Peter Binnall

An address given by the Very Reverend N.S. Rathbone, Dean of Hereford, at a memorial service for Canon P.B.G. Binnall held in Lincoln Cathedral on 10 December 1980.

We are here today, in the Cathedral which he loved so well, to give thanks to God for the life and work of Peter Binnall, and to commend him in our prayers to the Saviour in whom he trusted.

Peter Binnall was born in Yorkshire three quarters of a century ago, and he took some pride in calling himself from time to time a Yorkshireman; but he was but an infant when his family migrated to Lincolnshire, where his father was rector of Manton for thirty-four years. In his early manhood Peter went to Lichfield Theological College and was ordained in 1932. And so began a ministry which was exercised entirely in the diocese of Lincoln, and for almost its whole duration in quiet country parishes, until his appointment to the Subdeanery of this Cathedral Church.

It was an uneventful life, I suppose: the kind of existence which many a country clergyman lived during the last century and the earlier years of the present one: a life devoted to the quiet and faithful pastoral care of small communities, yet a life in which there was room for the development of other interests which enriched the church and the community at large. Such a way of life has now almost entirely disappeared. It was not a circumscribed or narrowing existence, for the cure of souls, the art of arts, can never be this. And Peter did not only serve and love his parishioners, but took his part in the life of the church as a rural dean and proctor in Convocation.

But his great and consuming interest besides was in the history and antiquities of this county, in its ancient buildings and in its people. For many years he served on the Diocesan Advisory Committee; he was a moving force in the Lincolnshire Old Churches Trust; he was vigorous in the defence of churches threatened with redundancy; he took a leading part in the establishment in this city of the Museum of Lincolnshire Life. All this of course you know well. On the family histories, the dialects, the folklore, the natural history of the county, he was an inexhaustible mine of accurate and curious information which he was always ready to share. In later years I see him in that Aladdin's cave of books and curiosities in the corner of the Subdeanery; a man in the great Anglican tradition of the priest-antiquaries, the clerical naturalists and scholars of days gone by.

But what of the man himself? Those of us who knew him well will recall not so much his work and activities as his personality. I think of him above all, and I know others do, as a man of frank and forthright character and strong opinions: qualities which he would perhaps have attributed to his Yorkshire origin, but which are equally those of the open and genuine hearts of Lincolnshire. Blunt perhaps he could be, but never hurtful; he did not suffer fools gladly, but he was patient with them. Above all he was loyal, loyal to his associates and colleagues, never seeking to apportion blame for error, but to redeem their failures. I remember Archdeacon Marsden, of blessed memory, saying to me soon after I came to this Cathedral here, 'Lincolnshire is a man's county.' By degrees I learned what he meant. Its landscape, its people, do not have the softness, the readiness to compromise or conceal, which we may discover in some other places and other persons. In the gentle and feminine contours of Herefordshire one feels the contrast with the starker and more uncompromising character of these eastern lands. And in these ways Peter Binnall was in every sense a man of Lincolnshire. But by the same token he was a man of a ready and open smile, a humorous turn of mind and speech, and an unfailingly hospitable nature.

When he was appointed to the Subdeanery, he received from the Archbishop the Lambeth degree of Master of Arts. He had learning indeed, but as he had not been himself at a university, he had not the title and proof of learning required by the statutes. But perhaps it was not so much that a lustre was shed on the new Subdean by this, but the bestower himself acquired an honour. One might have thought that he would have found the transfer to a residential canony a difficult one. Independent characters like his often rebel against the experience of close common life with their fellow canons. Men who have long served as parish priests are lost and miserable without the cure of souls. But with Peter Binnall this was not so. From the beginning he entered into the life of the Chapter, of that 'College of Lincoln' of which Dean Honywood's epitaph speaks. He found, I believe, as we all do, great happiness and fulfilment in this society, and in whose fellowship his special gifts and interests flourished. And if he had surrendered the formal cure of souls, in the Cathedral congregation, among the visitors and pilgrims, he was able to exercise his pastoral gifts.

But it was in this great building itself that he delighted. As Subdean he was a Master of the Fabric, and he made himself familiar with every part of it. When it became clear soon after his coming that major works of restoration were urgent, he applied himself with energy and success to raising the necessary funds. He loved the Cathedral, which in its great spaces so well typifies the county which it overtops, and whose level landscape it emphasises with its soaring towers. The Cathedral too exemplifies in a most magnificent way the glories and achievements of past ages. Peter Binnall did not live in the past, but he loved the past and saw no reason to desire change or promote novelty for its own sake or for doubtful advantage. 'Look unto the rock from which you were hewn' is a precept which he might himself have uttered. It does not surprise one to find that he was not enamoured of liturgical innovations and new forms of worship, nor of the experimental or modernistic in art.

As for his piety and his religion, it was disciplined and traditional, not to say sometimes perhaps old-fashioned in its practice and expression. He was I suppose a high churchman, a Tractarian of a kind now, alas, almost obsolete. His theology as he taught it in his sermons was of good homespun texture and weight, unadorned with the frills and laces of fashionable divinity. That way it kept out the cold better. Doubt, I think, he regarded as an infirmity of the soul, a weakness, or perhaps a weak-kneedness. But what counted was his integrity. His life and devotion
were all of a piece. Jesus, seeing Nathaniel under his fig tree, exclaimed: ‘See, a true Israelite; there is no guile in him’. No guile, no showiness, no slickness, no double-mindedness, no pretense, no pretension. He was what he seemed to be, and he seemed to be what he was. The description fits Peter Binnall. I have known no one so free of any kind of hypocrisy or acting a part. And for this grace perhaps above all others given to him, we thank God as we remember him.

And now he is among us no more. How diverse are the issues of death, of which David speaks in the Psalms. For one man there is a long and weary sickness, a foreshadowing of the decay and dissolution of the grave. For another the outgoing of death is a gentle and quiet prelude to the rest of the people of God. But as the issues of death belong to God, so by them He instructs us in the ordering of our lives. I shall not forget the passing of Peter Binnall’s predecessor as Subdean, Arthur Cook. With a clear mind and firm utterance he spoke from the bed in which he was soon to die with patriarchal authority, sharing his experience and wisdom with those in whose hands he left the care and cherishing of his beloved Lincoln. And Peter Binnall in another way, by his so sudden and unexpected death, speaks to us. The Advent trumpet in these days is summoning us to watch for the Lord’s coming. That coming may be as a thief in an hour we do not know. Pray that we may be ready. I make no doubt that it was so with our dear brother, who lived in daily mindfulness of his Master and Redeemer. As a thief the Lord may come upon any one of us. Let it not be as a thief in the night, in the darkness of ignorance or wantonness or sin.

But we do not rightly use this service if we use it only as an occasion to recall the past, and to dwell upon, however thankfully, the life of him whom we are remembering. Nor is it sufficient to seek out some lesson to the present conduct of our lives. The Christian heart will find here fresh enlightenment in faith, a new impulse for charity, new encouragement in hope. In the face of the death of one who has been, who is, dear to us, in the midst of our natural grief, what questions stir in our minds? What lies beyond the grave: what continuity is there between the present life and the life of the world to come? How may we think now of those we have known and loved: shall we meet them again? We repeat the familiar phrases of the creed: I believe in the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the body, the resurrection of the flesh, and the multiplied words do not define a truth but point us to mystery. And those sentences in which St Paul speaks of the natural and spiritual body, do they answer our questions? And then our eyes turn to the risen Jesus, the first fruits as the Apostle calls him, our first fruits. What is he, who is, we are to be at the in-gathering of the harvest of the world. ‘As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive’; and thus from grief and doubt issues a firmer faith and a deeper joy. Then, as in his life here on earth the Christian discovers his true life in the communion of saints, in the fellowship of the body of Christ and the love of the brethren, he understands that this is an eternal and immortal life which death cannot destroy. We who remain are not underlaid from those who have gone before us, and by their going we are called to supply their presence with a livelier charity. Death might separate us from the love of one another, but nothing, ‘neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature’ can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. May it be that through human sorrow and loss, we are led to a deeper understanding and a ready acceptance of the love of God in the hands of His children.

As for my friends, they are not lost;
The several vessels of thy fleet,
Though parted now, by tempests tost,
Shall safely in the haven meet.

Still we are centred all in thee,
Members, though distant, of one Head;
In the same family we be,
By the same faith and spirit led.

Finally, before an event which seems to the unbelieving heart to speak of mortality only and dissolution, the Christian is moved to a confident hope in God’s re-creation of all things. There shall be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’. ‘Behold’, says the exalted Christ, ‘I make all things new’.

That other Lincolnshire parson, Richard Gales of Gedney, whose essays I treasure not least because Peter Binnall gave me a copy of them, quotes a puritan and disapproving account of a simple countryman in the seventeenth century:

‘On his deathbed, being demanded what he thought of God, he answers that He was a good old man; and what of Christ, that he was a comely youth; and what should become of his soul after he was dead, that if he had done well he should be put in a pleasant green meadow.’

The heaven of our hope is pictured under a diversity of symbols, and as today we pray for a faithful priest, a countryman and lover of the country, perhaps this one, the green heaven, best befits. Grant, O Lord, to him and to all who rest in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace.

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green.

And there too shall be that springtime of the body, for which we wait and hope.

An obituary notice for Canon Binnall by Mr F.T. Baker appeared in the Society’s Annual Report for 1980-81. An appreciation of him has been included here by general request, in view of the unique position which he held in this Society and its parent societies. His support, extending over fifty-five years, included service as secretary of the Lincolnshire Architectural and Archaeological Society; as contributor to The Local Historian, the publication of the Lindsey Local History Society; as editor of The Lincolnshire Historian, journal of the Lincolnshire Local History Society, from 1947 to 1954; and as president of this Society from 1975 to 1978.

The Society is grateful to the Dean of Hereford for permission to publish his address, to Mr Cecil Jollands, Chaplin Clerk, for the loan of his recordng, and to him and to Miss Joan Williams, Cathedral Librarian, for transcribing and editing.

1 He was curate of Caistor with Holton le Moor and Clixby, 1932-4; perpetual curate of Holland Fen with St John the Baptist, Amber Hill, 1936-45; officiating curate-in-charge of Chapel Hill, 1939-45; rector of East with West Barkwith and rector of South Willingham, 1945-61.

2 In 1961.

3 He was rural dean of Wraggoe, 1959-61, and protoner in Convocation, 1955-9.

4 The Diocesan Advisory Committee on Faculties.

5 Richard Baxter, ‘He wants not friends that hath thy love’, English Hymnal 401.

6 ‘towards’ in the original.
