

MEMORIAL SERMON - ARTHUR ROBERTS

On the day after Arthur Roberts' death, I received from him the last of several letters that he wrote to me from Tucson. Enclosed were two church bulletins, one from an Episcopal Church, the other a Congregational. Having heard that the Episcopal parish was of the extreme Anglo-Catholic variety, he decided to make a personal investigation. Rising early that Sunday he went to a 7:30 mass. He lamented in his letter that there was only a "faint touch of Cranmer" in the service. There was far too large a touch, he implied, of Stephen Gardner, the advisor to Bloody Mary. Nevertheless, Arthur observed that "the rector, a vigorous and able man, delivered a worthwhile sermon, based on a passage from the prophet Hosea."

Having conducted this investigation of St. Michael's and All Angels, he made his way that same morning to the First Congregational United Church of Christ, where he had worshipped faithfully each Sunday while in Tucson. There, he confessed, he slept through the sermon.

It was clear that Arthur Roberts was enjoying himself on that last Sunday of his life.

There is much in that letter that was typical of him. There was his interest in whatever was going on around him, the way in which his mind and spirit were continually engaged and looking into things. While he was in Tucson, he discovered the local university law library, declared it to be the best he had seen, and immediately immersed himself in it. Arthur Roberts refused to let anything put him on the shelf. Last summer when he spent several weeks in the hospital he was constantly surrounded by books and newspapers. It was impossible to walk into his room without walking out carrying a clipping.

Another quality that comes out in this last letter was his interest in history. First there was his love of English history, especially the period of the 16th and 17th centuries. He identified spiritually with forces at work in that time of turmoil, so much so that he almost seemed to be fighting the British civil wars over again. He could deliver a sermon against sacerdotalism worthy of any soldier in Cromwell's army, as I discovered when I suggested that this church was in need of a cross.

But Arthur Roberts could also give the devil his due. He was always prepared to appreciate what was most worthy in a contrasting point of view. He gave the rector of St. Michaels and All Angels credit for a good sermon.

The interest in history he applied nearer to home as well. He believed fervently in the American heritage, especially that part of it that contributes to civil liberties. Yet in him there was none of that jingoism and tribal self-righteousness that so often passes for patriotism in this country. He was, of course, a leader in the affairs of the St. Louis County Historical Society. He himself was a regular encyclopedia of information about these parts. Yet, as he was bound to tell you sooner or later, Arthur Roberts was not by birth a Duluth man. He was from Superior, Wisconsin and proud of it. In this respect as in certain others, I often felt that Arthur lived in, but not entirely of, the world in which he moved.

So there was in Arthur Roberts this interest in history, a treasuring of tradition, a cherishing of old and seasoned things. Yet unlike so many others at this moment of history, he did not panic in the face of a fast-changing world. The traditions from which he drew inspiration were traditions of freedom, of progress, of revolt against systems of oppression. In some notes that he left for his son, he observed that he was descended from "revolutionary English and Welsh peasant stock with the will and energy to get up and out." On most social questions he held progressive ideas. Once somebody remarked to me that contrary to his expectations, he found Arthur Roberts to be something of a radical. When I told Arthur that, he was very much amused. He did not deny the allegation.

He was a man of the law and for that very reason a believer in justice. He did not hesitate to suggest in a statement he once read to the congregation that from the beginning the Federal Constitution was somewhat evasive on the question of racial equality. When it came to such an issue as school desegregation, he said, a church member could walk on the other side of the road like the Levite, or deal with the matter "from the background of his Christian belief and responsibilities."

Arthur Roberts could be something of a terror, but he was a kindly man who put himself out for others in all sorts of little ways. Sometimes in later years he may have seemed to be in a fog. But when he roused himself, he could take apart a problem with fine, logical precision. He was generous with himself and with his substance. In particular, he sought to provide help in the area of education, both through individual scholarships to local youth and through his support of Northland College.

He was greatly devoted to the church. He was a kind of connoisseur of churches. Church-going was not a routine with Arthur Roberts; it was an adventure. I received so many bulletins from Tucson that I told him that were it not for his Puritan sympathies he would have built up a sizable account in the treasury of merit.

He did not speak much about his religious beliefs. One suspects that they were far from orthodox. It was the prophetic side of Christianity that appealed to him. We may let the hymns he chose for this event stand in their contrasting ways for the breadth of his faith - Whittier's serene trust in the inward light, and Lowell's trumpet call to justice and to truth.

"The Law of the Lord is perfect", said the Psalmist, "reviving the soul." Our human law is imperfect and its practitioners are imperfect. But we find strength for living always in the faith that there is a higher rightness that gives shape to our best efforts to secure equity among men. To that higher rightness we turn now with the confidence that its sway is supreme, its judgment sure and its compassion without limit.