

GONVILLE AND CAIUS COLLEGE CHAPEL

Sunday, 11th November, 1951

TWENTY-FIFTH AFTER TRINITY

8.15 a.m. HOLY COMMUNION

10.00 a.m. MORNING PRAYER FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY

Hymn 140. Jesus lives! thy terrors now.
Psalm 107 (verses 1 - 32) Chants 189 & 187
First Lesson: Hebrews 11 and 12. (selections)
Te Deum Laudamus. Chant 344
Second Lesson: Romans 8. 31 - 39.
Benedictus. Chant 82
Hymn 585. O Lord of Life, whose power sustains.
Hymn 262. Thy Kingdom come, O God.

6.55 p.m. EVENING PRAYER

Psalm 15. Chant 45.
First Lesson: Wisdom 9. 1 - 6 and 11. 21 - 26.
Cantate Domino (Psalm 98) Chant 58.
Second Lesson: Matthew 6. 1 - 16.
Nunc Dimittis.
Hymn 173. I praised the earth, in beauty seen.
Hymn 266. Thou, whose almighty word.

At Evening Prayer the Preacher will be

Professor R.A. FISHER, Sc.D., F.R.S.

Collection for the Earl Haig Poppy Fund

5 ways of knowing God's will

1. Instinct - Conscience (in restricted sense)
2. Revelation - Bible -
3. In beauty & detail of nature
4. Prayer & reflection
5. Fellowship

Psalm 119.15: I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect
unto thy ways. Thy will be done.

One of the differences between mathematical and theological thought is that in Mathematics we try to make do with only a few axioms, whereas in Theology there seems to be an overwhelming superfluity of axioms, or as they are more generally called ~~dogmata~~ dogmas. Let us give a few minutes, therefore, to considering how far one could strip down the axiomatic, or dogmatic basis, and yet retain a recognisably Christian attitude.

What can we know about God, or, rather, what do we need to know about God? The absolute minimum seems to be this - that we should recognise the existence of something which we may call God's Will. At least in part; for we need not presume that we know all of God's will; for others, for example; but only that which is needed for our own guidance; limited *circumstances* drastically in two dimensions - God's Will for us, *for our immediate future.* now.

At this point a good sceptic might object. What you have said means absolutely nothing so far. You have given a name to something undefined. I shall know what you mean, *your words* *will acquire a meaning,* only when you have told me just how God's Will is to be ascertained in practice.

Well, ~~will~~, I can think of five sources of information, all solidly based and tested I believe, but you must judge of this, in the experience of Christian *men.* Five is a convenient number, for we are supposed traditionally to have five senses, so that at least our minds are used to coping with information arriving in five *distinct* different codes. Probably such collation is what our brains are best at, and what our minds were originally evolved for. Note that all our senses are fallible; knowing this we shall be less easily tempted to trust one only, and *to* ignore the others; this applies *also* ~~too~~, I am convinced, to our information as to God's Will for us.

My first source is called Instinct, our congenital emotional response to a specific situation. It is also called *though conscience also has a wider meaning.* Conscience. It comes to us by natural inheritance from our ancestors, a kind of counterpoise to Original Sin. It has

been, as it were, built ^{in to} into our being in the process of our evolutionary creation, and will be changed, and, please God, improved, in the future evolution of our species. We could learn how to change it; and it may be that the future will see the monstrous evil of a ^{nation} nature deliberately and systematically selected in order to degrade its instincts to a sub-human level. ~~Both~~ ^T the dragons and the St. Georges of the future may ~~have to~~ ^{sr Georges mean note!} be on a larger scale than in the legends;

The second source is called Revelation. I refer to that body of Sacred Writings of the Jews and early Christians, which we bind together as the Bible. A valid channel of guidance I believe, yet one for which such exclusive claims have been made, that the veneration in which it is held seems sometimes poisoned by superstition. The authors, I believe, were good men, sparing nothing to give us of their best, and ~~h~~ who moreover had reflected more deeply than we have on many questions which concern us also; but men fallible like ourselves, and using the same channels as we use to ascertain God's Will. Not the exclusive repositories of ipsissima verba straight from the ^{Deity} ~~Deity~~. No one can doubt that reverent recourse to the Bible has on thousands of occasions given to Christians the guidance they needed. Reproof, perhaps, or warning, reassurance and confirmation of courage, such as each of us ^{may} need. And, in a class by ^{themselves,} itself, those precious fragments which have survived of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, reveal, if we ^{earn} strive to be among those with ease to hear, a potentiality of human excellence, hardly otherwise imaginable. It seems to me fantastic, in the twentieth century, that the validity of the guidance of this Unique Teacher should be thought to depend on the abnormality, or the normality, of his genetic origin.

The third channel, I think is the Created World, or, as we say, God's Works. Natural Theology, by which we can hope to broaden our conception of God's purposes, by removing the spites and repressions of ^{sinful Man} from the centre of the piston.

picture. For most of us, perhaps, it is the aesthetic appreciation that is deepened and educated by this Testament of Beauty, to which Jesus also draws our attention. Yet even to those without special aesthetic sensibility, the wealth of variety, and the mere elaboration of detail, gives a sense of inexhaustible creative profusion, inducing humility and gratitude.

In the fourth place we seek most consciously and deliberately to learn to understand God's Will by Religious Observance, and acts of worship, including prayer. I cannot say how ill-qualified I am to speak of these. I understand that regularity of observance, and even some element of repetition, is essential to continuity of progress. I know that regularity is most difficult, especially in personal prayer. I should like, indeed, to include in prayer, the practice of reflexion. That is not "wreathing in prayer", but I doubt if wreathing is wanted ^{on} every ^{occasion} night. Tranquil and sensitive reflexion is more feasible as a habit.

Fifth, I suggest, is learning God's Will through Fellowship with others. It is a hard saying that we should love all of them - all the time. But feelings of respect and affection can be cultivated, and, if cultivated, they will often flower. Only so can we contrive to see the world through the eyes of others, to understand their point of view, and to learn from their experiences. It is an old Christian fancy, as well as a very vivid ^{personal} present revelation, that we can sometimes catch a glint of God's Nature transmitted through his ^{admittedly} imperfect ^{image}. The sharing of a purpose, fellowship in good works, must be among the most satisfying of Christian experiences.

(Recap)
And so, through one channel or another, most of us, most of the time, are not in ^{the least} doubt as to the direction in which our duty points. Doubts and ^{perplexities} stresses are common ^{occurrences} experiences, but, none the less, exceptional ^{occurrences} experiences. And if this little

talk has any bearing on the practice of religion, rather than on its abstract axiomatics, it is to suggest that if doubts arise, as they may do, on the ^{deciding into action} interpretation of our ^{an} instinctive ^{inclination} nature, or of a biblical text, we should listen attentively and sensitively to what our other channels of valid guidance have to tell us, and see whether they do not provide new material to resolve our difficulty.

A lay sermon by R A Fisher at Evensong
in Caius College Chapel, Cambridge

11 November 1951

- J. H. B.

LAY SERMON

11 NOV 1957

talk has my bearing on the practice of religion, rather
than on its abstract existence, it is to suggest that if
doubts arise, as they may do, on the interpretation of our
instinctive sense, or of a biblical text, we should listen
attentively and sensitively to what our other channels of
valid guidance have to tell us, and see whether they do not
provide new material to receive our attention.