

PART ONE 1921-41

New Growth

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

Genesis 1.1

Christ is the image of the unseen God, and the firstborn of all creation.

Colossians 1.15

BY 1921 my Bickersteth grandparents had been living for five years in Meister Omers, 16 The Precincts, Canterbury, a large flint and stone 13th century house fifty yards from the east end of the cathedral. At the end of August my mother and father arrived from their London home for her fourth 'confinement'. She loved the house, as we four children later came to; but she was well aware too that, whereas we had one maid and a nanny in London, my grandmother Ella still had her super 'Ninny' (who had been employed for her and Sam's second baby in 1884, and was to stay with the family for sixty years), plus five living-in staff, not to speak of a chauffeur and gardener. It was all a great deal more comfortable a place than our house in London in which to have a baby.

I was born in the Queen Elizabeth Room there on 6 September, and from soon afterwards my grandfather¹ had a framed photograph of me on his desk, changing it every year or so as I grew, and subscribing it very grandly 'John of Canterbury.' It says a lot for my older siblings that they never felt (or at least evinced) any jealousy about the 'title', nor did grandfather ever display any favouritism of which I was aware. He had certainly got it right that for ever after I would think of myself as part of the place. Add to this the fact that, from well before that September day in 1921 right up to my Uncle Burgon's death in the spring of 1979, there were Bickersteths living in Canterbury; and I am fairly sure that for me never a year passed (including the war years, as I shall show) without my going there.

Meister Omers was marvellous for children, with its Long Gallery for hilarious games, the spiral stone staircase, the upstairs passage to which grown-ups never seemed to penetrate because it was where the servants lived, and lots of wonderful nooks and crannies

¹ He was Residentiary Canon and Librarian of Canterbury Cathedral 1916-1936

for Hide and Seek. There was also 'cook', always 'cook'; probably there were several in succession, but our treatment from them was invariably the same, in that whoever she was delighted in spoiling us ten grandchildren (the three married sons and their children often stayed) with juicy titbits or drinks of ginger beer from big stone jars, on our clandestine kitchen visits. The hall boasted an organ, and at it grandmother played the hymn every weekday for Family Prayers after breakfast. I can see, as if it was yesterday, the servants filing in to sit opposite us; then grandfather, gown and all, would sweep in from the study with Bible and prayer book; his departure from the table a little earlier was obviously the signal to the staff that we had finished eating. To pray, we all turned to kneel at our own chairs, so it was a great game for my brother and me to squint round and see whether any new member of the domestic staff had a specially big bottom, and whether the younger maids were giggling.

Because of grandfather's increasing deafness he disappointingly became a rather remote figure, but I remember his wonderful smile and the great games he used to have with us in his study, where there was a step ladder to reach the top shelves, and the game was to collect as many chocolate drops as we could from their perches on the really high (?dusty) books, with gales of laughter if we did not find them all. My memories of Meister Omers are very happy ones.

The Dean of Canterbury then was George Bell, later Bishop of Chichester; it was he who in 1928 devised, as a way of raising interest in and money for the cathedral, a brand new organisation called 'The Friends of Canterbury Cathedral'. He could not have begun to know then that his initiative would be gradually copied by many thousands of people responsible for churches, historic houses, museums, gardens and so on all over the English-speaking world. For my part, as a seven-year-old, I clearly remember being taken along by grandfather, early on in the infant life of the Friends, maybe even in that year of their foundation, to join the Junior Friends, which I imagine was formed so that local children could become keen about this great House of God on their doorstep. I know I proudly displayed for many years a blue and silver badge, and the subscription was presumably paid by my father until I started taking it out of my pocket money. So I proudly claim that I

have been a Friend for nearly eighty years, and no one can gainsay me, as the records were all lost in the Blitz.

We could relate with our blind and very bright grandmother better than we could with our kindly deaf grandfather. The affliction hit her in 1928, when I was only seven, and so I do not really remember her before it. But her mind remained sharper than ever, and the highlight of those years was their Golden Wedding in 1931, much more notable an event than these are now, when everyone lives so much longer. My brother Edward was then sixteen years old and at Haileybury; he made the speech for the toast, as we sat round the long oak five-leafed table for lunch, the brothers all in morning coats. This fine table eventually came to Rosemary and me in Liverpool and later in Wells, where it worked very hard indeed, and was bought by the Church Commissioners, when we left, to remain in the Palace, a final resting-place for it of which the whole family much approved.

I was back in Canterbury in 1935 for Julian, my first cousin, and me to be confirmed on April 5th in the Chapel of Our Lady Undercroft in the cathedral. How anyone justified such a private confirmation, just two teenage boys and their families taking up a busy bishop's time, was not a worry for me; it was simply part of belonging to Canterbury. We were confirmed by the greatly-loved Alfred Rose who had just been made Bishop of Dover, a post he was to hold for twenty-seven years; he and his wife Lois became lifelong friends. Geoffrey Fisher² made him the first Bishop to the Forces, on top of his Canterbury diocesan responsibilities, and he came to Holland in the bitter winter of 1944 to take confirmations for us in the British Liberation Army, with whom I was then serving.

Our regimental padre thought he was not very good at it, and against my better judgment persuaded me, twenty-year-old officer that I was, to tell the bishop as much. It speaks volumes for Alfred's Christian charity that he took my suggestions seriously, thanked me for them, and I heard later varied his style effectively right away. Partly perhaps out of my bad conscience at such cheek, I took to writing to Alfred on the anniversary of my confirmation, and kept up the practice until he died nearly thirty years later. When I became a bishop his generous excitement knew no bounds.

My star 'Canterbury year' was 1941: I lived there on and off for

2. Archbishop of Canterbury 1944-1961

six months, the only time in my life that I have done more than stay a few nights in the city. It was the army that did it. I was called to the colours there during January from my October 1939 enlistment in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, achieving the transfer I had asked for to the regiment of my choice: The Buffs was one of the famous county regiments, the 3rd of Foot no less, the Royal East Kent Regiment. I had Jelf cousins currently in it; and a Jelf uncle, my mother's brother Gordon, was killed with them in the Great War. As a private soldier I lived in the old Victorian Chaucer Barracks at the top of Military Road for six weeks. From there I was sent to Wiltshire for officer training, and returned to Canterbury on 16th May, extremely proud of myself as a 2nd Lieutenant.

Burton was there to my great delight, and would often arrange for us to go out together for a meal with one of his friends. These included the aged Cosmo Gordon Lang³; sad and frail as I found him, I was mightily impressed to be sitting down to dinner with him in the Old Palace. There were also superb social evenings in St Martin's Priory, the Bishop of Dover's lovely house at the bottom of Sandwich Hill. Every Sunday of the war Lois Rose (mother of four boys, so she knew all about family life, and how much servicemen and women were missing it), invited young officers, pretty WRNSs and VADs, anyone she felt like befriending, for an evening meal, games, and dancing to gramophone records or sometimes to Lois herself at her Steinway Grand; she was a fine pianist. Furthermore her 'meal' was a really good supper conjured up from somewhere for fifteen or more of us; we guessed that the ingredients tended to come from Fortnum and Mason's, as Lois was a Guinness before she was married, so money was no object to this kind and generous woman. I was very glad, twenty years on, that our two small sons were able to experience her hospitality in the house she and Alfred retired to on St Stephen's Green, where they had a gypsy caravan in the garden, the first the boys had ever seen. The Roses were larger than life Canterbury characters, and it was privilege to know and love them.

3. Archbishop of Canterbury 1928-1942