



A Speech by His Grace

The Lord Archbishop of York

The Most Rev and Rt Hon F D Coggan DD

THE SPEECH WAS DELIVERED
AT A DINNER ON 21ST JUNE 1961
AT LIVERY HALL, GUILDHALL, LONDON
TO MARK THE
SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE BRITISH OXYGEN COMPANY LIMITED
AND BROADCAST
THROUGHOUT THE WORLD
BY THE BBC

MR CHAIRMAN, YOUR EXCELLENCIES, MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN – this is indeed an august and happy birthday party; and I consider it a very great privilege to be allowed to share in it.

The Company has been extremely kind to me in sending me literature to enlighten my darkness as to what the British Oxygen Company is and does; and I have been greatly interested in reading that literature.

I have no doubt they knew a little of my ignorance of things financial and scientific, though they could not have known the full extent of that ignorance.

I tremble to find myself tonight surrounded by magnates who deal in millions; and, if I am an ignoramus in things financial, I am still more so in things scientific; I am the sort of man who, if asked what copper nitrate was, would reply that it was overtime pay for policemen.

Hence my welcome for *Years of Challenge*, Directors' Report and Accounts, and other things I could not understand. But even so I ran into trouble.

On the envelope which brought *Years of Challenge* was the crest, presumably of this great Company, and I see to my pleasure that it adorns our menu card tonight. This rather fearsome crest, emblazoned with three rude beasts putting their tongues out, had underneath it the legend (and you must pardon my pronunciation of Latin) *Auris Vitalibus Vesci*. Now that again presented me with a problem. What did this mean?

Presumably ‘Whisky for vital hours’ – that was why the beasts were hanging their tongues out. No doubt this was an old Latin form taken over into the Scots dialect and imported in great quantities into England. But then, I reflected, was it likely that I would be invited to speak under the aegis of a Company with such a motto? I thought again; and, being an ignoramus in the classics as well as in finance and science, I took this problem to two friends of mine in my own lovely diocese of Bradford,* and asked them what it meant. They told me it was a quotation from Lucretius, who flourished in the first century BC – though for reasons unknown the order of the words was changed – and that the translation was *To feed on vital air*.

Well, Mr Chairman, no one could say that we have done that tonight. You have indeed entertained us royally and we, your guests, are grateful. But it did seem to me that in those words ‘vital air’ there was a theme from which anyone would delight to speak.

This substantial gathering of men here in the Guildhall tonight is concerned, I take it, with maintaining, fresh and pure, the vital air of industry in general and one great industry in particular. To that end British Oxygen and its overseas associates employs, so I understand, in various parts of the world, something like 25,000 men and women. No mean contribution this, to our economy and to our prosperity.

But, when I speak to you about ‘vital air’, I think in yet wider

*The Archbishop was Bishop of Bradford at the time.

terms of our national life, and of the life of our beloved Commonwealth of Nations. What is needed if stagnation and suffocation are to be avoided? What are the essentials for a people in order that the vital breath of a clean, wholesome, national life may blow full and free? These are questions of vast importance, and they must be faced, resolutely and squarely, not only by the professional theologians or ecclesiastics, but by the men of affairs, of commerce, and by Members of Parliament. Let us make no mistake – there are evidences of stagnation, of suffocation, of decay, I would add even of death, in our society, in the midst of this age of plenty, of this age of the affluent society. I do not find that, now wealth has increased, crime is decreasing, nor prisons are emptying, nor police are unemployed. I do not find that, since there is comparatively little real poverty in these islands, nervous breakdowns are dying out, nor that the psychiatrists have nothing to do. I find that the reverse is the case in hard fact; and I ask myself why.

Is it possible that this great nation, engaged on the splendid task of alleviating the lot of the less fortunate, of building up trade, of keeping unemployment at bay, has succumbed to the temptation of asking, if not the wrong questions, at least the not fundamental questions? If that be true, it may be that we have been hacking at the branches of evil and not cutting the roots; that we have been belabouring the outposts and not attacking the citadel itself.

Let me illustrate the kind of thing that is in my mind when I

speaking of asking the not fundamental questions, or of taking up the wrong cries.

Democracy – that is one of the cries of our day; government by the people, by the majority. Good. But suppose that the majority is wrong, as it very often is; suppose that our democracy were to be divorced from morality? Do we not then get mobocracy? For 25 men, or for 25,000 men, to unite in support of something wrong does not make it right. Power, divorced from morality and responsibility, can be a menace.

Freedom – that is another of the cries of our day. But freedom by itself is not enough; I ask – freedom *for what?* Freedom used for selfish ends spells licence. There can be no liberty without loyalty; no freedom without limitation. He who cries ‘freedom’ (and we have all done it) must ask himself to what ends he will devote that freedom; else he will open the door of his own being and of his society, if he exercises any influence therein, to the tyranny of licence.

Or again, what of the cry, often heard but less often pondered, ‘give me the Sermon on the Mount; let society live by that and all will be well’? True enough. But how many who give voice to that cry have read the sermon in its entirety within recent memory? And of those who have, how many have pondered on the fact that the ideals set out in that sermon are completely impossible of achievement by unaided human nature; that it is law far more terrifying than the laws given with thunder and lightning at Sinai? Granted that – and, if you

do not grant it, try to live by that sermon tomorrow – and you are back asking deeper, more fundamental questions. Can man, unaided, live the good life? Is there such a thing as divine grace? If there be, is it available to men in the City, or even perhaps to a bishop or an archbishop?

Must we perhaps stop thinking of Christianity as something sweet and nice – dangerous adjectives those – and begin to look at it as the antiseptic without which the air of our society will become foetid, without which we shall stagnate, suffocate and die?

Must we, in other words, abandon the mild inoculation of Christianity, which we have inherited from our school or from our particular way of life, and begin to take Christ, His person and His message, seriously; begin, in fact, to breathe deeply of His life; ‘to feed’, in very truth, in the words of your motto, on His ‘vital air’?

To put it in another way – can we expect to enjoy the fruits of Christianity in our twentieth century civilisation if we pay no attention to the roots of the faith?

I change my metaphor yet again and ask how long can we go on living on dividends if the capital is running out? There are not lacking indications that, in fact, it is fast ebbing.

I come back to a point which I tried to make in a recent television broadcast; it is this – the effects of dire poverty on the one hand, and the effects of affluence (as we understand that term today) on the other, seem to be much the same. They lead to a

man becoming absorbed with things rather than with convictions; with the verb 'to have' rather than with the verb 'to be'; with goods rather than with character and destiny. And that, of course, is the damnation of a man or of a society. It happened to imperial Rome in the first century of our era, and a poet put the results like this:

*On that hard Roman world
Disgust and secret loathing fell;
Deep weariness and sated lust
Made human life a hell.*

And it is my conviction that that could happen to us, in these islands.

Will you forgive so serious a word on what is, after all, a 75th birthday party? I fancy that so responsible a gathering of men, of such great influence in our national life and throughout the Commonwealth, and in fields further flung, would not have had it otherwise.

I close on a note of gratitude to you, Mr. Chairman, for your great kindness in entertaining my fellow guests and myself so liberally tonight; and on a note of felicitation to you, as you go on with your great work in the last quarter of the first century of your life as a Company.

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