



**Sheila White - The Lord will provide**

Faith is believing something which, though not provable, so takes possession of us that it is impossible afterwards to imagine living without it.

*Wrestling With the Angel (1977:86)*

It might surprise many familiar only with his political views that this passionate statement of a personal religious conviction was made by Enoch Powell. Today, anyone looking up his biographical entry on the popular Wikipedia site finds him identified as: 'A British politician, classical scholar, poet, writer, linguist and soldier'. Only a brief mention is made at the end, under the heading of Personal Life, of his 'devout membership of the Church of England' and little is said of his Biblical scholarship and trenchant views about Christian faith. Yet his religious studies, textual criticism and deeply held beliefs were central in his life from the time of his conversion from dogmatic atheism to Christian conviction.

In the introduction to the collection of his articles, sermons and dialogues, *No Easy Answers (1973)* he explains how he embarked on an 'endless' spiritual journey and he relates the story simply and with surprising frankness. He admits from the start that the key to his own personality lies in his obsessive intellectual activity for which he later found ample scope in religion. He enjoys the 'mental quests' on which he embarks in his study of the gospels and makes the rather endearing confession that sometimes in church he has found himself guiltily 'playing truant' by thinking rather than praying. That such constant mental activity was not a completely selfish indulgence is shown by the pleasure he found in sharing the fruits of his intellectual efforts with others.

In his youth, the predisposition to question and then reject what he perceived as 'untrue' led him to dismiss what he learned about the Christian faith at home and at school. His mother, with a 'phenomenal' knowledge of the Bible insisted that he should read it and be confirmed in the Church of England even though she had lost her own Christian faith. Another important contribution by his mother to his later intellectual development was in teaching him his first classical Greek. One of his treasured possessions as an adult was the Greek Testament in which as a girl she followed the lessons at her parish church.

At school he continued to scan the Greek Testament, using commentaries and scholars' textual criticism with a characteristic thoroughness, as a result of which he felt he had discovered that the Gospel was 'not true'. Reading J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* as a boy was a further formative influence convincing him that the Church was discredited; the basic themes of the Gospel were not unique but had a central part in the religions of much earlier cultures. The disillusion was completed later at University by his reading of Nietzsche with his revelation that 'God is dead'. He came to the conclusion that religion itself was only a device to meet man's psychological needs and that they could be met in better ways.

So, as he describes it, for twenty years he became a convinced atheist. The 'lazy' stance of agnosticism was not for someone of Powell's temperament. To him it was intolerable to be merely a passive observer of error. Like Saul of Tarsus, whose intellectual honesty he admired, his training and education had led him to a dogmatic conclusion and he actively promulgated what he felt was beyond refutation. Unlike Saul however, his changing conviction did not come as a blinding conversion but crept

up on him after the second World War during which he felt his mind had been in 'intellectual hibernation'.

This intellectual transformation occurred when he did something that, unusually for him, was not logical; one evening he felt himself drawn against his will towards the sound of the bells of St. Peter's, Wolverhampton. He went into the church where Evensong was in progress and sat quietly at the back in a dark corner, close to the South door for easy exit, hoping not to be noticed (even, he says, by himself). He felt ashamed that he could not find a satisfactory reason for having made this clandestine visit but nonetheless repeated it many times.

Gradually he found that the inner arguments of his earlier years were coming to the forefront of his mind. Listening to the Church's assertions in his unnoticed position, he began to realise that he had been confused by a misconception of the nature of the Gospel. His earlier dismissal of Christianity was because he felt that it was historically untrue but this was not the kind of truth that the 'inner' history of the Christian Gospel offered. His techniques of criticism and analysis were not, as he had feared, going to lead to 'getting to the end and leaving empty-handed'. Instead to his astonishment he found those techniques powerless to refute what he then began to perceive as the real truth of the Gospel.

Later in a series of addresses entitled, *'The Church and the Work of the World'* (*No Easy Answers* 1973: 40-59) he elaborated on his revised understanding of the relationship of the rites of the Christian Church to those of primeval antiquity which had once disconcerted him on reading *'The Golden Bough'*. He did not discard what he had learned from Frazer but discovered an additional truth that the rite and myth of the Church grew out of man's earlier religious experiences and were predictable and essential to its survival. He saw in the identification of the priest-victim-king devoured in primeval rites with the rite of the Holy Communion, unmistakable evidence that,

The rite of the Church embodies a theme of primeval antiquity, and the book of the Church is to that theme as the words of a song are to the music.

*No Easy Answers* (1973:50)

In fact a constant theme in his religious writings is the centrality of the Holy Communion (or as he referred to it in his high Anglican way, the Mass). On one of his furtive visits to the church in Wolverhampton he heard the parish priest refer to receiving the Holy Communion as a duty and at 6am on the next Easter Day (1950) he made his communion. After this he regularly attended the Communion Service, at least every Sunday if he could, and he felt the study of its meaning and content to be a personal obligation. A lady now in her eighties has described how when she occasionally visited St. Margaret's Church, Westminster (sometimes referred to as the M.P.s' Parish Church) for the Holy Communion Service on Sundays she was surprised to recognise the man who regularly occupied the seat in front of her as Enoch Powell. He became in fact a deputy churchwarden there for several years, an appointment of which his family believe he was almost as proud of as his Cabinet post.

Powell never seems to have doubted that within the Christian community his natural home was the Church of England. He claimed to have felt loyalty and affection towards his country from the age of six and had found the aims and values of what he called the 'empire-nation' worth fighting for in the second World War when he served

in North Africa and India. He argued that Britain was historically the only state where sovereignty was still ecclesiastical as well as secular. The stability of the liturgy, the forms of worship used in the Church of England and the definition of its beliefs were, it seemed to him, validated by the royal supremacy at its head (he felt the royal arms should be prominently displayed in every Anglican Church). He was proud that he could step inside the walls of his national Church and recognise it as a 'goodly inheritance' from which he had been exiled long enough.

He felt strongly that when entering the national church he was becoming a member of the Church Universal and he valued Christianity as an intellectual religion. However, of all the Christian denominations he felt the Anglican Communion was the one where the use of the intellect had been most 'tolerated, welcomed and honoured'. He described it thus,

'It is a Church which has characteristically fostered scholarship and study, and its love of learning is one of the virtues which it may plead in extenuation of its deficiencies.'

*No Easy Answers (1973:43)*

Powell also loved the architecture of English parish churches and made it his business to be knowledgeable about it. His daughter, Jenny, remembers family outings being frequently punctuated by visits to local churches. The vicar always received a courteous letter thanking him for his hospitality, but often pointing out to him something incorrectly recorded or missing from the information in the guide book. Powell was always eager to share his learning with others.

It has to be remembered that Powell gave the key to his own personality, central to his approach to religion, as the importance to him of intellectual effort. The textual examination of the Gospel, employing his outstanding knowledge of the Greek of the New Testament, thus inevitably became a favourite field of study. Typically he was not content to take the generally accepted translations and views of other textual commentators as his starting point. His own studies led him to some controversial conclusions. Chief among these was his opinion in later life that that the widely held view by New Testament scholars that St. Mark's Gospel was the first of the gospels to be written was incorrect. He became so convinced that St. Matthew's was the first Gospel from which the other writers of the synoptic gospels drew as their primary source, that in 1994 he completed a book on the subject, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, subtitled, *A New Translation of the First Gospel with Commentary and Introductory Essay*. Not an easy read for the layman but as he says in an essay entitled *Bibliolatry* in another collection of his essays and sermons,

One of the silliest and most dangerous fallacies about religion, and in particular about Christianity is that it ought to be easy.

*Wrestling with the Angel (1997:93)*

The unfortunate result of his determination not to compromise was that much of what he imparted in spoken or written word was often misunderstood or taken out of context. One recent critic having read Robert Shepherd's Biography of Powell, went so far as to comment on the internet

The willingness to attack and undermine Scripture, and the unquestionably very poor understanding of what Christian life is all about must call into very serious question whether Powell was ever a true Christian.

Robin A Brace, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2011 in a review of *Enoch Powell the Enigma, a Biography*, Robert Shepherd (1996).

Setting aside the writer's presumption in judging what is a 'true Christian' he voices what many who lacked Powell's scholarly approach concluded at the time. Unused to textual criticism which was then described as 'liberal baggage' by the literalist wing of the Church, he was judged by some to be somehow attacking ancient truths. Yet Powell had noted that at the time he committed himself to Christianity he had come to the realisation that,

The techniques of textual criticism and analysis were as powerless to refute the Gospel as the techniques of scientific investigation are to refute the material to which they are applied.

*No Easy Answers* (1973:4)

In using his undoubted gifts of scholarship to examine the earliest texts, Powell refused to accept without question what he called 'the proverbial familiarity' of the words of the gospels. Instead, he suggested one should 'read them and question them with all the resources that the late twentieth century has at its command'. His close study of such familiar stories as the account of the feeding of the five thousand, the woman taken in adultery and the parable of the Good Samaritan led him to dismiss accepted interpretations but his own conclusions about what he perceived as the true meaning in each case might be seen as more profound and challenging.

Powell was also repeatedly called to account by Christian apologists for a perceived mismatch between his religious convictions and his political opinions. There are accounts of public dialogues with well-known Christians of his day often organised at his church by the Reverend Joseph McCulloch, Rector of St. Mary le Bow in the City of London, who was an intelligent and popular preacher with a great concern for the poor and disenfranchised. Debaters challenged Powell particularly on the issue of his perceived racism and in some of these exchanges his antagonists came to understand that his arguments were without malice. McCulloch ended his own debate with the comment that though he had expected to meet a highly intelligent man he had been dubious about whether he would encounter a kind man. He concluded,

I *have* met a kind man and I'm very grateful. I think, despite the utterances that are reported in the Press, that we are greatly privileged to have met a very remarkable person and one I would like to talk to for a very long time indeed.

*No Easy Answers* (1973:82)

Powell's judgement appears in some debates about social justice to be clouded by his instinctive rejection of the 'social gospel' popular at the time which he saw as the equivalent of the first temptation of Christ in the desert to turn stones into bread (*Matthew 4:3-4*). He described some Christian efforts to provide for the world's poor as 'amateur economics' and accused Dr. Coggan, then Archbishop of Canterbury, of 'speaking the language of materialism' when he called upon the government to

increase its official overseas aid programme in 1975. He also criticised the Pope for suggesting that joining the European Economic Community would bring the goal of universal peace and justice closer. Powell had different ideas about society and the Gospel,

The Gospel indeed is a social gospel, though not in the sense in which that phrase is commonly used today to imply a gospel about secular society.

*Wrestling with the Angel* (1977:28)

He did not think that Christianity was looking forward to 'a gradual betterment' of humanity. The message about what difference Christianity makes to individuals and to society was that men were not improvable but redeemable. He felt this was best expressed in the words of St. Paul,

God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world.

*Galatians 6:14*

One of the many dialogues in which Powell took part at St. Mary le Bow, was with an old acquaintance who had known him since his days as an army officer; the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. He like Powell had progressed from convinced atheism to committed Christianity but in his case he had been deeply influenced by witnessing the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta so had made the journey in a less cerebral way than Powell. Muggeridge placed great importance on the expression of a Christian's love for his fellow man being shown in social action. Powell admitted that he felt a conflict between the 'impossible' demands of the Kingdom of God, to which he was sure he was called as a Christian duty, and his work as a politician where harm could be brought on others by lack of foresight. Muggeridge asked, 'Do you consider yourself to be a religious man?' Perceiving that in his reply Powell was struggling to express something deeply personal about his spirituality he prodded him to elaborate by asking what it was he was 'hungering for'. Then Powell made the following confession which in its honesty and passion comes close to poetry,

'I'm hungering to hear, to be told, and to receive, things which I don't know where to find elsewhere, and which I feel I shall be the poorer if I don't hear and receive, and which I feel in some sense I shall die if I don't have.'

*No Easy Answers* (1973:34)

This was not a statement designed to win over his audience but a rare public admission of the ultimate aim of his spiritual search. Soon after he became a politician, he asked a friend to make a small plaque for him on which four words were to be inscribed. This was his mantra, especially when things were difficult. He put the plaque on a shelf opposite the desk where he worked, perhaps to remind him of where the search for what he could 'not find elsewhere' must end. It remained there for the rest of his life and the words on it were, 'The Lord will provide'.