
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The First Bishop of Liverpool

By The Rev. O. R. Clarke, M.A.

CHURCH people of Liverpool have been celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the formation of the Diocese. It is seventy-five years since Liverpool became an independent see, with a Bishop of its own. Hitherto it had been part of the Diocese of Chester, which then included South-West Lancashire. But Liverpool was a great and growing city with a crowded, vigorous life. It was a leading centre of shipping with its miles of docks, and its lively cosmopolitan life. The link with Chester, for all but officials, could clearly be only a slight and tenuous one, and Episcopal government from so distant a centre meant little. A separate Diocese was needed. Action was taken, the needed funds raised, the legal obstacles surmounted, and the See safely launched, free and independent.

To think of the founding of the Diocese is to think of the first Bishop, John Charles Ryle. " A man of granite with the heart of a child, a man whose name is better known through that part of Christendom where the English language is spoken than that of any other save Charles Spurgeon "—such was the generous tribute paid to him by his successor, Bishop Chavasse. Ryle was the first Bishop of the new Diocese, and rightly proud of the fact. His critics—and no man is without critics—declared that he would not allow the fact that he was the first to be forgotten. Yet such pride in his Diocese was natural and proper. To be the first in such a position, for one who is himself outstanding, provides an unparalleled opportunity to form and mould the lines of right development. And Ryle was outstanding, and strong to rise to the challenge.

John Charles Ryle was born in 1816 in Macclesfield. His father was a well-to-do banker, and M.P. for Macclesfield. It was his wish that his son should succeed him as M.P., and his education was designed for that end. His schooling was at Eton, and from there he obtained a Fell exhibition to Christ Church, Oxford. At Oxford he distinguished himself alike at sport and scholarship. He rowed in the Oxford boat against Cambridge in the boat race. He was Captain of the University cricket team. Of his experience as Captain he wrote : " I believe it gave me a power of commanding, managing, organizing and directing—bearing, forbearing, and keeping men around me in good temper, which I have found of infinite use on hundreds of occasions in life, though in very different matters ". In learning he distinguished himself by being elected a Craven scholar, and by obtaining a first in " Modern Greats ". He was offered Fellowships, but decided to return home, and from 1838-1841 was content to assist his father, to train in the Yeomanry, and to act as Magistrate.

In his early days Ryle was without any real and vital religion. " I certainly never said my prayers," he writes, " or read a word of the Bible from the time I was seven to the time I was twenty-one ". A

number of factors combined to bring about a change. In 1837 he was ill, and was driven to more serious thought, to prayer, and to Bible reading. A new church was built at Macclesfield, with an Evangelical ministry, and one of Ryle's sisters was influenced by the teaching of the great doctrines of sin and grace, which were there proclaimed. Undoubtedly Ryle would learn and ponder this.

The crisis was at hand—it occurred between mid-summer 1837 and the beginning of 1838. Dr. Griffith Thomas, a former Principal of Wycliffe Hall, describes what happened : " Many years ago an Oxford undergraduate sauntered into an Oxford church. At that time he was nearing his final examination and feeling somewhat depressed. As he entered the church the second lesson was being read (Ephesians ii), ' By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves—it is the gift of God '. The Divine word went home to the undergraduate's heart." To use Ryle's own words—" he was fairly launched as a Christian ".

Three years later there was a dramatic reversal in the fortunes of the family. In 1841 his father became a bankrupt. Ryle describes what happened thus : " My father was a wealthy man. He was a landed proprietor and a banker. I was the eldest son, and looked forward to inheriting a large fortune. I was on the point of entering parliament. I had all things before me till I was twenty-five, but it pleased God to alter my prospects in life through my father's bankruptcy. We got up one summer's morning with all the world before us and went to bed that evening completely and entirely ruined." How deeply Ryle felt the change is seen by the fact that writing thirty-two years later, he had to confess that there was not a day when he had not remembered the pain and humiliation of having to leave Henbury, the lovely country residence among its 1,000 acres.

Yet Ryle took the blow as a Christian. " I had a firm and deep conviction," he writes, " that all was right, although I could not see it and feel it at the time ". His conviction was that God shut the door to parliament, because he wanted him in the ministry. Years later Ryle wrote : " I have not the least doubt it was all for the best. If I had not been ruined I should never have been a clergyman, never have preached a sermon, or written a tract or a book." He was ordained in 1842 by Bishop Sumner, and went to a country curacy in the New Forest, where he diligently visited a neglected population. After two years he was appointed Rector of St. Thomas, Winchester, and soon filled the church to capacity. In 1844 he was offered by the Lord Chancellor the living of Helmingham in Suffolk, and remained there for seventeen years till his appointment by the Bishop of Norwich to the living of Stradbrooke. In 1880 he was nominated by Lord Beaconsfield as Bishop of Liverpool. Stung by the High Church vote for Gladstone it is said that the great Disraeli resolved that Liverpool should have an evangelical of the evangelicals.

An amusing, but characteristic, incident is told of his time at Stradrooke. On one occasion, when leaving to fulfil a preaching engagement, he was pressed for time. " We shall miss the train," he shouted to the driver of his carriage. " I can't go faster," was the reply, " unless the horses gallop". "Then let them gallop," roared the Vicar,

and, as the horses dashed through the streets the people ran to the doors to see the sight, and cry, " old Ryle, late again ".

Many Bishops to-day succeed to their high office in early middle life. Not so Bishop Ryle. High preferment came to him late. For the greater period of his life he was the incumbent of rural parishes deep in rural England, and they provided him with his preparation for the Episcopacy. He was unburdened by numerous and onerous parochial chores, and was able to be a student ; he had time to read, and used it to good effect. He drank deep of the teaching of the Puritan divines. He had leisure to write, and employed his pen with powerful effect. The freedom of small parishes enabled him to accept engagements to preach and address meetings throughout the country, and to become a leader of the evangelical cause.

Ryle secured a great reputation as the author of innumerable tracts, which were simple, terse and compelling, and which achieved a wide circulation, not only in this country, but throughout the world. The tract was a powerful weapon in the hand of Newman or Pusey in the first stages of the Oxford movement, and had stimulated and provoked discussion on the issues which lay behind that movement. In Ryle's hands the tract was used with solid and massive effect. The style was simple and forceful : the titles he chose terse and vivid and compelling. To give an example : his first sermon at Helmingham was printed as a tract under the title : *I have somewhat to say unto thee.*

Ryle was a prolific writer and the author of numerous books, all characterized by the same simple and forceful style. The last few years have seen a considerable revival of interest in these works, and new editions of many of them have either been published or promised. *Knots Untied,* " being plain statements on disputed points in religion from an evangelical standpoint," is one of the most famous of Ryle's works. Here is a characteristic passage typical of Ryle's blunt style : " Once for all I protest against the charge that I am no true Churchman because I hold the opinions that I do. In the matter of true and real attachment to the Church of England, I will not give place by subjection to those who are called High Churchmen for one moment. Have they signed the Thirty-nine Articles *ex animo* and *bona fide* ? So have I. Have they declared their full assent to the liturgy and all things contained in it ? So have I. Have they promised obedience to the Bishops ? So have I. Do they think episcopacy the best form of Church government ? So do I. Do they honour the sacraments ? So do I. Do they labour for the prosperity of the Church ? So do I." Ryle's practical commonsense point of view is well illustrated in some of the questions he puts in his introduction to his book on *Holiness.* He asks—" Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do, that the holiness of converted people is by faith alone only, and not at all by personal exertion ? Is it according to the proportion of God's word ? I doubt it." Or again—" Is it wise to use vague language about perfection, and to press on Christians a standard of holiness, as attainable in this world, for which there is no warrant to be shown either in Scripture or experience ? I doubt it."

Ryle's consistency and complete conviction gave him a position of leadership among the Evangelicals in the Church. And rightly. His

advice was sound and sensible, and one was never left in any shadow of doubt about it. He saw the folly of Evangelicals isolating themselves from the main stream of Church life. This issue was clearly seen in the case of the Church Congress, which began in 1861, and became a powerful factor in Church life. Evangelicals tended at first to regard the Congress as a platform used by Anglo-Catholics for their propaganda, and therefore to avoid attendance at their meetings. Ryle saw that this was folly. It was essential that Evangelicals should play their part fully and conscientiously in the life of the Church, and use all lawful means of declaring their rightful views. Ryle attended the Congress meetings himself, and spoke frequently and with effect. Here is a short extract from his speech at the Dublin congress on Home Reunion: "Repeal the Act of Uniformity. Shorten the services! Use the laity! Treat the Dissenters kindly." Ryle's advice was similarly sensible and wise as regards the plan for the restoration of Convocation, whose functions since 1717 had become merely formal: Convocation met to vote the loyal address and then prorogued forthwith. Evangelicals feared that the Tractarians would use the restored Convocation for their own ends and so opposed restoration. But Ryle saw further: he saw clearly that Convocation would be restored, and that it was therefore better for Evangelicals to have their own plan, and to follow a policy of Co-operation rather than isolation.

The crowning period of Ryle's life was his episcopate. When he came to Liverpool in 1880 he declared that he came as a committed man. "The views I held as a Presbyter, I hold as a Bishop." "I come among you as a Protestant and Evangelical Bishop of the Church of England, but I do not come among you as the Bishop of any one particular party." With those who wanted the Mass, confession, etc., he was adamant. But he was no mere party man. The historical schools in the Church—high, broad, and low, he recognized and respected, provided that there was an honest acceptance of the fundamentals, the Creed, the Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer. Holding his own views firmly, he respected those who differed from him, but had the courage of their convictions. "I can trust the Bishop thoroughly," said one clergyman, belonging to a different school of thought.

The Bishop exercised a most vigorous preaching ministry. One could imagine his motto being like that of John Wesley: "Church or no Church, the people must be saved". Griffith Thomas tells us that when Ryle first began to preach he thought to model his preaching on the magnificent but florid style of Canon Melville of St. Paul's. He soon realized the folly of this, and that what was needed was simplicity and clarity. His style as preacher became simple, homely, and yet forceful. His sermons sought to challenge men, and to awaken them to their need of Christ.

A bishop must be a faithful pastor to his clergy: this is fundamental, and Ryle took pains to discharge this side of his duty. He took great care with his ordination candidates. One who was ordained by him gives a vivid picture of the ordination retreat. Every night during the three days, after supper, the Bishop—preceded by one of the

examining chaplains carrying a large Bible—spoke from the dining-table. His advice to his ordinands was " read your Bibles, young men, read your Bibles ". There were also strong warnings about Rome and ritualism. Those he ordained were welcomed back year by year at a social function, and encouraged by the fellowship and interest in their work.

Very early in his episcopate Bishop Ryle decided to leave the building of a Cathedral to his successor. " I was present," he says, " at many wearisome committee meetings and the common slanderous report that the bishop took no interest in the subject and did not wish a cathedral to be built is destitute of a grain of truth. But those committee meetings finally convinced me that there was no prospect of agreement among the inhabitants of Liverpool about the site of a cathedral and not the least likelihood of the half-million being raised by the diocese in this generation for the endowing and building of a suitable metropolitan church." Ryle also wrote : " The humblest cottage meeting where Christ is preached and the scriptures honoured, and five real believers assembled, is more pleasing in God's sight than the grandest cathedral in which the Gospel is never preached and no work of the Spirit goes on ". Ryle was convinced that the first need was the provision of more man-power, and the building of new churches and mission rooms, and halls.

To administer a newly-formed diocese, when there was no machinery that worked itself, as in the older dioceses, was no easy task. The success of Ryle's administration is seen in the practical results achieved. During his episcopate the number of incumbents was increased from 170-206, and there was a great increase in the number of scripture readers and Bible women. The Bishop, moreover, sought to make provision by a sustentation and pension fund for the clergy to enable them to retire in old age. The number of churches built was no less than forty-four, and also fifty-nine mission rooms. In addition to all this activity a start was made on the building of a Diocesan Church House, which would be a centre for diocesan work and administration. All these are solid substantial achievements which testify silently to the ability in administration of the diocesan, and the confidence of the people in him. The Bishop's view on patronage were definite and forthright. He did not like the idea of a diocesan board of patronage. " I believe," he said, " that it would gradually fill the diocese with colourless, tame, no-party men, theological jelly-fish, without bones, brains, teeth, or claws, who have no distinct opinions about anything and would do no good ".

As a Bishop, Ryle did not allow himself to be so weighed down with routine as to forget that the bishop is the chief pastor of the diocese. He was vitally concerned that the working people of the vast, congested city should be brought to the Church and play their vital part in its life. " Give him—the working man—" he said, " a clergyman who will not only preach Christ in the pulpit, but come and sit down in the house, and take him by the hand in a Christ-like familiar way during the week ". That was what Ryle did. He must have been one of the last bishops to be able to attract great numbers of working men to a meeting. Canon Hobson, who did so magnificent a work

among the slums of the Liverpool parish of St. Nathanael, Windsor, a church in which Ryle and his family frequently worshipped, writes : " A tea was given to all the men employed in the coal-yards near the parish and they filled the great hall. The Bishop had been invited to come in and address them, and they cheered him lustily both on his arrival and departure, for he had already made his mark amongst the working people of the city by his terse, homely style of speaking, and the practical nature of his strong, common-sense utterance ; indeed he might have been styled the working-man's Bishop." It may be said that there is little sign of an awareness of social conditions in Bishop Ryle's writings and sermons. Those men whom he addressed at St. Nathanael's came from a district which abounded in the most appalling slums. But to single out Bishop Ryle and to accuse him of insensitiveness to social conditions, would be most unfair. Failure to realize the social implications of the Gospel was widespread, and disastrous.

There are still some who have personal recollections of the good Bishop. They tell of his commanding presence, his flowing beard, his military carriage, his somewhat brusque manner, concealing a kind and generous heart, his simple direct manly manner of speech. " Yon man's no Bishop," exclaimed one working man on hearing him speak, " I can understand every word ". One characteristic stands out pre-eminent throughout his life—his fearlessness. Having formed his principles he was resolute in adhering to them. " The views I held as a Presbyter, I still hold as a Bishop "—no saying is more typical of the man, or more revealing of his character. Such was the first Bishop of Liverpool, a great Evangelical champion whose passionate desire was to win souls to God.