

Reflection: Charles Simeon Wednesday 13th November 2024

Revd Linda E Hunter

Today is a day when we reflect on Charles Simeon who lived from 1759-1836. Born in Reading in 1759, Charles Simeon was educated at Eton and King's College Cambridge. A requirement to attend Holy Communion in the college chapel caused him weeks of mental anguish, and he was converted to faith on Easter Day 1779, in King's College Chapel.

In 1782 he was made a fellow of King's College, ordained deacon, and, priested the following year. After a curacy at St. Edwards, Cambridge he was appointed, in 1783, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church where he remained for 53 years. Initially his, parishioners did not welcome his evangelistic style of ministry, but his pastoral care won them over.

Charles set up a regular weekly prayer and bible class out of which developed a system of group meetings which enabled him to assist individuals in their spiritual growth. He also began a specifically student orientated ministry, later to be followed in many churches in university towns with his famous Friday evening 'conversation parties' where he taught theology and preaching technique. By this means he was able to encourage vocations in students.

As a Church of England clergyman Charles had extraordinary influence. He was particularly concerned with the quality of preaching in churches, being more concerned with biblical exposition, than long moral lectures which were fashionable at those times. He was a brilliant expository preacher himself, as he opened up the Scriptures in his sermons, conscious of the importance of the preacher not obscuring the attractiveness of God.. He had carved in the pulpit at Holy Trinity the words of the Greeks in John's Gospel: 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'. He wrote that his three aims in sermons were to 'humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour and promote holiness'.

Some of the great evangelical churches in Cambridge - St Edward's, Great St Mary's and Holy Trinity churches relied upon his published skeletons of sermons when drafting their own. In 1799 he was involved in establishing a more effective missionary enterprise in the foundation of CMS the church missionary society.

Charles was committed to the reform of the Church of England from within, during a time of great hostility to evangelicalism and doctrinal weakness in the church. His continued commitment to personal evangelical faith in Christ, the centrality and supremacy of the Bible, and the reform of the Church of England, beginning in its parishes, were his great legacies. As well as that he worked tirelessly and successfully to prevent dissenting groups from leaving the Church of England at a time when dissension was rife. More concrete legacies survive in the Church Missionary Society which he co-founded, and the Simeon Trust which now has influence over the nomination of clergy in 143 benefices. It was said that his influence and authority extended to the most remote corners of England, and that 'he had a real influence over the Church of England more than any Primate.

For his last 24 years, he lived in the spectacular rooms in the college overlooking the river. Charles was very generous. He gave a lot of money away at home and abroad, to the poor in Cambridge

(and surrounding villages) and to the Church Missionary Society. He became a mentor to hundreds of Cambridge students and inspired many of them to be priests and missionaries.

In September 1836 Charles travelled from Cambridge to Ely to see his new bishop, there he caught a cold which developed into a fatal fever and he died on 13th November. His funeral procession brought Cambridge to a standstill. Shops were closed and classes were suspended. Thousands of Cambridge residents, from the University as well as from the town attended the funeral. Charles Simeon is buried in a vault in King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

As we heard the familiar reading from St. Luke's gospel of the parable of the sower we remember with gratitude the life and ministry of Charles Simeon, particularly for all those seeds of faith he planted in the hearts of so many students in Cambridge. As we move forward to receive Holy Communion, may we follow his example of being humbled as sinners, of exalting the Saviour and of aiming for lives of holiness. 'Let anyone with ears listen'.

References:

<https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/charles-simeon-roots-and-ramifications/>

Saints on Earth Church House Publishing