

Rev. Peter Oliphant Hirst

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by G. Bicheno

In the splendour of the middle years of manhood and the ripened fulness of exceptional powers, Peter Oliphant Hirst has suddenly received the home-call. He was born forty-five years ago in the little Cumberland village of Lazenby. "A man to be revered and loved, strong and strenuous, full of grace and truth. *A great silent soul,*" so writes the Rev. J. W. Fryer of him. The poetry as well as the silences of his county had saturated his being; he might so fittingly be called a poet-preacher.

Nature dowered him generously, giving him a noble presence, a wide mental outlook, and a fine spirituality of temperament, while his whole character was heightened and ennobled by the ceaseless culture of a life of conscious communion with God. To save and help men came to be a blazing passion with him, and this, expressed through a magnetic personality, issued in a winsome ministry, magnificent in blessing, particularly as to the Scottish portion of it. With an unerring spiritual instinct and a tact and prescience beyond compare in organising Church life, he drew from men and movements thought and toil and treasure which might have been deemed incredible.

From his colleagues flowed the deepest reverence and love; he elicited their choicest feelings, and impressed himself indelibly upon their memories. "Mr. Hirst," says the Rev. R. Ferguson, his colleague of longest standing, "was a man of princely spirit. No man ever worked with a more single eye to the glory of God; no man ever gave me such an ideal of the Christian ministry." From his earliest appointment at Selby his preaching was "in the power of God." Halifax Third and Preston Third followed, but the march of signal triumph began with Glasgow Second fifteen years ago, followed by three successful years at Hull.

Regarding Glasgow, his crown of rejoicing, Mr. Ferguson shall speak. "When he came there were three churches and a mission with a membership of 385. On leaving last July there were five churches and 705 members, and this after Shettleston had become a new station, taking over one hundred members. The wonderful advance was three churches, 450 members, two ministers, seventy teachers, and 600 scholars, with material progress fully matching. Three churches and a hall were built and two extensions made at a cost of £6,400, considerably more than half being raised. With his marked humility Mr. Hirst seldom spoke of this save to give credit to others, but it was due to his consummate generalship. He inspired by his commanding strength, he educated by his matchless sympathy. Very many "owe their souls" to him, and not a few young men have felt their call to preach while listening to his stirring word. Two are amongst our most promising younger ministers, while six at least are in the ministry of Canadian Methodism."

His supreme endowment was his preaching gift. Add to the qualities named a fine voice, a peculiar charm of style, a grace and reverence that were as a beautiful investiture, lips ever "touched with a live coal," and his pulpit fascination will be partly understood.

His first utterance amongst us as a student revealed the spiritual seer—the breath of the hills in his message and he all alight and aglow with the vision of God. He rarely lectured, and he would not write, though highly gifted with the literary sense, but there were times when his pulpit speech attained as nearly to pure eloquence as any we have ever heard.

In his early years he was laid low with rheumatic fever, and in recuperating spent nine months with me. Through College days and these and all the years our intimacy and friendship have remained unsullied by a single cloud or the first faint mist of waning trust. Knowing him so well, and having read the hundreds of letters of soul-moving testimony to his ministry's efforts, some of those from Scotland stirring the heart-strings strangely, I conclude with Rev. S. Horton, "Take him all for all, he was the biggest human I have known."

The simplicity and reality of his conversion-story; the tempting offers he received from other churches with their greater emoluments and kept silence concerning; his glowing love of Scotland; his fine scorn of subterfuges, his concentration in his work and reckless abandon thereto, his unique disregard of the wide popularity he might have attained; our mutual

sermonising when I would be at humdrum and he soaring into the heavenlies; the speech, the hand clasps and the silences; those last pathetic bracings up for fight when mortally stricken—how the deathless memories whelm mind and heart to-day!

Reaching his new station, Luton III., in July, he was early prostrated by pernicious enemia. Tenderly nursed night and day by his brave devoted wife, and heartened by the brotherly solicitude of Rev. J. Ritson and others visiting him, it once seemed that he might rally, but on Sunday evening, October 2nd, 1911, painlessly he “crossed the bar.”

Mr. Ritson conducted the funeral service on the following Thursday, the Free Church ministers of Luton and the Vicar attending, with Revs. H.J. Taylor, J. Bowles, R. Ferguson, J. Gorton, G. Bicheno, the Circuit officers, and a large and sympathetic company. Sunday, Oct. 17th, Rev. J. Ritson preached a singularly eloquent and impressive memorial sermon, an appreciation worthy of a great, God-honoured life, now “rounded into calm.”

The Luton III. Circuit, and a host of friends, have shown Christlike kindness to Mrs. Hirst and her little girl. As for our friend, he seems too near, too really present to allow a farewell said. “Till we meet again,” we say; “Till we meet again !”

References

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