

CHARLES LOWDER



James 1:27 "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

First, my apologies to those of you who heard parts of this sermon when I told them in one of my Storytime videos during the shutdown period back at the beginning of the pandemic. It is a story that seems worth repeating though, given that passage from James today. So here goes:

His name was Charles Lowder, and he was a child of the Oxford Movement, that revivalist wave in the Church of England during the 19th century that stressed the importance of the catholic side of the Anglican Church, that sense of tradition,

and authority and sacraments, and social justice. Charles Lowder entered Exeter College at Oxford in 1841 when the Tractarian controversy, as it was sometimes called, was at its peak. The last of those anonymous and notorious Tracts for the Times was published during his first year at University, and the next year Dr. Pusey of Christ Church, my alma mater, was suspended from preaching by the Bishop of Oxford because of his supposedly radical views. However, it was too late for those like Charles, who had already been greatly moved and inspired by the sermons of Pusey, and Newman, and Manning. For Charles Lowder had already decided to give his life to the service of Christ, and upon being graduated, he was ordained as an Anglican priest. Moreover Charles, full of youthful zeal and enthusiasm, was determined to become a missionary for the Church. After failing to get a post in the South Pacific and then another in southern Africa, he became a curate in what was then described as "the largest heathen city in the world, outside of China," namely, London.

Father Lowder became a curate in a mission established by the Society of the Holy Cross, one of those Anglo-Catholic spiritual associations formed in the wake of the Oxford Movement. The mission was established to aid the Rector of St. George's parish in London, who with little help had charge over thirty thousand souls in the very worst part of the city. St.

George's parish included the area around the London docks where there was massive overcrowding. For as in many cities at that time, this parish church had been swamped by the enormous changes that had been wrought in society following the Industrial Revolution. Huge increases in urban population from the countryside had not been matched by appropriate civic improvements in housing or welfare or health care --- or in the provision of clergy and churches.

Moreover, there was little real work in such neighborhoods, and what was there produced pitiful wages. Most employment depended on industries attached to the docks, which provided income only erratically --- only when the ships came in. Large numbers of people lived on minimal Poor Relief; others on whatever they could find or steal. There were large numbers of pubs, providing an escape from the misery of life, and numerous prostitutes, unable to earn a living in any other way. It was the pub owners and brothel managers who most resisted the work of the Mission as a threat to their trades. It was they who later promoted the violence.

One contemporary commentator described the neighborhood thus: "The most graphic picture of narrow courts and alleys, as seen through the murky atmosphere of fog and dust, with all the horrors of sight and sound and smell --- scowling brutal faces of men, degraded monsters of women; poor little children half

clad except with dirt, with naked feet and disheveled hair, playing in the gutter, many of them stunted, half-witted, and deformed, and all wan and sickly looking; the air filled with the bruit of quarrels. Shameful words, and curses --- no mere passing experience of such outside features can give any adequate knowledge of the life that is lived within, in the wretched hovels that go by the name of home."

Like an abject scene from a Dickens's novel, here is where Charles Lowder and his associates lived out their faith. Here, and in places like it, is where the Oxford Movement became real, became something more than theological statements or liturgical interests. Here Fr. Lowder and his two assistants transformed the world around them. They started, as was their wont, with regular daily worship and soon began a boy's choir. Then Christian Education classes were established. A religious order for women nuns was formed to help with the work, with John Mason Neale's sister being one of the founding members. A school was started for the children. A refuge or shelter was established for young girls in the district to keep them from walking the streets at night, and that led to the formation of an industrial school for girls, teaching them useful trades with which to make a living, which was a very radical idea at the time. An institute for working men was also started, then a working men's college. Spiritual direction was widely given,

Baptisms and Confirmations became numerous. And in the end, St. George's Mission became St. Peter's parish, London Docks, and Fr. Lowder became their first Rector.

But all had not been easy, especially at first. Fr. Lowder became embroiled in the Ritualist controversy as it was being fought out in that day, not at the university level, but at the local parish. The history of St. Peter's struggle is not much different from many other early Anglo-Catholic parishes, including some in this country. One of Fr. Lowder's curates, Fr. Mackonochie, was probably the most notorious case for the anti-Tractarians. He was in and out of court defending his liturgical practices for sixteen years, until he finally collapsed of exhaustion and died in the Scottish Highlands. A succession of Bishops and ecclesiastical lawyers were outraged at some of the Anglo-Catholic practices of St. Peter's, practices like the fact that the clergy and vested choir processed, that people bowed towards the altar, that the ministers faced eastward to celebrate, or that there were colored frontals on the holy table. Things like candles and crosses infuriated many Bishops as being excessive and Romish. And yet there are probably few churches in the Anglican Communion today which do not entertain these as standard practices, even St. John's here.

However, in Fr. Lowder's day the low churchmen did not simply grumble and mutter disapprovingly to the bishop, they

sought criminal lawsuits in the courts, or caused disturbances in the church during the services. There were actual riots in St. Peter's, with rioters taking over the choir stalls on several occasions, interrupting worship with jeers and catcalls, and even pelting the altar with orange peels and butter. Police had to be stationed inside the church to keep the peace during worship. An angry mob once even tried to throw Fr. Lowder into the river, but failing to find him, settled for one of the wardens.

The controversy only ended when a more serious concern swept through the parish with the spread of a cholera epidemic in East London in July of 1886. The first week only four people died, the next week 20, the third week 308, and at its peak 818 people died in the neighborhood the last week of July. Chances of survival in that parish were less than 50-50. But Fr. Lowder, the mission clergy, and the sisters, were undaunted. When the hospital was full, the parish opened its own houses and schools, and established a cholera fund to aid in the work. They secured a convalescent home for those stricken, and then an orphanage for those children who lost their parents. They ministered to all in their district who suffered, without distinction. In the end, they won the hearts and devotion of the people, such that when the epidemic was over, no one really criticized them anymore.

The parish prospered again and Fr. Lowder grew older, his health failing while on holiday in Austria, finally dying in his hotel room attended to only by a fellow Englishman who happened to be staying there and a Roman Catholic priest who refused him the Sacrament. But his congregation would not let him be buried a pauper in some foreign land. The Working Men's Institute raised the necessary funds to bring his body home to his people. Huge crowds filled the narrow streets to join the funeral procession as it made its way across the parish from the railway station. Fourteen Masses had to be celebrated on the day of his burial to accommodate the throngs of people who gathered to mourn the loss of this simple parish priest. More than 3,000 people attended his burial at the graveyard. Allow me, if you will, to read a bit from the sermon preached at St. George's that Sunday:

"I need not say that he was loved by the poor among whom he ministered and with whom . . . he was 'Father' Lowder --- always ready to visit them in their affliction and help them according to his ability to be unspotted in the world. They mourn for him with a sorrow which is deeply sincere, for they well know what a loving and unsparing friend they have lost in losing him.

"Those who were present last Friday, when his body was brought to St. Peter's on its way to Chislehurst, where it was laid in the grave, will never forget that day. It is well to see

crowds respectful; it is rare, indeed, to see so many among them, men, women, and children, in tears. Such a sight of genuine human love speaks not merely for him who was mourned but for those who mourned him.

"They must have carried away in their hearts a deeper perception of self-sacrificing personal holiness. It was that which marked him, and it must have left the sacred contagion of its grace in them.

"Four and twenty years ago he entered some of the streets amid the jeers of such as lived there. He has now left them amid their sobs. They laughed when he came, and they wept when he went.

"I will say no more. They do not sorrow as men without hope. They felt that he was taken from them by the God and Savior whom he loved and served, to be forever with the Lord, and they surely went away again to their homes with a still stronger mind and purpose to lead righteous lives themselves." Fr. Lowder could have wished for no higher tribute than these words from his Bishop, who had more than once suspended him from his priestly duties.

In the end, Fr. Lowder was not the leader of a political party, he was not the Lion of the Senate, nor was he an intellectual or scholar. He had no voice in the Establishment, and no authority or prestige higher than that of a simple parish

priest in one of the poorest parishes in Victorian England. Still his life, I believe, is of immense significance for the Church. For it is an effective witness to the saving power of the Gospel and the love of God.

When you think about the Oxford Movement and those early Anglo-Catholics and High Churchmen, do not forget the slum priests, like Fr. Lowder and Fr. Stanton and Fr. Dowling or Fr. Benson, who gave their lives in the service of the poor in the most wretched places in the British Isles --- in the slums of East London, or Plymouth, or in Cowley, or Birminham, or the Gorbels of Glasgow, or Scully's Square in Boston. For it is they more than those full of words and speech who actually promoted the spread of devout and religious living, of personal holiness, which characterized the Oxford Movement. They more than others transformed the Anglican Church and the society where they lived, those slum priests of Victorian England ----- And so as James wrote in his Epistle today: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." And so let us too not be hearers of the word only, but doers. For faith without good works is dead. AMEN.