

## **Sunday 25 July 2010, Evensong: St Martin in the Fields, Basil Jellicoe Celebration**

“We are going to build Jerusalem in Somers Town” declared Fr. Basil Jellicoe after his appointment to the Magdalen College Mission in 1922.

He was a man of manic energy with powerful Establishment connections and a blue in networking which drew the Prince of Wales; the Archbishop of Canterbury and even Queen Mary into the campaign for better housing in one of London’s worst remaining slums. Bad housing, he said was “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace”. So the St Pancras House Improvement Society was founded – “an economically viable and morally inspiring form of regeneration” Diarmaid MacCulloch.

He was following a noble tradition. Hope is fortified by seeing how far we have come since 19<sup>th</sup> c. London was described as the “City of Dreadful Night”.

Progress had been made since the Royal Commission on “The Housing of the Poor” reported in the 1880’s on the state of the rookeries which formed a great horseshoe around the city from St Martin in the Fields and St Giles to Clerkenwell and Whitechapel.

The decade also saw the beginning of a more thoroughly scientific attempt to map social distress. Charles Booth’s famous poverty map was first exhibited in Toynbee Hall and Oxford House in 1888. It used a colour code from yellow for respectable to black for “seats of vice”.

It was hard however to keep abreast of the rising population and by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the problem of overcrowding was still acute. 45% of the inhabitants of Finsbury for example lived as whole families in one or two rooms.

Some urban reformers under the influence of anarchist ideas dreamt of an alternative society of voluntary co-operation living and working in small self governing commonwealths. The Garden City movement is one of the fruits of this tendency. A rather different route into the future was laid out by le Corbusier whose vision was more authoritarian and centralist.

Jellicoe had his eyes firmly fixed not on some ideal scheme of social improvement but on his parishioners, the actual tenants of the slums in his parish and in the rest of the borough of St Pancras. It was an essential part of his plan that the buildings refurbished by the Society were let at precisely the same rents as the old slums to local people.

In view of recent Government rhetoric it is perhaps instructive that if you start honestly to build the Small Society in a particular locality then the effect especially in our wired up world can be immense.

Jellicoe like many Anglo-Catholics had a theatrical streak. He celebrated the beginning of a new phase of demolition and reconstruction by a ceremonial burning of huge effigies of the cimex lectularius, the slum bug which infested the condemned properties.

He had the charisma of a founder but it was necessary for others to consolidate his work after a number of breakdowns. Paradoxically this released him to spread the St Pancras model throughout the country.

He disappears from the Diocesan Directory in 1929 at the time of one of his breakdowns but it was also then when Whitbread's gave Jellicoe the control of a rebuilt pub in Stibbington Street licensed to sell beer but not spirits and equipped as a place of innocent recreation. He dreamt of founding a college for publicans where in Jellicoe's words "young men of the best type would regard the office of publican as a great and honourable profession – a magnificent opportunity of social service by providing decent and happy recreation for their fellow men."

F.D.Maurice, one of the greatest prophets of the Church in London said – "To me the Kingdom of Heaven is the great existing reality which is to renew the earth".

There was an earthiness and a realism about Jellicoe's vision at a time when some Catholics in the Church of England had deified the Church and were making the scarcely credible claim that the Kingdom had arrived in its life and structure. Other people were shy of claiming that the Kingdom could have any embodied form at all and should be regarded as something that would only be realised and entered by individuals, only beyond time and space.

Jellicoe laboured with great integrity to do justice to the sense that the Kingdom has already broken through in the work and teaching of Jesus Christ; that Jesus calls us to a transformation of the world and not merely a spiritualised description of it or an elaborate mythology; that the Lord's prayer is intended to pray down the Kingdom into the present; that we are in a zone of struggle and sacrifice with the principalities and powers still in possession of the surfaces and spaces of our world. "To me the Kingdom of Heaven is the great existing reality which is to renew the earth."

How the transformation is to be effected and what the New Jerusalem will look like when it appears – these are all difficult questions.

But the difficulty does not acquit us from the effort of making some anticipatory sketches and essays which may themselves play a part in liberating the influence of the end time so that it can contribute to the transformation of the present. Part of the real weakness of the church at the present is our lack of clarity and specificity about the shape and nature of the Holy City for whose appearing we are meant to be looking and working.

The Nineteenth Century secular visions of heaven and earth have faded in the face of the ingenious hells that were created by the social engineering experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Utopian laboratory was built on top of a vast graveyard and revealed itself to be under the occult management of death.

Jellicoe believed that Jerusalem could be glimpsed in Somers Town and the way to it was by that love of God which is not an emotion but self giving of the absolute kind that we see in Jesus Christ hanging on the cross; self giving to our neighbour in whom we see and serve God himself.

The Jellicoe interns are exploring this path for themselves and for us although I hope earnestly that they will not be so neglectful of their own health as he was. But nevertheless if Jerusalem is to be built it must be with sacrifice. Jellicoe still challenges us 75 years after his death at the early age of 36.