

Editorial

DOROTHY L. SAYERS REMEMBERED JUST A LITTLE LATE

2007 was the 50th anniversary of the passing of Dorothy L. Sayers. At the time of her death in 1957 she had one of the highest profiles among contemporary writers in England. In the 1920s and 30s she had dazzled the English-speaking world with the detective novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey. But that was how she made her living; she was first of all a scholar, having received a first class honours degree in medieval literature from Oxford University. Like C.S. Lewis, she had become an articulate apologist for the Christian faith.

She was invited by the “Friends of Canterbury Cathedral” – who for some time had been sponsoring dramas to be performed in the cathedral’s Chapter House — to write the play for the 1937 season. The one she prepared was a very stylized production – that included angels! – which centered around the life of William of Sens. After a disastrous fire at Canterbury in 1174, he was responsible for the design of the cathedral as it now stands, and in the course of construction fell from a great height and was killed. Sayers’ theme was hubris and its consequences. The play, entitled *Zeal of Thy House*, was published in book form the same year, and attracted sufficient attention that she was invited by the BBC’s children’s division to write some radio plays on the life of Christ. In the end she prepared 12 plays, each running about three-quarters of an hour, that were broadcast for a general audience. The series carried the title *The Man Born To Be King*, and the book containing the plays bore the same name.

There is nothing like those plays anywhere in the English language, and not just because they were prepared strictly for the ear and not also for the eye. They were written by a scholar who knew much theological history; they were based entirely on the Greek text; and they carried impressive theological and psychological insight into the Gospel narratives. C.S. Lewis sent a letter to Sayers many years after their publication to say that he

never let a Christmas go by without rereading the plays. For the May issue of *Touchstone*, 1991, I wrote an article entitled “Dorothy L. Sayers: Moving Toward Paradise”. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the broadcast of the first play, which took place in December, 1941, and which created a flood of angry criticism from the well-placed in the land. The project was almost cancelled, and the airing of the next play greatly delayed. However, the chorus of gratitude that sounded from all corners of the country gave courage to the BBC brass and they resumed the broadcasts.

I have almost missed the anniversary of her death, but belatedly I want to remind readers of the work of Sayers, a scholarly and compelling writer on a number of subjects, including Christian themes, whose talks and essays are accessible to the lay reader, and who can still illumine the mind and enrich the soul. And for the more adventurous, I can testify that one of the most engaging and accessible introductions to medieval theology in our language is to be found in the addresses and essays she prepared about Dante, after she plunged in to translate the most celebrated three-volume poem in western literature, his *Divine Comedy*.

Once she embarked upon Dante, which happened at the end of 1944, Sayers refused most of the many invitations she received to speak and write, unless they were related to him. But she loved the theatrical world, and the preparation of plays greatly attracted her. Thus when the Bishop of Chelmsford asked her for a drama to celebrate a Festival to be held in Colchester in 1951, she agreed to provide one. Knowing Christian history as well as she did, Sayers was aware of the fact – or the legend – that the mother of Constantine the Great, Helena, was the daughter of Old King Cole, i.e. the King of Colchester. Helena was a Christian, in a day when that really meant something. Since in the course of his rule over the Roman Empire Constantine presided at the very first general council of the church, held in Nicea in 325, out of which came the initial form of the Nicene Creed, Sayers seized the opportunity to write a play – a chronicle she called it – about Constantine’s role in Christianity being adopted as the official religion of the Roman empire, and the serious ambiguities surrounding that.

The play shows both the people of the old religion and the Christians in the subtle shadings of virtues and vices. But the heart of the chronicle is the debate that was raging in the church at the time of Constantine over the teaching of Arius, who denied not just the true deity of Christ but his full humanity. This is what prompted the gathering at Nicea. Sayers follows the scholarly trail to find out who was there, and what their leanings were. She is aware that the council did not create a new creed, but modified one already in use in Caesarea, which its bishop, Eusebius, brought to the meeting with him. And she knows that, in spite of the lofty words about Christ in the Caesarean creed – “the Word of God, God from God, Light from Light, Life from Life, only-begotten Son” — Arius was comfortable with it. Eusebius himself was in Arius’ camp to begin with, though he changed sides before the end.

The issue was not whether Christ was divine. Arius believed that. The question was whether the Son shared eternally in the *same nature* as the Father. Arius denied that, and Sayers shows that he had no trouble finding passages of scripture, and statements by authoritative figures from the past, to support his stand. In the face of Arius’ challenge, the majority at the council opted, not for terminology that would bring all parties together in harmony – which many wanted and Constantine had strongly urged – but for a sharp-edged non-biblical word that Arius and his followers couldn’t accept, a Greek term that blocked off the notion that Christ, however close the bond he had with God the Father, was but a divine emissary. The adopted wording of the creed thus affirmed that he was a human being who at the same time shared “the same nature” as the Father.

It is a pity that few people today know the play exists. It was published in Britain by Gollancz in 1951 under the title, *The Emperor Constantine*. Eerdmans put out an American edition in 1976. Teachers in seminaries and ministers in congregations don’t usually experience great difficulty in getting people to have a feel for events in the church’s past, as long as they are about things like faith, danger, courage, hardship, selflessness, love, power, ambition,

money or sex. If, however, they happen to be about a tug-of-war over christology, the eyes of the students or of the congregation will often glaze over. The problem is certainly there with regard to the council of Nicea and what came out of it. For that, Sayers' play could be a useful resource. It paints the debate over Christ's identity as such a fallible human process, but at the same time helps readers to see how critical the issues at stake were then, and are to this day. Sayers' portrayal of the discussion at the Council comes largely from her imagination, and since Arius wasn't a bishop he may not have been inside the venue, let alone have spoken. The play presumes that Athanasius, also a presbyter, was present and engaged Arius in debate. Nevertheless Sayers demonstrates the level of her knowledge of the issues that were under discussion, and her command of theological nuance. Check the most likely library to locate a copy of the play. And don't be put off by the distracting appearances of Old King Cole. He had to be thrown in because the drama was, after all, commissioned for Colchester's Festival and performed there.

– A. M. W.

THE UNTIMELY DEATH OF A TOUCHSTONE FOUNDER, DAVID HOFFMAN

On Tuesday, October 30, 2007, we lost a founder and deep friend. The Rev. David Hoffman died in Regina at the age of 54, after several months of deteriorating health. David made a critical contribution to this journal, helping to launch it, to shape its direction, and write for its readers with care and insightful humour. We will miss his thoughtful patience and his delightful sense of humour and grace. He served 28 years in ministry, being a pastor of theological sophistication and a profound tenderness of spirit.

We remember and extend our deepest condolences to David's wife Bonnie and their children, Andrea, Stefan, and Jonathan. He was an instrument of Christ's grace and peace. For the blessing of his friendship and companionship we are deeply grateful.

– J.H.