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## **Radio 4 Sunday Worship**

### **25 February 2001**

**from**

**The Church of the Birmingham Oratory**

**Celebrating the bi-centenary of one of the greatest  
Christian thinkers of modern times.**

**Led by: Fr Guy Nicholls and Dr Judith Champ**

**Music Director: Judith Pendrous**

**Soloist: Adrian Thompson**

**Reader: Anthony Hyde**

**Organist: Meirion Wynn Jones**

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**GPN:** Welcome to the Church of the Birmingham Oratory. Our congregation has come together to praise and adore Almighty God in celebration of the life and work of John Henry, Cardinal Newman, who was born 200 years ago this week. Newman founded the Oratory, a community of priests working and living here in Birmingham. He himself lived here from 1851 until his death in 1890.

And today we welcome Dr Judith Champ who'll be reflecting on how Newman's understanding of the Christian Gospel, and of the subtleties of our human nature, enabled him to speak prophetically about his own times, and can help us understand circumstances we encounter in our own day.

But first we begin with some of Cardinal Newman's best known words, taken from his longer poem The Dream of Gerontius - the hymn, Praise to the Holiest in the Height.

**Hymn (All):**

**Praise to the Holiest in the Height (Billing)**

**Opening Prayer.**

**Lord God, by whom our lives are governed with unfailing wisdom and love,  
take away from us all that is harmful and give us all that will be for our good.  
Through Christ our Lord.**

Amen.

**GPN:** John Henry Newman was born in London on February 21st 1801, the son of a well-to-do banker. At school he was not only the cleverest boy his headmaster had ever taught, but also showed himself to be a leader, gathering round him a group of boys whom he directed in various escapades. During a severe illness at the age of fifteen he experienced a kind of religious awakening. Having previously wished to be virtuous without being religious, Newman now recognised that the Christian religion was a divine

revelation, not simply a moral system, and that God was as real as his own self. As he wrote later, "there were two and two only luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator". [This idea of religious truth was to be the hallmark of his religious journey and understanding.]

Soon after this he was sent by his father to Trinity College, Oxford, where he was recognised to be a brilliant student. He went on to win a fellowship at Oriel College and became an Anglican clergyman, devoting himself both to the teaching and pastoral care of the University Students. But he was no ivory tower academic. He set about caring assiduously for the poor of the parish of St. Clement's in Oxford. This combination of working in a pastoral and intellectual way was to characterise his whole life and ministry. He studied especially the early writers of the Christian Church, and came to realise that there was much in their writings that was not to be found in the Anglican Church. Gradually the idea dawned on him that his work was to be the revival of the faith of the early Church in his own day. God had created him to do a particular work, as a prayer he composed many years later explains:

**Anthony Hyde:** God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught, I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it – if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore I will trust Him. [Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends: He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me – still] He knows what He is about.

**GPN:** Newman knew how to offer his difficulties and trials to God, because he knew and practised the importance of prayer. We now hear a prayer from Psalm 5, set to music by Sir Edward Elgar: Pay heed to the voice of my crying, my King and my God.

**Choir:**  
**Intende voci: (Elgar)**

**GPN:** Newman lived in an age when scepticism towards religious authority, and the idea that all truth is relative, was growing in popularity among the educated classes. This had much in common with the sophisticated intellectual atmosphere of Athens which St. Paul encountered in his teaching mission, as we now hear in this reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

**Reader:**  
Paul, standing up in the middle of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "to an unknown god". What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each of us, for "in him we live and move and have our being."  
Acts 17:22-28 (RSV)

**Judith Champ:** The question which still torments our society, saturated with information and with sophisticated levels of scientific, technical and medical understanding is - who am I? We still face the perennial dilemmas which lie at the heart of our humanity: Why do I exist? What do I need to make me fully human? How do I connect with the rest of humanity? These paradoxical questions have been sharpened

by our contemporary anxiety and sense of insecurity. The elements of human life which are unknowable and beyond our control are being eliminated on an almost daily basis and yet we strive for insight into that which is both closest to us and most remote from our grasp - our basic human nature.

We retreat into all manner of belief systems, spiritualities and forms of self-improvement to try and answer these questions. Many of us assert some belief in God, but we might be uncertain what form that God takes. [G K Chesterton remarked that when people stop believing in God, they believe not in nothing, but in anything.] That begs the question of what it means to believe in God, and how that belief affects my sense of self? If I believe that God created me and the whole of the human and natural world, how does that shape my identity, my sense of who I am?

It may seem strange to look to a Victorian churchman, a long dead Oxford theologian, to shed light on such contemporary dilemmas. Yet the conflicts and uncertainties with which he struggled were not unlike the insecurities which torment our world.

Newman lived in a world shaped by the great movements of ideas which had largely cast God aside in favour of the supremacy of human reason. His was an age which believed it had all the answers, in which dependence upon the machine was rapidly replacing dependence upon God. Political liberalism, social division, and belief in the ultimate power of the human intellect all conspired to undermine the faith which Christians proclaimed. While to us, the Victorian age suggests a time of serene Christian faith, to those who lived through it, it was a time of doubt, loss of faith and insecurity. Trying to make sense of Christian belief in an age where it was being rendered irrelevant, Newman encountered an age not unlike our own. He challenged society on its own terms - yes, humanity is the supreme creation of God, capable of rational, ordered, reflective being - but also, in the face of the immensity of God, less than nothing.

**GPN:** In 1833, the young Newman set off with some friends to tour the Mediterranean, quite an adventure in those days - and during the trip he fell seriously ill. When he recovered, he wrote one of his best-known poems in which he speaks of the contrast between the darkness of human ignorance and wilfulness, and God's "kindly light". It was this kindly light that Newman now understood was guiding him, even though he might not always have realised it.

**Hymn (All):**  
**Lead kindly light (Lux benigna)**

**Judith Champ:** Newman's aim was to proclaim a faith which illuminated what it means to be fully human, to be what God created us to be. Christian faith preached with integrity must engage with issues and offer some coherent account of the place of the individual in the world in relation to God. For Newman, belief in God meant engaging the whole person. A belief which did not profoundly affect the individual's sense of self made no sense. Belief involved grappling with the paradox that God's greatest creation was also less than nothing. This paradox had 3 aspects which had to engage the Christian - loving God, loving self and loving each other.

We strive to find our place in the world, to make something coherent of our lives. At its fullest, to be human is to strive to love God, to love ourselves and to love each other. Each of these is a process, a growth, to which Newman committed his life. He took almost as life's motto a phrase from one of his early religious mentors: "growth is the only evidence of life" (Apologia p61). Later he would express it vividly in his own words: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (Essay on Development, p40).

The starting point of this journey is the recognition that I am a creature of God. [To acknowledge my createdness means to understand myself as part of the universal plan of God' eternal and infinite creation, but also to know that I have an intimate relationship with God.] It is to appreciate that I am a fragment of the vastness of

creation, yet to be conscious of being personally held in being in the power and love of the Creator. The absolute reality of God was the only basis on which Newman could make sense of human existence. Reality was, to him, God and life in God.

This is expressed in his epic poem *The Dream of Gerontius*, where the dying man approaches God, secure in his identity, his humanity and above all his faith. This passage from Elgar's famous oratorio setting, is sung now by Adrian Thompson.

Adrian Thompson: **Firmly I believe, and truly** (Elgar: *Dream of Gerontius*)

**Judith Champ:** Only an account of God which allows for both the immensity and power of God, and the intimacy which we share with God, can help us make sense of ourselves. To be created in the image of God is to be open to limitless possibilities of personhood. Confidence in the living power of God as creator means that we too share in that immensity - each of us has the spark of God within us.

For this to make a difference in our lives, we have to allow it to, by an attitude of remembering, attending to God, of loving gratitude. In a sermon entitled *Love*, the one thing needful, Newman spoke of what constituted the love of God and the costliness of the lack of that love in human life. It leads to the very symptoms of malaise in our own generation - hardness of heart, selfishness, and an obsession with the superficial.

#### **Anthony Hyde:**

Love clearly does not consist merely in great sacrifices. We can take no comfort to ourselves that we are God's own, merely on the grounds of great deeds or great sufferings. The greatest sacrifices without love would be nothing worth, and that they are great does not necessarily prove they are done with love. It is possible to obey not from love towards God and man, but from a sort of conscientiousness short of love; from some notion of acting up to a law; that is more from the fear of God than from love of Him. I suppose most people, or at least a great number, have to lament over their hardness of heart, which, when analysed, will be found to be nothing else than absence of love. [I mean that hardness which makes us, for instance, unable to repent as we wish. No repentance is truly such without love.] A great many have a general indisposition towards prayer and other exercises of devotion. [They find it most difficult to get themselves to pray; most difficult too, to rouse their minds to attend to their prayers.] They are kept in them by habit, by regularity in observing them; not by love. A like absence of love is shown in our proneness to be taken up and engrossed with trifles. Why is it that we are so open to the power of excitement? Why is it that we are looking out for novelties? Clearly because we are deficient in love.

**Judith Champ:** In the absence of any real sense of loving God, we are more than capable of muddling ourselves up with our creator. In rejecting the authoritarian image of God and the often narrow and rigid impression given by institutional religion, we may seek to construct a relationship with God by other means. This often means a personalised version of religion, in which my self-improvement, my psychological health, my self-esteem, my equilibrium are the goals of my journey. Loving self could be the contemporary Gospel of western society, in which we have set all else aside but the immediate satisfaction of our needs and greeds. Large spaces have been created to be filled with an emotional understanding of God, which meets what I feel I need, which allows me to reinvent God to suit myself. Ultimately it will not satisfy. A God which is limited by our imagination is no god at all, certainly not one worthy of a lifetime's love and commitment.

**GPN:** ..... He and his friends launched a campaign to reform the Church of England, to reawaken in its clergy a sense of their divine mandate and of the need to re-establish the Church's independence from State interference - as a Holy Body founded by Christ with a mission to bring salvation to all mankind. It was known as 'the Oxford Movement'. It attracted a large following. But of course there was opposition; many people suspected that Newman and his friends were trying to make the Church of England into something resembling the Roman Catholic Church. Far from it - he originally believed that the Roman Catholic Church was corrupt, and full of errors. It

was simply that the Church of England needed to be reminded of her true identity.

Newman was in a state of inner turmoil and needed time to think. Was he wrong about the Church of England? If so, was the Church of Rome the Church founded by Christ? He was not yet ready to answer those questions. He retired from Oxford to the nearby village of Littlemore where he undertook a six-year long programme of careful study. By 1845 he was finally convinced that the Roman Catholic Church was indeed the very same Church that Christ had founded, and so he became a Catholic.

In all that he did, Newman prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit, whom he called 'the light and life of my soul'. We now hear Thomas Tallis's setting of Our Lord's promise to his disciples: If ye love me, keep my commandments, and I will send you the Holy Spirit of truth, to be with you for ever.

**Choir:**  
**If ye love me (Tallis)**

**Judith Champ:** Loving self is not selfishness and does not consist in indulging selfish desires or needs. It requires us to nurture that part of ourselves which recognises the limitations of our creatureliness, and our desire and purpose to love others. My conscience does not exist in isolation. My conscientious choices are not simply what I 'feel good' about, nor what is best for me at the moment, or at the expense of others. It means being conscious of myself in all my Godliness, but in relation to my creator and to those around me in the world. A maturing conscience requires of us that we love each other. This flows from taking seriously the integrity and Godliness of each human being. As a creature of God, each person merits dignity and value, merits my attention, merits my love. This is nothing to do with my personal likes and dislikes. Newman's motto as cardinal, *Cor ad cor loquitur* - Let heart speak unto heart, suggests the way in which the love of God is mediated between human beings. Friendship was important to Newman, and he gracefully acknowledged the formative influence on his life of those with whom he later disagreed. The significance of these people is evident in his recollection of his last days in Oxford. It is clear that the parting of friends was the most painful aspect of leaving Oxford and the Church of England.

**Anthony Hyde:**

: I left Oxford for good on Monday February 23 1846. On the Saturday and Sunday before, I was in my house at Littlemore simply by myself, as I had been for the first day or two when I had originally taken possession of it. I slept on Sunday night at my dear friend Mr Johnson's, at the Observatory. Various friends came to see the last of me; [Mr Copeland, Mr Church, Mr Buckle, Mr Pattison and Mr Lewis.] Dr Pusey came too to take leave of me; and I called on Dr Ogle, one of my very oldest friends, for he was my private tutor when I was an undergraduate. In him I took leave of my first college, Trinity, which was so dear to me, and which had on its foundation so many who have been kind to me both when I was a boy, and all through my Oxford life. Trinity has never been unkind to me.

**GPN:** Contrary to a view that has become widespread, Newman was not prickly and unapproachable. [His thinking, his writing, was all deeply informed by his human relationships: he wrote many letters to friends in perplexity about their faith, about their children, about their work, to whom he always wrote cheerful words of encouragement and support. Throughout his life he preached sermons that were models of clarity and wisdom, building up the Church, the body of people who came to him day by day and week by week to have their children baptised and instructed, to be prepared for marriage, to ask that their dead loved ones be prayed for with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.] He loved truth, and could not fudge difficulties. Hence on occasions he might reprimand or stand aloof from those he found insincere. But he was not therefore a proud and unforgiving man. On the contrary, he went to great lengths to be reconciled with those from whom he might have become estranged, especially if illness and death were close. He found great delight in the friendship and support of fellow members of the Oratory, the community he founded, especially in his last years after he had been honoured by the Pope with the dignity of Cardinal.

**Judith Champ:** Newman had come to the conclusion that the individual self owed it to his creator to pursue his own journey, to develop his own identity and sense of self. This is a fundamental way of valuing each other, of seeing God in each other. We cannot talk with integrity of loving God if it does not affect and direct the way in which we act and live. Our love of God must draw out of us a value and appreciation of the Godliness in each human individual. We cannot love ourselves if we do not love the spark of God which we see in each other.

We hear now a setting by Durufle of the ancient hymn Ubi Caritas - Where love and kindness are found, there is God.

**Choir:**  
**Ubi Caritas (Duruflé)**

**GPN:** and now we are led in prayer to God who has revealed Himself to us as our Father and Creator, through Christ our Lord and Redeemer, in the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between God and us all.

**In true humility of heart let us pray to God, saying:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Defend the Church against all danger**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Protect John Paul, our Pope:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Be the strength of Vincent our Bishop:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Preserve the world in peace:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Bring light to those who do not believe in you:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Guide the rulers of the nations:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.:

**Come to the aid of the poor:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Comfort the afflicted:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Have mercy on the dead:**

Lord, have mercy on your people.

**Let us pray to our heavenly Father as our Saviour has taught us:**

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

**Deliver us, Lord from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.**

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

**God, our Father, Your servant John Henry Newman upheld the Faith by his teaching and example. May his loyalty to Christ and the Church, his love for the Immaculate Mother of God, and his compassion for the perplexed, give guidance to the Christian people today. We beg you to grant the favours we ask through his intercession, so that his holiness may be recognised by all, and the Church may proclaim him a saint. Through Christ our Lord.**

Amen.

**GPN:** Throughout his life, Cardinal Newman enjoyed the solace of music. Indeed he was no mean musician, playing both violin and viola [well enough to perform string quartets by Haydn, Mozart and his favourite composer, Beethoven.] He even directed

the choir here at the Oratory for a time, and the tradition he established of choral and organ music has remained at the centre of the Oratory's worship. So now we conclude this Act of Worship with a jubilant setting of words from Psalm 81, composed by the great Roman Master of the 16th century, and friend of St. Philip Neri who founded the Oratory in Rome, Palestrina: Exsultate Deo – Sing out joyfully to God our strength.

**Choir:**  
**Exsultate Deo (Palestrina)**

**Organ:**  
**Fanfare and Gothic March (Guy Weitz 1883-1970)**

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