

The 'Jellicoe Sermon,' preached in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, by Captain Nick Coke, of the Salvation Army in Stepney, Sunday 21 October 2012

Two lives well lived. Two lives that changed the world they inhabited. Two lives that continue to inspire us long after they've gone.

The first of those lives is Father Basil Jellicoe – a man who we remember today in this Jellicoe sermon. An Anglican priest and Missioner of this college, who went on to transform a community blighted by poverty. A social reformer of the 1920s who took on the mighty housing developers of his age and re-imagined a community devoid of slums and substandard housing.

The second life is that of General William Booth – the man who invented the uniform that I and 3 million others around the world proudly wear today. He founded The Salvation Army in 1865 – a movement that has become known for its practical Christianity amongst those living on the margins.

Two lives well lived. Two lives that we Christians can be proud to recount. But two lives that were very different.

Basil Jellicoe was born into privilege, an educated and well connected man who wisely used his networks to advance the cause of those in his poverty-stricken parish. Booth by contrast was from humble origins, a man who relied heavily on his more educated wife Catherine to provide the theological basis for what he preached. Unlike Jellicoe whose blazing light was extinguished at the age of 36, Booth did not lay down his sword until the ripe age of 84. Two very different lives, each treading their own path.

Two very different lives. Two lives but one inspiration.

I like to imagine the lives of those like Jellicoe and Booth as signposts. At times we can look at such well-lived lives and we can make them the destination – canonising our heroes and exalting them beyond the reach of ordinary Christians like ourselves here today. But for me the lives of those like Jellicoe and Booth are simply signposts, just as St Francis, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King are. They are signposts to the one who inspired them to action.

Two lives but one inspiration.

The source of this one inspiration was spelt out in the majestic verses in the Epistle reading this morning from Hebrews (4: 14-16).

'We have a great high priest' says the writer to the Hebrews, 'Jesus, the Son of God, who has ascended to heaven.' Jesus who is not untouchable but one who can empathise with us even in our weaknesses because he experienced the earthly life. Let us be in no doubt that for Jellicoe and Booth this was the inspiration that drove their lives. It was their faith in

Jesus Christ, Son of God - Jesus who is the means by which we approach the throne of God to receive his mercy and grace – that inspired them to action. If we want to learn anything from these lives well-lived, then let's honour them by treating them as signposts. Let us see where they are pointing. Let us then proceed to the same throne that they approached and let us receive the same mercy and grace that is available to all who call on the name of Jesus Christ. This is the source of a well-lived life, whatever path or shape it takes. That is the first lesson we can learn from these two lives. Two lives – one inspiration.

Two lives well lived. Two lives that lead to action.

The Hebrews verses remind us of something else, too. They remind us that Jesus occupies and unites both the heavenly and earthly space. I've no doubt that if you were to put Booth and Jellicoe in a room together to talk theology they'd probably disagree on an awful lot. Observing an encounter between the Anglo-Catholic Jellicoe who was famed for his manic energy and the fiery no-nonsense Evangelical street-preacher Booth might not be a pretty sight! An 'East End brawl' might well have broken out! But clearly they did agree on something and this is it simply put: faith leads to action. If the Jesus of Hebrews connects heaven and earth, then so should the lives of those who follow him.

Today in Stepney, we and our Jellicoe Community partners try to follow suit. In Tower Hamlets where we are based, the signs of poverty that Jellicoe and Booth encountered still exist in abundance. On the Ocean Estate where I, my wife and 2 children have lived for 9 years - up to 15 people across 3 families can be crammed together into one 2 bedroom flat. We regularly visit families where we are offered the bed to sit on as this is the only room the family has and the only seat on offer to guests. Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK – 52% of children are considered to be living in poverty. The Foodbank that we set up with other churches last year cannot keep up with the need presenting itself.

So what do we do in the face of such needs? The same question was posed to William Booth in 1888 by his son Bramwell who had just witnessed homeless men sleeping rough under Blackfriars Bridge. William's response was simple: 'Go and do something!' This was the beginning of the Salvation Army's work amongst the homeless.

In the Gospel reading (Mark 10:35-45), Jesus presents another answer. James and John had their mind on the things of heaven. 'Let us sit at your right and left in glory', they asked. But Jesus brings them down to earth. You want to be up there – then you must be a servant here and now! Let us not miss Jesus' rebuke today. Each of us here today is called 'to do something'. We cannot simply gaze at the glories of heaven - we must become servants right here, right now. Jellicoe knew this when after his appointment to the Magdalen College Mission in 1922 he declared: "We are going to build Jerusalem in Somers Town". He knew it was going to take sacrifice and service and boy did he practice what he preached.

For us in Stepney we are working on Jerusalem! We campaign for a living wage for people living on our estate. Not long ago 50 cleaners, many who live in our neighbourhood, were moved to a living wage after we took the campaign to a local housing association who had them on the minimum wage. Amazingly their pay was backdated for the whole previous year. We know very directly what a difference this made to one family. One of the cleaners is a member of our Salvation Army congregation and his 9 year old daughter is my daughter's best friend. Where once the poverty pay only allowed them to survive on only the very basics they now have a standard of living that means more opportunities for the whole family.

We have taken the fight to the drug dealers who treat our playgrounds and parks as though they are drive-through drug markets open day and night. We gathered together a group of men from the mosque and church and patrolled the communal areas in the evenings, our presence simply making the dealers uncomfortable that they were being observed and leading to them moving on. Each year we have reclaimed the park from them with a huge community party slap bang in the middle of what they consider their territory. Last time over 1000 neighbours came out to celebrate and with our presence we sent a message to the dealers that this park was made to be a place of community not of criminal activity. We meet regularly with the police and local authority to hold them to account and to take action on behalf of the community in enforcement and education.

We prioritize spending time with people who are different from us. We refuse to gather in cliques but seek to build bridges across race and religion, economic circumstances and background. We play sport together, we share meals together, we clean up overgrown gardens for vulnerable people on the estate together and we campaign for better housing together. The result is a glorious and diverse mess of humanity which is beginning to look something like a community that cares for one another.

Next week we're starting a youth club. I could go on... There is still a lot to do! 'Jerusalem' still seems a long way off but I have never found it difficult to sense the presence of God in even the darkest recesses of the Ocean Estate. Please pray for us and I promise we will pray for you. As we meet here now, our small congregation is also gathered and I have asked them to remember you in prayer today.

If you follow the signposts that are the lives of Jellicoe and Booth, this is where you end up. To heaven before God's eternal throne and then back to earth again where the need is great. And then, through God's grace and mercy you begin to see the signs of a heavenly Jerusalem emerging in your life and in your community. This is the evidence of a life well-lived. It is what we are all made for, it is what we are called to and it should be what we all long for.

Two lives well-lived. Two lives – one inspiration. Two lives that lead to action. Let us take heed of the signposts and let us walk that way. Amen.