



BR. EDWARD

Edward Gordon Bulstrode

Village Evangelist

24th November, 1885 – 25th March, 1953

Feast Day: March 25th

The 14th child of William and Jane (they had 15 children in total), Edward grew up in Croydon. His parents were deeply committed evangelicals who counted amongst their closest friends the future Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, whom Edward joined at Haileybury College for his senior schooling before going up to Keble College, Oxford in 1904. Although he was a typical undergraduate he was regular in the college Chapel and would assist at other city churches and, as a consequence of attending a mission event at the Albert Hall, he began to think more seriously about his faith. Aware of God's call he began examining

his past life and made his first confession to the college chaplain who remained an important friend throughout his life. It was at University he also developed a social conscience and was drawn to help the Rev. A. F. Willington-Ingram (later Bishop of London) in his work at Oxford House in Bethnal Green. This gave him an invaluable insight into life in the East End at the turn of the century and from there he went to Ely theological college, possibly following the example of the co-founder of the Society of Divine Compassion, Fr. Andrew SDC, whom he had come to know through their work amongst the poor of the East End.

Edward was ordained to the priesthood on the 22nd May, 1910 and served his first curacy at St. Columba's, Wansted Slip in the Stratford marshes. Edward showed signs of his future ministry of evangelism and, in the early summer of 1912, decided to try his vocation with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (the County Fathers) after having considered joining the Society of the Divine Compassion. However, his time in SSJE was short as he found it impossible to accept the vow of Obedience although was deeply drawn by the renunciation required through the vow of Poverty.

At the suggestion of his friend (and later bishop) Walter Carey, to whom he made his first confession, Edward went from Cowley to Temple Balsall near Coventry where there was a small community centred around the saintly vicar, Frank Fairbairn and his wife Sophia. Inspired by Nicholas Farrar's community at Little Gidding in the 16th century, Sofia would rise each morning at 5:30 and, as well as joining in the Offices of Mattins and Evensong, would also attend the Eucharist in the church, recite the entire Divine Office and observe the Wednesday and Friday fasts throughout the year. Edward became their spiritual child and made making Temple Balsall his home for 14 years whilst also seeking a more ascetic life for himself.

At the outbreak of the First World War he had been considering joining Br. Giles (Edward Evans) in Dorset who had founded the Brotherhood of St Francis of Assisi at what is now known as Hilfield Friary. He had met Giles on a mission to the EastEnders who went hop-picking every year in Kent, but in December 1914, at the suggestion of Father Maxwell, SSJE he became an unofficial chaplain to the troops awaiting embarkation for France, at Roffey Camp, Horsham, Sussex. But he was uncertain about such a role because of his pacifist views: "the more I meditated on Christ's life and example and on his teaching, the less did I find it possible to reconcile it with fighting and intentional slaughter"

It was at this time that Edward decided to walk whenever possible and, like Br. Giles, would sometimes stay in the Casual Wards for men on the road found at that time in many towns. He also had begun to consider creating a centre where both men and women could be trained as Friar-Evangelists, going out either singly or in pairs, to take the gospel to the country parishes of England and began attracting others. Amongst them was Geraldine Mott who told him of her attraction to the Religious Life and, together, they founded the Servants and Handmaids of Jesus of Nazareth (SHJN). She had the means to purchase a property in the village of Westcote in the Cotswolds and Edward created the nucleus of a men's community (Nazareth House). As at Temple Balsall the parish church was the centre of their worship for their worship, but whilst Mother Geraldine's foundation flourished (eventually becoming the Community of Jesus of Nazareth), Edward was unable to develop a stable community – not least because of his frequent absences in order to preach, lead retreats, or take to the road living the life of a wandering evangelist.

Increasingly he found himself leading parish missions and spearheaded the development of Parish Communion. His missions embraced both church and street and addressed crowds in London's Trafalgar Square and during his visits to London he lived in a small room at the Church of the Holy Cross, Cromer Street. Because it was the cheapest form of clothing he could find, Edward normally wore a simple cassock and was able to reach out to both evangelical and Anglo-Catholic with a ministry which had elements of evangelical revivalism and devotion to the sacraments. He was a great believer in the ministry of healing and there are various accounts of the cure's that occurred through his intercession. He believed that the purpose of the church was not to convert the world but simply to bear witness in every part of the world.

The Village Evangelist (VE) movement began in 1948. Bp. Walter Carey asked him to join some others for a three-day retreat at the Southwark Diocesan retreat house in Surrey during which they spent a night of continuous prayer. At the close they decided to meet again with the intention of 'doing something' and that resulted in the formation of the Servants of Jesus of Nazareth (SJN), a company of Christian people seeking to be servants of Jesus which lasted until at least 1951 by which time they numbered 250 priests and 100 lay men and women. It was then that they were re-christened the Village Evangelist's and by the end of the decade as many as a thousand were involved in this voluntary part-time evangelistic effort.

Between 1948 and 1964 no fewer than 4000 parishes, roughly a third of the Church of England's total, received a visit from the village evangelists and each year about 250 missions were held. Most of these evangelists were 'unqualified' but committed to the proclamation of the gospel and at the end of each mission many parishes decided to continue the Parish Communion, which the Evangelists had introduced (before most churches had an 8am Communion service followed by another service at 11am. Br. Edward wrote about this in his book, 'Sunday Morning: the New Way' – and the development was taken up by the Parish and People movement

Such was Br. Edward's reputation that, in 1946, he was invited by the BBC to give a series of Lent talks on the radio and was chosen as the Principle Missioner for the great Mission to London in 1949 and gave the opening address which was broadcast on the BBC. His health deteriorated and he was admitted to hospital in Windsor where his last words to his sister were: "I don't want to get better; I want to go to Jesus." He died on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1953.

Brother Edward: Priest and Evangelist, Kenneth G. Packard, Geoffrey Bles, 1955
Men of Habit, Bernard Palmer, Canterbury Press, 1994