TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Bishop Edward King

ON THE NINETEENTH OF MAY, 1985, a service was held in Lincoln Minster to mark the centenary of the enthronement of Edward King as Bishop of Lincoln. He died in 1910, so that few present at the service could remember him personally. Yet the first few rows of pews were filled with men and women who could. They were in their eighties and nineties, and bursting with pride that day, because each of them had been confirmed in childhood by Bishop King.

For most members of the diocese, however, 1910 was long ago and far away. There was a distinct doubt, in the minds of some who had organized the commemoration, as to whether the congregation would prove worthy of the occasion. One of the canons was heard to remark, before entering the cathedral, 'We don't know if there'll be anyone there, you know'. He spoke only half-jocularly, and conjured up a vision of the cathedral three-quarters empty. In point of fact, the great church was thronged. Young and old, Anglicans, Catholics, Free Church people overflowed the Minster. They had come to give God thanks for the life of a man who was renowned, not only as a spiritual guide, but as a saint. His Feast Day in the Anglican Calendar is March 8, and he is designated, in *The Alternative Service Book 1980,* as 'Bishop of Lincoln, Teacher, Pastor'.

Edward King was born in 1829, and before coming to Lincoln in 1885, spent over thirty years in and around Oxford. He was an undergraduate at Oriel College; served as a country curate at Wheatley; and was first Chaplain, then Principal, of Cuddesdon College, the Tractarian theological seminary founded by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1854. Then for twelve years (1873–85) he taught in the University, as Professor of Pastoral Theology and Canon of Christ Church. In each of his varied spheres of work he excelled as pastor and spiritual guide. His extraordinary gifts of sympathy, tact, courtesy and shrewdness were devoted to the human and spiritual needs of his people, whether these were country parishioners, Anglican ordinands, or members of the University. One of his biographers, whose grandfather was King's vicar at Wheatley, judges that, 'during his twelve years in Oxford King became unquestionably the most powerful religious influence in the University'.[1]

How was that possible? It was possible in the first instance because King stood in a living tradition of pastoral care and spiritual guidance. King was a second-generation Tractarian, a son of the Oxford Movement, the Catholic Revival in the Church of England, of which the University of

Oxford was the epicentre. He was a graduate of Oriel College, seed-bed of Tractarianism, and a disciple of Newman, Pusey and Keble. He held to the great Tractarian priorities: sound doctrine and the fulness of the faith; holiness of heart and life; Catholic worship and ceremonial, through which to worship and to teach; and a pattern of spiritual guidance which was both sensitive and humane.

As a spiritual guide, he was not afraid to draw on continental, Roman Catholic teachers: Fénelon, Dupanloup, J. M. Sailer of Regensburg. Fundamentally, however, he was rooted in the bible, the Fathers, and in that English school of spirituality whose prime exemplars include Aelred of Rievaulx, Julian of Norwich, George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar. It is a school which holds together dogma and devotion, the homely and the holy, and issues in a spiritual guidance which is gentle and discerning, without being weak. As King himself was fond of urging, 'Gentleness is not weakness, but restrained strength'.

The character of King's spiritual guidance can be seen with especial clarity in his work as a confessor. Following the example of Dr Pusey and of his own colleague at Cuddesdon, Henry Liddon, King became a noted confessor at Oxford. It was not a role he sought; rather, one into which he was drawn in response to pastoral need. When he became Principal of Cuddesdon College in 1863, he had never been to confession himself. That was in no way exceptional, even among high Anglicans, at this period. When, however, one of his students asked him to hear his confession, the request brought the issue sharply to a head for the Principal. King told the man, 'Wait a while, I must make my own first'. Soon afterwards he did, riding into Oxford to make his confession to Dr Pusey at Christ Church. That was for him the beginning of a lifelong practice of regular, though not frequent, confession. He was never an undiscriminating advocate of the confessional, though he staunchly defended its healing power as a means of grace. His mature judgement was,

> that it would not be amiss if some of the people who use Confession very frequently would go less often; while he wished that many who never go to Confession would do so now and then. His words to one who had known him for many years were: 'Don't you think, dear friend, that it would be a good thing if some people did not go *quite* so often as they do, and if some who do not go at all would go sometimes?'[2]

To an Evangelical critic of *The communicant's manual* (1871), a devotional handbook for which King wrote a commendatory preface, King spelt out his own position on confession:

> The Manual does not teach, nor have I ever taught, that Confession before a Priest is necessary. The Church of Rome, as has been well

> said, compels her children to make Confessions; the Church of England compels her priests to hear them.[3]

He amplified his view some four years later, in a letter to a priest who had sought his advice on confession:

> (1) Confession to a priest is not necessary, God will pardon on true repentance; therefore confession of our sins to God, with true sorrow and purpose of amendment, and prayer for pardon through Christ, will bring pardon.
>
> The necessity of confession to a priest once a year was not enforced till the Council of Lateran (1215 A.D.). . .
>
> (2) Our Prayer Book says, as you know, in the exhortation to Holy Communion, that if a person cannot find peace in this way, then their duty is to go to the priest for confession. We should, I think, teach people this, and trust to the Holy Spirit to guide them when to come.
>
> (3) In the case of sickness, as you know, we are to move the sick person to make a special confession if there is any weighty matter.
>
> Here again, if we all did this, I think a great number would be able to see what they ought to do, without any great difficulty.

With particular penitents, his caution in the matter of confession may sometimes seem excessive, as when he writes to a lady who had asked for advice about framing a rule of life: 'Confession. I can only repeat the Church's advice, try and get on without it; if you can't, use it.'[5]

If King was concerned not to exaggerate the significance of auricular confession to a priest, he was also prepared to acknowledge the value of mutual confession within the small Christian fellowship. In his *Letter to the Rev. Charles J. Elliott*, he cites St James's exhortation, 'Confess your faults one to another' (James 5, 16), and refers to early Methodist attempts to obey this injunction:

> John Wesley saw how deep this text should cut when he drew up the rules for his Band-Societies. 'The design of our meeting', he says, 'is to obey that command of God, Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed.'[6]

Among the key questions to be asked at each meeting were: 'What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?. . . What temptations have you met with?. . . How were you delivered?' King was not, of course, advocating the Methodist pattern for Anglicans. In point of fact, Wesley's 'band-meetings', as a corporate form of the confessional, lasted only a few years in the early stages of Methodism. King simply uses the Methodist

illustration to underline the need for the Church to provide opportunities for auricular confession.

He himself heard many personal confessions, both at Cuddesdon and at Christ Church, and served as spiritual guide to a wide range of people. It has been well said of the work of the confessional that it requires 'the skill of a physician, combined with the tenderness of a mother, and the love and firmness of a father'.[7] That was a view which Edward King both endorsed and exemplified. In his lectures to his Oxford ordinands, he spoke of the pastoral care of the sick, and urged, 'You must make them know that you have more than a mother's tenderness, more than a father's wisdom'.[8] Canons Randolph and Townroe, both of whom knew King personally, characterize this aspect of his ministry thus:

> As a spiritual guide he was extraordinarily gentle and hopeful. His way was always to encourage people as much as possible. He would often say, 'You must not let temptation take the heart out of you. You must go bravely and quietly on'. After absolution had been given he would always offer up extemporary prayer with wonderful insight and directness of application to the wants of the particular penitent, and then he would give his blessing, ending up with the words of St Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, praying that God would guide you and strengthen you and uphold you and 'give you all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost'.[9]

Like St Francis de Sales, King was sometimes accused of being a laxist in his moral and pastoral theology. He was not. He did, it is true, take the considered view that

> It is better to be over charitable than over strict. I am sure we must run the risk of the charge brought against our Lord of being too easy with sinners. It is a great difficulty, but that is the line, I am sure.[10]

Yet he could, when he judged it necessary, be exceedingly stern. Take, for example, the letter he wrote to Frances Heurtley on 16 November 1883, which Owen Chadwick has described as, 'one of the most severe letters ever addressed by a pastor to a soul asking for advice'.[11] Miss Heurtley was the daughter of Canon Charles Heurtley, King's colleague at Christ Church, and he certainly does not mince words in writing to her.

> I am very sorry that you should be so greatly disturbed. You must really do all you can to live with more self-control. Such out-bursts of temper are below the average standard of ordinary Christians, and are very bad in a person enjoying so many privileges as you do . . . It is a sad out-come of dear Dr Pusey's care, and you will lead people to

> say, as some do, that he spoilt some people. I am sorry to write so severely, but, if you wish for my help, you must not wish me only to say kind things and to indulge you in your waywardness. It might become a question whether you had not better give up Confession, except at rare intervals, if you do not derive more benefit from it, and exercise more self-control.[12]

We are reminded of King's dictum that, 'Gentleness is not weakness, but restrained strength'. Certainly, he may be included among those whom John Coulson has called 'the gentle masters of the spiritual life',[13] Christians like St Anselm, St John of the Cross, St Philip Neri, and St Francis de Sales. His gentleness was all of a piece with King's profound humanity, with his incarnational, sacramental view of the actual circumstances of people's lives. He would have agreed with Baron von Hügel's aphorism that, 'Grace is not the cuckoo, which drives all other birds out of the nest'. Owen Chadwick has highlighted the sense, which King gave to those who knew him, of a complete harmony between nature and grace in his life and character:

> One of the secrets of his . . . power was the naturalness of his faith. Faith was nothing strange in the world. The love of God was never fanatical or irrational. It was man's true home. King had no experience of conversion. It is doubtful whether a soul who experienced such turmoil of mind could have conveyed the sense which King always conveyed, of a perfect harmony between nature and grace.[14]

Or, as King's friend Scott Holland expressed it,

> Grace had so mingled with his nature that it was all of one piece. Grace itself had become natural. Who was to say which was which? Was it all Grace? Was it all nature? Was it not all both?[15]

How this integrity of nature and grace worked out in King's spiritual guidance, we may judge from his response to a question of conscience, posed by one of his ordinands in 1873. The man had scruples about going shooting in the vacation, querying whether it was a proper recreation for an intending clergyman. As his theological college principal, King robustly advised him to go ahead and shoot, adding,

> I am not saying all this out of false kindness, because, I think, it is telling you to do what you like (I love you too truly for that), but because I do value so highly a natural growth in holiness, a humble grateful acceptance of the circumstances God has provided for each of us, and I dread the unnatural, forced, cramped, ecclesiastical

> holiness, which is so much more quickly produced, but is so human and so poor.[16]

This reply to the young ordinand is, however, nuanced by King's comment that he could not recommend the man to go on shooting after ordination, as that would be inconsistent with the priestly life.

King's concern for 'a natural growth in holiness' led him to stress the need to make use of the everyday circumstances of one's life, as all grist to the mill of holiness. In his Pastoral Lectures, he urged upon his ordinands the view that, 'Discontent with our lot is disbelief in God's providence'.[17] Similarly, he writes to Miss Heurtley, on St Stephen's Day, 1884, in a vein that recalls De Caussade's 'sacrament of the present moment',

> I hope you will some day find your life more congenial than I fear you do just now. We might, I believe, trust more than we do to God's ordering the circumstances of our lives; so that the best way would be to do each day what we have to do, as well as we can for Him. So we should find a set of spiritual exercises with rewards and crosses, encouragements and reproofs, ready for us, and most exactly suited to our real nature and needs, which are not always just what we fancy they are. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and, loving us more than we love ourselves, is more true.[18]

Such was his consistent teaching. To a young priest, he writes: 'To do the Divine Will in little daily duties—this is the inner armour of the saints'.[19] To a lady encountering difficulty, he counsels, 'Take the daily troubles as the very best discipline you could possibly have. They are simply God's own words to you.'[20]

King's basic stance here is redolent, not only of De Caussade and St Thérèse of Lisieux, but of the great Tractarians who were King's Anglican mentors. We find the same strain in John Keble's *Christian year*, with its lines:

> If on our daily course our mind
> Be set to hallow all we find,
> New treasures still, of countless price,
> God will provide for sacrifice . . .
>
> The trivial round, the common task,
> Would furnish all we ought to ask:
> Room to deny ourselves; a road
> To bring us, daily, nearer God.

Pusey expresses the same thought in his own idiom, and with a luminous simplicity: 'Holiness does not consist in doing uncommon things, but in doing common things in an uncommon way'.

King's concern for a natural growth in holiness also led him to deprecate attempts to take heaven by storm through sudden or excessive austerities. As Principal of Cuddesdon, he sent a note one Good Friday to a student who had eaten hardly anything during Holy Week: 'Dearest man, eat breakfast and come down to the lower level of yours, E.K.'.[21] O the one hand, King acknowledged the austerities practised by Father Benson of Cowley, the founder of the Anglican Society of St John the Evangelist, as part of his heroic holiness. On the other side he was keenly aware that such mortification was not for every one, and that if taken as the norm or ideal, it might well deter Christians struggling on the nursery slopes from making any further progress at all. To Charles Edward Brooke, a former student, on the eve of ordination, King wrote in 1871:

> I think, dear man, we must be gentle in our unworldliness, while we are really strong in the great things—in unselfishness, and in communion with God at odd times and in odd circumstances. Until your ordination, therefore, I should try and please people in many ways which one might be glad to escape, but which probably do not pull us down.[22]

Yet, as his letter to another Cuddesdon ordinand shows, King was not in the business of prophesying smooth things, and telling people what they most wanted to hear. To this correspondent, who was facing the need to part from a close friend, he writes:

> Do let me assure you that the heart is such immense capacity if we only give it up to God to discipline, that these woundings are rather *prunings* for greater beauty and richer fruit. Had you gone with your good friend it might have narrowed the circle of your love, and you would not have had the sense of freedom to love all who may be waiting to be won by you to Him through your real love for them.[23]

One of King's greatest gifts was an imaginative sympathy which enabled him to discern, with insight and sensitivity, the human and spiritual needs of those who sought his advice. He had no blanket prescriptions to offer. He treated every one as a distinct person in his or her own right. In the early days of Cuddesdon College, there were difficulties when the rigorist Vice-principal, Henry Liddon, attempted to form the ordinands according to a set pattern, or, as King put it, 'to fit the Cuddesdon shoe on every foot'. That was not King's way. He was infinitely adaptable to the needs of each person. He dealt with people right across the social scale, and was never inhibited by Victorian class barriers. As the great Oxford liturgiologist, F. E. Brightman, testified:

> He moved up and down the social strata without effort; or rather he seemed to have no sense of social distinctions, and could talk to everyone 'in the language wherein he was born', so that the

> ploughboy could say he must have been a ploughboy himself. He was so absolutely a gentleman that his rustics could say there was nothing of the gentleman about him.[24]

With this courtesy and sympathy there went acute insight into character and personal needs. Writing to one of his young ordinands in 1873, he replies to the man's confession that idleness is his besetting temptation:

> You say . . . that you suffer from temptation to idleness, *i.e.* idleness in *reading*, for I should not think you were ever an idle, lazy, lethargic man, and so I should think it would be well to keep the point clear. If I am right—I mean I think you will find the work of visiting, preaching, teaching in school classes not difficult to you . . . but in reading, in patient intelligent culture and progress, that is where I expect you need consideration, resolution and help . . ..
>
> . . . I wish you would talk more, and write more. There is a certain mental crudeness, and abruptness, almost a hardness, your thoughts being as it were wrapped up, involved too tight. This I long to see unfolded, softened, expanded . . .

We get the picture of an intensely activist, vigorous young man; highly-motivated, intent on doing people good; but in danger of neglecting the inner life, both intellectual and spiritual. So King ends his letter on the deepest note, and comes, with consummate tact and yet entire directness, to the heart of the man's need:

> We both need deepening more and more in divine love—in fact, real love of God and love of man in God, or God in man, makes all labour light—and, therefore, reading; and we need to be more kind, more considerate, less selfish even in carrying out religious plans, more ready to acknowledge God's presence in others, and to fall in quietly and brightly with their different ways—freedom from any *religious harshness*, a docile, child-like, simple, loving spirit.[25]

In that passage, we have much of the essence of Edward King, as a minister and spiritual guide: the love of God at the heart of it all; a natural growth in holiness; a courtesy and sensitivity to others' needs; and that gentleness which is not weakness but restrained strength. It is all there, *in nuce*, in the collect prescribed for the day of his commemoration, March 8:

> O Almighty God, who gavest such grace unto thy servant Edward King that whomsoever he met, he drew nearer unto thee; Fill us, we beseech thee, with sympathy as tender and deep, that we also may win others to know the love which passeth knowledge; through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord. Amen.

John A. Newton

NOTES

[1] Elton, Lord: *Edward King and our times* (London, 1958), pp 46–47.
[2] Randolph, B. W. and Townroe, J. W.: *The mind and work of Bishop King* (London, 1918), p 54.
[3] King, Edward: *A letter to the Rev. Charles J. Elliott, M.A.* (Oxford, 1879), p 9.
[4] Randolph, B. W., ed: *Spiritual letters of Edward King, D.D.* (London, 1910), pp 72–73.
[5] *Ibid.*, p 104.
[6] King, Edward: *Letter to . . . Charles J. Elliott,* p 11.
[7] Deedes, A. G.: *Charles Edward Brooke: a memoir* (London, n.d.), p 114.
[8] Graham, Eric, ed: *Pastoral lectures of Bishop Edward King* (London, 1932), p 58.
[9] Randolph and Townroe: *Bishop King*, pp 53–54.
[10] Randolph: *Spiritual letters of Edward King*, p 86.
[11] Chadwick, Owen: *Edward King* (Lincoln, 1968), p 6.
[12] Heurtley Papers, Pusey House, Oxford: HEU 5/2/43. Dr Pusey was Miss Heurtley's previous confessor.
[13] Coulson, J., Allchin, A. M., Trevor, Meriol: *Newman: a portrait restored* (London, 1965), p 24.
[14] Chadwick: *Edward King*, pp 3–4.
[15] Holland, Henry Scott: *A bundle of memories* (London, 1915), p 48.
[16] Randolph: *Spiritual letters of Edward King*, p 35.
[17] Graham: *Pastoral lectures of Edward King*, p 13.
[18] Heurtley Papers, Pusey House, Oxford: HEU 5/2/57.
[19] Randolph: *Spiritual letters of Edward King*, p 44.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 83.
[21] Chadwick, Owen: *The founding of Cuddesdon* (Oxford, 1954), p 115.
[22] Deedes, A. G.: *C. E. Brooke*, p 17.
[23] Randolph: *Spiritual letters of Edward King*, p 31.
[24] Ollard, S. L., Crosse, G., Bond, M. F., eds: *Dictionary of English Church history* (London, 1948), p 308.
[25] Randolph: *Spiritual letters of Edward King*, pp 40–42.