

Preached by the Revd Dr Angus Ritchie (Jellicoe Chaplain), in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Sunday 6th February 2011, to mark the anniversary of Fr Basil Jellicoe's birth.

There is more information about the Jellicoe Community, and Magdalen College's Jellicoe Internship programme, at <http://jellicoe.org>



Many of you will have seen this week's Chapel posters. Fr Michael has chosen a wonderfully retro photograph (*above*) - with a becassocked cleric, standing behind a bar. The priest in question is Fr Basil Jellicoe, Magdalen's Missioner to Somers Town – back in the 1920s, one of the most wretched slums in London. (Our College Trust, which disburses funds to charities each term, is the successor to the Mission.)

Among his many distinctions, Jellicoe – slum priest, retreat conductor, social reformer – is the only Anglican priest to have inspired an entire musical. *Jellicoe: The Musical* had its brief moment of glory eight years ago, treating the residents of Somers Town to such hits as 'St Pancras House Improvement Society' and 'A Parson Running A Pub'. While it has yet to hit the West End or Broadway, the musical is indicative of Jellicoe's larger-than-life character, and the affection his memory continues to inspire in his old parish.

Jellicoe exemplified the best characteristics of that generation of Anglo-Catholic clergy. He had passion and prayerfulness, humour and charisma. Above all, he was inspired by the conviction that the life of God could and should become flesh in every earthly community.

Born on 5th February 1899, Fr Basil studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, before training for the priesthood at St Stephen's House. Upon ordination, he was appointed Magdalen's missioner to Somers Town. Jellicoe regarded the state of his parishioners' housing as a scandal. As a good Anglo-Catholic, he knew the Eucharist to be "an outward and visible sign of an inward and

spiritual grace” – a sign of the way God in Christ enters and redeems the material world. His sermons attacked the slums were a theological as well as a social outrage – they were, he said “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace.”

Jellicoe had been born into privilege and used his many connections to assemble a powerful alliance for change - enlisting the support of the Prince of Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Housing Minister in his St Pancras House Improvement Society. He understood the importance of dramatic flourish – erecting vast papier mache effigies of the rats and bugs that infested the slums, and ceremonially torching them as the first slums were demolished. And he used the ‘new media’ of his age: making an early film of the conditions in which his parishioners lived, and making a mobile cinema in a trailer, so that those who lived in prosperity up and down the land could see what life in the slums was really like. After each showing he told them: “Now you know what life is like. You have no excuse for inaction.”

The Times’ obituary gives some flavour of Jellicoe’s extraordinary energy and enterprise: telling its readers that Fr Jellicoe “resolved that he would not rest till his people had homes fit to live in, and the rehousing schemes started by his society have already provided many excellent flats with gardens, trees, ponds, swings for the children, and other amenities. Although the rents charged are not more than what the tenants paid for the old slums, the loan stock receives 2 per cent and the ordinary shares 3 per cent.”

Jellicoe asked local people what they wanted (not a common practice at the time), and ensured the housing was beautiful as well as functional, with space for socialising and creativity. Not surprisingly, the beauty and layout of this college was also an important inspiration. Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch has observed: “Half a century before the development of London’s docklands, Fr Basil Jellicoe had pioneered an economically viable and morally inspiring form of ‘regeneration’. More recent initiatives have all too often alienated and displaced the original residents. Jellicoe’s version of neighbourhood renewal took local people seriously, and ensured their needs were given pride of place.”

Jellicoe’s vision transcended the narrower tendencies of Anglo-Catholicism. Archbishop Rowan Williams recounts a characteristic incident: “Father Basil was challenged by some of his more narrow-minded High Church friends about why he would come to celebrate and preach in a parish church like [St Martin-in-the-Fields] where the Blessed Sacrament was not reserved. Jellicoe said he had no problem at all in coming to preach in a church part of which was reserved for the service of Christ in the form of his poor.” The sacrament we celebrate today was, for Jellicoe, about a deep and generous engagement with the world – not a pious retreat from it.

Fr Basil was a realist – living in the world as it is, and inspired with a vision of the world as it should be. We see this realism in the economics of the St Pancras House Improvement Society, and in Jellicoe’s willingness to move beyond the confines of one church tradition. We also see it in his attitude to alcohol. Jellicoe himself was teetotal, and yet one of his most controversial schemes was the establishment of a College for Publicans. His reasoning was pragmatic not judgmental. He wanted the drinkers of Somers Town to get good service and good beer – and to save them from the kind of pub that made its money by encouraging alcoholism and so devouring the whole of a family’s much-needed income.

Seven decades on, the Jellicoe Community was founded here at Magdalen. Its aim was to enable another generation of students to live Jellicoe's convictions, on residential placements in East London. More recently, interns have been drawn from a much wider range of institutions – last year, Magdalen's Antonia Adebambo and Ellen Lynch were joined by around 20 other students. Today's interns are placed in Christian congregations from a wide variety of traditions. Within the Church of England, these vary from charismatic evangelical right through to the smells and bells of Jellicoe's own church, St Mary's Somers Town. Jellicoe interns are also placed in Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal and Salvation Army congregations.

These churches are all members of London Citizens (<http://londoncitizens.org.uk>), the capital's broad-based alliance. It contains over 160 dues-paying organisations – alongside churches there are mosques, temples, schools, student and trade unions. Their common action has achieved some striking results. London Citizens has won over £60 million pounds for low-paid workers, and secured the world's first Living Wage Olympics. The Citizens UK Assembly in May secured commitments from David Cameron and Nick Clegg to the end of child detention in the asylum process, and to Community Land Trusts as a way of achieving decent, affordable housing in our own generation.

In organising, the action grows out of the relationships – relationships based on an attentive listening to people's circumstances, passions and values. Community organising is not unique because of the things it campaigns for. What's distinctive is the process. The action is not merely for the poorest and most marginalised in society – it is taken by them. People used to being passive recipients of whatever the political process deals out become agents of change. The process matters every bit as much as the results.

The work of community organising is very much in the spirit of Jellicoe: in its commitment to valuing and listening to local people; in its invitation and its challenge to those with wealth and status and in its realism - its willingness to engage with the world as it is and not simply to dream of the world as it should be. I hope community organising can also learn from the less positive aspects of Jellicoe's story – focusing not on a charismatic individual (with the attendant dangers of burn-out – Fr Basil died of exhaustion, aged just 36) but participating in a process which is actually led by local people.

At a time when young people are supposed to be apathetic, the growth of Jellicoe Community shows there is a real appetite for engagement with social and economic justice - engagement driven by the very people who are supposed to be hardest to involve. At a time when they are supposed to have given up on institutional religion, we find students increasingly drawn to a form of social action built on the life of local congregations. And at a time when the media is full of stories of church disunity, we find Christians working together across a wider and wider range of denominations and traditions. The approach of community organising is to build relationships around the issues on which we can agree. This is not to evade the serious issues of disagreement. Rather, the hope is through organising on the areas where passion and vision are shared, we can come to more contentious issues with deeper bonds of trust and solidarity.

In denouncing slum housing as “an outward sign of an inward disgrace” Jellicoe’s words and deeds proclaimed the intimate connection between spirituality and social justice. Fr Basil knew that when the Spirit of God warmed and transformed human hearts there would be evidence of this in the public sphere as well as the personal, in the transformation of slums as well as the celebration of sacraments. Of course, the Jellicoe internship is just one of many different ways in which you might rise to that challenge.

Last term, Bishop Doug Miles preached the Chapel’s annual Jellicoe sermon – choosing as his theme ‘A Life That Counts Beyond The Self’. Basil Jellicoe lived such a life; a life that counted for something, a life that is still having an impact, many decades on.

Like Bishop Miles’ sermon, today’s readings [Isaiah 58:7-10; Matthew 5:13-16] both challenge us. They ask what kind of life we want to live, what kind of church we want to be. Will we follow the stale path of maximising earnings and minimising engagement beyond the circles of the prosperous and fortunate – a life that may be outwardly religious but which is hardly salt or light? Or will we allow Jesus Christ to call us out beyond our self-absorption – into a life that is richer, fresher, fuller – a life that changes, and is changed by, the poverty and injustice of our own age?

*Bishop Doug Miles’ Jellicoe sermon is online at
<http://jellicoecommunity.blogspot.com/2010/12/jellicoe-sermon-2010-life-that-counts.html>*