

Foreword

This is not just the story of a remarkable man, it charts the end of an era in church life, that of the preacher as star performer who drew the crowds and enjoyed the kind of fame now reserved for television celebrities and sports personalities. To the very end of his long life, Leslie Weatherhead could fill the largest hall in town, though he never made the mistake of drawing optimistic general conclusions from his individual success. Yet a poignant paradox runs through this book. The fact that succeeding generations of preachers have been unable to do a 'Weatherhead' will strengthen the conviction of those who insist that preaching as a rhetorical art died with him, ours is the age of pulpit conversations, dialogues and over-the-garden-wall type chats. And yet, it is not easy to see by what other means than the sermon as a formal act of proclamation could congregations have been confronted with the mercy and judgement of God in war-time London. Nor in what other manner many thousands throughout the world could have been invited to wrestle with the Gospel not as a discussion topic but as part of a liturgical act through which God was made real to them and their lives transformed by the friendship of Jesus – to use one of Weatherhead's favourite phrases.

Temperamentally, Weatherhead was a preacher to his finger-tips. I recall the last time I went to visit him at his last home in Bexhill on Sea. He seemed at a loose end, the old charm was still there but not the spark. He was a public performer robbed of his audience; had he been a West End star, one would have said he was missing the roar of the crowd and the smell of grease paint. He complained about his rotten health and catalogued the miseries of being old. Eventually, he looked at the clock and excused himself, he was taking a mid-week service at the old people's home just down the road. He collected his bible and book of prayers, he squared his shoulders and suddenly the lassitude had gone, he seemed to have a new access of energy, he was about to do what he did best. And the great preacher strode off to address the smallest congregation he had had in over sixty years.

In an easy, lucid style of which Weatherhead would have approved, John Travell conveys something of the glory of great preaching and its cost. Phillips Brooks' famous definition of preaching as truth conveyed through personality implies the limitations as well as the strengths of the art. Some of the most revealing and moving passages in this book are those in which Weatherhead shares his deepest feelings by letter with another popular religious personality, the Bible translator J B Phillips, about the spiritual and psychological cost of being a pulpit star. He was painfully aware of the absurd irony of being highly successful at commending one who was in earthly terms a failure, who came to his own people and unlike the popular preacher was not feted but despised and rejected.

I read this book expecting to be choked with nostalgia about a man I revered and an era whose passing I deeply regret. So I was, but I also found John Travell's analysis of Weatherhead's ministry in its general context deeply disturbing. Leslie's great friend, Donald Soper, died as I was reading this

manuscript., the last of the great Methodist triumvirate with Edwin Sangster, had gone. Despite the passing of the, last of the Titans, I cannot accept either the option of writing off formal preaching as a lost art nor that of prophesying its renaissance as part of a religious revival just around the corner. So what are we preachers to do? Well, if this story underlines our dilemma, it must also offer some clues to the way forward, for Leslie Weatherhead, like all great men and women of God, had discovered how to make God real to whoever was within range of his voice. Perhaps his secret was so simple that we could easily overlook it in our quest for complex answers. In the end, preaching is not the art of making a sermon and delivering it; it is the art of making a preacher and delivering that. Leslie Weatherhead made the Christian doctrine of redemption credible because he looked and talked and behaved like someone redeemed.

Leslie had the courage to run the gauntlet of public ridicule by exploring ideas and experiences which are regarded by many in the Church as cranky, such as spiritualism, reincarnation, out-of-the-body experiences, psychic healing and the like. In particular, he was passionately interested in communication from beyond the veil. Though I have never had the nerve nor the conviction to follow him into such esoteric realms, I will go so far as to suggest he is speaking to us through this book.

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