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GREAT ANGLICAN DIVINES – (5) JOHN PEARSON (1613-1686)

By David Watson

In these days of theological confusion, non-commitment, and downright apostasy, it may be some comfort to reflect that a man whose learning eclipsed that of any living Bishop saw no reason to doubt, and every reason to believe, the plain statements of Scripture and the historic doctrines of our faith.

‘The Christian religion has very strong evidences . . . I would recommend to everyone whose faith is unsettled . . . Dr. Pearson.’ Thus Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1763, a century after the publication of John Pearson’s *Exposition of the Creed* which for 250 years remained a standard text for ordinands in the Church of England. 1986 is the tercentenary of his death. Who was he? What lessons can we learn from him today?

His whimsically-named birthplace, Snoring, conjures up visions of yawning yokels or a sleepy squire in the pews of a Sunday morning; but in fact the name Snoring is derived from a river . . . the Snare. John was the eldest of nine Rectory children, and in after life ‘he took occasion very often and publicly to bless God that he was born and bred in a family in which God was worshipped daily.’ At the tender age of 10 he was admitted to Eton College as one of the 70 ‘poor scholars’, whose daily regimen might surprise some of us:

5.00 a.m. Get up, dress, repeating prayers. Clean room, wash.

6.00 a.m. Prayers, led by the Lower Master.

7.00 a.m. Study: Latin and Greek.

9.00 a.m. Breakfast.

10.00 a.m. Prayers.

11.00 a.m. Dinner.

12.00 p.m. Study.

5.00 p.m. Supper.

7.00 p.m. Beverages.

8.00 p.m. Bed, saying prayers.

There was ‘play’ before and after supper *only on holidays*: and on Christmas Day the boys go to bed immediately after 7 o’clock because in former times they had to rise between 3 and 4 o’clock for morning prayer.’ Apparently John thought eight hours a day insufficient time for study. His contemporaries allege that after others were asleep he would light a candle and continue reading . . . with such diligence that by the age of 18 he had covered most of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church, quite outside the school curriculum. Thus was laid the foundation of that encyclopaedic learning for which he was later famous: ‘among Englishmen of the XVIIth century probably the ablest scholar and systematic theologian.’

Exposition

From Eton to Cambridge (Queens’ and King’s), where he took holy orders, but was soon deprived of his Suffolk rectory because of his attachment to King Charles in the Civil War. Under the Commonwealth he withdrew to London and in 1654 accepted an invitation from the parishioners of St. Clement’s, Eastcheap, to deliver a weekly sermon. These sermons form the substance of his *Exposition* (1659) which has been described as ‘the most perfect and complete production of English dogmatic theology.’

With the Restoration, the fortunes of royalist clergy were reversed. Pearson's genius was recognised and he was appointed, in quick succession, Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, professor of theology, and Master of Trinity College. Subsequently he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society; and Bishop of Chester in 1675. (Ironically, this was also the year in which John Bunyan was imprisoned for the second time and began *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has outsold every literary production of the XVIIth century . . .except the A.V. including Pearson's masterpiece).

Pearson was a man of spotless life and of an excellent temper: Richard Baxter admired his imperturbable equanimity. . . a rare gift in those days of fierce theological controversy. Unfortunately, he regarded nonconformists as lost sheep needing to be coerced into the one true fold . . . the Church of England! This pride and prejudice were no doubt inherited (his grandfather, too, had been Bishop of Chester); but the same tenacity for tradition was an invaluable asset when it came to expounding the Creed. From his Introduction, 'To the Parishioners of St. Clement's, Eastcheap: 'The (*first*) principles of Christianity are now as freely questioned as the most doubtful and controverted points; the grounds of faith are as safely denied as the most unnecessary superstructions (*i.e. secondary matters*); that religion has the greatest advantage which appeareth in the newest dress, as if we looked for another faith to be delivered to the saints: whereas in Christianity **there can be no important truth which is not ancient; and whatsoever is truly new, is certainly false.**'

Creation

He goes on to support the Apostles' Creed with more than 2,000 quotations from Scripture, and another 2,000 from 440 ancient authors. His defence of the Virgin Birth and Resurrection is as relevant today as it was in 1660; and his insistence on a literal interpretation of Genesis, and the doctrine of a Young Earth is also of contemporary interest:

1) ' . . . there is no single person carries more evidence of his youth, than the World of its novelty.' He then quotes the Roman atheist philosopher/poet Lucretius:

"If earth and sky had no starting point in time (*or if homo sapiens has been around for two million years*) why have no poets sung of feats before the Theban war and the tragedy of Troy? Why have so many heroic deeds dropped out of mind and found no shrine in lasting monuments of fame? The answer is, I believe, that this world is **newly made**: its origin is a recent event, not one of remote antiquity. That is why even now some arts are still being perfected: the process of development is still going on . . ."

2) Pearson examines the claims of Egypt to a great antiquity 'far beyond the annals of Moses', and concludes that they are false. 'Again, for the calculation of eclipses, as it may be made for many thousands of years to come, and be exactly true, and yet the world may end tomorrow . . . so may it also be made for many millions of years past, and all be true, **if** the World hath been so old; which the calculating doth not prove, but suppose. He then who should see in the Egyptian temples the description of so many eclipses of the sun and moon, could not be assured that they were all taken from real observation What then are these feigned observations and fabulous descriptions of the World's antiquity, in respect (*compared with*) not only the infallible annals of the Spirit of God, but even of the constant testimonies of more sober men, and the real appearances and face of things, which speak them of a far shorter date?'

3) 'The inventions of all arts and sciences, the letters which we use, and languages which we speak, **they all have known originals** and may be traced to their first authors . . . whatsoever all the Muses (*i.e. poets*) could rehearse before those times, is nothing but the creation of the World and the nativity of their gods.'

4) 'We read without any show of contradiction how this western part of the world hath been peopled from the east: and all the pretence of Babylonian antiquity is nothing else, but that we all came from thence. Those eight persons saved in the ark, descending from the Gordiaean mountains and multiplying to a large collection in the plain of Sinaar, made their first division at that place; and that dispersion hath peopled all other parts of the world'

5) ' . . . it is not probable that any person now alive is more than 130 generations removed from Adam. And indeed thus admitting the Greek account of less than 5,000 years since the Flood, we may easily bring all sober or probable accounts of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Chinese (sic) to begin since the dispersion at Babel.'

6) Pearson refutes those philosophers who allege frequent destructions of the world by floods and fires. Their theories, he says, 'serve only for a confirmation of Noah's flood so many ages past, and the surer expectation of St Peter's fire, we know not how soon to come.'

Conclusion 'It remaineth then that we steadfastly believe, not only that the "heavens and earth and all the host of them" were made, and so acknowledge a creation; . . . but also that all things were created by the hand of God **in the same manner**, and **at the same time**, which are delivered unto us in the books of Moses by the Spirit of God, and so acknowledge a novelty, or no long existence of the creature . . . most certainly within not more than six, or **at farthest seven, thousand years.**'
(emphasis added)

One final question: why has Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* not been reprinted since the Cambridge University Press edition in 1899? I suggest two possible answers: 1) the decline of classical studies has put his Greek and Latin footnotes beyond the reach of many clergymen; 2) the general acceptance of Darwinism as gospel truth has led Church committees to regard as obsolete his chapter on 'Maker of heaven and earth'. If (2) be correct, then it is time for a rehabilitation of Pearson as of William Paley. His arguments for man's recent creation are as cogent today as Paley's arguments for Design in nature. Both authors deserve to be remembered, re-printed and re-viewed by the new generation of Christian scholars now emerging from a century of Darwinian darkness.

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