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Frances Knight

University of Nottingham, frances.knight@nottingham.ac.uk

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Preaching in Britain's "Parish Church": Sermons at London's St. Paul's Cathedral, in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Frances Knight

ORCID: 0000-0002-0124-8118

Introduction

This paper explores "space, place and context," the themes of the Sermon Studies Conference in 2018, with an examination of changing preaching practices at London's St. Paul's Cathedral between about 1700 and 1900. The cathedral was, and remains, one of Britain's most important religious spaces, a place where various types of national drama have been played out, and a setting for significant acts of public commemoration and celebration. The enormous scale of the building meant that for most preachers, preaching at St. Paul's was always an event, and never a matter of routine. This sense of "event" meant that sermons preached at St. Paul's were fairly often printed and have survived in relatively large numbers. Furthermore, during this period artists regularly depicted scenes at the cathedral, and this visual material aids our understanding of the context in which sermons were delivered.

Even when they have been edited for publication, and to a greater degree than other forms of theological production, sermons tend to remain shaped by their original context. The evidence is usually still visible of a particular preacher seeking to communicate something which at that moment he believed significant for the particular audience gathered before him. Assuming that he has written the material himself, much of the preacher's politics, education and worldview seep into his sermon, as well as his theological sympathies. At St. Paul's, as elsewhere, the sermons that were preached in 1900 were different in almost every respect from the ones that were preached in 1700. This paper argues that the preachers went from being defenders of the ecclesiastical establishment, expounding the well-worn themes of God's providential protection, the duty of patriotism, the errors of Dissent and Rome, and the necessity for a reformation of manners, to becoming skilled biblical exegetes, commending the Christian faith to increasingly discerning London audiences. After a long period in which the content of sermons appeared to alter relatively little, the critical moment of change occurred around 1870, when, partly in consequence of a new Anglo-Catholic cathedral chapter, and partly as a result of wider reforming pressures, the preaching at St. Paul's began to change in a number of significant ways.

St. Paul's was different from Britain's other cathedrals in at least two important respects. First, it was not the mother church for the whole of the town in which it was situated; its remit was technically limited to the geographically tiny, but hugely influential, City of London. Westminster Abbey and the Chapels Royal were rival ecclesiastical institutions that could and did host major civic and royal events, and there were also a number of large city churches with important historic traditions. Secondly, unlike the medieval English cathedrals which had to be repurposed for Protestant worship, St. Paul's was a creation of a Protestant age, and one with a spacious choir that was well adapted to the regular rhythms of Prayer Book worship. The Great Fire of London in 1666 had destroyed old St. Paul's, and this created the opportunity for something entirely new. Sir Christopher Wren's new cathedral, opened in 1697, was immensely impressive, and it rapidly became what it has remained, the iconic dome on the London skyline, and a prime tourist destination. In its imposing new appearance, there was more than a nod to St Peter's in Rome. Initially, this was seen as a Protestant riposte—Rome might have St. Peter's, but London had St. Paul's, and St. Paul was, fortuitously, probably the

Protestants' favorite saint.¹ The new cathedral was certainly vast, but unlike St. Peter's, it was not vulgarly colossal.² It had been paid for by parish subscriptions garnered from all over the country, and with a coal tax imposed on the City of London. This crowd-funding initiative added to the sense of its being a parish church for all of the people—in a nation which, after the union with Scotland in 1707, was becoming Great Britain, and was in need of unifying national symbols. St. Paul's had the potential to be powerfully deployed for this purpose.³

Developing a Preaching Culture in the New St. Paul's

For the first state sermon preached from the pulpit in the choir of the new St. Paul's, on December 2, 1697, the Bishop of London, Henry Compton, took as his text "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1).⁴ Although the sermon appears not to have survived, the text was a classic choice for such an occasion, and one which perhaps also hinted at the potential of the new cathedral to provide a shared space for the state (represented by the Corporation of the City of London, as the King had absented himself from the occasion) and the Church to come together. There was also some hope that after the political and religious turbulence of the mid-seventeenth century Commonwealth and Restoration, the new St. Paul's would be able to offer a clean slate for the Church of England itself: a big, light, airy space where various parts of the fractured Church might come together, and where some degree of healing might be achieved.⁵ The reality, however, would fall well short of the ideal: Henry Sacheverell's famously incendiary sermon of 1709 on "the perils of false brethren, both in Church, and state" led to riots, and to the preacher being impeached for sedition.⁶ Nevertheless, the cathedral's seating capacity and location made it an ideal venue for meetings and ecclesiastical interactions of all types, at a time when very large public meeting places were limited.

But the huge building also had huge disadvantages. Its size, emptiness and coldness were off-putting for local worshippers, nor did they need it: the cathedral was surrounded by about eighty parish churches in the square mile of the City of London, including St. Martin Ludgate, St. Bartholomew the Great, and St. Giles Cripplegate, where the residents of the City of London (who were relatively few) could continue to resort for more human-scale Sunday worship and the rites of passage. Although regular worship was conducted in the choir and the morning chapel, it was the hosting of big events that gradually became St. Paul's major purpose.

An engraving by Robert Trevitt showing Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, preaching a thanksgiving sermon to Queen Anne and both Houses of Parliament on December 31, 1706, illustrates how preaching was conducted at St. Paul's in the eighteenth century.⁷ The preacher appears as a tiny figure in the imposingly tall hexagonal pulpit with moveable canopy or tester,

¹ For Wren's intention that St. Paul's should be a Protestant cathedral, see Kerry Downes, *The Architecture of Wren* (London: Redhedge, 1988), 77, 112.

² Jeremy Gregory, "Preaching Anglicanism at St. Paul's 1688-1800," in *St Paul's: The Cathedral Church of London 604-2004*, ed. Derek Keene, Arthur Burns, and Andrew Saint (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 345.

³ The new state of Great Britain was inaugurated in the cathedral on May 1, 1707. See Nigel Aston, "St. Paul's and the Public Culture of Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *St Paul's*, 361.

⁴ Aston, "St Paul's and the Public Culture," 364.

⁵ This was often done by simply asserting the superiority of the Church of England over its rivals, and emphasizing the iniquities of Rome, and the chaos of Dissent. See Gregory, "Preaching Anglicanism," 344, 347.

⁶ Gregory, "Preaching Anglicanism," 343-4; Brian Cowan, *The State Trial of Dr Henry Sacheverell* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell for the Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust, 2012).

⁷ It is reproduced in *St Paul's*, 228. For a fee, it can also be downloaded from <https://www.alamy.com/st-pauls-cathedral-london-1706-1707-artist-robert-trevitt-image60077835.html>.

which is sited at the northeast end of the choir, and a large congregation is assembled. As well as sitting in the choir stalls, worshippers are shown in the boxes behind the stalls, and in the galleries above, which provided (and still provide) a further three rows of seating.⁸ Other hearers are shown seated on forms, in the center of the choir, and in the east end behind the pulpit.⁹ The picture suggests that at least 400 people may have been present on this occasion. Royal visits such as this were, however, extremely infrequent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Elaborate arrangements were made when George III attended in 1789 and 1797, and in 1814 the Prince Regent attended to give thanks for victory over Napoleon, but St. Paul's would not be regularly visited by the royal family until a service of thanksgiving was held for the recovery of the Prince of Wales from typhoid, in 1872.¹⁰ By this time, St. Paul's was moving into a distinctively different phase of its history. Queen Victoria attended—from her carriage—a brief service of commemoration for her diamond jubilee, in 1897, and once into the twentieth century, royal visits became very much more frequent. Although it was rarely fully exploited in the period considered in this paper, St. Paul's and its immediate environs had tremendous potential for public ceremonial. When extra seating was placed under the dome, it was able to accommodate at least 10,000 people, and the processional route from Buckingham Palace to the cathedral provided the possibility for thousands of spectators to catch a glimpse of the royal family, members of Parliament, and other dignitaries.¹¹

Up until about 1870, two distinct types of preaching happened at St. Paul's. The first was Sunday preaching, and preaching for holy days, which occurred at services that were held in the cathedral choir. As the Trevitt illustration and other eighteenth-century pictures show, the original pulpit was set up in the choir with a view to assisting the visibility and audibility of the preacher, and in the classic Wren "preaching box" style. The simple hexagonal pulpit, which may possibly have been on wheels, was replaced in 1805 by the Mylne pulpit: a modest but elegant carved and inlaid fitting which is now in the triforium.¹² Regular preaching in the choir continued until 1871.

⁸ The original choir seating is still in place, although in the nineteenth century it was moved one bay westwards. I am grateful to Simon Carter of St. Paul's cathedral for showing me the choir stalls and former pulpits.

⁹ There were forty-eight retractable benches, which ran back on wheels between the joists under the stalls when not in use. John Newman, "Fittings and Liturgy in Post-fire St Paul's," in *St Paul's*, 229.

¹⁰ W. M. Jacob, "History, 1714-1830," in *St Paul's*, 82; John Wolffe, "National Occasions at St Paul's Since 1800," in *St Paul's*, 382-5.

¹¹ Wolffe, "National Occasions," 381. A painting by Nicholas Chevalier depicting the Royal Family on their way to St Paul's in 1872 emphasizes the pageantry that was to become a feature of royal visits to the cathedral.

¹² The pulpit was named after its designer, Robert Mylne, the cathedral surveyor, 1766-1811. See Newman, "Fittings and Liturgy," in *St Paul's*, 229 for the suggestion that the original pulpit was moveable.



The Mylne pulpit (photo by the author)

The second type of preaching was what occurred at the great occasions in which St. Paul's began to specialize. These included the annual commemoration of events that were of specific importance in articulating and reinforcing English Protestant identity, such as the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) and the landing of William of Orange (1688)—both events on the fifth of November—or which were of particular significance to the City of London, such as the anniversary of the Great Fire, for which a sermon was preached each third of September. Fifth of November and Fire sermons continued to be preached until 1859. There were occasional funeral sermons—both Admiral Lord Nelson (1806) and the Duke of Wellington (1852) were buried in the cathedral with great ceremony.

Charity Sermons

Major preaching events were the annual charity sermons, which formed part of festivals which raised funds for a variety of causes, the most prestigious of which were the anniversary festival of the Sons of the Clergy, in mid-May, and the festival of the children of the London charity schools, usually on the first Thursday of each June.¹³ These were carefully organized musical, liturgical and social occasions. The Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy had been set up in 1655 to respond to a specifically Protestant problem—the provision of financial support for clerical dependents, in a world in which having a married clergy was seen as highly desirable, but an unhappy outcome of which was impoverished or even destitute clergy widows and orphans. The Corporation amalgamated six clergy relief charities in 2012 and was known as the “Sons and Friends” from then until March 2019, when it changed its name to the “Clergy Support Trust.” It held its 364th festival on May 15, 2018, with Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London, preaching the sermon.¹⁴ It still contains most of the elements that existed in the

¹³ For further discussion of the sermons and the events of which they formed a part, see Sarah Lloyd, “Pleasing Spectacles and Elegant Dinners: Conviviality, Benevolence, and Charity Anniversaries in Eighteenth-Century London,” *Journal of British Studies* 41 (January 2002): 23-57; Donna T. Andrew, “On Reading Charity Sermons: Eighteenth-Century Anglican Solicitation and Exhortation,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43 (1992): 581-91; W. E. Tate, “The Charity Sermon 1701-1732, as a Source for the History of Education,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 9 (1958): 54-73.

¹⁴ Photographs from the most recent festival can be found on the Sons and Friends website, <https://www.clergysupport.org.uk/festival-2019>.

eighteenth century—a choral service with augmented choir, a sermon, a dinner and a gathering of senior clergy, benefactors, supporters and City of London dignitaries. The event, with its faithfulness to its original format, is an interesting example of continuity at the heart of the Church of England.

Eighteenth-century sermons for the Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy tended to stress the importance of an orderly Christian household. Texts such as 1 Timothy 3:12—"Let the deacons be the husband of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well"—were cited with approval. George Stanhope, a royal chaplain selected to preach the first sermon in the unbroken line to be held at St. Paul's in 1697, reminded his audience that "the true Intent of all Religion is to reform Men's Manners."¹⁵ The children of the clergy should be models of good behavior, and a credit to the Protestant cause. Then came the inevitable attack on clerical celibacy, the consequences of which were "too filthy to be mention'd."¹⁶ In a style that seems to have been conventional in these charity sermons, the appeal for funds was either left to the very end or hinted at in an allusive manner. Demonstrating the first approach, George Stanhope concluded by saying "To Those, whose better Circumstances are capable of extending Relief to our Brethren in Affliction, I beg leave to recommend, nay even to conjure them to a Bounteous Liberality."¹⁷ In the second category was John Buckner, Bishop of Chichester, whose appeal for funds was in the form of a subtle hint that God had implanted an instinct that "prompts to pity a desire which impels to relieve distress."¹⁸

Over a period of a hundred and fifty years, the tone and content of these sermons changed remarkably little, with a regular return to the well-worn themes of the scriptural injunctions to care for the widow and the fatherless and to maintain a well-ordered home, coupled with thanksgiving that the clergy were "emancipated...from the unwarranted and unholy chains of celibacy."¹⁹ Clergy who were wealthy and well connected were invited to preach the sermon, and those who were given the honor of acting as stewards—together with the nobility and gentry who also served as stewards—were all expected to give very generously.²⁰ The amounts collected at these occasions were considerable, although what the specific effect of the sermon was on this is impossible to determine. There were separate collections at the rehearsal (for ladies to contribute) and at the dinner (a male-only affair) but not, it seems (at least during the early eighteenth century), during the service itself.²¹ These festivals were, and have remained, important musical and social events, and presumably many

¹⁵ George Stanhope, *A Sermon Preach'd in St Paul's Cathedral at the Annual Meeting of the Sons of the Clergy, Tuesday 7 December, 1697* (accessed via Early English Books online). Stanhope held various livings in Hertfordshire and Kent, and later became Dean of Canterbury. He was considered to be an excellent preacher.

¹⁶ Stanhope, "Sermon," 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ John Buckner, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, London: on Thursday June 12, 1800. Being the Time of the Yearly Meeting of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster* (London: Ann Rivington, 1800), 8.

¹⁹ For example, see Griffith Griffith, *A Sermon Preached at the Anniversary Meeting of the Sons of the Clergy in the Cathedral Church of St Paul on Thursday May 16th, 1793* (London: Rivington, 1793), viii, and Hugh Pearson, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, on Thursday May 19th, 1836* (London: Rivington, 1836), 20.

²⁰ Being invited to become a steward was clearly a mark of high status, and a serious financial commitment. Originally sixteen but later twelve men were selected each year, with a balance of clergy and laymen. The names of the stewards from past years dating back to 1674 were faithfully reproduced as a lengthy appendix at the end of each printed sermon. In 1800, the sermon ran to 15 pages, but the list of past stewards covered a further 37 pages. The document itself had become a list of the Sons of the Clergy's past major supporters, with a sermon prefixed. See Henry William Majendie, *A Sermon Preached at the Anniversary Meeting of the Sons of the Clergy in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, on Thursday May 15, 1800* (London: Rivington, 1800).

²¹ Lloyd, "Pleasing Spectacles," 42.

of those present had already determined the size of their donation, well in advance of hearing the sermon. In 1721, the first year in which the size of the collection was recorded, the sum raised was £330 16 shillings. By the 1730s the annual sums collected were around £1,000, and they remained at this level for the next hundred years.²²

Sons of the Clergy sermons from the mid-nineteenth century bore some striking resemblances to their much earlier forebears. George Butler, Dean of Peterborough, preaching the sermon for the 1843 festival, produced a densely scriptural piece on the seasonally appropriate theme of the Ascension (thereby demonstrating an appreciation of the liturgical year which was becoming more common by the mid-nineteenth century). But his reticence in mentioning the needs of the Corporation until his eighteenth page, when he formally and stiffly invoked the charitable support of those present for this object, suggests that he was following the sensibilities of the earlier period. He concluded his sermon by demonstrating the usefulness of the clergy in a somewhat utilitarian manner—these were the people who were constantly on hand to attend to the sick and dying, to instruct children and to rebuke the spendthrift and the blasphemer.²³ In 1851, the headmaster of Harrow School, C. J. Vaughan, adopted a similar structure, with a lengthy biblical introduction (on the Aaronic priesthood, and the tribe of Levi) followed by a concluding, although hard-hitting, appeal for funds: for as long as a clergyman has surviving relatives, “his claim upon the militant Church is not cancelled out by his transfer to the Church triumphant.” He reminded the congregation that their liberality at this hour would determine the comfort, or wretchedness, of a hundred beneficiaries in the coming year.²⁴

By the 1880s, however, a distinct change had occurred in the content, tone and length of the Sons of the Clergy sermons. They became more straightforwardly focused on explaining the purpose of the charity, and any reticence about appealing immediately for funds had evaporated. Henry Montagu Butler, prebendary of St. Paul’s and headmaster of Harrow School, set the trend in 1881. He was, he explained, the son of a clergyman, and therefore had a particular understanding of the pressures on clergy widows and families. The clergyman’s dilemma was that he must take care of his family, but “he cannot decently make money.” He defended the clergy against what was evidently a current criticism that they should be relying on life insurance, not charity. Life insurance was important, but it would not cover disabling accidents, paralysis, blindness or deafness. He explained that the income from the land investments of the Sons of Clergy had dropped as a result of the agricultural crisis. He returned to the time-honored theme of Britain “blest with a married clergy” but gave it a modern twist: the widows and unmarried daughters of the clergy to whom the charity gave pensions and grants were very often women who had had a significant ministry of their own, in missionary dioceses, hospitals, orphanages, or visiting associations.²⁵

John Gott, Dean of Worcester, also addressed the criticism of the clerical failure to take out life insurance when he preached the sermon in 1886. How could they save for an annuity

²² Griffith, *Sermon*. As was usual at this period, the appendix to this sermon supplies information about the sums raised, the names of the stewards, the preachers, the text chosen, whether or not the sermon was printed, and other details of the event from 1721 to 1793. See also the appendix to Pearson, *Sermon*. This appendix contains much interesting information about the work of the Corporation, including a list of 47 clergy children who had been apprenticed in the previous 12 months since May 1835. According to the National Archives currency calculator, £1000 would have been worth around £118,000 in 1730, and £68,000 in 1830.

²³ George Butler, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St Paul on Thursday May 11, 1843 at the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy* (London: Rivington, 1843).

²⁴ C. J. Vaughan, *The Personality of the Tempter, and Other Sermons, Doctrinal and Occasional: Including a Sermon Preached in St Paul’s Cathedral, at the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy* (London: J. W. Parker, 1851).

²⁵ Henry Montagu Butler, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, Wednesday May 18, 1881, at the Two Hundred and Twenty-Seventh Anniversary Festival of the Sons of the Clergy* (London: Rivington, 1881).

or a life insurance, when they had used what little money they had to help the poor? Gott went even further than H. M. Butler, addressing the phenomenon that would later be known as "ministry burnout," and providing harrowing real-life examples of distressed and impoverished clergy families that he had encountered. Whether consciously or not, he was adopting some of the techniques of the sensation journalism that was gaining popularity at this date. At only ten pages in its published form, his hard-hitting sermon was half the length of the Sons of the Clergy sermons of previous decades. It was skilfully constructed, tied together by the Easter text "Woman, why weepst thou?" (John 20:15). His conclusion was a strikingly modern one, that much of the early death and chronic illness found among the clergy could be prevented with earlier intervention, in the form of "timely help" and a break from unceasing strain and labor.²⁶

Another long-standing and large-scale event at St. Paul's was the annual festival of the London charity schools. Charity schools, which were mainly founded in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries under the auspices of the Church of England's Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, were a major means for providing education for poorer children in England and Wales until 1870. From 1811, most of them became associated with the Church of England's National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, and they required regular fundraising appeals in the form of sermons. The very principle of educating the children of the poor was one that needed to be regularly restated and defended, and part of doing this was to present the schools as essential for the maintenance of the Protestant faith. The annual festival of the London charity schools had begun in 1704, initially at St. Andrew's Holborn, but it was transferred to St. Paul's in 1782, and was possibly the major event in the cathedral's annual calendar for almost the next hundred years.²⁷ The poet William Blake commemorated it in "Holy Thursday," one of his "Songs of Innocence" poems in 1789, illustrating it with a picture of the children in their colored uniforms being led into the church by the "grey headed beadles."²⁸ In that year, the sermon was preached by Samuel Hallifax, Bishop of St. Asaph, on the text "a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15).²⁹ Blake was not exaggerating when he described "The hum of multitudes" and "Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands." At its height, the event was attended by up to 8,000 children, who were placed under the dome on specially constructed raked seating which took at least a fortnight to prepare.³⁰ Bringing the children together meant that they could be displayed to their financial supporters and to the general public, thus increasing the likelihood of further donations. Furthermore, the children themselves could be seen and heard actively giving thanks for the benefits of their education, and the sight of the

²⁶ John Gott, *"Woman, Why Weepst Thou?": A Sermon Preached at the Anniversary Festival of the Sons of the Clergy* (London: Rivington, 1886).

²⁷ For the London charity schools, see W. M. Jacob, "'The Glory of the Age We Live In': Christian Education and Philanthropy in Eighteenth-Century London Charity Schools," in *The Church and Education: Studies in Church History* 55, ed. Charlotte Methuen, Andrew Spicer, and Morwenna Ludlow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 241-55.

²⁸ William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul 1789-1794* (facsimile edition, Oxford, 1967), 19-20.

²⁹ Samuel Hallifax, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, London: on Thursday, May 28, 1789. Being the Time of the Yearly Meeting of the Children Educated in the Charity-Schools, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster* (London: Rivington, 1789).

³⁰ An engraving by T. Prattent shows the way in which the charity children were stacked in twelve high-rise rows under the dome. The occasion was the thanksgiving service for the recovery of George III, on 23 April 1789. The picture is reproduced in *St Paul's*, 354. Another illustration of the same occasion, by Edward Dayes, shows the sermon being preached by the Bishop of London, Beilby Porteus, from the hexagonal pulpit in the choir. This picture is reproduced in *St Paul's*, 368. The sermon would obviously have been inaudible to those outside the choir, including the children under the dome.

poor as a disciplined and thankful mass was likely to be a reassuring one for many of those who beheld it. As the preacher of 1789 put it:

The affecting spectacle before us, of a multitude of children, who by means of the salutary instruction, derived from the various charity-schools of this vast metropolis, have been trained in virtuous industry, and imbued with just notions of duty to God, their fellow-creatures and themselves, are now met together, in order to offer to their Creator and ours the grateful tribute of praise and thanksgiving for such inestimable benefits.³¹

As was customary, this sermon was addressed to the several hundred potential and actual donors who were gathered in the choir, not to the children themselves. The choir was still closed off from the rest of the cathedral by the screen and the organ, and in fact the “affecting spectacle” would have been more auditory than visual.³² The children sang during the service and were rehearsed beforehand. As Blake put it, “Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song.” In an obvious attempt to stress the harmony hoped for on the occasion, much was made of so many children’s voices appearing to blend as one. The reality may have been rather different. Horace Walpole complained in the 1790s that when he attended the cathedral, the children were “croaking and squalling” the psalms.³³

As the children were usually “clothed” by the charities who provided their education,³⁴ the sight of them arriving in their increasingly archaic dress—boys in knee breeches and colored coats, girls in colored dresses, petticoats, mob caps and long gloves—was also regarded as a spectacle. But by 1870 there was a greater realization that corralling the children into St. Paul’s was an ordeal for them. They had to perch on the precarious seating scaffold for several hours, as the sermons tended to be long, and the service itself interminable. Some of the children fainted and had to be removed.³⁵ There were safety concerns, as the wooden scaffolding was stored in the crypt when not in use and was thought to pose a fire risk.³⁶ In 1870, Dean Mansel made it clear that he wanted to put a stop to the annual disruption of the normal activities of the cathedral of “more than a month” caused by the installation and dismantling of the children’s seating. He was, however, nervous about the public reaction: “I had originally thought of placing the children and the congregation on the floor, and perhaps we may come to this finally; but at present I feel public opinion is not ripe for so great a change; so many have been used to the *spectacle* in its present form and admire it.”³⁷ Fortunately for Mansel, Forster’s Education Act of that year provided more state funding for education, and made reliance on charity sermons and festivals seem less necessary. Just seven years later, the

³¹ Halifax, *Sermon*, 15.

³² Nevertheless, it appears that there were also many members of the public who came to witness the spectacle. The watercolor by Robert Havell (junior), “The Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Children in the Cathedral of St Paul” (1826), shows the scene from the west end, with crowds of people filling the nave as they look upon the children in their seating. For a fee, the image can be downloaded from <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-robert-havell-jr-the-anniversary-meeting-of-the-charity-children-in-84779738.html>.

³³ Lloyd, “Pleasing Spectacles,” 40.

³⁴ W. M. Jacob, “The Eye of his Master: Children and Charity Schools,” in *The Church and Childhood Studies in Church History* 31, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 370-1.

³⁵ Stephen Paget, *Henry Scott Holland: Memoir and Letters* (London: John Murray, 1921), 139-40.

³⁶ Tate, “The Charity Sermon,” 55.

³⁷ Lambeth Palace Library, Tait Papers 167 ff.291-4; H. L. Mansel to Charles Waldegrave Sandford, 21 July 1870, 26 July 1870; Sue Eastwood, *From Orphan to Dean: A Biography of Robert Gregory 1819-1911*. (Chichester: University of Chichester Press, 2011), 58.

festival of the charity children was discontinued.³⁸ It had been, according to an observer writing in 1878, "that most beautiful and touching of all London sights."³⁹

The Introduction of Nave Preaching

In some great institutions, change comes imperceptibly slowly. This was not the case at St. Paul's. The arrival of Dean Milman in 1849, the first dean for many years who did not combine the deanship of St. Paul's with a bishopric somewhere else, was a significant start.⁴⁰ Milman's innovation with regard to preaching was the introduction of evening services under the dome, "for the benefit of the floating masses of Londoners."⁴¹ On the first occasion, on Advent Sunday 1858, 2,500 chairs were provided, but 10,000 people attended.⁴² Preaching in this enormous space required, amongst other things, a commanding platform from which the preacher could launch his message, and F. C. Penrose's enormous inlaid marble pulpit, supported by ten Corinthian columns in different colored marbles, did not disappoint. Two years later, Milman directed that the choir be opened up, with the removal of the screen and the relocation of the organ. This created a clear view from the west door to the east window and ended the sense of the cathedral as a closed off choir in which worship happened, and a vast space in which nothing much happened, outside of the major services.⁴³



The Penrose pulpit (photo by the author)

³⁸ Tate, "The Charity Sermon," 55.

³⁹ Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London* (London: Cassell, 1897), 1:261.

⁴⁰ Donald Gray, "Liturgy 1714-2004," in *St Paul's*, 355.

⁴¹ Thornbury, *Old and New London*, 1:254.

⁴² Arthur Burns, "From 1830 to the Present," in *St Paul's*, 89.

⁴³ Henry Scott Holland provided an evocative account of St. Paul's in its pre-reform days, and the changes brought about by Dean Church in Mary C. Church, *Life and Letters of Dean Church* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1895), 208-16.

Post-Protestant St. Paul's

Dean Milman and his successor Dean Mansel had had relatively little support from the cathedral chapter, but within a few years around 1870, all of the members of the old chapter had either died or left, resulting in a new regime at St. Paul's, led by the new Dean, R. W. Church, and Robert Gregory, who rapidly became the senior canon, and was promoted to dean on Church's death in 1890. Other new members of the chapter were H. P. Liddon and J. B. Lightfoot. These men thought differently from their predecessors on just about every ecclesiastical matter. Most significantly, they were Anglo-Catholics, and it can be said that under their leadership, St. Paul's entered its post-Protestant phase. A visual representation of this can be seen in a picture made to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897.⁴⁴ The Archbishop of Canterbury (Frederick Temple), the Bishop of London (Mandell Creighton) and the Dean and Chapter are all depicted greeting the Queen in her carriage. They are elaborately vested and wearing skull caps (zucchetti) in the manner of senior Roman Catholic clergy. Gregory, Liddon, and Church strongly identified with the Catholic wing of the Church of England; they wanted a different style of worship, with significant changes to the fabric of the building. The new chapter had a recognizably modern sense of how the cathedral should be used—“from end to end,” as Henry Scott Holland, who joined the chapter in 1884, put it. To the changing aesthetic tastes of the late nineteenth century, Wren's cathedral seemed unfinished—the walls and ceiling were plain and austere. The chapter decided that the choir should be decorated with mosaics, and that much more color should be introduced into the building.⁴⁵ They wanted to create an atmosphere suitable for dignified Eucharistic worship, in which London's poor and ordinary citizens would feel welcome in what the clergy hoped would become the “parish church of the British Empire.”⁴⁶

It became conventional for the canons to preach at Sunday afternoon services, and for clergy not attached to St. Paul's to be invited to preach in the evenings. It was Holland's job to invite the guest preachers.⁴⁷ He sought to reassure them that the congregation would not be intellectually intimidating. Rather, they would be “a guileless mass of clerks and sweethearts holding each others' hands and glad to use common hymn-books...they are all humble folk.”⁴⁸ He warned a friend who was due to preach in St. Paul's against being too intellectual. “He may think his audience were all immersed in the problems of Robert Elsmere.”⁴⁹ Probably they were housemaids.”⁵⁰ Liddon was similarly disparaging. Asked by a friend how the newly-appointed Henry Scott Holland was managing as a preacher, he commented favorably, and added “But my young colleague has yet to learn the exceedingly limited capacities of an ordinary St. Paul's congregation.”⁵¹

⁴⁴ The picture by J. P. Mendoza is reproduced in *St Paul's*, 359.

⁴⁵ See G. E. Mitton, *St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1914) for watercolor illustrations which show the effect of this.

⁴⁶ This phrase was used by Canon Alexander during the First World War. Paget, *Holland*, 141.

⁴⁷ See London Metropolitan Archives MS25806/001 for the St. Paul's Cathedral Preachers' Book for this period.

⁴⁸ Paget, *Holland*, 153.

⁴⁹ *Robert Elsmere* was a best-selling novel published by Mary Ward (Mrs. Humphry Ward) in 1888. The eponymous hero is an Anglican clergyman who is assailed by various doctrinal doubts and puts his faith in the social Christianity espoused by various prominent Anglicans of the time, including Holland himself.

⁵⁰ Henry Scott Holland, *An Apology for St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 10.

⁵¹ Eleanor C. Gregory in *Henry Scott Holland: Some Appreciations*, ed. Christopher Cheshire (London: Wells Gardner & Co., 1919), 11.

Preaching and Celebrity

H. P. Liddon, who was a canon of St. Paul's from 1870 to 1890, was regarded as one of the greatest preachers of the age.⁵² As Michael Chandler has noted, his appeal was widespread, and his heavily-reproduced sermons were undoubtedly significant in promoting the gradual acceptance of Anglo-Catholic opinions more widely within the Church of England.⁵³ His sermons were completely different from what had been heard at St. Paul's in the earlier period. As should be expected from a man who combined his canonry with being Dean Ireland's Professor of Scriptural Exegesis in Oxford, they were learned—he had a thorough knowledge of scripture, and of the ancient world. They revealed a man of deep theological convictions and conservative views. His sermons were intended to teach, as well as to edify; for example, he gently introduced his hearers to ideas about textual dating: Paul is writing to the Corinthians over a quarter of a century after the resurrection.⁵⁴ Housemaids or not, these were sermons that would have only really made sense to a highly theologically literate audience, and so it is significant that they were so popular. In order to accommodate the numbers who wanted to listen, he preached under the dome, and from 1871, all sermons were preached from the nave pulpit. Although one undesirable consequence of this was to render the preacher largely inaudible to those in the choir,⁵⁵ the removal of the old Mylne pulpit had the effect of removing an obstruction in front of the altar, which was itself a significant liturgical reform. It was said of Liddon that he “re-peopled the City on the day of rest”; he attracted a mixed congregation, Roman Catholics and Nonconformists, and also visiting Americans who “felt that such an experience was indispensable to their programme of sightseeing.”⁵⁶ Some people arranged their holidays in London during August, because Liddon was preaching at St. Paul's in that month.⁵⁷

Whereas the cathedral had always been a tourist attraction, the preacher as tourist attraction was a particular phenomenon of the late nineteenth century. It was something that also extended to the most famous of the preachers of London Nonconformity, for example C. H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and Joseph Parker and R. J. Campbell at the City Temple. The precise reasons for Liddon's popularity are difficult to gauge. The acoustics under the dome meant that all preaching could be difficult to hear, and Liddon had a reputation for inordinate length, even by the standards of the late nineteenth century. He was taken to task over the length of his sermons by everyone from his mentor E. B. Pusey to ordinary members of the public, but still it seemed that he was unable to develop a more concise style.⁵⁸ He regularly preached for an hour or more, at a time when sermons of between twenty and thirty minutes were the recommended norm, with an absolute maximum of forty-five minutes.⁵⁹ Liddon had preached extempore at the beginning of his career, but by the time he arrived at St. Paul's, his texts were written out in full. This was partly to ensure that he maintained control over the process of publication, as his scripts could be immediately handed to the printers, without the need to rely on a text taken down, sometimes unreliably, by a reporter.⁶⁰

Liddon had evidently developed a charisma which captivated congregations. People commented on his “high silvery tenor voice” and careful diction, which perhaps arose from what he had learned studying French preaching styles. He was interested in the techniques of

⁵² Church, *Life and Letters*, 217.

⁵³ Michael Chandler, *The Life and Work of Henry Parry Liddon* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 99.

⁵⁴ H. P. Liddon, *Easter in St Paul's: Sermons Bearing Chiefly in the Resurrection of our Lord* (London: Rivington, 1892), 25. This particular sermon was preached on April 8, 1887.

⁵⁵ W. A. Frost, *Early Recollections of St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1925), 22.

⁵⁶ “JSB,” *Canon Liddon: A Memoir* (London: “The Family Churchman” Office, 1890), 9.

⁵⁷ Chandler, *Liddon*, 98.

⁵⁸ See Chandler, *Liddon*, 105-6.

⁵⁹ Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1984), 97.

⁶⁰ Chandler, *Liddon*, 110-11.

various Jesuits and Dominicans, and rejected the view of the earlier generation of Tractarians, who had believed that sermons should be delivered in a monotone style in order to avoid giving undue attention to the personality of the preacher, at the expense of the message being preached.⁶¹ Although he must have been aware of his extraordinary popularity, in a way rather typical of his Anglo-Catholic outlook, Liddon was somewhat disparaging of preaching. He wrote to Henry Scott Holland in 1887: “There is, I believe, no doubt that hymns do more to keep religion alive among the half-instructed or uninstructed mass of our people than any other feature of our public worship. Certainly, they do much more than sermons.”⁶²

Everybody who had heard both Liddon and Holland preach commented on how different they were from each other.⁶³ Holland’s sermons were regarded as intellectually challenging, philosophical, energetic and vivid, yet they did not lose touch with the everyday predicaments of his hearers. Eleanor Gregory (the daughter of Dean Gregory) emphasized that his preaching “did not appeal to anyone without some love of metaphysics” and that the meaning had to be worked at.⁶⁴ She also claimed that “preaching was the only form of self-revelation he ever practiced.” The man who apparently hated talking about himself never avoided the use of the words “I” or “me” when in the pulpit; “nothing to interfere with the feeling of interchange so necessary to friendship.”⁶⁵ In the manner of a modern preacher, Holland was interested in helping his audience to understand how Christianity could make sense to them. His heavy use of the first-person plural, and rhetorical questions that he appeared to be posing to himself as much as to his audience, were all strategies for diminishing the distance between himself and his hearers. In the preface to one of his volumes of sermons, *Pleas and Claims* (1892), he states (very helpfully for the historian) that they are being printed just as preached.

Just one example serves to show how the mindset of the clergy had changed almost beyond recognition during the nineteenth century. Holland takes up the theme of political economy, which had been the dominant intellectual discourse of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Christian thinkers, expounded by Malthus, Chalmers and J. B. Sumner, among others. Holland marveled that earlier generations could have been so taken in by it: “The odd thing was that we were quite satisfied with this limited and partial explanation... We actually fancied that we could explain the actions of living men and women without allowing anything at all for their personal and moral characters.”⁶⁶ Holland had particular ways of using words that seemed unique to him. “He played strange tricks with the English language, heaped words upon words, strung adjective to adjective”—and yet he still appeared fluent in delivery.⁶⁷ Ralph Norman has pointed out the similarities in the way language is used in Holland’s sermons and in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins—they had known each other as undergraduates at Balliol. Norman argues that Holland’s sermons show discernible Anglican parallels to particular aspects of Hopkins’s literary style and religious faith.⁶⁸

A canon with the radical and progressive tendencies of Holland must at times have found dealing with some of the centuries-old traditions of St. Paul’s challenging. A glimpse of this can be seen in 1890, when he contacted the secretary of the Sons of the Clergy, begging him to drop from the annual festival service Psalm 127, with its unbridled celebration of male fertility and large families:

⁶¹ Ibid., 104.

⁶² Paget, *Holland*, 145.

⁶³ Paget, *Holland*, 154-6; G. W. E. Russell, *Selected Essays on Literary Subjects* (Letchworth, n.d.), 178.

⁶⁴ Gregory, *Holland*, 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁶ Henry Scott Holland, *Pleas and Claims* (London, 1892), 26.

⁶⁷ G. W. E. Russell, “A final appreciation” in Cheshire, *Holland*, 82-3.

⁶⁸ Ralph Norman, “The Law of Sacrifice: G. M. Hopkins, H. S. Holland, and Oxford Anglicanism,” *Religion and the Arts* 22 (2018): 405-428.

Tempers and minds are changed: and it now seems a terrible irony to sing "Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them" [i.e. children] on an occasion like this. Such a psalm raises all the problems of the families of the clergy ... Everybody in church must be conscious of the difficulty: and especially the laity whom we are inviting to give. And then, could we not read something less exalted in key than "The wilderness and the solitary place"? [Isaiah 35]. We are thinking of giving some necessary and scanty aid to pinched children: and we cannot attribute to our gifts the highest fulfilment of Messianic joy. It is, really, a serious matter. Pray put it strongly. Otherwise, we may find ourselves the subjects of some caustic ridicule.⁶⁹

This is an interesting glimpse into a collision of theologies between what appeared to be an unthinking loyalty to long-established tradition shown by the officials of the Corporation, and the progressive outlook of a canon of St. Paul's, who not only had a realistic approach to clerical poverty, but also an appreciation of the need for a contextual reading of scripture.

Conclusion

Concentrating on sermons preached in one place over two hundred years provides an insight into slowly changing mindsets, within a culture which, superficially at least, remained relatively fixed. In the case of the preaching delivered for the Sons of the Clergy and the charity schools, developing attitudes to children and families become clearer. In the earlier period, children were generally regarded by preachers as either inherently prone to evil and in need to correction, or at best as a *tabula rasa* on which God's laws needed to be written. Yet undertaking the annual feat of marshalling them by the thousands into St. Paul's was regarded as so important as to merit significant disruption to the life of the cathedral. There was a need for them to be seen in mass public worship, ideally as disciplined, thankful and tuneful, but even if they turned out to be unruly, the organizers persevered, repeating the spectacle in the following year. For the children, it was a means of giving them a little stake in London's great cathedral, an annual act of collective binding to the Anglican culture which was central to the education they were receiving. Yet the festival became as precarious as the scaffolding on which the children sat, and the scaffolding was partly to blame. Its rather rapid ending in the 1870s was linked to a range of newer concerns: child welfare, fire risk, safety, and liturgical order, as well the changing landscape of elementary education after Forster's Act. In contrast, the necessity for supporting needy clergy families was not lessened in the late nineteenth century, and so the annual Sons of the Clergy festival continued and continues still. But the style and content of the sermons changed markedly. By the 1880s, those preaching for the Sons of the Clergy were having to defend the very notion of charitable giving, which had earlier been an unquestioned axiom of Anglican culture, in the face of a new expectation that clergy should prepare for future hardships with insurance policies and savings for annuities. Behind the scenes, the cathedral clergy were urging changes to the service to reflect late nineteenth century ideas about limiting family size. It was no longer seen as acceptable for the clergy to have a quiverful of children that they could not afford.

Eighteenth-century preaching at St. Paul's had been mainly concerned with defending the Church of England: its place in society, its institutions, and its relationship with the state. There was also a large emphasis on manners and morality. During the nineteenth century, this began to change. As the preachers looked out from the marble splendor of the Penrose pulpit, they appeared more obviously concerned with the people arrayed before them as individuals, each with their unique set of circumstances. They were no longer treated as semi-anonymous

⁶⁹ Paget, *Holland*, 146.

masses for whom generalized moral exhortation would do. Preaching became much more sophisticated, and it also became about expounding and explaining Christianity as a faith that emerged from the New Testament texts and from other early Christian writings. This was done in a number of ways, including scholarly explanations of the biblical context, and a much greater openness to exploring the dilemmas posed by faith. There was a growing sense that preacher and preached to were “in it together,” sharing a quest to live a Christian life in the face of all the challenges of modern life in one of the world’s greatest cities. The complete transition to nave preaching in 1871, and the expectation that there might be hundreds present, required a different style of delivery. The acoustics remained extremely challenging and required great technical skill. Even after years of practice, Holland still raised the echoes too much, and spoke too rapidly for the words to be reliably captured by the reporters.⁷⁰ Yet the preachers had to strive continually for audibility, to ensure that every word had been carefully chosen and every gesture was meaningful. Preachers found it exhausting. After preaching, Liddon went home for a warm bath, and then straight to bed, and Holland also went home to rest immediately afterwards.⁷¹

The new chapter that assembled from 1870 gave greater attention to the liturgical year, with Liddon publishing collections of sermons for Lent, Eastertide and Christmas, although this also reflected the fact that his periods in residence were December and April, as well as August.⁷² Biblical texts were no longer seen merely as aphorisms with which to garnish the beginning of the work. Instead, biblical material was drawn upon more thoroughly and more intelligently. During his August residency, and unusually at this period, Liddon developed the habit of preaching on one of the lessons in the Prayer Book lectionary, something that would become standard practice in the Church of England during the twentieth century. The resulting sermons were thoughtful and sophisticated, but still managed to be popular. Both Liddon and Holland were regarded as captivating preachers, but no doubt the printed texts of their sermons helped their audiences to understand what they had actually said, as well as fulfilling that other function of the published sermon, material which could be drawn upon by other preachers. It is significant that Liddon and Holland were the last generation of Anglican theologians whose published work more or less entirely took the form of sermons.

By the late nineteenth century the members of the chapter “worshipped at very different shrines politically,”⁷³ as Eleanor Gregory put it, yet they managed to remain unified, doubtless because they were all Tractarians of the second and third generation and had a common set of liturgical and ecclesiological assumptions. W. C. E. Newbolt, who succeeded to Liddon’s canonry in 1890, and remained in it until his own death in 1930, expressed his strong belief that “the voice of the Cathedral pulpit should as far as possible be one; and that no member of the Chapter ought to preach *in the Cathedral* [italics in the original] doctrines or opinions such as another member might reasonably controvert.”⁷⁴ Newbolt went on to say that Holland, for all his radical political and social opinions, never offended against this principle. The pulpit itself, and the Anglo-Catholic common life that it implied, was being elevated above the views of individual preachers. St. Paul’s had entered a world of collective responsibility, and morals began to be pointed in a different way.

⁷⁰ Gregory, *Holland*, 22.

⁷¹ Paget, *Holland*, 154. Liddon also offered a bath to visiting preachers who stayed at his house. See Chandler, *Liddon*, 109.

⁷² Chandler, *Liddon*, 108.

⁷³ Gregory, *Holland*, 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*