EDITORIAL

The Death of a Prince: The Revd William Still

Scarcely a couple of months after he retired from the ministerial charge of Gilcomston South Church of Scotland in Aberdeen, which he had held for fifty-two years, William Still died on July 29, 1997 in his eighty-seventh year. The style of ministry that he promoted, which has had such a wide influence within and beyond the Church of Scotland, was one that perhaps did not readily suggest the honorific 'prince'. He did not court eminence or recognition, was no world-traveller, built no mega-church, whether of people or plant. Indeed, one of his boldest distinctives insisted on stripping away many of the accretions of congregational life which turn it into a something-for-everybody religious multiplex, and stripping it down to the God-given essentials, which for him reduced to two or perhaps three – expository preaching, prayer and the church as a single worshipping family. In the ministerial tasks on which he concentrated, supremely the expounding of the Word and pastoral care, he most surely displayed princely gifts. Tributes to him by those who knew him best have used other language beloved of our forefathers: 'we shall not see his like again'.

This *Bulletin* has special cause to record with thanksgiving the remarkable impact of William Still's ministry in the growth of conservative Evangelicalism within the Church of Scotland. One of its outcomes and organs was the Crieff Fellowship, which since 1970 has gathered like-minded ministers (and some elders) two or three times a year for encouragement, challenge and reflection. Even as it grew in size and embrace, so that latterly many have come from furth of Scotland, participation remained at William Still's invitation, thus continuing as it had begun.

Rutherford House, Edinburgh, which co-publishes this *Bulletin* with the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society (formerly the Scottish Tyndale Fellowship, which produced its predecessor, the *Scottish Tyndale Bulletin*), was another initiative of the strategic vision of William Still. In part its formulation was a response to the need felt within the Crieff brotherhood for a resource centre to support and strengthen the increasing ranks of evangelical ministries in Scotland. Mr Still presided from the outset, and was the indispensable channel of the princely generosity which set it on its feet. It stands and serves as a solid material memorial to his passion for an evangelical testimony in the life of the Kirk.

Theologically William Still moved over a number of years from the Arminian tones of his Methodist and Salvation Army upbringing to

Reformed convictions. Within the bounds of Reformed theology he identified his most salient emphasis as the three distinct dimensions of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as dealing victoriously not only with guilt but also with the indwelling strength of sin and with Satan and the powers of evil. His book *Towards Spiritual Maturity* provides an early exposition of these themes. How characteristic that his doctrinal heart should home in on the very centre of the good news of Jesus Christ! It coheres exquisitely with his single-minded simplification of congregational activities and structures to the core essentials. Together they must count among his most abiding lessons for the church in post-Christian Scotland – and the West in general.

One of the most seductive temptations for a declining church is to seek a role for itself in terms that a secularising society still finds appealing – as a human rights pressure group, a humanitarian agency, a purveyor of social-welfare services, a dispenser of healing therapies, and many another worthy or not-so-worthy cause. If William Still's long-lived and magnificently focussed ministry speaks any message to the successor generation it must be a recall to the unique dimensions of the church's vocation – what it has to say and do that nobody else in the world can say or do. And most if not all of this will be found in the burden of that princely apostle which William Still made so much his own – 'Jesus Christ and him crucified'.

The Death of a Princess: Diana, Princess of Wales

It rarely makes sense for a six-monthly journal like this one to serve up editorial comment on current events. It is likely to taste mustily stale by the time readers come to consume it. On this occasion, however, I am certain that the reverberations of the death of Diana (how many other contemporaries of ours need globally no other identification than their first name – itself not an uncommon one?) will still be rippling through at least British society long after this *Bulletin* has come and gone. Her death – understood here as encompassing a popular response unprecedented in its extent and intensity – has invited Christian reflection on a number of counts.

Most obvious, perhaps, has been the quasi-religious, or even quasi-Christian, flavour of the effusions of grief and affection. The vocabulary has been inescapable: goddess, icon, angel, saint, AD (=After Diana), queen of heaven (move over Mary! Oh the irony, since early devotion to Mary fed off the cult of Diana of the Ephesians!), scapegoat (the paparazzi, or the Al Fayeds, or the royal family), shrine, cult, pilgrimage, *etc.* These are not all exclusively Christian terms, to be sure, but it is difficult not to discern in this massive wave of emotion what will remain a marked feature of post-

Christian society for some time to come, namely, its misuse, ranging from the innocently dubious to the flagrantly offensive, of Christian language and symbols. In a myriad ways they surface from the subconscious of folk Christianity.

Roy Clements commented, on visiting Kensington Gardens during the week between the death and the funeral, that no 'previous experience had ever brought home to me quite so poignantly just how radically the erosion of our Christian heritage has affected our national consciousness' (*Evangelicals Now*, October 1997, p. 2). Other estimates of the countrywide outpouring of emotion, which left few of us, however much bemused or questioning, unmoved, have judged it more authentically Christian, and been impressed by the tenacity of religious instincts in finding expression on such an occasion. To some it has at least exposed widespread spiritual hunger. Rather than entering into this debate, I wish to focus on one major aspect of the event and to pose one question for readers' consideration.

Several commentators have characterised the episode as a defining moment in the development of our society. Opinions have varied enormously on what that definition amounted to, and for several it was less revolutionary in itself than revealing of how much we had already changed. The death of 'the people's princess' exposed the ascendancy of populism; ours is predominantly a pop-culture, in which heart prevails over head, sentiment over reason. (Diana herself had little time for books.) For some interpreters, the episode disclosed the feminisation of society, for others it announced the 'unbuttoning' of Britain – an advance to frankness and radicalism which 'did not so much proclaim the birth of a new order as illustrate how unconcerned we were with the old one'.

So close to the happening it should not surprise us if endeavours to make sense of it have arrived at no hard consensus. Yet running through many of them has been a recognition that it laid bare the ineffectiveness, almost irrelevance, of the old dominant 'official' culture. An obvious casualty was a central bastion of that established order, the royal family. Another, we may well judge, were the churches – their services corralled for ends determined by popular pressure more than by the commission of Christ. (The character of the Westminster Abbey service will undoubtedly increase demands on local ministers for similarly secular contents in funeral services.) A parallel comment is probably merited on the BBC's handling of the episode. So long a citadel of the British establishment, the week opened another window on its losing struggle to resist the down-drag exerted by the more populist broadcasting media. Surviving unscathed, after an initial scare, were the unrivalled shakers and movers of our corporate moods and passions – the popular papers.

Coming out of it fairly buoyantly was our relatively new government, which has courted something of the character of a populist administration.

Those reading this editorial may fasten on other, perhaps conflicting, facets of the amazing public response to Princess Diana's death. But since, like no other event in living memory for most of us, it revealed the kind of people and society and culture we have become, no Christian teacher or theologian who is called to write or speak God's Word to men and women here and now can afford not to grapple with its significance, however disturbing and dislocating that may be. I wonder how many pastors and preachers on that fateful Sunday (or the following Sunday) directly helped their congregations to make Christian and biblical sense of it all? One cannot imagine one of the Old Testament prophets passing up the opportunity or the challenge! None of us may be a prophet, but we may need to balance the obvious benefits of preaching through books of the Bible with a deliberate recovery of topical preaching, especially in response to happenings like Diana's death which so possessed the feelings and thoughts of a whole nation for days on end.

A larger question arises here, in connection with the creeping secularization of life in Britain. Are we unwittingly colluding with it by our failure to help Christian folk make Christian sense of it? We cannot share the national enthusiasm for the lottery, we deplore the transformation of Sunday into a day for anything and everything except worship, we shudder at the prevalence of drug-taking (on which populism will surely frustrate any hard moral or penal line), we condemn the trivialization of all-powerful TV, we draw in our skirts at the advancing sexual free-for-all – indeed, we feel more and more alienated from the dominant mores of our God-forsaking society. But is that the sum total of the Christian sense that we make of it – that it is God-forsaking?

Applied theology is not a strong suit among Evangelicals today, and reasons are not far to seek. It is surely easier to lambast and write off than to understand and interpret. And straight biblical and theological exposition is less taxing than fashioning out of the resources of Bible and theology a Christian wisdom for living through such discouraging times. This requires sharper reflection – for Scripture nowhere touches explicitly on so many regnant features of our world, like TV and the tabloids and pop music and sport and holidays and so on. Do we as a consequence never say anything about them from the pulpit or in the study group or in our magazines? If we keep our silence, we unconsciously aid and abet the onroads of secularization, that is, of society's emancipation from God; we foster an understanding of life which to an ever-increasing extent seems

beyond the scope of the Christian mind, and we risk retreat into an evangelical cultural ghetto.

In particular, how should Reformed Christianity, which has placed a higher premium on sound learning than most traditions, address a predominantly populist society? Preaching is seen as speaking chiefly to the mind, and may often convey the sense of belonging to a bookish culture. What of the mass of the population who believe and act more out of sentiment than principled reasoning, and whose grasp of reality is fashioned by snappy one-liners, fleeting sound-bites and short-lived visual images? How would we respond if these were the dominant shapers of culture in a far-off 'missionfield' where God called us to serve? Why should we respond any differently in mission to Scotland today?

The challenge thrown up by the national spasm of emotion over Diana's death thus ranges more widely than coming to terms with the event and its immediate aftermath. Does a public world seemingly in headlong flight from the old order in which the faith and practice of the church still carried weight leave us tongue-tied, speechless, even mindless? How do we re-learn the skills of application to the present day in our teaching and preaching? How do we make sense of vast reaches of contemporary experience which Scripture nowhere directly addresses? The opening up of an unbridged gulf between church on Sunday and the whole of the rest of our life is a sure recipe for the progressive marginalization of church.