

PREFACE

In a plain little room out of the sun, religious zealots in robes and beards meet to study the teachings of the founder of their sect. In the hum of their discourse and the rhythm of their prayer summaries of his teachings emerge, are worked up, recorded and broadcast to the communities he founded, fractious and disobedient, in the cities and towns of that hot and volatile region.

The teacher we know as St Paul. He lived in the first century in Palestine, and those summaries we know as his epistles, or letters, to the communities he founded. Paul was born a Jew and became a brilliant scholar, so devout and so rigorous he was charged with putting down a weird little sect that had sprung up around an itinerant rabbi from the north, Jesus of Nazareth, whose teaching was so scandalous, so threatening, that he had been handed over to the Romans and executed.

And then something extraordinary happened. Paul, who had never seen Jesus or heard him teach, encountered him in a way that was so dazzling he was at first blinded by it. When he recovered his vision he saw something never seen before: the God who created the universe fully realised in a man, the expectation of the Jewish people not only fulfilled but surpassed, and the offer of salvation for all.

Paul exhausted his exceptional intelligence and gave his life to set out why this is so, and to pass on the good news – or gospel – to everyone else.

‘Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given to me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given,

to preach to the Gentiles the fathomless riches of Christ . . .’

Paul’s followers sent this document out as a round robin to the churches that waxed and waned in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, among them Ephesus. In time the document became known as St Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, and in that form made the final edit of the New Testament. And so for many centuries it has captivated and mystified and transformed its readers, among them me, who came into this inheritance like a ne’er-do-well in a Victorian novel suddenly and undeservingly enriched by an unimaginable and unforeseen largesse.

I am a sinner. My best efforts to return Christ’s generosity are inadequate, and even devalue the currency they’re paid in. This matters, because my lack of generosity and meanness of spirit and self-absorption contribute, in their own small way, to building a hell in heaven’s despite. But in spite of my inadequacies, and the inadequacies of all who struggle to live in the gap between Jesus’ love and our best efforts, God continually restores to us that inheritance, no matter how thoroughly we fail to be what God would have us be, no matter how insistently we fritter ourselves away on the diversions that the world in all its splendour and awfulness can offer. I have frittered much in splendour and awfulness, and I have tried to be as candid as I can about that, in order that – if disgraced myself – I do not disgrace Paul’s calling: to preach to the Gentiles the fathomless riches of Christ.

1. A Boy is Born

I know a priest who, after he had shut up shop on Christmas Day, would get into his pyjamas and take a bottle of vodka alone to bed, watch *The Sound of Music* and cry. An irony that a festival so commonly thought to be the one time of year when vicars come into their own should for him be a time of particular *tristesse*. Since the enchantment of childhood dimmed I, too, have had at least ambivalent feelings about the festive season.

One year, between falling out of pop music and getting ordained myself, Christmas for me began with a migraine, which lasted the whole day. I was with my brothers and my parents and after lunch and the Queen I went upstairs for a lie-down and tried to play *Sonic the Hedgehog*, the only computer game I have ever possessed. After a couple of goes, I decided I didn't need any more garishness and unreality than the day had already provided, so after a sleep I went downstairs and rejoined my family, dozing, reading, waiting for tea and Christmas cake. My mother, at least, was alert and suddenly into the silence she spoke: 'Darling,' she looked at me, 'I was driving to Northampton the other day and a record came on the radio which I thought I recognised and I was right, it was the CommuNARDS' (she always pronounces the name of my band with an odd emphasis on the last syllable). 'And, do you know, I thought it sounded really marvellous, so marvellous I was dancing around as I drove along. If anyone had seen me they would have thought I was crackers. Don't leave me this waaaay. It was really, really great.' I felt myself puff with pride. 'I don't care what anyone says,' she added.

Later on, like many gay men after a family Christmas, I decided to

seek the comfort of strangers, only where could I find a comforting stranger on a freezing cold Christmas night in the middle of Northamptonshire? I pulled into a lay-by, hidden by woodland, expecting it, on this most holy night, to be deserted, but it wasn't. A car was parked in the darkness, the engine turning over but with no lights on. I parked in front of it, a few yards ahead, and noticed in my rear-view mirror something stir within. The headlights flashed. A signal. I switched on my interior light and switched it off again. After a moment the car's headlights came on and stayed on. A figure got out and came and stood in front, illuminated by the headlamps. It was a man, doing a dance, and he was completely naked apart from a bow of tinsel, which he had tied round his balls. Merry Christmas, I thought: Happy Feast of the Nativity.

My own nativity was on this wise. I was born in the Barratt, on 26 March 1962. As I appeared the midwife exclaimed, 'Ooh, Mrs Coles, he's got clickers' hands.' This was a good omen. Clicking – cutting out the shapes from a hide to make up a shoe – was the best-paid job in a shoe factory. And it was shoe factories that had not only funded the Barratt but had also funded my mother's stay and my arrival there.

It was the first maternity unit in the county, given in 1936 by William Barratt, one of the magnates of the Northamptonshire boot and shoe industry. Private fortunes, thanks to nonconformist Christianity, were then often used to fund public projects and to this day the manufacturing towns and cities of Britain are much the better off for the largesse of the men in suits and hats and beards and watch chains who stare confidently at us out of black and white photographs printed on thick board. I am the great-grandson of another, John Wallace Coles, who, in 1908, started our family firm in Burton Latimer, a small town about twenty miles from Northampton. He was a Congregationalist, a Liberal in politics and man of energy and purpose, renowned as a public speaker and the first mayor of the town. He had worked for another firm as a salesman, but somehow managed to get the wherewithal to set up on his own. The

catastrophe of the First World War was, with bitter irony, very good for business – for armies, despite Napoleon’s assertion, march on their feet not their stomachs – and those first shoe factories boomed. He prospered, the county prospered, the firm grew.

When John Wallace expired over an early morning cup of tea in the same year Barratt gave Northampton his maternity home, my grandfather, Eric Keith Coles, inherited. He was another man of great energy, although his was invested more widely, shall we say, than his father’s. The firm continued to prosper, the Second World War, a boot-hungry conflict like the First, enriched it and him. My father, Nigel, grew up during those years, suffering few of the deprivations others did thanks to his father’s wealth and complete disregard for the virtue of austerity. Eric Keith was a man of terrific appetites, for food and drink and luxury and company, and would illegally trade pairs of shoes for sirloin and whisky and cigars.

As my grandfather’s firm – Coles Boot and Shoe Ltd – prospered, he acquired more factories, in Burton Latimer and in the neighbouring town where I am now vicar, Finedon. After visiting the Caribbean, which he adored, he even opened a factory in Jamaica, a tax-deductible excuse for going again, I suppose. A number of my parishioners today remember Eric Keith well. He was a peacock, in Prince of Wales check, and a waxed moustache, and drove a huge black Rolls-Royce, NNV 1, a ‘prestige’ number plate, *avant la lettre*. One told me my grandfather would leave the car at the factory for the workers to clean, but they liked doing this because they could sit in the back, help themselves to the cocktail cabinet and sprawl out on the leather seats imagining what it was like to be the boss. In photographs I have of him giving out the prizes at the town carnival, he is the picture of *noblesse oblige* – only the expressions on the faces of the rector and the lady at the big house suggest they were thinking something different. He was loud and emotional and dominating and rather adorable in a Mr Toad sort of way. Another parishioner told me that when he was sixteen, and had just started working at the factory, he took a morning off to get married and was late returning to work. Walking to the factory he saw my grandfather’s Rolls-Royce

lumbering down the street and as it arrived alongside him it stopped and the window was wound down. He thought he was going to be sacked but instead was handed a bottle of champagne with my grandfather's compliments.

I loved him. He was flamboyant and funny and constantly showing off, singing comic songs at the piano and giving tasters of whisky and puffs of cigarettes to my two brothers and me when we were only four or five years old. These things I, too, came to love, and my endless fascination with food is his, transmitted through my father, who would walk through fire for a decent fish soup. In this we are dogs, easily distracted from our mongrel purposes by a good dinner, and in our family history food rituals were significant. After Eric Keith died, my father took his place at the head of the table, and having carved the joint of beef on a Sunday my grandmother, Kathleen, would take a tablespoon of the meat juices down to him to slurp them as she held the spoon to his mouth.

Kathleen was the youngest of thirteen whose father died of the cure for drink when she was only six. Her mother, widowed at forty-seven, had to rely on her late husband's father for a living; another bearded, hatted, watch-chained paterfamilias, he was the inventor of the bacon slicer (at least according to him), which he neglected to patent. He also invented machinery for shoe factories and, most spectacularly, a car, the Robinson, one of which survives in Kettering's museum. It was made for a local doctor and has a fold-down operating table on which appendices could be removed. He was a Baptist, signed the pledge and ruled like an Old Testament patriarch, so maybe it was inevitable that his son and heir became a sot. Kathleen, his youngest granddaughter in a family of beauties, was the most beautiful of all, and caught Eric Keith's eye at Kettering Fair when she was five and he was seven, so the story goes. When she grew up she wanted to be a dancer but her grandfather forbade it and she became a secretary instead, only not for long. She married Eric Keith in the Toller Baptist church in the summer of 1923.

It was a marriage both life-long and life-giving, as the C of E service puts it, but she had to acquire extraordinary patience due to Eric

Keith's insatiable appetites and restless ways. After the war they took a liner to Istanbul at a time of tension between Britain and Turkey, because my grandfather had 'business interests' there. They were advised not to go ashore but my grandfather insisted and she had to climb down a ladder in a fur coat and get a tender to the quay. There they were picked up by a driver and taken to an address in the Old City. The driver warned them it was dangerous but my grandfather ignored him, told my grandmother he'd be twenty minutes and then disappeared for three hours, leaving her stuck in the back of the car, the focus of unfriendly interest.

In spite of these minor humiliations and some major humiliations, she loved him and when he died, suddenly, she went into shock. They were halfway through building a bungalow but work stalled because she found she couldn't make a decision, until one day the builder told her to snap out of it and her three decades of widowhood began.

The bungalow was on a plot of land next to their house in Barton Seagrave, an ancient village that had been swallowed up by Kettering. At the top of its hill, which claimed a great-uncle who died when he fell off his penny-farthing at its bottom, houses were built between the wars to accommodate those made prosperous by shoe-making. They had names like 'Fieldways' and 'Fourwinds', names I cannot write without thinking of doilies and rockeries and ticking clocks. They were the equivalent of the executive residences built today, with loggias and sunrooms and nurseries instead of en suite bathrooms and media rooms and triple garages. My grandparents lived in Poplars Farm Road, just round the corner from my uncle and aunt and their glamorous children in Ridgeway Road, where we lived, too, my parents and my two brothers, in a new house, 'Longmeadow', built for them when they'd got married in 1959. On Sundays we all went for high tea at my grandparents' house, a meal so defeatingly big and splendid it turned hospitality into a sort of challenge. There were sandwiches and cakes and sardines on toast and little stainless steel dishes of radishes and hard-boiled eggs and two kinds of tea: 'India or China?'

Not far away, on Pytchley Road in Kettering, lived my other grandparents, in a house just along the street from where my grandmother, Joan, had been brought up. Her father, the town's dentist, had raised his family in 'Grey Gables', a musical plural which conveyed both a sense of style and the suggestion of grandeur, but later, Joan – who married his junior partner – lived at 'number twenty-nine', which, as a child, I found a little disappointing. My grandfather, Leonard, not only married the daughter of his senior partner, but also inherited the business, measures of his own achievement, having been brought up the son of a dental technician in Devonshire. He was clever and caught the wave of opportunity that came after the First World War, studying dentistry at Guy's, while helping to keep the trams running during the General Strike. I wish I'd known Joan better but she died when I was fourteen. She seemed rather severe to me as a boy and was an uneven cook. Her marmalade tart makes me tearful even when I think of it now. Very unusually, she and her sister had studied maths at University College London, which must have opened up an unimaginably wide horizon, and I wonder what she made of her return to Kettering and marriage to her father's junior partner. She smoked like a chimney, loved cards, and said little, although even as a boy I sensed intelligence at work and judgements being formed. I think she found us tiresome and after my brothers and I stayed for a weekend she had a short conversation with my mother and we never stayed again.

I adored Leonard. He was creaky after a car accident and smoked a pipe and had a gin at six and was extraordinarily well read. He knew Shakespeare and Milton and Bunyan and Dickens practically by heart and liked my company because I was interested in things like that, too. My father's side of the family could not be described as cultured and it was this side that dominated, so, while Kathleen's intelligence, under wraps, intrigued me, my grandfather's, more readily expressed, engaged me, and we would talk about history and literature and religion. He was a low church Anglican, and a churchwarden in the village where they built their retirement bungalow, 'Paddockwray'. After my grandmother died, of lung cancer, he lived

there alone, with his pipe and his Sunday Times Wine Club deliveries and his books and cricket and British Dental Association business.

My mother was the eldest of their three children, born in 1936 in Kettering. During the war she used to walk around town with a collection of animals from her Noah's Ark and push them through strangers' letterboxes until they opened the door and then she would say, 'Hello, my name is Elizabeth and I like sweets.' She liked to give people what for – she still does – and once brained the vicar's son, whom she found a bit pious, by poking a stick through the front of his bike as he was going along so he fell over the handlebars on to the road. She had great enthusiasm for things as a child but was only prepared to do them on her own terms. Playing the part of the green fairy in a junior school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she couldn't be bothered to attend Titania and flitted around the stage amusing herself instead until someone made her go and sit down. At St Leonard's – a fiercely dour boarding school in Scotland – she was as happy as she's ever been. She loved sport, cricket and hockey in particular, and my favourite photograph is of her in the Miss Jean Brodie uniform of the day cross-legged wearing pads in the school cricket team photograph. After school she went to Domestic Science College in Gloucester and once, reading the lesson at Evensong in the cathedral, had to say 'the pricks of the Corinthians', which I think must be the only time she has ever blushed.

By the time of her twenty-first birthday she was engaged to my father. I have a photograph of them dancing at their party, he in black tie, she in one of those wonderful fifties dresses that look like chintz sofas on the move. My father, after leaving the minor public school which my brothers and I would also attend, did his national service in Korea, just missing the war, but not its aftermath, for one of his men, stopping for a pee, stepped on a landmine and was blown into pieces next to him. I find it difficult to imagine my father, the gentlest and most gentlemanly of men, in armed conflict, but he was, serving as a second lieutenant in the Royal Tank Regiment, under a Captain Partridge and a Major Pidgeon. At Aldershot, where he trained, he

nearly drove his tank into Field Marshal Montgomery's Humber and once after firing practice absent-mindedly rested his hands on the all but red-hot barrel of the tank's gun and had to be sent home. After the army he went to college in Leicester to learn the mysteries of the shoe trade and spent the weekends driving around Kettering in his MGA, going to dances, playing badminton and meeting my mother.

My parents were married in the summer of 1959 at St Andrew's Kettering, on a blazing hot day, so the beaks on the ice-cream ducks she'd requested wilted. In the wedding photographs, they all line up, my father's father, rich and glamorous, looking like it is all about him, next to my mother's mother looking pensive. She once forgot herself and spoke of her new in-laws as 'trade'. My father, smart and confident, and my mother, happy and triumphant, on the brink of a life they must have expected to be much like their parents' – steady, prosperous, in a world that would not change so much. Of course their world changed as much as mine has, as it had for their parents, too, but weddings make us salute the values of permanence and stability amid all the changing scenes of life.

I got lucky with my parents. I have never once doubted their love nor for a moment thought they might not endure. They never really argued, though once, spectacularly, when a plate and a poached egg launched by my father flew without warning across the kitchen and Mum burst into tears and ran off in her quilted dressing gown, I thought the end of the world had come. Now I know this sort of explosion happens when resentment is left unexpressed, arguments go unrehearsed. I still have a doomsday reflex that fires whenever people argue, but there are many worse things you can lay at your parents' feet, if you are lucky enough to still have them, than a dislike of quarrelling.