Homily Charles Simeon 15.11.2026
SJO.HC.8&1030am

Blessed Spirit, celebrating
the life and witness of all
who have gone before us,
grant that we with them
may follow in our Lord's footsteps,
to our Father's glory. Amen

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This morning
I've chosen to celebrate
the life and witness
of Charles Simeon –
no doubt unheard of
by most of you!

I have venerated him
ever since I first
came across him
as a theological student
at Oxford.

His memorial day
in the church calendar
was 2 days ago – November 13.

I begin *in medias re!*

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The wardens
of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge,
were not pleased when
the young Charles Simeon
stepped into their pulpit
for the first time
on January 4th, 1783.

Twenty-three years old
and not yet ordained,
he had been appointed Vicar
by the Bishop of Ely
as a favour to his father.

The wardens refused
to attend services,
and locked their
old-fashioned box pews
so no one could use them.

At his own expense,
Simeon bought benches
and set them up
in the aisles,
but the wardens
dragged them into
the churchyard.

For several years,
Simeon preached
to a standing room
only congregation
in a church full
of empty seats.

Simeon proposed
an evening service,
but the wardens
ensured the church
was locked on
Sunday evenings.

Meanwhile,
they invited their
preferred candidate
to preach on Sunday afternoons
and paid him double
Simeon's salary.

Simeon took to riding
into the countryside
on Sunday afternoons
and preaching in country churches
that couldn't afford
to pay a preacher –
to increasingly large
and appreciative congregations.

What no one
could have imagined in 1783
was that Simeon would:
- occupy the pulpit
of Holy Trinity Church
for 54 years,
- become the most
influential preacher
in the land,
- and single-handedly
redefine what a sermon
is supposed to be.

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Simeon lived to preach.

Lest we find that obsessive,
recall our Lord Jesus.

Early in his ministry,
after a long day
of preaching
and healing many,
he withdraws into the desert
alone and at prayer.

His disciples find him
and urge him to return
with them
as the crowds are keen
to see more of him.

Jesus' response?

In his own words:
Let us go on
to the neighbouring towns,
so that I may preach
there also;
for that is what I came out to do.
(Mk 1.38)

Then too,
recall St Paul's exhortation
to Timothy:
In the presence of God
and of Christ Jesus,
who is to judge
the living and the dead…,
I solemnly urge you:
preach the word;
be persistent whether the time
is favourable or unfavourable;
convince, rebuke, and encourage,
with the utmost patience
in teaching.
(2 Tim 4.1f.)

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In Simeon's day,
it was the fashion
to preach sermons
prepared by others
or taken from books.

Simeon saw this
as an invitation to
self-satisfied, lukewarm piety.

He wrote his own sermons,
spending 12 hours
and more
in preparation each week.

And he sought to engage
the whole person,
the minds, hearts, and wills
of his listeners.

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Congregations
were small at first,
but within a decade
the pews began to fill.

(New, more sympathetic wardens
unlocked them in 1790 –
7 years after his arrival!)

By 1800
a Sunday congregation of 1000
was not unusual.

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The most distinctive
feature of his preaching
was his faithfulness
to Scripture.

He rose daily at 4 am
and spent 4 hours
in Bible study and prayer.

He knew the scriptures intimately,
and said of his preaching,
and I quote:
"My goal is to bring
out of the scriptures
what is there,
and not to thrust in
what I think
might be there".

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Simeon preached for conversion.

He'd arrived in Cambridge
as a student –
like most of his contemporaries
without a faith
and careless of the church
and spiritual matters.

"The 3rd day after my arrival",
he writes,
"I understood that
I should be expected
in the space of about 3 weeks
to attend the Lord's Supper".

He set about preparing himself.

He continues,
"...in Easter week,
as I was reading Bishop Wilson
on the Lord's Supper,
I met with an expression
to this effect,
'that the Jews
knew what they did
when they transferred
their sin to the head
of their offering'.

“The thought rushed
into my mind – What!
“May I transfer
all my guilt to another?
“Has God provided
an offering for me
that I may lay all my sins
on his head?
“Then, God willing,
I will not bear them
on my own soul
one moment longer.
“Accordingly, I sought
to lay my sins
upon the sacred
head of Jesus…
[and on Easter Day, April 4,]
I awoke early
with those words
upon my heart and lips:
‘Jesus Christ is risen today! Hallelujah!’”.

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Simeon’s own experience
explains what he later called
the preacher’s test
(and I quote):
“[Does your sermon] tend
- to humble the sinner?
- to exalt the Saviour?
- to promote holiness?”
(end quote)

In another place
he describes what he calls
‘evangelical preaching’
(and I quote):

“The *subject* of it
must be ‘Christ Crucified’;
that is, Christ
must be set forth
as the only foundation
of a sinner’s hope;
and holiness
in all its branches
must be enforced;
but a sense
of Christ’s love
in dying for us
must be inculcated
as the main spring
and motive
of all our obedience”
(end quote).

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Simeon’s other great legacy
is his founding
of the Patronage Trust.

Many parishes in England
were held by the local
landlord or squire
who was responsible
for appointing the clergy.

The prospect
of a decent income
and little expectation of work
meant that a family member
or friend of the squire
was often appointed
regardless of spiritual
qualifications.

These trusts were often
bought and sold.

Simeon used his
considerable income –
- partly inherited,
- partly from the sale
of his published sermons –
to buy up parishes,
especially in growing
urban areas.

His goal was to provide
challenging ministries
for committed clergy.

The result was that
strong evangelical
gospel preaching
began to revitalize
the church in many areas.

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I've used more than once,
because Simeon used it,
the term 'evangelical'
to describe him.

His was a particular
form of evangelicalism.

He met John Wesley once,
but was not a disciple.

By Simeon's time,
many Wesleyans
had left the Church of England
for the new Methodist Chapels.

Simeon was an evangelical,
but a loyal Anglican.

Perhaps his greatest contribution
was to show how
evangelical Christianity
can flourish within
established church order.

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As I draw to a close
let me share four texts
in which I let Simeon
speak for himself.

In the first one
he distinguishes
his evangelicalism
from other forms
with which we might be
more familiar,
and perhaps suspicious!!

"Many, if their imaginations
are pleased
and their spirits elevated",
he writes,
"are ready to think
that they have been
greatly edified,
and this error
is at the root
of that preference
which they give
to extempore prayer,
and the indifference
which they manifest
towards the prayers
of the established church.

“But real edification
consists in humility of mind,
and in being led
to a more holy
and consistent walk
with God
and one atom
of such a spirit
is more valuable
than all the animal fervour
that ever was excited”.
(end quote)

Here he is
identifying the bedrock
of his life – in Christ.

“The tender heart,
the broken and contrite spirit,
are to me far above
all the joys that
I could ever hope for
in this vale of tears”.
(from Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon)

In this next quotation
he exhorts us to
Christ-centeredness.

“Learn, sisters and brothers,
before it be too late,
- that ‘without Christ
you can do nothing;’
- that ‘all your fresh springs
are in him;’
- and ‘of him must
your fruit be found;’
- ‘in him alone shall all …
be justified,
and shall all glory’”.

Finally,
a winsome
and illuminating blend
of joy and humility.

“With the sweet hope
of ultimate acceptance
with God,
I have always enjoyed
much cheerfulness
before others;
but I have
at the same time
laboured incessantly
to cultivate the deepest
humiliation before God”.
(from Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon)

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Thanks be to God
for his faithful servant,
Charles Simeon.