

Colenso's Greatest Sermon

Ninety-seven years ago on a Wednesday morning of March crowds of men and women dressed in mourning black filed along the streets of Pietermaritzburg towards the cathedral church of St Peter's. Not only in the capital but throughout Natal, all shops and places of business were closed as a result of a proclamation by the Governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, that this particular weekday should be observed as a 'Day of Humiliation and Prayer, in consequence of the great Disaster at Isandhlwana, on January 22nd, 1879'.

In scores of churches the preachers delivered solemn addresses in which they referred to the tragic deaths in battle of young Natalians and Imperial troops. Of the 150 European volunteers who died at Isandhlwana eighty of the dead were Natalians and thirty of them — officers and men of the Natal Carbineers, Newcastle Mounted Rifles, and other colonial units — were members of the best families in the colony.

So many a heart turned over and many an eye filled with sudden tears as parents, wives, and sweethearts sitting in the pews thought of the unburied dead still scattered round that Zululand hill. It was an emotional day throughout the colony, a day on which the majority of the officiating clergymen did not attempt anything more than a pious memorial service for the young men lost.

One clergyman, however, was to be different — the Right Reverend J. W. Colenso, D.D., Bishop of Natal — and it was to hear the service in his own church that the worshippers were making their way along the Pietermaritzburg streets.

The sermon which he delivered — printed by P. Davis & Son, Longmarket Street, that same year — was long remembered by the congregation. The copy which I have, yellow with age and stained in places, runs to 15 pages, in all about 5 000 words. It is a brilliant example of Colenso's pulpit style — logical and well-arranged, with an infrastructure of aggressive argument and illustration that still gives it the power not simply to hold attention but almost to compel it.

Although only seven weeks had elapsed since the battle Colenso spoke hardly one word of comfort to those bereaved and for some of his listeners the pangs of sorrow must quickly have been replaced by feelings of indignation. As for the 'my-country-right-or-wrong' types seated in front of him, he had nothing but harsh words: 'vainglorious . . . reckless . . . ready to triumph boastfully . . .' To speak in this style to a congregation bereaved, saddened, and apprehensive of worse disasters to come was a very chancy thing. Donald Morris, author of *The Washing of the Spears*, considers that Colenso's sermon on this occasion was 'perhaps the bravest act of a courageous lifetime . . .'

He entitled the sermon '*What doth the Lord require of us?*' His text came from Micah vi., 8: '*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good! And what doth the Lord require of thee, but to walk humbly with thy God?*' In a short introduction he said that he responded most heartily to the call of the

Governor who, he doubted not, himself felt deeply a sense of those sins which as a people all had committed.

The people of Natal had been rash and hasty in giving public approval — or at all events silent consent and encouragement — to many things which they had half-suspected or even felt in their heart of hearts to be wrong. These things were at variance with the eternal laws of truth and righteousness, with their Christian profession, and with their character and reputation as Englishmen:

It is of no use merely to lift up our hands — to make vague professions of penitence, if we do not amend our doings — to keep a day of humiliation and prayer, if it leaves us as thoughtless and headstrong, as regardless of the good, the true, and the just, as vain-glorious and self-confident, as reckless of blood-shedding and deeds of violence done in our name, as ready to triumph boastfully in acts of slaughter and plundering, ravaging and burning as before . . .

Then in words which must have rung defiantly through the little church, Colenso said:

I am called this day as a minister of religion to take my part with you in this solemn service. And I will not prostitute my sacred office by speaking peace to you when there is no peace . . .

He then moved directly into the political field. No colonist had any doubt that what led to the Zulu war and thus to the late great disaster had been the annexation of the Transvaal by which, as the Boers complained, the British had come by stealth, deprived them of their rights, and taken possession of their land. The apparent agreement to this act had not come from the great body of old Dutch residents but chiefly from newly-arrived Englishmen.

By this act of annexation, said Colenso, Britain inherited the quarrel between the Zulus and the Boers over the Disputed Territory, i.e. the land south of the Pongola, which the Boers claimed and which they encroached upon, despite increasing protests from the Zulus, who had asked for a strip of neutral country to be set between them and the Boers. Britain, as the dominant power, neglected a settlement of this question for fifteen years, during which time the Boers built farmhouses and little townships, eventually annexing the disputed land.

Then in 1877 Sir Henry Bulwer, the then Governor, appointed a Boundary Commission which reported in favour of the Zulus' claim. But here again the British did 'unjustly'. In a special clause they reserved all private rights given under the Boer government, including land-grants. The result was that the Zulu king had no real possession over the land for occupation, grazing, or settlement.

From these acts of injustice, claimed Colenso, this war had come. Then, referring again to his text, he asked the silent congregation: 'Wherein, in our invasion of Zululand, have we shown that we are men who love mercy?' Already 5 000 human beings had been killed and 10 000 cattle plundered:

It is true that, in that dreadful disaster, on account of which we are this day humbling ourselves before God, we ourselves have lost very

many precious lives, and widows and orphans, parents, brothers, sisters, friends, are mourning bitterly their sad bereavements . . .

Next, bending that accusatory eye of his on the listeners he asked:

But are there no griefs — no relatives that mourn their dead — in Zululand? Have we not heard how the wail has gone up in all parts of the country for those who have bravely died — no gallant soldier, no generous colonist, will deny this — have bravely and nobly died in repelling the invader and fighting for their King and fatherland?

As for the spirit of revenge:

Shall we kill 10 000 more to avenge the losses of that dreadful day? Will that restore to us those we have lost? Will that endear their memories more to us?

He had a word of castigation for the home government:

Alas! that [a] great English statesman could find no nobler word, at such a time as this, than to speak of 'wiping out the stain', if he really meant that the stain on our name was to be 'wiped out' with the blood of a brave and loyal people, who had done us no harm, nor threatened to do us harm, before we invaded their land . . .

He concluded his sermon with the prophecy:

If we will go on killing and plundering those who have never seriously harmed us, or threatened to harm us, until we made war upon them — treating his [Cetewayo's] message of peace with contempt and neglect, even with ridicule, ascribing it falsely to the promptings of men in our midst, judging unfairly and misrepresenting the Zulu king, both in the Colony and in words sent to England — if we will do these things — then indeed there will be reason to fear that some further great calamity may yet fall on us, and perhaps overwhelm us — by the assegai, famine, or pestilence — in what way we cannot tell, but so that we shall know the hand that smites us . . .

So ended that memorable address, long to be remembered by those fortunate enough to hear it. Many of his listeners were indignant, some were saddened, a number accepted the castigation, and a few were admiringly antagonistic, but whatever the reaction to his words, such was the overall effect exercised by Colenso's strong and sincere personality that he was heard through to the end in silence.

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