

Illtud Evans—an appreciation

386

Illtud Alban Evans, though born in London, was quintessentially a Celt. His roots lay deep in Wales and the subtle cosmopolitanism of his outlook, equally at home in Athens, Bangkok and Los Angeles, only served to emphasize his strong traditional loyalties. His health was never good but in spite of this he drove himself with extraordinary ardour and enthusiasm. He combined a great precision of thought, for he was always most careful about his sources, with a capacity for vivid description that could illuminate the most difficult and obscure political and social problems: here one recalls the articles he wrote in *The Tablet* in the late 1960's on conditions in the United States.

Before coming to the Order in 1937 he had worked as a journalist, and from the moment of his ordination he pursued his trade relentlessly in spite of frequent severe illnesses. Twice Editor of *Blackfriars*, where his first tenure of office was particularly fruitful, he also wrote and reviewed for *Time and Tide* and contributed regularly to *The Tablet* (under the pseudonym of Aldate) and also to *The Times* and *Times Literary Supplement*. While he was in America from 1966 to 1970 he was Associate Editor of *Faith Now*, a monthly supplement to *The Sunday Visitor*, as well as working regularly for other Reviews. His writing shows him to be a conservative of the best kind, one who treasures but is not uncritical of tradition and who is at the same time open to modern problems, while being helped by his gift of quick sympathy for those in distress and by those flashes of insight, amounting sometimes to near genius, which brought him close to deprived groups and those suffering from anxiety problems. He gave a lot of his time, particularly in the early part of his priestly life, to helping those in borstals and prisons, and not only did he give generous assistance to many individuals but he also studied closely prison conditions and the problems of penal reform. Some of the principles that lie behind this work are stated in the book edited by him called *Light on the Natural Law*. This gift for sympathetic understanding was developed in a special direction when he was in America, for there he gained a great reputation for helping priests disturbed by changes in the Church and he was often able to reconcile individuals and groups separated by differences of training, tradition and age. One of his Californian brethren wrote: 'You are surely aware of the extraordinary work he has been doing, particularly with the secular clergy here in the West. It is rare to find a priest who combines a vital interest in people, intellectual curiosity, doctrinal coherence, unshaken faith and an ability to express himself in the English language.'

The storm and sunshine of Illtud's temperament are helped into their context by what he wrote. When he edited *Blackfriars* in the

1950s, Christian compassion, not just for the socially, but also for the sacramentally, deprived, was his constant urge; he often found both deprivations together. In September 1953 he introduced the series called Moral Dilemmas, starting with Gerald Vann's then explosive piece on Muddled Marriages, and he associated himself with it: 'Even in their misery, . . . separate and beyond the community of grace, they can begin to hope. That is what the Gospel is about, and that is the situation the Church exists to serve. But it must be seen to be so.' He was shocked when Fr Gerald found himself in a hornets' nest.

With his experience of borstals and prisons, Illtud wondered about Catholic schools: 'The handsome school with its guaranteed religious instruction can be a deluded hope if its children continue to be brought up in a pagan world which the statutory catechism can do little to mitigate. . . . To insist on the vocation of the Christian family when it has to be realized in a single room is to insist on the humanly impossible.' He asked for a sociological enquiry into our schools. 'It would at least be interesting to know the subsequent history of children who have been educated in them.' So he welcomed the Newman Association's national demographic survey, two years after he had suggested it. He considered its closure to be financially imprudent and pastorally inept.

He searched for a way to re-state Christian moral principles 'in a language that may hope to have meaning for those who are wholly ignorant of the niceties of a formal moral theology'. He hoped for a radical liturgical reform, to recover the sense of the Bible as the creative word of God, something 'integral to a pastoral liturgy' where 'once more the faithful people of God may enter fully into the liturgical mystery which exists precisely for them'.

He foresaw how, 'in a context of extreme confusion, we must study the limits of obedience and the rights of conscience'.

All this was in the early 1950s. Some of his hopes are on the way to fulfilment, but most are as far away as ever. He was a prophet, and largely ignored.

In all the hurry, bustle and constant activity of his life he was always a man searching for the eternal source of love and one who, at moments, shared in its undisturbed peace. He had all the eloquence of his people and great social gifts to match. These he harnessed to the demands of the preacher and the retreat-giver and, when he was Prior of London, to those of the pastor. Innumerable people, both in this country and America, will remember him with gratitude and personal affection. Vivid, tempestuous, storm and sunshine, by a miracle of will and grace he preserved a balance and discipline so that he will be remembered as Illtud, a Christian friar.

IAN HISLOP, O.P.
BEDE BAILEY, O.P.