

# Thomas Phillips 1868-1936

**T**O know Thomas Phillips was a liberal education. To be a student of his was to share in an exhilarating adventure of learning. To enjoy the privilege of his friendship was a benediction—fragrant and full of grace.

Dr. Thomas Phillips became principal of the South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff, in 1928, to succeed one of the most gifted and one of the best beloved of all the principals of the college from Haverfordwest via Pontypool to Cardiff, the Reverend James Morlais Davies, M.A. He brought with him a modest academic record, established some twenty years previously, and an illustrious ministerial and pulpit record second to none. Primarily, this was the reason for his appointment, and it was made to match the urgent need of the college at that time.

Both the college and the Church were involved in the crisis of the late twenties in the life of Wales. The years of depression had fallen upon South Wales and they were to continue until the outbreak of the second world war. The drift away from the churches had set in with increasing rapidity and strength. In South Wales, the tide of Anglicization was rising high and the Welsh churches, which had been the main strength of the college for many years, were staring at a bleak future.

Culturally, economically and religiously, the constituency on which the college had depended and which it was meant to serve, was entering upon a revolutionary epoch which was to bring radical changes to the life of the nation. To guide the college, to prepare the Church, through her ministers, to meet the tensions of the new day, to accept the change without surrender of the high purpose which the college was committed to fulfil, this was the colossal task to which Thomas Phillips was called.

Those of us who were students of the college when he first came soon realized how pivotal to all his life and work was his devotion to his Lord. For Tom Phillips, all that finally mattered was a man's devotion to Jesus Christ. No-one who ever heard "T.P." preach or pray or conduct a communion service will ever forget the slight inclination of the head and the soft, reverent inflexion in his voice when he uttered the name of his Lord. He was fettered by no creed; he was bound to no dogma; he was held captive by no doctrine of any book; he was unashamedly a *doulos*, a slave of Jesus Christ. In this enslavement he enjoyed perfect freedom, and his preaching, perhaps more than anything else, reflected this "liberty which is the glory of Christ."

For Tom Phillips was authentically and unmistakably a preacher, an acknowledged prince of the pulpit. He was more at ease in the pulpit than he was on any other platform, and yet the pulpit was for him "that holy place," "the awe-ful place" where men stood in fear and trembling to break before a waiting people the "words of life." His tall figure, his dark hair, his plain clothes, with no vestments or other signs of office, his penetrating eyes, the gentle smile that lit up his shy countenance, his beautifully modulated voice, his command of language, his dramatic imagination, his use of metaphor and of parable from the everyday working world of farmers and of technicians, artisans and actors, men of business and dockworkers—all this gave to his preaching its human appeal and its verve.

When first he came to Cardiff, he declared that if he could produce five or six preachers he would feel that he had achieved something worthwhile for the Church and for the nation. Had he lived longer, he would have seen "of the travail of his soul." Whatever distinction as preachers some of his students may have achieved, there is not one among them who would not wish to acknowledge publicly and gratefully his indebtedness to this one man who never prostituted preaching for his own demagogic ends, who wore the mantle of the prophet with self-effacing simplicity, and who proclaimed without fear or favour "the redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ."

Not that any one of his men sought to copy him or to adopt his style. He was *sui generis*. Everyone who sought to copy would have forfeited his claim to be a preacher. He would not have been himself. T.P. had no desire to produce "echoes" of himself. He gave to us a zest for preaching but the genuine article had to be our own. He would tolerate no fake, no copy, however flattering or however accurate. To become a preacher, he used to insist, a man must meet three imperatives—consecration, compassion, communication. Only the man who is committed to his Lord can preach His gospel. Preaching is the exaltation of Jesus Christ, and there can be no self-gratification for the preacher in this act. Chaucer's words are still apt:

"Criste's lore and his apostles twelve  
He taught, but *first* he followed it himselfe."

The measure of his consecration was compassion. Stern words have to be uttered; judgment has to be declared; sin has to be castigated; those who exploit the innocent have to be exposed; but in all these the preacher has to speak out of deep compassion. There is a world of difference between the forthright condemnation of sin and the rebuke of the sinner. The preacher, too, is a sinner, and when he uses his hands it may be just as well for him to remember that when his Lord once showed his hands they carried the mark of nails.

No amount of consecration and not all the compassion in the world will avail unless the preacher can communicate. Tom Phillips' speech was simple, direct, poetic and vividly practical. His gift of communication was based on wide reading—tomes of theology, books of fiction, novels, biographies, newspapers, magazines, and the English classics. In addition, he was endowed with a remarkable memory, and he could recall the apt quotation, the telling poem, the well-fashioned phrase, with ease and felicity.

Two further comments should be made. The first is that his most effective preaching ministry was exercised while he was the pastor of a congregation. For him, preaching was the supreme function of the pastoral ministry. Throughout the week he walked in and out of the lives of all sorts and conditions of men. He knew and loved his people. He gave comfort to the aged and courage to the young. He summoned those in the midst of their years to the dreams of their youth, and pointed them to the hope of their to-morrow. To the failures, the misfits, the "fallen," the wayward and the prodigal he spoke and gave the assurance of healing, of restoration and of renewal. Having ministered throughout the week in grace, there was no contradiction between his pulpit ministry and his pastoral care.

The second is that as a preacher, though the language he most frequently used was English, he was unmistakably Welsh. I do not make this comment as a bigoted, doctrinaire, or inflexible nationalist. He was a son of a Welsh home, and became heir to the rich, rare and cultural heritage of a particular people. If I may say so without any irreverence, Tom Phillips was a Welshman in the same sense that his Lord was a Jew. Neither of them denied the rock whence he was hewn and neither of them apologized for his birth within a certain people. Tom Phillips ministered to English congregations all his life. He went from Bangor, North Wales, a bastion of Welsh culture at its most splendid best, to Kettering, to Norwich, to Bloomsbury, London, and back to Cardiff—the most Anglicized city in Wales—and in all his journeyings he kept the glow, the unaffected simplicity, the eager curiosity, the frankness, the imagination of his native land. He remained true to himself and to his own folk.

He taught me Philosophy and more than Philosophy. He taught me Theology and made me a theologian. I have learned, also, how crucial it is for every preacher to be sure of his Lord, particularly if he wishes to avoid the twin perils of his office, arrogance and egotism. "Disgybl wyf efe a'm dysgawdd." ("I am a disciple; He disciplined me.")