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The Theology of Charles Kingsley's Village Sermons by David J. Keep

Dr. Keep, who is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Rolle College, Exmouth, has previously contributed to our pages on Heinrich Bullinger (EQ 47 (1975), 223-230). This paper was read to the Ecclesiastical History Society in 1978; it will be interesting to readers who may have read nothing more of Kingsley's work than The Water Babies.

The repeal of the Corn Laws by Peel in 1846 probably had a greater effect on the Church of England than the year of revolutions two years later, for it led to that decline in English agriculture which was to sap the wealth of the Church and so the income of country parishes.¹ The decades before this decline were the heyday of country anglicanism, as many people know them scathingly chronicled by Trollope in his novels. Not all rectories were centres of blood-sports and intrigue, and it was the country parsons who wrote and read the *Tracts for the Times* and who marshalled themselves against the threat to orthodoxy posed by *Essays and Reviews*. A comfortable village living provided not necessarily slipped obscurity, but a pulpit and desk from which a gifted clergyman might influence the nation. This was true of John Keble in his thirty years at Hursley. It was equally true of Charles Kingsley, curate of Eversley from 1842 and vicar from 1844 until his death in 1875.

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The year 1848 was of supreme importance in Kingsley's career. It saw the publication of *The Saints tragedy*, a work which arose from his highly erotic manuscript *Life of St. Elizabeth* which he had given his wife as a wedding present in 1844, and which has brought him considerable publicity in the present decade.² More important from an historian's point of view were the continental revolutions which led to J. M. Ludlow's famous letter and the founding of the Christian Socialist Movement. Limited as was the importance of 1848 in England, Kingsley regarded it as a singular act of divine judgment in his preaching. In the first of his collected national sermons he asked:

Who expected on the 22nd February last year, that within a single month, half the nations of Europe which looked so quiet and secure, would be shaken from top to bottom with revolution and bloodshed — kings and princes vanishing one after the other like a dream — poor men sitting for a day as rulers of kingdoms, and then hurled down to make room for other rulers as unexpected as themselves? Can any one consider the last fifty years? — can

¹ After giving the figures for the numbers of deacons ordained showing a decline from 814 in 1886 to 569 in 1901, Owen Chadwick commented: 'It is possible that Tithe did more than Doubt to turn the scale downward.' *The Victorian Church* (London 1970) II, 249.

² Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk* (London 1974), had access to new papers and printed his drawings for the first time.

any one consider that one last year, 1848, and then not feel that we do live in a most strange and awful time?³

In a sermon on the parable of the unfaithful servant preached in 1851 he described how God punished unfaithful popes in the reformation.

So he did, only three years ago to many kings and princes on the continent . . . A few paltry mobs of foolish starving people, without weapons, without leaders, without good counsel to guide them, rose against them. And what did they do? They might have crushed down the rebels most of them in a week, if they had had courage. And in the only country where the rebels were really strong, that is in Austria, all might have been quiet again at once if the king had only had the heart to do common justice, and keep his own solemn oaths.⁴

In the year of the Great Exhibition⁵ it was far from characteristic of anglican clergy to see the hand of God in revolution, but like the Hebrew prophets Kingsley used the political experience of his day to scourge the abuses of the rich and proclaim the approach of Christ's Kingdom.

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This political awareness is one reason why Kingsley is the best-known victorian divine. His name occurs as a second christian name in a generation of men born in the first decades of this century and he is still an inspiration to the increasingly radical contemporary clergy, perhaps more in his concern for the poor than for his muscular christianity. His reputation survives on his popularity as a novelist and on his strategic appearance in public life at the Chartist rally on 10 April 1848 which led to his contributions to *Politics for the People* and *The Christian Socialist* as 'Parson Lot'. *The Water Babies* was probably his most effective work as it led to the Chimney Sweepers' Regulation Act within a year of its publication in 1863, and it remains a haunting allegory of social and moral justice. Indeed Kingsley's most significant contribution as professor of modern history at Cambridge from 1860-69, a role in which he was more popular than academically prominent, and which he gladly replaced by a canon's stall at Chester, was the invention of a romantic folk-hero for the Fens.⁶ As a theologian his most significant action was his unfair and untrue attack on Newman which led to the convert's profound answer.⁷ All this is well-known. What I have attempted in this

³ (*The King of the Earth (and other Sermons on National Subjects)*) (second edition London 1872), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 289-90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 101 and 146.

⁶ *Hereward the Wake* (London 1866), his final novel.

⁷ *Newman's Apologia pro vita sua, the two versions of 1864 and 1865 preceded by Newman's and Kingsley's pamphlets* with an introduction by Wilfrid Ward (Oxford 1913).

paper is to examine what Kingsley actually preached to his congregation at Eversley in an attempt to see how the inspiration of urban upheaval might have touched a conservative rural population. Kingsley's sermons were extensively published in the nineteenth century⁸ though undoubtedly less widely read than his novels. This paper is concerned with his preaching in the period 1849-54 when his radical writing was at its peak and obviously concentrates in the limited space available on those aspects which indicate the preacher's liberalism in theology and politics.

Any theological survey must begin with the doctrines of God and the Trinity. Despite his friendship with F. D. Maurice, there are no hints of uncertainty about the divinity of Jesus in these sermons, but as there has always been a tremendous variety in the formulation of orthodoxy, I have selected two points which illustrate Kingsley's distinctive contribution to the problem of evil and to christology in his reassertion of the kingship of Christ. His understanding of the Spirit was orthodox with an inclination towards identifying the persons.

The cholera epidemic of 1849 like plagues in the past produced an atmosphere of religious excitement and revival.⁹ Kingsley preached four sermons between 27 September and 15 November in which he drove home the lesson of the disease 'that cleanliness is indeed next to holiness'. He accepted that God was punishing the people, but insisted that a national fast without specific confession and action was useless:

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Did they repent of and confess the covetousness, the tyranny, the carelessness, which in most great towns, and in too many villages also, forces the poor to lodge in undrained stifling hovels, unfit for hogs, amid vapours and smells which send forth on every breath the seeds of rickets and consumption, typhus and scarlet fever, and worse and last of all, the cholera? Did they repent of their sin in that? — Not they. Did they repent of the carelessness

⁸ Sermons printed in the writer's lifetime appear as the last eight of the twenty-eight volume *Collected Edition of the Works of Charles Kingsley* (London 1879-85). These, with the original dates of publication, were: *Village and Town and Country Sermons* (1849 and 1861; reprinted 1868; collected 1877); *Sermons on National Subjects* (1852 and 1854; reprinted 1872; sermons 13-16 appeared as *Who causes pestilence?* 1854); *Sermons for the Times* (1855); *The Good News of God* (1859); *The Gospel of the Pentateuch and David* (1863 and 1865); *The Water of Life and other Sermons* (1867); *Discipline and Other Sermons* (1868); *Westminster Sermons* (1874; reprinted 1878). A posthumous collection *All Saints' Day and other Sermons* appeared in 1878 and the fourth edition of this was added to the pocket edition of the *Works* (1890-93).

⁹ There is little in English on nineteenth century revivals. There is a brief history of the Cholera Revival, identified as the thirteenth of seventeenth Welsh movements in J. Vyrnwy Morgan *The Welsh Religious Revival 1904-5* (London 1909).

and laziness which sends meat and fish up to all our large towns in a half putrid state — which fills every corner of London and the great cities with slaughter-houses, overcrowded graveyards, undrained sewers? — Not they.¹⁰

Genuine repentance would have cost money as well as words. Thus were the pious victorians at the peak of English church-going¹¹ urged not only to care for their tenants but to practise utilitarian reforms in the great cities, as Chamberlain was to do for Birmingham 1873-75. In the second sermon he demonstrated how Adam's fall led to the 'visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children'.¹² He claimed that there were 'in London alone upwards of 10,000 children under sixteen who live by theft and harlotry'.¹³ Doctor and priest were not immune from the disease and he told of an Irish widow who killed a whole street with typhus because no one would offer her shelter.¹⁴ The cure for disease was to cleanse uncultivated ground, and as he developed in the third sermon on the same text, 'a man is truly and sincerely civil just in proportion as he is civilized; in proportion as he is a good citizen, a good Christian — in one word *a good man*'.¹⁵ Goodness was inevitably corporate: 'every house kept really clean, every family brought up in habits of neatness and order, every acre of foul land drained, every new improvement in agriculture and manufactures or medicine, is a clear gain to all mankind.'¹⁶ In the final sermon *On the day of thanksgiving*, he assured his congregation that Christ the King of the earth had not left them. The cholera had been God's means of recalling the people.

A universalist christology was at the heart of Kingsley's preaching. He saw Jesus:

not merely as the Saviour of a few elect souls, but as the light and life of every human being who enters into the world; and as the source of all reason, strength, and virtue in heathen or in Christian; as the King and Ruler of the whole universe, and of every nation, family and man on earth . . .¹⁷

¹⁰ *King of the Earth*, 187 and 178-9.

¹¹ The 1851 Census figures are the nearest to a precise return of churchgoing recorded in England. Horace Mann's figure of 28.3% of the population attending the established church and 56.3% attending all churches was probably a little low. In Hampshire attendance was between 70 and 80%. John D. Gay, *The Geography of Religion in England* (London 1971), 223 and 266.

¹² Exod. 20. 5; *King of the Earth*, 190. Few diseases were not the consequence of human folly, 168.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 199. The anecdote is referred to in the following sermon on 213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁷ Preface to *Sermons on National Subjects (preached in a Village Church)* (second edition 1872), v.

In the light of Maurice's famous *The Kingdom of Christ* of 1838 and the persistence of the influence of Ritschl's teaching about the communal nature of salvation and ethics this seems typical of the mid-century idealist thought. Kingsley stated the opposite: 'we . . . speak very little about the kingdom of God now-a-days. One hears less about it than about any other words, almost, which stand in the New Testament.'¹⁸ This sermon was about happiness as the consequence of virtue applied to pharaoh and to young people. This was precisely the argument of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* 1790, the formative work for idealist ethics. An earlier advent sermon had proclaimed that the king would arise and judge those who offended against their neighbour by unfair wages and competition, or excessive drinking.¹⁹ He had proclaimed the same theme in advent 1849. The king of law, and order, and justice was coming, though 'wages are low, and work is scarce, and fuel is dear, and frosts are bitter, and farmers and tradesmen, and gentlemen too, are at their wits' end to square their accounts and pay their way.' At the end of the hungry forties he saw hope. 'Five thousand years hence, our descendants may be looking back on us as foolish barbarians, in comparison with what they know: just as we look back upon the ignorance of people a thousand years ago.'²⁰ His evidence for this was steamships and railroads. In this England, Christ reigned as much as Queen Victoria, not simply over a few individuals but over the whole of life. On the third Sunday in advent he reiterated the coming of Christ's kingdom through the process of technology in words which must have excited his readers, but which a hundred and thirty years later read like blasphemy, almost more so than the Jehovah's Witnesses contrary claim about Armageddon in 1914:

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. . . whenever one of the days of the Lord is at hand, whenever God's kingdom makes a great step forward, this same prophecy in our text is fulfilled in some striking and wonderful way. And I say it is fulfilled now in these days more than it ever has been. Christ is healing the sick, cleansing the leper, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, and preaching the gospel to the poor, seven times more in these days in which we live than He did when He walked upon earth in Judaea.

Do you doubt my words? At all events you confess that the cure of all diseases comes from Christ. Then consider, I beseech you, how many more diseases are cured now than were formerly. One may say that the knowledge of medicine is not one hundred years old. Nothing, my friends, makes me feel more strongly what a wonderful and blessed time we live in, and how Christ

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁰ *King of the Earth*, 2-3. High prices are cited again on 45.

is showing forth mighty works among us, than this same sudden miraculous improvement in the art of healing, which has taken place within the memory of man. Any country doctor now knows more, thank God, or ought to know, than the greatest London physicians did two generations ago. New cures for deafness, blindness, lameness, every disease that flesh is heir to, are being discovered year by year. Oh, my friends! you little know what Christ is doing among you, for your bodies as well as for your souls. There is not a parish in England now in which the poorest as well as the richest are not cured yearly of diseases, which, if they had lived a hundred years ago, would have killed them without hope or help. And then, when one looks at this great and blessed plan for what is called sanitary reform, at the sickness and misery which has been done away with already by attending to them . . .²¹

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Kingsley's hearers were urged to be grateful for the increasing presence of Christ. The theme of gratitude continued in the two christmas sermons which followed. His theology, as he was glad to acknowledge, rose out of the evangelical awakening²² and was vigorously anti-catholic, though this does not emerge in these sermons. The arminianism of Wesley had become universalism for him. His orthodoxy was not challenged as Maurice's was in his *Theological Essays* of 1853, but his teaching that Christ was in men as they conquered nature contains hints of Marx and Nietzsche and is far removed from evangelical pietism. Christ was coming in technological triumph in the year of the Great Exhibition.

Kingsley's view of society followed closely from his christology with its distinctive view of the Kingdom of God. His prophetic condemnation of the rich and sympathy for the poor were the basis of what was called christian socialism. In many respects he was a man of his time: his abhorrence of the régime of Louis Napoleon in France was matched by an extreme chauvinism:

I believe that our punishment will be seven times as severe as that of either France, Germany, or Austria, because we have had seven times their

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34-6. See also 'The Fount of Science', 144-8.

²² The past sixty years was compared with the reign of Hezekiah, *ibid.*, 267-8. He spoke of God working in the hearts of the poor by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley *Sermons on National Subjects*, 313. His description of the gospel was limited to the resurrection message which gave courage to martyrs. Kingsley's preaching was more a call to goodness than a proclamation of justification by faith (*Ibid.*, 294-7). For his understanding of Paul's doctrine see No. VI of *Sermons for the Times* (London 1880), in which he reserved the *Thirty-nine Articles* for scholars, but claimed that the church catechism protected children from 'either a religion of fancies, and feelings, and experiences, or one of superstitious notions and superstitious ceremonies which have been borrowed from the Church of Rome . . .' (81).

privileges and blessings, seven times their Gospel light and Christian knowledge, seven times their freedom and justice in laws and constitution; seven times their wealth and prosperity . . .²³

More characteristic still and more crucial was his total rejection of any idea of natural goodness and his insistence that all virtue was the consequence of civilisation, even in the Roman midwinter festival.²⁴ He believed that the disappearance of the Red Indian and Australian aboriginal races was the consequence of their closeness to animals. He drew a clear distinction between animal and human life: 'The fox in the wood needs no house, no fire, he needs no friends, he needs no comforts, and no comforters, because he is a beast —'²⁵ 'The English have laws and obey them, and the gypsies have none . . . This is why savages remain poor and miserable . . .'²⁶ This arrogance which seems more akin to the views of Jack Russell the hunting parson of Swimbridge than to modern sensitivity to threatened tribes and species could be justified by a use of Darwinism as much as by a belief in *Genesis*. Kingsley welcomed the *Origin of Species* and wrote popular accounts of geology.²⁷ The doctrine of the survival of the fittest is not very far from ethical elitism, and both were characteristic of the eminent victorians.

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Kingsley also presented a strict class consciousness. He taught that God cared for the poor and ignorant: 'He meant the Bible for a poor man's book' which with the catechism would bring them to goodness in contrast to 'cramming the children's brains with scholarship.'²⁸ Kingsley made no attempt to include his congregation in the same category as the poor. 'Their handywork renders our houses luxurious. We wear the clothes they make. We eat the food they produce.'²⁹ The consequence of the divine compassion matched by the obedience of Christian gentlemen would seem to produce a decent, clean well-fed and well-housed proletariat, guaranteed freedom under the law and possibly with the vote. If

²³ *King of the Earth*, 6. The traditional dislike of the French was referred to in his sermon on *David's Victory*: 'Three times in the last sixty years has God delivered them from evil rulers, and given them a chance of freedom; and three times they have fallen back into slavery. And why? Because they will not be righteous . . .' *Sermons on National Subjects*, 6. This statement is repeated on 57 and God's special blessing of the English itemised on 47 and 154-6.

²⁴ *King of the Earth*, 50-54. The Roman civilisation rotted away because it persecuted Christians. *Sermons on National Subjects*, 282-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 234 and *King of the Earth*, 107.

²⁶ *Sermons on National Subjects*, 33.

²⁷ Susan Chitty, *The Monk and the Beast*, 215 and 259.

²⁸ *King of the Earth*, 232 and 236. *Sermons for the Times*, 80.

²⁹ *King of the Earth*, 170.

Kingsley had more radical ideas about the reshaping of society in his mind he did not divulge them to his congregation at Eversley. His vision was in the paternalistic tradition of Strutt at Belper, Robert Owen at New Lanark and Cadbury at Bourneville.

There was one theme in Kingsley's teaching which fitted his vision of the ideal society but contrasted with most Christian exegesis of the Fall. "I believe," says the Creed "in the resurrection of the flesh." The Bible teaches us to believe, that we, each of us, human beings, men and women shall have a share in that glorious day . . .³⁰ Kingsley did not approve of abstinence for its own sake: all his absolutes were positive:

Therefore abstinence is not a good thing in itself; for if a thing is good in itself, it can never be wrong. Love is good in itself, and therefore you cannot love any one for a bad reason. Justice is good in itself, pity is good in itself, and, therefore, you can never be wrong in being just or pitiful.³¹

214 The sweep had to be made clean to enjoy the full freedom of the flesh. The *Water Babies* and *St. Elizabeth* are in the tradition that runs at least from Blake's *Songs of Innocence* to D. H. Lawrence's coal miners in white trousers. Adam's fall led to sin, but to Kingsley, Adam's restoration was a revival of the role of the flesh and human sexuality, not a denial of it. This is an important move away from evangelical asceticism towards the Christian materialism of William Temple.

In this paper I have attempted to illustrate Charles Kingsley's theology from the sermons he preached in the period of the year of revolutions and the Great Exhibition of 1851, both of which stimulated his imagination. His teaching was clear and aptly directed to an age which believed in progress, but like much English theology, it was not clearly thought out. I have selected the atypical points from the sermons. For the rest, Kingsley appears to have held unthinkingly to the tenets of the creeds and articles of religion. The excitement of some of his thoughts may still be discerned through his sermons, but his genius will continue to be measured by his novels rather than his theology. Certainly his skill as a writer improved his preaching. His sermons are written clearly and are free from theological or any other jargon. Where their content is limited is in their failure to deal with the profound theological questions posed by unitarianism and the questions raised by higher criticism.³²

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³² The only hint of this was a piece of lower criticism when he attributed Zech. 9:9 to Jeremiah (*Sermons on National Subjects*, 87).

Perhaps this should not be expected of village sermons. As such, they are interesting because they indicate the attempts of one Anglican to make a rural church aware of the problems and needs of the great conurbations. A church whose chief liturgical success was the restoration of the Canaanite harvest festival into the calendar failed to find the resources to meet the needs of the burgeoning populations of the cities. The nonconformist churches, succeeded in building chapels, but neither branch of the church was able to produce a message or a social organisation to cope with tens of thousands. Kingsley believed he had the message. He lacked the platform for it in the establishment as his pulpit was either in rural seclusion or cloistered privilege. The church of England never fully established the bourgeois protestantism of the continent. That role was won by dissent. What Kingsley did manage to offer was an optimistic eschatology that God was working through technological progress and that change should be welcomed.