

David Watson

St Saviour's Summer Sermon Series : Great Preachers

a sermon preached at St Saviour's by the Rev. Colin Lunt on 22 August 2010

Introduction

David Watson, who died in 1984, was an Anglican priest, evangelist, and author. He had a very public ministry as a preacher, a pioneer of church renewal, and in his involvement with the ministry of peace and reconciliation, which brought him into the public eye for several decades. J. I. Packer said he was "one of the best-known clergymen in England". John Gunstone, writing of him in 1989, declared: "It is doubtful whether any other English Christian leader has had greater influence on this side of the Atlantic since the Second World War." His ministry was not just national but international, though. Several of his books continue to be in print on both sides of the Atlantic.

Beginnings

David Watson was born in 1933 and educated at Wellington College and St John's College, Cambridge. It was at university that he became a Christian. As he made a commitment to follow Christ, he found help from David Sheppard, a well-known cricketer who was then training for ordination at Ridley Hall – the two men undertook to have weekly Bible studies together. David Watson was a very rational and clear-thinking person, but at that point he had acquired quite a muddle of beliefs. Responding to his own father's death, a consequence of his belief in Christian Science, when David was just ten years old, David Watson had weighed up the teachings of Christian Science, had explored theosophy, and been attracted by Buddhism and eastern mysticism, combining these together into a sort of spiritual atheism. However, he became convinced that, although there was definitely a spiritual reality beyond human reach, human effort alone was insufficient to attain certainty or obtain truth – it would always be relative as it was coming from the human direction. He came to the view that he would have to trust God's revelation of his own self in Jesus Christ. He thus became a keen student of the Bible. One person, hearing him preach many years later, in York, said: 'What impressed me most was David's burning enthusiasm which came from such a scholarly study of the text of Scripture'.¹

Ordained ministry

After several years of study at Cambridge, including training at Ridley Hall, David was ordained and became a curate at St Mark's, Gillingham, Kent, working with another curate, David MacInnes, under John Collins. Here he found himself ministering among the dockers of Chatham – quite a change from the gentility of Cambridge. For his second curacy he went to the Round Church in Cambridge in 1962, which would give him a base for evangelising students. He continued to develop his preaching skills.

¹ A story related by David MacInnes in *David Watson : a Portrait by his Friends* / ed. Edward England. – Crowborough, East Sussex : Highland Books, 1985. – p.17.

York

In 1965 David Watson went to York to become curate-in-charge of St Cuthbert's, Peaseholme Green, just inside the city walls. He went to an ancient Saxon church which had no more than a dozen people at any service and was twelve months away from redundancy. On his arrival the congregation grew steadily. By the time I moved to York, in 1972, two identical services were being held at 10.00 a.m. and 11.00 a.m. on Sundays because there wasn't enough room for all the congregation to attend a single service. At the evening services, attended by quite a number of students as well as by many others, there was a television relay to an annex behind the church, and at 'guest services' (where members of the congregation were expected to bring their friends) a further sound relay to the nearby St Anthony's Hall. At any of the evening services, you had to get to the church half an hour early if you wanted a seat in the church. A bigger venue was definitely needed.

St Michael-le-Belfrey, the last pre-Reformation church to be built in York, which stands in the shadow of York Minster, can easily hold 700. It was in the process of being made redundant. The very tiny congregation graciously accepted what could only be termed a take-over, and the church continued to grow, now based more in the city centre.

David had had an experience of the Holy Spirit whilst at Cambridge, and he became someone who encouraged the growth of the charismatic movement as it developed from the 1960s onwards. He was never a leader of the movement, but he wrote regularly for *Renewal* magazine, and he was always open to seeing the value of the movement in communicating the gospel, bringing faith alive, and deepening the Christian life.

In the 70s he invited the Fisherfolk (a group originating at the Church of the Redeemer, Houston, some of whom had already moved to Coventry) to York for a residential week. St Michael-le-Belfrey church started to run its own residential 'renewal weeks' which were attended by people from all over the world, as well as running summer-time missions in York, initiating the drama ministry of Riding Lights Theatre Company (Paul Burbridge, Murray Watts et al), and a liturgical dance group, promoting banner-making and song writing, producing albums of songs, founding The Mustard Seed – a Christian craft shop and café, and sending out ministry and worship teams around the north of the country.

Some of the visitors to the renewal weeks in York were from Ireland, and David developed a ministry in the area of ecumenism and reconciliation and took part in one of the Peace Marches in Northern Ireland. He spoke at a National Charismatic Conference in Dublin, which was attended by 6,000, of whom 5,000 were Catholics. His encounter with Catholic charismatics challenged him about his attitude to Roman Catholicism. His rigorous thinking and self-examination helped him to overcome prejudice and partisanship. In 1980 he met John Wimber (the founder of the Vineyard churches), and invited him to visit St Michael-le-Belfrey, which he did.

By this time, David had made a decision to stop doing university missions, feeling that he was getting too out of touch with the students – they needed someone younger – but he continued to travel, and was probably away from York at least a third of each year. The church was run by a team of elders, and by several ministers, including a full-time lay pastor and a full-time curate. I remember counting at one point that there were over thirty people on the 'staff' (not all paid, though). The elders used to meet fortnightly at 7.00 a.m. on Saturday mornings. Graham Cray, a CPAS worker, was one of those appointed with the official title Assistant Curate, but effectively 'vicar', so that David could concentrate on his preaching and writing.

Driven

David was definitely someone you would call 'driven'. He didn't want to miss a single moment that might bring someone to know Jesus Christ for themselves. He even turned down invitations to speak at international conferences in order to keep focused on his own work. Although he would never have considered himself a writer, he did write quite a few books, as well as a video series called *Jesus Then and Now* (we joked that it might have been called 'Jesus now and then' – he had a good sense of humour). For his first book, he thought carefully and not entirely successfully about his literary style, as he admitted. However, for subsequent books he wrote more freely as he preached, and as he spoke, and this gives his writing a freshness and immediacy. He was never interested in writing about himself or simply propounding his own ideas. He had a sort of ruthlessness concerning the gospel, cutting through clap-trap, muddled thinking and hypocrisy, and challenging his congregation and those who wanted to enlist him into their cause – evangelicals, charismatics or whatever. In his book *Discipleship* (1981), he writes:

Christians in the West have largely neglected what it means to be a *disciple of Christ*. The vast majority of western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again-believers or Spirit-filled-charismatics – but not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to learn the meaning of true discipleship and actually to become disciples, the church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering.

This is no idle claim. It happened in the first century when a tiny handful of timid disciples began, in the power of the Spirit, the greatest spiritual revolution the world has ever known.

Discipleship / David Watson. – London [etc.] : Hodder and Stoughton, 1981. – pp.16-17.

He shocked some of his supporters when he said that he thought the Reformation was one of the worst things to have happened to the church.

He was always keen to listen to criticism of his sermons. If there was anything he could have said better, if there was anything incorrect, if there was anything unnecessary ... he wanted to know. Above all, he was passionate about communicating the message of a personal Saviour, and he didn't want anything to get in the way of that. As a mere college student talking to this internationally renowned preacher I remember saying to him once that he had used the phrase 'and the like' rather a lot in his latest sermon. From then on I never heard him use the phrase again.

Family and household

David's utter commitment to his ministry had a down side; this was the neglect of his own family. It wasn't that he was uncaring, but simply that work always came first. It was Anne, his wife, who caught the vision for community life. The Watsons' extended household might contain up to about six other adults, filling the three-storey Victorian Rectory and making a community of ten or so, plus at least as many again who visited frequently. Everyone living in the community had a job to do. David's domestic task was to empty the bins weekly, I seem to remember, but he rarely did so – he was either away or too busy. Having said that, there were many happy times in the household. I remember one period, a very busy time, probably Christmas or Easter, when things seemed even more hectic than usual. The household had been given a large box of chocolates – Terry's 'All Gold'. I can't remember who made the joke first, but David cut off a piece of sticky label and placed it over the 'ld' so that the box lid now said 'All Go', picking up on one of the catch-phrases around at the time: 'It's all go'. So we shared the 'All Go' chocolates with fun and laughter.

The extended household had a serious purpose, which was to support David's ministry. Among other things, it enabled people to join David's team through the provision of a place to stay. The household met together every morning at 7.00 a.m. for prayer. This was an informal time of sharing and prayer. David had already got up earlier and said the morning office on his own in his study at 6.30 a.m.

London

David and Anne left York in 1982 and moved to London, where David built up a new team. His literary agent, Edward England, persuaded him to write his autobiography, published as *You are my God* (1983). Early in 1983 he was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Much prayer was offered for him. John Wimber even flew in from the United States to pray for him. Bishop Morris Maddocks led a healing Eucharist for him at St Michael-le-Belfrey. David had to stop working and undergo surgery. This time of having to ease up on his work led to some good things, though. He felt God saying to him that he didn't have to prove himself to him all the time – God loved him anyway. At this time, he very much enjoyed teaching his daughter, Fiona, to learn to drive, something that work commitments would have prevented him from doing previously.

In his final year David was persuaded (again by Edward England) to write another book about himself – this book, *Fear No Evil*, is a vivid description of his time as a cancer patient. He died on 18 February 1984, and the book was published three months later.

Conclusion

How to summarise the ministry of David Watson? He was an outstanding preacher, speaking crisply and to the point, pulling no punches. Although coming from a traditional evangelical perspective, he embraced anything that would help people acquire faith and come to a living awareness of Jesus Christ. He was able to communicate the Christian faith with clarity, conviction and urgency. His voice came across well through public address systems (he had even done some passenger announcements for British Rail)² – it was strong and emphatic.

He believed in shared ministry, and part of the impact of his ministry was due to working with teams, which demonstrated practically a powerful joint ministry and infectious fellowship. For him, though, things like drama, dance, music, extended households ... all had to pass the test of producing fruit in the form of changed lives to be worth supporting.

He was as critical of himself as anyone else could be, and had quite a heavy dose of humility to go with his sincerity and conviction. Despite his usually very traditional appearance – he often wore an old school tie and a blazer or sports jacket – he was a true radical who really believed in the subversive message of the New Testament and the transforming experience of Christ in people's lives, his own included.

² The St Michael-le-Belfrey sound engineer was a British Rail worker.