as its minister, who owed his relief from prison to the Sheriff of Bedfordshire, Thomas Bromshall of Blunham. In 1724 it separated from the Bedford Meeting and appointed its own minister. During Beachcroft's time it had fifty members with Martyn Mayle as its pastor. When some of its people told Beachcroft that they desired to start a Sunday School and hoped he would not be offended, he was delighted and said, 'It always gives me pleasure when good is done', although he had his own Sunday School.

This was of a pattern with his character which was so animated by the love of Christ that a visitor to Blunham once remarked that many spoke of his cheerful temper which never allowed anything to offend him, and that he was so humble he connected any little blessing to God's love. He sought to pass judgment on no person. When asked by Countess de Grey for his opinion on Lewis Harrison, recently appointed steward of Wrest Park, he gave it frankly, but later wrote: 'To me the least tincture of suspicion is so disagreeable that I always endeavour to defer my judgment until I have pretty good ground to reason upon'. One who knew him well said:

His countenance was one of singular kindness and animation . . . His manner was gentle, graceful, impressive in a high degree, and whether preaching Christ to his rustic parishioners at Blunham, or to his polished auditory at Brighton, he was enabled to execute and fix attention.

Writing to his mother from the famous watering place he remarked that he 'never even wished to soften his message, but to win the people by love if I can', though the large congregation had many clergy and high society people present.

One of his ministerial predecessors at Blunham was John Donne, seventeenth-century Dean of St. Paul's, London, an absentee

Rector. Unlike him and many other Anglican clergy who took the stipends of a number of parishes but were rarely seen in them, Beachcroft chose to live the year round in his, except for occasional preaching elsewhere. He reasoned that the resident minister and his family would be an example to others in Christian living and would be at hand to give advice in any little emergency. Such a pastor could easily visit the sick, oversee the Sunday School, act as father to the poor, and be unhurried for Sunday worship. The sheep were then never left in the wilderness. When unavoidably away from home he left his curate, Mr. Menham, in charge of the parish. Most of all, his Rectory was what he called, 'My happy parsonage' to which any parishioner could seek him out if in need.

Beachcroft's views on non-resident clergy are set forth in the 'Christian Observer' by an article he entitled 'Dry Rot'. He had, he said, been appalled on visiting an ancient Gothic church, its fabric damp, its floor mouldering, and its pews, pulpit, reading desk, and clerk's seat in havoc. He asked himself, 'Can any remedy be found for this evil? Is there no remedy for checking its progress by the introduction of a free current of air?'. Pondering over it, he thought of how things which at first seem trifling prove destructive at last. So with the Established Church whose sixteenth-century Reformers were zealous, discreet, and scriptural men. What is it, he asked himself, which often weakens the hands of the clergy and renders their ministry of little use? Agreeing that on the whole they were good and moral men, there was a spiritual decay in them due to sloth, indolence and formality. In wasting whole days going about doing nothing they were 'indolent shepherds', 'idle watchmen', who sap the foundations of the Church. 'One such', he wrote, 'is Pigerrimus, a late riser, who has breakfast, reads his newspaper, strolls in and prunes his garden, walks to town, has dinner, returns home in the moon, and the day is frittered away. Not so the farmer who oversees his cattle and crops'.

All this may be judged unqualified exaggeration, but it is a picture of many rural clergy drawn by current writers of his day.

In his own pastoral work he was dominated by one thought: 'How can I best employ my time to the largest benefit of my parishioners? . . . I am always happiest when I have most to do'. He lived for his people as exhorter, counsellor, comforter and benefactor, and was daily in their homes. It was said of him that he considered every day and almost every hour as given up to the service of others and parish matters as the highest claims on his duties and privileges. He regarded, he said, 'Family wants, and every finger ache of the neighbouring poor, call for sympathy, and if possible relief'. He never left a house without feeling immense gratitude as he journeyed home.

In his day poverty was widespread, and during the first three decades of the nineteenth century Bedfordshire suffered many riots

and acts of violence by rural labourers who refused to work on low wages.³ Armed gangs and individuals terrorized villages and farms, burning corn stacks and barns. Some turned to poaching and brutally attacked keepers, for which a few were hanged or transported. Due to high rents, three or four families often lived in one cottage. Anyone who owned their house forfeited parish relief. Blunham appears to have been unaffected. How much this may have been due to Beachcroft's ministry and influence is not known. But he deeply felt the needy condition of his people and sought financial help from friends, including a branch of the Thornton banking family who lived in his parish. In the Jubilee of George III of 1809 he arranged a dinner for his parishioners and collected fifty pounds in church, using it to provide food and blankets for them at Christmas. At George IV's coronation in 1820, he, and some local gentry, including the Thornton family, gave a quarten loaf and three pounds of meat to every household.

Although river mud and floods sometimes reached his gate he went at once when he heard of anyone's illness. In his view there was little virtue in a minister's fidelity in public worship if he were not prepared to share his people's trials and sufferings. To a friend he wrote:

My employments which I have always loved, win upon me with fresh charms every day. I think that the work of a minister of religion in a place where he can know his people, the very happiest, while it is the most anxious, on this side of heaven.

And later, in 1817, his ministry at Blunham, he said, 'had been my chief delight for the long period of eleven years'. He was no itinerant preacher, but like Samuel Walker of Truro, he held firmly to Church Order. Neither was he a James Hervey of Weston Favell who was widely known through his writings. People, rather than paper was Beachcroft's forte in his ministry.

In return he was known and loved by all, not least by children for whom he remodelled and enlarged a school mostly at his own expense, his second wife holding a Sunday School in it. To his great sorrow he had no children of his own, but felt that if God had given him some he might have loved them too much. In order to reach families through children he advised Ministers' wives to open Sunday Schools and to buy a small organ by which to teach children to learn at least twenty four easy tunes and hymns that most honour God.⁴

He took special care of his household staff, holding for them morning and evening family worship in which he schooled them in spiritual truths by Bible readings with comments, and spontaneous prayers. He allowed no servant to attend Balls or card games leading to gambling and sensual delights. As a strict Sabbatarian he forbade all unnecessary Sunday work, such as cooking, and gave no orders to

servants, so allowing them to rest, attend public worship, and engage in prayer, devotional reading, and spiritual conversation. Sunday newspapers were forbidden in the house as likely to lead to secularized thought. But he was no austere Christian, for those who knew him best testified to his joyous disposition and the cheerfulness and spirituality of his household.

He was as much at home in high society as amongst the lower classes, counting the de Greys, the Thorntons, Lord Grantham, and Viscount Goderick, whom he served as chaplain, as his friends. But he never entered such company without first praying for the strength and preservation of the Holy Spirit. His courtesy, mannerliness, and loving temper pleased both worldlings and Christians alike. It was said that it was impossible to know him and not like him. Nor did he hide his faith before the aristocracy, as when dining with a neighbour a lady present dropped her necklace and pearls to the floor: collected by a gentleman who said he could never understand why a merchant should part with all he had for one pearl, Beachcroft remarked that one pearl (Jesus Christ) was incomparably more precious than all the rest. In time he gradually withdrew from such society. In particular he had no love of field sports and fox hunting as unbecoming a Christian minister.

Yet there was no arrogance, pride, or harshness in his relationship to others. He was respected and loved by all who knew him.

The Preacher

For over twenty years God honoured his balanced views, godly life, and the heart-searching simplicity of his scriptural sermons by filling his church with parishioners and others from the district around. One who knew him wrote, that in preaching:

His countenance was one of singular kindness and animation, his voice was sufficient in its compass, distinct in articulation, pleasing and varied in tones.

His sermons are said to have been simple, clear, bright, joyful and loving. His method of sermon preparation was to choose a text on Sunday evenings and outline its structure, consider it further the next day, complete its content, and finish it on Tuesday, thus leaving pastoral work for the rest of the week. The end result was a discourse scriptural, clear, simple, and practical. They were so valued by his hearers that in 1816 he published some of them in two volumes dedicated to Lord Grantham entitled 'Plain and Practical Discourses' setting forth the subjects of Christianity that lead to faith in Christ. Bishop Burgess of St. David's diocese had them translated into Welsh. They were later reprinted in America and given to younger ministers. He was quick to use natural calamities to a gospel purpose,

as when a mother of three children, heating turpentine, set herself on fire. After being attended to, he used the accident to impress upon the spectators the nature of sin and the fulness there is in Christ.

Beachcroft did not confine himself to sermons within the public liturgy. He instituted a Sunday evening Bible expository lecture consisting of Bible readings, comments, or one of the Homilies. It particularly attracted the working classes.

Apart from preaching the Gospel of God's redeeming love he gave close attention to the conduct of public worship. He was deeply devoted to the *Book of Common Prayer* and read its services with great sincerity and reverence, being specially careful in his choice of psalms. In his view, the devout use of prayers, properly read lessons, good singing, and a spirit-filled sermon, 'Make the two hours passed within the walls of a church one of the happiest Spirit-filled truths this side of the grave'. To that end music, which he dearly loved, should play a suitable part. He advised other ministers that agreeable tunes taught to people during the week would prepare people for Sunday worship. But he had little time for choirs sitting alone, feeling perhaps somewhat superior, and suggested that those with good voices should sit amongst the worshippers, so leading the voices of those around, and helping forward a unity of love. As his renown spread his Bishop chose him as preacher to the clergy.

He organized a fortnightly cottage meeting in outlying hamlets with scripture readings and prayers. Of it he wrote:

This service is admirably attended. We say from time to time at whose home the following meeting shall be held, and the poor take a pleasure in getting chairs borrowed, and the room tidy, and a Bible on the table.

The meeting also met the needs of the sick, cripples, and aged who could not attend church. Every Thursday he also held a service in the local workhouse expounding scripture, praying, and reading missionary extracts.

Of wider activity was his staunch support of the new evangelical Societies of which his foremost allegiance was to the British and Foreign Bible Society. He became secretary of its Bedford auxiliary for which he laboured diligently. Of it he said, 'I never liked anything so much as my employment at Bedford'. Unlike Berridge he was no itinerant preacher, but near and far he spoke on its behalf, going at Lord Teignmouth's and Wilberforce's invitation to northern and other places, and addressed meetings at Cambridge University. It was there, no doubt, he met Charles Simeon, founder with others of the auxiliary. His speeches dwelt on the infinite value of the scriptures, the importance of their distribution, and their effect in mansion and cottage when they are believed and observed.

Blunham was in close proximity to many parishes where the work of revival had taken place, and more recent ones where it was progressing. The godly and influential Henry Venn had died at Yelling, and the fiery John Berridge of Everton had gone to his own rest. So had John Newton of Olney. Within easy compass was Leigh Richmond of Turvey, Thomas Scott who followed Newton at Olney, James Hervey of Weston Favell, and Thomas Jones of Creaton, under all of whom the reviving Holy Spirit was bringing forth much fruit. In the close-knit evangelical circle of that day Beachcroft must have been a welcome associate. Still nearer to Blunham was Timothy Matthews at Colmworth three miles away. He had come under the influence of Charles Simeon as a Cambridge undergraduate and was attracting large crowds until he turned to Dissent. All these may have influenced Beachcroft's preaching and his firm hold on the Reformed doctrines of grace.

The Victor

Although temperate and abstemious in his ways he had never enjoyed robust health. In 1829 he suffered the first of three strokes that prostrated and partially blinded him and confined him to a couch from which he could only move around his room on crutches. Visitors were allowed ten minutes, and his wife had to help him remember Bible passages. Yet he was able to produce sermon notes when recuperating at Ramsgate, and wrote to his parishioners urging them to keep firm hold on Christ, and to his school children at Blunham. He moved to Bath where on 17th April he entered his fiftieth year. Confessing himself to be a sinner he was full of the thought of Jesus being a sufficient Saviour. Although his fatal illness had greatly alarmed those who knew him intimately he had no fear of death. His thought of heaven was of a state of life where there would be no Prayer Book, for all was praise, no sermon, for all would be taught of God, no church building, for there would be the Church Triumphant, and no missionaries, for there would be no heathen to convert.

Moving to Clifton, Bristol in November he passed into the presence of the Saviour whom he loved and had faithfully served, having sent a donation to Newfoundland schools an hour before he died. At his mother's wish, then aged eighty, who lived with him, his body was taken home by hearse and at Bedford Bridge was met by Lord Grantham, Bedfordshire County gentry, and many clergy before proceeding to his church. Some miles from Blunham a great crowd of parishioners, as well as two hundred men with black crêpe on their hats, and women in mourning attire, met the cortège and escorted it to his village past the cottages of his people who stood at their doors in sobs and tears. He was buried in his church, a grave slab near the north door describing him as 'universally lamented'. A monument on the east chancel wall near where he is buried records:

Sacred to the memory of the Revd. Robert Porten Beachcroft for the space of 24 years Rector of this Parish. He died Nov'r 11th. 1830 aged 49 y'rs. His faith was based upon that Saviour whose Gospel it was his glory to preach and in whose perfect atoning sacrifice he looked for salvation. The work of Righteousness shall be peace and the effect of Righteousness quietness and assurance for ever'. Isaiah 32:18.

The close scrutiny and high approval given to the outstanding persons of the eighteenth century Evangelical Awakening must be redressed by consideration and appreciation of clergy whose own personal lives and ministry had been revived by the doctrines of grace, and bore fruit in quiet places. Beachcroft was redolent with the beauty and gentleness of Christ. He neither sought nor desired the limelight. It could be said of him, as in the words of Howel Harris, the Welsh preacher, to George Whitefield, 'The Blessed Spirit comes either as a Spirit of wisdom . . . a Spirit of tenderness and love . . . a Spirit of hot burning zeal . . . also as a Spirit of uncommon power'. He was content to serve God faithfully in a small remote place, quietly sowing his seed and watering it with his prayers, far from the glory in which others basked. Thomas A. Methuen, an old and valued friend who wrote Beachcroft's biography the year after he died, judged that 'He had valuable and attractive, and commanding qualities. He was no common man'.⁵ It is not too much to say he deserves a place in the calendar of those remembered and honoured as stars in the Evangelical Revival.

ARTHUR BENNETT is Canon Emeritus of St. Albans Abbey.

NOTES

- 1 See Patricia Bell, 'Blunham Township', 1974, a public lecture.
- 2 See Patricia Bell, *Belief in Bedfordshire*, 1987, published by the author.
- 3 See A.E. Cirket, 'The 1830 Riots in Bedfordshire', *Bedfordshire Historical Records Society* Vol. 57, 1978.
- 4 See *The Christian Observer*, editions 1821, 1822, 1824.
- 5 Thomas A. Methuen, *The Life of Robert P. Beachcroft* 1831.