Grimshaw of Haworth: Bi-centenary

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Sermon preached at Haworth by

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It is 200 years since Grimshaw became Vicar of Haworth. Some of you will already know the main facts about his life and character. But they must excuse me if I recapitulate them for the benefit of those who only know his name.

He was a Lancashire man, born in 1708. He had served curacies at Rochdale and Todmorden before, at the age of 34, he came to Haworth, where he remained for 21 years as Vicar until his death in 1763.

Life and manners in the country districts of England were then rough, and Haworth, lying off any of the main high roads of the North, was rougher than the average. The Haworth people of the time are described as "ignorant, brutish, and wicked." There is little doubt that they were a tough crowd, and that a Parish Priest who wanted to succeed with them had himself to be a tough man, both physically and spiritually.

Grimshaw was certainly such a man. His nickname was "mad Grimshaw"; and the stories of his odd ways and forceful methods are still familiar to many people. In particular he is remembered as the Vicar who used to horse-whip into church those of his parishioners whom he found lounging about in the streets at the time of the Sunday sermon.

But he was much more than an eccentric with rough ways suited to ministry among a rough people; and it is of the deeper qualities of his nature and experience that I would speak.

He had begun as a man of the world, "proficient in wickedness," says Newton, his friend and biographer; and though, as far as we can make out, he indulged himself only in the less gross forms of dissipation, he was at first, judged by any standard of Christian vocation, a trifler and a worldling. His Ordination in 1731 made him a parson, but did not make him a converted man. But he must have had in him a possibility of spiritual honesty and earnestness, for his spiritual growth came to him, we are told, as the result partly of sorrow and bereavement, partly from a sense of his own spiritual incapacity, and mainly as the fruit of devout and persistent study of the Bible. His conversion took place in 1734. But it was not till 1738 that his dedication to God really matured. He then entered into a covenant of service to God, which he wrote down at the time and subsequently renewed on at least three occasions at intervals of about eight years, in 1744, 1752, and 1760. Anybody who reads that covenant will realize the religious whole-heartedness of the man and the spiritual zeal which possessed him; and from 1738 onwards his ministry showed in ever-increasing force those signs of complete dedication to God which made him a power for Christ in all this district.

He was in the first place a preacher, and he was quite indefatigable in such work, both in Haworth and in the neighbouring parishes, where he conducted a roving ministry, often preaching nearly 30 times a week—and we may remember that the sermon of those days seldom lasted less than an hour and often stretched to two. Like his friend John Wesley, he

was criticized for thus trespassing in other men's parishes; and undoubtedly he was violating the conventional regulations of the Church of England. But in those days of the Church's supineness, a man who, like these two, felt a burning compulsion to evangelize the people, was unlikely to sit too obediently to a system which condoned utter negligence on the part of only too many clergy. It was in virtue of this evangelistic ministry that he came into relation with the earliest activities of the Methodist revival. Like the Wesleys and all the first Methodists, he was no separatist. His reverence in the conduct of his church services, the growth of his congregation and the increase in the number of communicants at Haworth Church during his ministry, testify to his steady loyalty to Anglicanism. The separation which later took place between Methodism and the Church of England was something to which neither he nor John Wesley would ever have consented. Undoubtedly their own actions, in going beyond the accepted organization of the Church, and in encouraging Methodist classes and meetings, distinct from the parish system, blazed the trail for future separation. A wiser or a more earnest Church would probably have known how to preserve the Methodist ideal within the Church; and the separation certainly did grievous damage to the power of Christian witness in the nation.

Grimshaw was not merely a preacher. He was also a pastor, who knew his flock and was known of them. His ways were often strange, and his disposition was autocratic. But he was simple, humble, and hospitable. He cared for his people. He knew and understood their qualities, good and bad. Above all, he had a heartfelt zeal for their souls' health. To him they were all children of God, for whom Christ had died, and for whom he would have to render account to God.

The secret of his power lay in the fact that he was a really converted man. His favourite text was "To me to live is Christ and to die is gain"; he lived and worked in the conviction which that text expresses. Nothing to him was so terrible as sin. He would have had violent words to use about the easygoing modern delusion that sin is merely good in the making. In his view it was positive rebellion against God. It was the self-will of man preferring to go his own way rather than God's. It was the thing which spoils men and obstructs God's purpose for their welfare. His ideas as to the gravity of specific sins were the ideas of his time and of his school. The Puritans, of whom the Evangelicals of Grimshaw's time were the descendants, had been prone to lay perhaps more stress on the severity of God's judgment than on the wideness of His mercy. Like many other preachers of the austerity of Christianity, they tended—as a favourite modern hymn puts it, to "Make God's love too narrow by false limits of their own, and they magnified His strictness with a zeal He will not own." But none of us will wish to challenge or to modify what was their deepest conviction, that man has gone wrong through preferring his own will to God's. Grimshaw's whole ministry was afire with the belief that he was set to preach redemption from sin by the blood of Christ and the reality of divine Grace by the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Grimshaw laid the foundation of Christian living in Christian belief. To him nothing mattered so much to a man as that he should get right with God. The keynote of his conviction was "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." But belief to him—as to every Christian who really understands his religion—was not the mere consent of the mind to an idea, for that is merely the assent of a part of the man. Belief meant the committing of yourself—body, mind, and spirit—to a divine Person who may be trusted to put you right with God and with your true self. He is one who exacts hard service; Grimshaw spared neither himself nor anybody else, in his conviction that Jesus calls us to aim high and to strive hard so as to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling." But Jesus is one also who gives sufficient grace for the effort; we are to work out our own salvation, but "it is God who worketh in us both to will

and to do of His good pleasure;" and if Grimshaw left his hearers under no illusion as to the extent of Christ's claims, he also left them in no doubt as to the reality and efficacy of His help.

So then, "to live is Christ." Life only reaches its full meaning and possibility as it is lived in Christ. The only fulness of life for men comes from its nourishment from beyond with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. To live is Christ, for Christ is the Life. And, when life has become like that, then death is only the event by which man ascends nearer to the source of his life. Death, as Grimshaw showed when the time came for him to meet his own death, is no departure to an undiscovered country. It is a going home. To die then is gain, for it is a home-coming. To live is Christ. To die is more Christ, Christ seen clearer, Christ understood more fully, Christ enjoyed at closer quarters. In that faith Grimshaw himself lived and died. In that conviction he laboured to bring his people to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection. Men criticized his ways, or laughed at his oddities, or resented his zeal, or accused him of narrow fanaticism. But within himself, in the secret chamber of his soul, where Christ and he met, he had the spring of conviction, the seal of dedication, the inspiration of service, which made him the man, the pastor, the preacher that he was.

Times have changed. Grimshaw's ways of action would not suit this generation, any more than his ways of speech would be its idiom. But we do well to remember with honour this fiery evangelist and devoted parish priest, for the example which he gives to later times of a wholly converted life and a wholly dedicated ministry. Well for us if he stimulates us to look to the same source of grace and to build on the same foundation of conviction as he did. For, just as all good has its source in God above, so other foundation can no man lay, upon which the life of man or of nations will stand firm and secure in a changeful and troubled world, than that foundation which is laid, even Jesus Christ. My brethren, Church people and Methodists alike, and indeed all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, we may look to Grimshaw most of all neither as Churchman nor as Methodist, neither as preacher nor as pastor, but as a Christian man who, in an age of religious negligence and indifference, showed how a man can live in Christ and so find life a vocation, and dying to sin with Christ, can find death a gain.

BISHOP OF BRADFORD