

## Bishop Joseph Butler - A notable Anglican

As one of the celebrated Anglican theologians of the eighteenth century, it is somewhat surprising that in the contemporary Church of England Joseph Butler (1692-1752 - whose commemorative day falls on the 16<sup>th</sup> June), rarely attracts the attention he merits. In the 1720's and 30's, a time of growing rationalist skepticism, he took up the cudgels against the kind of spirit-denying materialism that undermines faith. As Rector of Houghton-le-Skerne and then of Stanhope in County Durham, he wrote his most famous work, the *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736). The *Analogy* has been described by John R. H. Moorman, former Bishop of Ripon, as "one of the most important and influential books in Christian literature", and indeed this work remained on the reading list for Anglican ordinands at theological college throughout the nineteenth century.

Brought up a Presbyterian, Butler was educated in dissenting academies. Despite this strong formative influence, as a young man he decided to join the Church of England, and after studying at Oxford was ordained a Deacon in 1718, going on to preach and publish his famous *Fifteen Sermons*, first delivered at the Rolls Chapel in London. He later became Bishop of Bristol, and then of Durham in 1750. Butler's works are celebrated for their subtle and assured style, combined with great modesty and clarity. Whilst holding reason in high esteem, he pointed out the limitations of this faculty, arguing for the necessity of revelation. He also urged the importance of paying greater attention to conscience - which he regarded as a God-given moral compass - and of applying Christian values in daily life.

The rational demand for tangible, sense-based evidence cannot be applied in spiritual matters, and in these, Butler contends, intuition necessarily holds sway. Intuition leads one, for example, to faith in divine providence: to the view that God cares deeply for creation and for human history as it unfolds. This is in strong contrast to the Deist notion of the dispassionate 'watch-maker' God, who sets creation in motion, and then retires to 'celestial heights' to let the universe run its own unaided course. For Butler God's deep care for creation is revealed both in scripture and the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ, which he unequivocally regards as a witness to the fullness of God's love acting in history.

In contrast to Thomas Hobbes, who essentially held a pessimistic view of human nature, arguing that, left to their own devices, human beings were little better than amoral and selfish beasts of the jungle, Butler held to a spiritual understanding of the human soul. In line with this more idealistic picture of the human being, he regarded such human qualities as proper self-esteem, kindness, altruism towards one's fellows and conscience as indications that we are made by a loving God, who has planted seeds of his own nature in our souls. Butler believes that we are born with these 'seeds', these predispositions to goodness already within us, albeit that they need to be nurtured in the right way. This theology

distances him both from Calvin, who saw human nature in its own right as being completely unregenerate and evil, and from the philosophy of John Locke, who believed that the human soul or inner nature was a *tabula rasa* or blank piece of paper, that could be socially conditioned and moulded in any direction. For Butler such a concept was anathema, because he understands the human soul to have a spiritual nature made in keeping with God's design, and believes therefore that true happiness lies in living in accord with this design. These divinely given 'soul-seeds' are nurtured and watered both by scripture and in church life through the Holy Spirit's activity within the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through this activity the church becomes God's sacrament as the Body of Christ in the world.

Starting from a foundation of rational thought, Butler shows the importance of moving beyond this to a faith founded on revelation and an intuition of profound spiritual activity at work in the world. In so doing he fought a powerful rear-guard battle against materialism and skepticism, and inspired many to feel drawn to the Church of England and indeed to ordination within that church. He remains a beacon of light in the Anglican tradition and it is entirely fitting that we continue to commemorate his life and work on annual basis in our lectionary.

Revd Ian Welch

17<sup>th</sup> June, 2018 - Third Sunday after Trinity.