

HIDDEN STREAMS

The Middle Way in the life and work of Canon E. John Townroe

INTRODUCTION

In his foreword to a book called 'The Warminster Venture' Rowan Williams wrote this of John Townroe in 2010:

'John Townroe's personal influence on countless priests and laity of the Church of England has been a matter not just of what he has given directly in so many hours of counselling and support, in writing and conversation and preaching, but also of the way he has 'held' for such a number of Anglicans an image of what this Church might yet be at its compassionate and intelligent and patient best'..... The book ' makes visible to a larger public some of the hidden streams that have kept the Church of England alive through a witness like his.'

John himself was well aware of the hidden streams that had flowed into his life from others and of our profound interconnectedness in the Body of Christ.

BIOGRAPHY

I am giving a mini biography of John Townroe which I hope may illustrate his place in the middle way of the best of Anglicanism.

Born in 1920 to devout and socially aware parents John's father, as a boy, met and corresponded with Bp Edward King, through an uncle, James Weston Townroe, a friend and ally of King. John himself as a boy met the same Townroe great Uncle and read of King. Aged 12 John then had his own unexpected, brief yet profound personal experience and awareness of God's warm enveloping Presence, through which came the certainty that he must be a priest.

As a pupil at Westminster school there was the regular worship of the Abbey, but there was too the accidental discovery of the SSJE in St Edwards House in Great College Street, and the influence of the brethren. In later life John became a spiritual director to S.S.J.E and was to give their centenary lecture entitled 'Spirituality and the Future of Man'

He was prepared for confirmation by the young Maths teacher, Robert Llewellyn, on whose book shelves he discovered the writing of Jean Nicolas Grou, from whom he understood that ' Grace does not destroy nature but corrects, fulfils and perfects it' . This was a key element in John's development and also in his direction of others.; a healthy balance between the life of the spirit and our embodied life on this earth. This was backed up by learning from Baron Von Hugel's writings of the importance of good doctrine. 'It showed me how a life of prayer could be distorted or even end in disaster if you get your doctrine of God wrong.'

At Westminster John's earthly delights were his Scouts group but more particularly rowing where he became head of the Water. At home it was cars!

He went up to St John's Oxford as war broke out, volunteering for service with the Fleet Air Arm but was counselled, including by William Temple, to accept the reservation offered to those en route for ordination. Oxford teaching influences... tempered his Anglo Catholic leanings. He was secretary to the Oxford S.C.M and head of the J.C.R. Then at Lincoln Theological College Eric Abbot the Principal early recognised, both John's spiritual depth and maturity and his leadership capability. He also recognised the physical (and nervous) limitations John had to contend with throughout his life, with a heart condition caused through rowing, which necessitated rest. In a way this gave the space for the contemplative life in John to grow. In 1944 he was introduced to

Abbot's spiritual director Reginal Somerset Ward and immediately found in him the guidance he needed, especially for prayer. S. Ward remained his director until his death in 62. John was to give a remarkable memorial lecture for him in Guildford Cathedral in 1992.

Bp. John Austen Baker on the fiftieth anniversary of John's ordination said 'That John has been Elisha to Somerset Wards Elijah no informed observer would doubt, not just to fellow Anglicans but to fellow Christians of other denominations.' At the same time John was very much his own man, the hidden streams shaping his distinctive life and ministry.

He served a four year curacy at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Sunderland., where he shared a council house and a disciplined life with others of the Company of Mission Priests. Toward the end of this time John came under some pressure from S.S.J.E to test a monastic vocation just as the role of chaplain to St Boniface College Warminster, the fourth year of training for ordinands from Kings London was proffered. Ward was a crucial figure in helping John to discern his path here. In due course John was for more than 7 years at the heart of the common life as chaplain in the College buildings before moving out to St Boniface Lodge as the Warden for a further 13 plus years.

In all that time the quasi monastic timetable was the framework of a job for which he was ideally suited. 1005 ordinands came under his care as he lectured in moral theology, personal ministry and Christian spirituality. Bp. George Hacker, chaplain for some years said that John also set a wonderful example of help and guidance at a personal level. 'He has a very sure touch with people, seeming to know instinctively when to be gentle and when to be tough.' Not much escaped his keen observation. Hacker noted also John's practical common sense. This was a key part too of his work of direction; both that sure touch and a practical outworking, real 'spiritual exercises' to be employed in daily living, properly incarnational.

The four year training of King's and St Boniface college was reckoned to be second to none. Nevertheless the powers that were, decided to resite the College to somewhere less withdrawn.. ie Canterbury. John opposed this move, believing it would not work. Indeed it lasted only a few years. Under his leadership the college at Warminster had worked both to foster an inner life of the spirit and an outgoing spirit of mission. This was part of the middle way. 'The missionary tradition is maintained not by self-conscious deliberation but because we cannot do otherwise; it is of the very stuff of the Christian calling... equally there is still a full measure of withdrawal in the life of the College. Time to think and time to pray are as important now as ever and we do not agree with those who see only harm in withdrawal. Inward obstacles to faith or full commitment to Christ are often not even noticed until the comparative quiet of Warminster.' John was not afraid to take a stand for what he believed and could be very direct if truth demanded it, including to Bishops.

Though he did not speak of this himself it seems to me that the sixties must have been part of John's dark night. In 62 came the death of his father, and then within a few months, of Somerset Ward. His mother's death followed a few years later, then came the struggle for the College and its closure in 69.

Yet even in his curacy John's wider speaking ministry had begun and was to flourish. A paper given in 54 at the Theology and Ministry Conference at Christ Church Oxford became his first published booklet.. 'Prayer for Busy People. ('the mark of a contemplative life is not the absence of activity but the presence of contemplation'). Other articles appeared over the years in journals and periodicals. I am delighted that a paper of John's given in 1964 at Pusey House on 'The Christian Mystical Tradition; the Affirmative way in the writing of St Francis de Sales, was printed by SLG press Fairacres for this Winters Chronicle. It holds a balance which is so typical of John's thinking. The Via Negativa and the Via Positiva' are not mutually exclusive. In fact they might be called emphases rather than ways, for they belong together in the wholeness of truth. The Christian

Mystical tradition is deep and wide and there is room in it for all.'

What emerges in this lecture is another characteristic of John's guidance too... the desire to lead people into freedom, into the glorious liberty of the children of God. From fear and the law to Gospel trust and freedom.

S.L.G. holds more papers of John's left to me at his death, a collection of which (Our Home Is in God) is even now finding its way into print to reach a wider audience, with others in process.

As early as 64 John was approached with an invitation to an extended visit to St Bernard's RC seminary in Rochester , upstate New York . He was very tempted by this invitation as is clear from a letter he wrote to S Ward. His conclusion , nevertheless, that it was not good for the College that he should go was confirmed by Ward. But John was approached again as the College closed, and this time he was free to accept. Though the closure of St Boniface was devastating on some levels for John it did mean that he could now embrace a wider ministry. Here he was very much in the pattern of S Ward, for he refused a possible Cathedral role , to follow a vocational lead into a freelance way of non stipendiary ministry. This was a very real risk of faith since he had slender means, but a bequest from a God father helped to make it possible. John spent three extended periods at St Bernards Seminary as what was termed ' Visiting Professor of Ascetical Theology.'

John had accepted on the understanding that he was completely free to teach and preach as an Anglican. His first visit ran from January to June in 1970, then from September to December in 75 and similarly in 79. He lectured, sometimes publicly, and led classes and seminars each day and he was hugely appreciated. This was something of an irony given what had just happened to him in the closure of the College for which he had laboured so long and so hard for minimal financial reward. He was extremely well paid by St Bernards and made lasting friendships with staff and some students. Despite this John refused when he was offered more permanent work there as his loyalties and heart were with the Anglican communion. This was the Church he served. With the wonderful experience in America he was still able to see limitations in the R.C. Church of the time which led him further to appreciate the freedom of thought and expression, gentleness and honesty of Anglicanism.

Do you love the Church ? Was the title of a Compline address John had given to his own students, a question that would not come amiss in training today. John certainly did love the Church as the Body of Christ and in its Anglican expression. In his 90s he was disturbed by the Ordinariate and expressed his concerns in his annual report to the St Boniface Trust which had been set up following the closure of the College. After this he instigated, for his mind remained sharp to the end of his 98 years, a competition.. with a monetary reward, for an essay. The topic was, 'Why I am an Anglican and believe I will remain so.' There was a considerable response, actually from around the World, and the prize was won by a French woman who found her home in Anglicanism after attending a service of Evensong! It was in fact an academically very able essay which was judged by the late Bps. Mark Santer and Michael Turnbull.

With the permission of the St Boniface Trust whose headquarters it was, John continued to live and exercise his ministry from St. Boniface Lodge ,which has now been renamed after him as Townroe Lodge in deference to his years as school governor to the Warminster School.

I found my way there in 1976. John had come to lead a seven day silent retreat for my own community in the very hot summer of 75. I recognised in him what I would later term a spiritual master; someone entirely Scriptural and Orthodox and yet quite exceptional in material and presentation, and the retreat was for me life changing.

As was our custom there was only one address a day but each was about 45 minutes long with a short break for assimilation. He appeared to speak from minimal notes and his delivery was

measured to our capacity to receive it. I appreciated the delivery, the voice itself and his skill in teaching. The style and angle of approach then and subsequently was refreshing.. To the end of his life John could still speak off the cuff and in a way that could make you see a familiar text in a fresh light. He was profound but comprehensible, deeply spiritual and also pragmatic.

When I had an interview with him I discovered what many others found, an extraordinary perception which could only be 'of the Holy Spirit'. Over the many years that I turned to him for guidance I discovered also that truth bearing quality which could be uncomfortable as well as a deep humanity. There is no doubt at all that the God he experienced personally at the age of 12 was the God of Love. This may sound obvious but it is not. Many people carry lifelong false images of God. In the recently published article on The Mystical tradition he says. 'What in human experience is most life giving? It is to love and to be loved.'

A booklet printed two years ago by the SLG press is a set of retreat addresses on the theme of 'The Undistorted Image' of God in Christ. As John had early understood, prayer could go badly wrong if you got your doctrine or we may say, your image of God wrong. This retreat was preached by John in his seventies to over 70 former students who came for an annual reunion and retreat at Warminster.

The St Boniface Trust was set up on the closure of the College, utilising rents from the buildings now occupied by Warminster school. John gave an annual report to this Trust to the end of his life where he attempted to 'read the signs of the time' and indicate initiatives such as the essay on Anglicanism, or a paper sent to Bishops on the nature of sabbaticals, or on retirement.. In these reports John was clear eyed but also.. and this is a key note of his own belief and practise.. always affirmative, positive, hopeful.... believing in the resurrection Spirit of God always at work in the church and in the world. I once suggested to him that perhaps he was over positive but he refuted that firmly! He had few illusions, having been brought up in the cynical post great war years, having lived on a very tough estate in Sunderland through the second world war, having seen and heard enough of human behaviour, not least in confessions, and having to fight within the Church of England for what he held dear... but he was still firmly positive because of his understanding of God. In that sense he is in the tradition not just of the Gospel but of writers such as Francis de Sales, Pere Grou and the Abbe de Tourville whose Letters of Direction he greatly valued. I am so grateful for this sturdy faith as we look out onto the sea of troubles which is our present World and on our own shaken and seemingly diminishing C of E. In this sense he is of value for our times. We need that hope and confidence in God. In 1978 he wrote an article in New Fire called Confidence in an Age of Insecurity. This would be Johns stance for these times.. Confidence in God in whom all times are held. In what may have been his last words to the annual reunion (?2017)John said this:'We are in a World in turmoil. In some way beyond our knowing we are all bound up in a bundle of life. And that's where we may make our contribution, by faithfulness, watchfulness, steadiness, affirmations. There is, it seems to me, a sharpening of the conflict between good and evil. There have always been ups and downs, but this maybe is something new. In this unknown territory is where we need to stand firm against all the odds. This we can do in the power of the cross and the resurrection of Christ. The last word is with the resurrection.'

John practised affirmative belief also in relation to individual human beings. He refused to denigrate and sought the positives. I think there was a great discipline underlying this; he disliked and would not gossip. Should this make him sound dull let it be said that he was never that and whoever knew him at all well would also know he had a very considerable sense of humour. Personally he was very self effacing; a wonderful communicator but as a channel, not in anyway self advertising. I think he would like to have written a book or two but that was not to be; his time and energies were rather written into peoples lives.

From Warminster John would drive to the Franciscans at Cerne Abbas to teach and direct. I recall the very great effort he put, in his later nineties, into writing to a brother in need. This must have been one of his last letters and it cost him in terms of exercising his own brain to bring clarity and indicate priorities.

John's connections with S.S.F. were life long. He noted the ability of S.S.F to attract and hold together diverse strands within the C of E.. 'Let us call them in shorthand the catholic, the evangelical, the liberal, the charismatic and the radical..' S.S.F.s measure of success in holding this together has made, he believed. 'A wonderful contribution to the C of E which is always weak when these diverse elements are at war with each other, always spiritually strong when they are well coordinated within its life.' We might heed that for our present times where the C of E has become lop-sided with a much reduced catholic presence.

In Warminster itself John was warden to the community of St Denys as long as it lasted. . There was some work with the armed forces, including in Germany. There were Clergy Schools; in St Teilos in Cardiff. At Lee Abbey Devon for Bristol Clergy, in Bradford. He was self confessedly nervous at leading an ordination retreat in for women in 1994 in the Salisbury Diocese in his early 70s. He need not have worried, he was deeply appreciated by the women. The formidable list of people coming for counsel included lay men and women from all walks of life, clergy, religious, Bishops. Under all of it was his quiet discipline of prayer. That there was a personal cost is certain, but his health did not give way as it did three times prior to becoming warden of St Boniface College. He had somehow got into his stride and was sustained in the work and way of life God called him to, which continued, though in diminishing amounts to his life's end. It might be noted that he also did this without the support of a married family life which he would have wanted. Even as a curate he expressed the sense that marriage might not be in God's purposes for him but this did not make it easier to accept and live with; a costly and inevitably lonely celibacy.

I hope that the sketch of John's life that I have given shows some of the hidden streams that flowed into his life and to which he then contributed. I hope too that his love for the Anglican way is evident in his appreciation of its breadth and richness and in the attempt to be open in facing difficult issues.

John's faith was certainly incarnational and it was also a radical faith. God was his ALL and for that ALL he gave his all. He did not take a safe way but lived the Abrahamic risk of faith and encouraged others too in that way; though he did this by teaching people pragmatically to build up their faith and trust in simple everyday matters.

His confidence in the resurrection power of the Spirit was comprehensive and applied to daily living. The relevance of the affirmative path, his confidence in God's power at work in the world are possibly what he most has to offer today. People are insecure and depressed, even defeatist, about the circumstances we are in. John's theology and spirituality would address this downward pull. He would be on the alert for the springs of renewal, hope and life. Where would he be seeing those now? I am told there is, for example, beginning to be a renewed desire for the transcendent, the properly mysterious, the numinous. I hope this is so. We need it and we need the church to be fostering it, not least in the training of ordinands and in our worship and, always, in encouraging the contemplative dimension.

John lived with that strong sense of the Eternal, present now but to be known in fulness hereafter. He was a man of great and hidden depth, a rare person in the late 20th and early 21ST Century..