

A VIEW FROM RIPON

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On a Friday afternoon towards the end of April, by car, train and aircraft, we converged on the northern city of Ripon, which I would imagine was not too well known to many of us. Despite road works and an accident, which meant that the writer did only 28 miles in his first hour on the A1 and contrary to received wisdom, a dull and rainy south gave way to a bright and (on Saturday) sunny north. All was redeemed on arriving at the college and seeing buildings of varying decades nestling among trees which were obviously there before the first bricks were thought of some 150 years ago. To complete the pastoral scene were Jacob sheep and many jet black lambs – the clerical members of the Society no doubt noted this illustration for future sermons.

We were warmly welcomed by both college staff and Society executives and it was interesting to learn how much the college wanted the conference to be held there. We all know that institutions have to pay their way in the last half of the 20th Century and cannot have their buildings standing empty for months of the year. It seems that, even in our classless society, QC, Rt. Revd. and Venerable still carry weight and would, surprisingly, encourage other conferences to come to Ripon.

Dinner showed us what excellent hosts the college were and when it was discovered that there was a wine list, activity and conversation increased and waitresses were sent scurrying in all directions. As well as some better known names, the College Blanc and College Rouge turned out to be not inconsiderable house wines.

After dinner we got down to our first serious piece of work. A Roman Catholic priest from Ireland cannot speak with anything but a twinkle and the Revd. Professor Patrick Hannon DD BL, Professor of Moral Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, was no exception. He took us gently and with natural learning into our overall theme of Law, Grace and Liberty by discoursing on Aquinas and Augustine under the title of Law and Virtue. Members were kept metaphorically on the edge of their seats, for to nod would have been to miss a considerable part of this rapidly delivered lecture. The call to meet in Dublin in two years' time reflected the way in which the Professor had taken hold of his audience. Questions followed the lecture.

On the Saturday morning, after Matins from the BCP and the Eucharist from the ASB, members sat down to a cooked breakfast which they never normally eat! Work, on Saturday morning, began with lectures from the Dean of King's College, London, the Revd. Canon Reggie Askew and the Bishop of Bristol, the Rt. Revd. Barry Rogerson. Canon Askew reflected on 'Jeremy Taylor's Merely spiritual power – an examination of Canon Law in *Ductor Dubitantium*, 1660.' He had thoughtfully provided us with a briefing paper, which prompted one member to suggest that this might be a good practice for all speakers at future meetings of the Society. The Bishop of Bristol took us along

the tight-rope between Law and Grace, which is such a difficult one to tread when endeavouring to discipline the clergy with a pastoral touch. After coffee our three guest speakers were joined by Brian Hanson, the legal adviser to the General Synod. He has the facility to remind us gently but firmly, of the realities of life in Church House, of what is and what is not politically possible, while combining with that a gentle rebuff to Archdeacons, who leave the disciplining of the clergy for far too long before they do anything about it.

At the end of the morning session, it was announced that the meeting of the Executive Committee, timed for after lunch, would be brought forward half an hour to enable our Chairman to be in time for the first race at Ripon racecourse, which many of us had passed as we arrived in the town. Fortunately, Saturday lunch was the only meal which was self-service. This meant that members were able to eat at a speed which enabled them to arrive on the course at least as early as the Chairman, if not before. The official 'entertainment' of the Conference was a tour of the cathedral and a goodly number of members took advantage of that. However, these two events had to compete with Fountain's Abbey and Studley Royal Park nearby.

When we re-assembled – after Evensong in the Cathedral – black ties enabled judges, solicitors and archdeacons to all look much the same. Is not this the idea of all uniforms? The chef rose to the occasion, as he had done throughout the conference, to produce a memorable conference dinner. Wine and port flowed and speeches were made. The Bishop of Ripon proposed 'The Society' with a warm, witty and welcoming speech. The content was much appreciated and so was the length, to gather from the comments from round about. Our Chairman responded in that most entertaining and disarming way he has of appearing to be thinking on his feet but which any of us who have spoken in public know, requires diligent and thoughtful preparation beforehand. The reply to his proposal of 'The Guests' was made by our host, the Principal of the University College, Professor Gordon McGregor. Here again was a thoughtful and entertaining speech but one containing also some serious comment on the education scene today. He had seemingly done his homework and noted that there was a Tory MP among our number.

On Sunday the conference turned itself into the Annual General Meeting of the Society. As is so often the case, the apologies for absence made interesting listening as to why people could not be among us. We missed our President but were delighted to hear that he was in Turkey with his wife celebrating their Ruby Wedding. The formalities of an Annual Meeting were gone through. We were encouraged both to contribute to the Journal and to have it bound. We then had some interesting and thought-provoking reports from the working parties. These proved that they had not spared themselves during the preceding year and that some of them had even met, as the timetable said, at 4 o'clock on the previous day – despite the attractions of Ripon and its surroundings. The working parties above all emphasise the professional input the Society makes to the life of the Church.

Between the Annual Meeting and the concluding item, Sunday lunch, we had a splendid celebration of a Rite A Eucharist. The Bishop of Blackburn was the preacher (see page 111) and he reminded us that there should be no great gulf fixed between Law and Gospel. In an ideal world one interprets the other.

My lasting impression of the conference is that it reminded us that the Christian faith we hold in common is an incarnational one. The title 'Law, Grace and Liberty' speaks of that fact. The Bishop of Blackburn reminded us of that in another way when expounding the day's Gospel – the Walk to Emmaus. The beauty of the cathedral and the beauty of horseflesh on Saturday afternoon brought it home to us through other dimensions. Perhaps it is an unwitting function of the Society to remind us that the God we know and worship is known to us through His created order. Without wishing to detract in any way from our visiting speakers, I feel that the value of our Annual Conference is seen most of all in the relationships and friendships we renew and make with each other and then, since we are a learned society, in the study we do.

(The papers given by the three speakers will be published in the next issue of the Journal. Editor)