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Bishop Robert Caldwell

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Abstract: ***At Calcutta in March 1877 after nearly forty years in India and at the age of 63, Caldwell was consecrated as bishop. It had long been felt that Tirunelveli should have a bishop of its own and in many ways Caldwell had, together with Rev Dr Edward Sargent of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), carried out the coordinating function in their large districts with help from their societies in Madras. Caldwell felt that he could do more good by ministering not to the privileged higher castes in the towns and European settlements but to the poorest and most isolated communities. Caldwell's mission lasted more than fifty years.***

Keywords: Robert Caldwell, Mission Work, Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Bishop Robert Caldwell, he was too great a man who, for 36 years prior to his becoming a Bishop, played on too small a stage of his beloved village of Idayangudi and its neighbourhood unlike Bishop Sargent who almost controlled over the entire Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) wing of the Tirunelveli Church. Even after becoming a Bishop he wanted to live in Idaiyangudi, develop it still further and exercise his Episcopal supervision only from there.

After his consecration at Culcutta he chose to return home by sea. Landing at Thoothukudi, he was given a tumultuous welcome and was taken in a procession to the Dutch Church as it was known then (today's Holy Trinity Church) for an impressive thanksgiving service. On the same evening the Bishop preached in Tamil at St.Patrick's Church, where a welcome was accorded to him after the service. The same night the Bishop travelled in a bullock cart and reached his beloved Idaiyangudi which went wild with joy in receiving its builder and maker as a Bishop.

Bishop Caldwell's episcopate had an unpleasant beginning with a severe famine and an outbreak of Cholera all over Tirunelveli district in 1877-78. The Bishop addressed himself to relief work among the entire community irrespective of religion. This earned for him the affection and regard of all and accounted for as many as 24,000, Hindus and Muslims embracing Christianity. Bishop Caldwell visited almost all the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G) Districts, enquired into the state of every local Church, its increase in membership in recent years through baptisms and decrease through backsliding.

On 8th January 1878, Bishop Caldwell completed 40 years of his labour in India, and Idayangudi, as their chief beneficiary, observed the day in a fitting manner. On 17 March 1878 there was held in Idayangudi the first ordination service at which two Deacons Rev. V Ganamuthu and Rev Joseph Ganavolivu were ordained as priests by Bishop Caldwell. The latter, Rev Joseph Ganavolivu served with great distinction at Puthiamputhur, Ramanathapuram and taken to St Paul's Church, Vepery, Madras where he died as a martyr on 29th April 1897, after being stoned with a huge boulder by a fanatic Hindu hiding in ambush. He is honoured with a mural tablet in the chapel of S P G House, London.

A scholar of International repute that he was, it was natural that Bishop Caldwell gave importance to education at all levels. In Idayangudi itself both he and Mrs Caldwell had opened schools for boys and girls and placed them on a sound footing. To their endowment Lord Napier (Governor of Madras) and Lady Napier (who spent a whole week with the Caldwells), donated enough money for planting 1000 Palmyras. With a donation of 100 pounds by Rev J M Fenton in England, Bishop Caldwell developed the Fenton Estate on a hill slope gifted by the Government. He was the pioneer in giving Free Mid-day meals to 171 students long before the Governments today claiming credit for this scheme. But, as a matter of principle he insisted on each pupil paying a nominal fee.

S P G was following a wise policy that their schools at Idayangudi, Nazareth, Mudalur, Christianagaram and even Thoothukudi should be at best feeder institutions for their superior seminary at Sawyerpuram . Founded in 1842 by the renowned Dr G U Pope, it was a multipurpose seat of learning a Training School to train their teachers and catechists for the Christian schools, a Theological Seminary to equip the Indian clergy and (from 1862) a High School, which turned out the first batch of matriculates in December 1864.

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When Dr G U Pope left Sawyerpuram for Thanjavur in 1854, his Seminary began losing its fame. Some S P G missionaries were not for sending their bright students to Sawerpuram as before Rev. Caldwell, however, was always a staunch patron of the Sawyerpuram Seminary, and the best products of his Idaiyangudi School had their finishing touches at Sawyerpuram.

On his being made the Bishop of the S P G wing of the Tirunelveli Church in 1877, Bishop Caldwell felt that he should revamp the Sawyerpuram educational complex. He made the High School a Second Grade College and got it affiliated to Madras University in 1880, the local missionary, Rev T Adamson, overburdened with other responsibilities, was asked to hold for as Principal for just a few months; and Bishop Caldwell was quick to bring on the scene as Principal Rev J A Sharrock, a brilliant Cambridge academician. Sharrock's leadership gave the College a prestige all its own; and Sawyerpuram students so easily bagged several prizes and medals awarded by Madras University.

The Metropolitan of India, Bishop Johnson, who visited Sawyerpuram in 1881, was all praise for the new College their; and he urged the necessity of making it a strong centre and basis of operations. At the same time he recommended that Thoothukudi, with all its advantages of being a growing town, should be made S P G headquarters of Tirunelveli and the College also be transplanted from its first quiet nursery to a larger and more fertile filed. Bishop Caldwell set about raising funds, and in 1883 purchased a disused cotton-press with a bungalow attached; and the College and High School were at once transferred (13.1.1883) to the campus of the erstwhile Anglo-Vernacular School dating back to 1857 which got merged with them in Thoothukudi, and was named Caldwell College. At the same time Madras University sanctioned it's upgrading with B. A classes on Mr H Malim-a Wrangler of Jesus College, Cambridge joining the staff as Mathematics Lecturer and Vice-Principal.

All the time the scholar and researcher in Bishop Caldwell was busy, producing several books of lasting value. Among them are:

1) Records of the Early History of the Tinnevlly Mission, (The only reliable source book detailing the labours of the early S P C K and S P G missionaries in Tinnevelly.
2) Political and General History of the District of Tinnevelly (From which the Gazetteers of the District have drawn so liberally)
3) The controversial book, The Tinnevelly Shannars
4) Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Language

The greatest day in Bishop Caldwell's life was 6th July 1880, when he consecrated the stately Holy Trinity Church at Idayangudi on which he had laboured with his own hands from time to time for 35 years. Bishop Sargent participated in the service, besides 5 missionary clergy man and 35 Indian clergy man.

For being sung at the service the Bishop translated into Tamil the hymn: The Church One Foundation, since sung on thousands of such occasions. Over 5000 people thronged the Church and its compound of whom 2000, are said to have been non Christians.

As advised by the Metropolitan, Bishop Johnson, Bishop Caldwell left Iadayangudi in 1883 and lived at Thoothukudi which became his headquarters since then.

Shortly after moving to Thoothukudi and opening the College at Thoothukudi, Bishop Caldwell went to England on a year's furlough. But it was mainly a deputation on behalf of the new College which was sought to be strangled by the Madras Committee of the S P G; abetted by the local missionaries who did not see eye to eye with Bishop Caldwell and Rev Sharrock. The Bishop attended meetings of several bodies of S P G, C M S, and S P C K and silenced much of their misgivings. He obtained assurance of substantial assistance from S P C K. It was these heroic efforts of the good Bishop that gave some lease of life to the new College, which otherwise would have been closed as dramatically as it was opened. But it was one continues struggle for even a hand to mouth existence. With the help of Mrs Caldwell the Bishop also strengthened the Primary Schools in Thoothukudi and established three schools for Girls in different parts of the town and a Girl's Boarding School at Pudukottai (1883). As a crowning effort of Mrs Caldwell's labours in the cause of women's education was opened the S P G Victoria Girls Middle School to mark the completion of the 50 years of the reign of Queen Victoria by the Metropolitan of India on 8th November 1887, before a distinguished representative gathering.

The 8 January 1888 marked the Golden Jubilee of Bishop Caldwell's landing in India as a missionary; and the event was fittingly celebrated in Thoothukudi. It was an occasion for thanksgiving to God and stocktaking of the Bishop's labours in Tinnevelly for half a century.

Bishop Calwell's powers were slowly ebbing out. They were just enough for his bare ecclesiastical duties in the two S P G districts of Tinnevelly and Ramanathapuram. Also with the death of his close friend and colleague, Bishop Sargent, on 11 October 1889, he had to exercise oversight in the C M S wing of Tinnevelly also. He found the climate of Kodaikanal more congenial to his declining health; and most of the time he lived there and conducted the business of his office.

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Even in his failing health, in August 1890 he visited some centres in famine-stricken Ramanathapuram district. On 10th August 1890 he confirmed 198 persons and prayed fervently for rain. Even as the service was over there was a heavy downpour of rain. While the Bishop was in Ramanathapuram, there was an outbreak of fire in Idayangudi, destroying 61 houses. The Bishop was moved to tears. Unable to go himself, he sent Rev Wyatt to comfort the victims and arrange all possible relief.

Deprived of the Bishop's immediate presence and protection, Caldwell College soon began tottering to its foundations. Sharrock held the fort as long as he could; but his arch rival, Canon Margoschis, had by then built up enough influence with the Madras Diocesan Committee of the S P G to turn its indifference to Caldwell College to open hostility. Margoschis could never forgive Sharrock having once urged Bishop Caldwell to reduce the two High Schools he had opened for Boys at Nazarreth and Alwartirunagari (1885) on his own steam without S P G aid and flouting Episcopal orders – to Middle Schools. It is said that this civil war within the Mission very much embittered the last years of the Bishop's life and even hastened his death.

So even as Caldwell College was celebrate its Jubilee in 1893-1894, S P G forced its closures. When Nemesis struck at last it was unsparing. The College, along with its Principal Rev Sharrok was taken to Trichirapally and a Caldwell Hostel was opened there for boys from Tinnevelly. Strangely enough, the two Schools it was the sheer mercy of God that Caldwell High School was spared as the sole memorial to the Bishop's labours in Thoothukudi.

Shuttling between Kodaikanal and Thoothukudi was too taxing for the Bishop who had been weakened by age and continued exertion. During his last visit to Thoothukudi in January 1891 he wrote to Bishop as from 31 January 1891. The very next day he took leave of Tinnevelly and went with his family to Kodaikanal to live of well earned rest.

But such rest was to last only for 6 months. On 19 August 1891 the Bishop went for his usual walk and returned with a bad cold. High fever and severe cough followed. The Bishop's younger son Dr Addington had come from Australia on a casual visit to see his parents. Medical aid was of no avail and the Bishop was called to his Heavenly Home at 9 a.m. on28 August 1891.

The Bishop had expressed his desire that his mortal remains should rest in a tomb beneath the alter of the Holy Trinity Church, Idayangudi, All difficulties were overcome to meet his last desire. Placed in a coffin, his body was carried 12 miles down the hill slope by a relay of 24 stalwarts of the Madura American Mission. From the foot of the hill the coffin was taken in a bullock cart to the kodaikanal road Railway Station. The coffin was placed in one of the two compartments kept ready to be attached to a south bound train which came at noon on 30 August and reached Tirunelvelly Bridge Station at 8 P M. A large gathering of C M S clergy, teachers, catechists and lay men led by Rev Thomas Walker received the coffin most solemnly and took it in a procession to the Holy Trinity Cathedral Church, Palayamkottai, where after a brief service the Bishop's body rested that night and on the day after near the alter for so many to pay their last respects to their beloved Bishop.

On the evening of 31 August the Bishop's body placed in a bullock cart resumed its southward journey and reached Idayangudi early next morning to be received by a huge concourse of mourners. The coffin was placed inside the Church the whole day for several thousands of Christians, Hindus and Muslims to file past and pay their last respect to one whom they loved and adored.

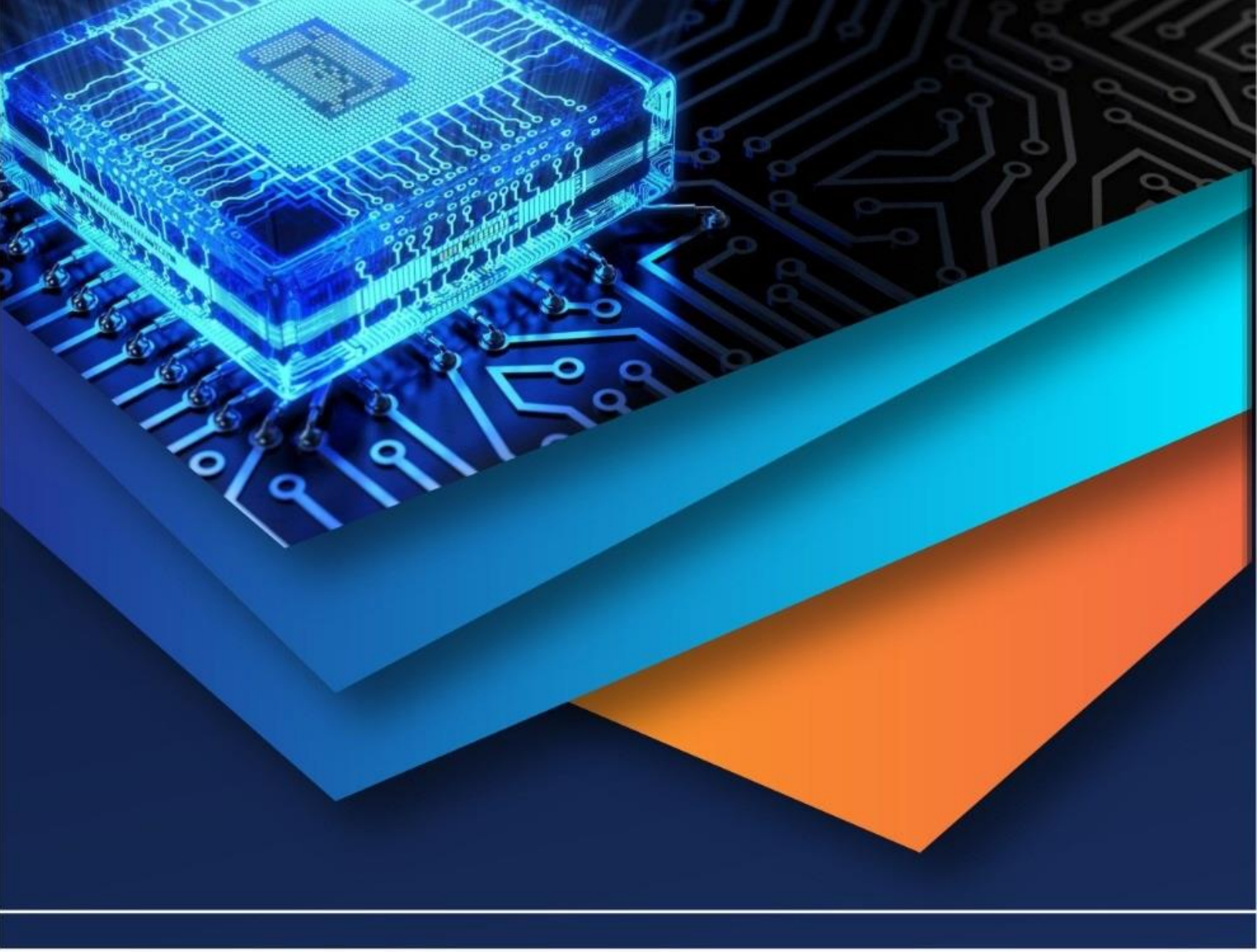
The Funeral Service began at 9 a.m. on 1 September, C M S Missionaries-Walker, Kember, Schaffter and the S P G missionary-Margoschis, besides several Indian clergy-men of both S P G and C M S participated. As the coffin was lowered into the grave prepared at the altar, Rev Wyatt (Bishop's son-in-law) conducted the burial service and pronounced the Benediction, leaving one of the greatest missionaries ever sent to India to rest beneath the Church around which for half a century he lived a life of restless labour.

II. CONCLUSION

Bishop Robert Caldwell who worked for over fifty years ministering to 'the poorest of the poor' in Tinnevelly, the southernmost and one of the hottest districts of India. He was a missionary served as Assistant Bishop of Tirunelveli from 1877. He trained many native agents, brought thousands of heathen into the Church of Christ. In sum, Caldwell the Christian evangelist and champion of the native church remains today an important figure in the modern history of South India.

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