

James Gray

**Johnson's Emergency Sermon: The Convict's Address
to His Unhappy Brethren**

The scene is the Chapel of Newgate Prison, London; the date, Friday, June 6, 1777; the time, evening. Before a congregation composed almost entirely of prisoners, all condemned to die, rises the Rev. Dr. William Dodd, B.A., M.A. and LL.D. of Cambridge University, to deliver what is called, in eighteenth-century parlance, "the condemned sermon."¹

In normal circumstances, such a sermon would be delivered by the Newgate Ordinary, the Rev. James Vilette, or by an invited preacher. But the present circumstances are far from normal. For one thing, the preacher, the Rev. Dr. Dodd, is himself a prisoner, due to be executed in three weeks time for the capital crime of forgery. For another, the sermon he is about to deliver has been composed for him, in large part, by Dr. Samuel Johnson. A third abnormal circumstance is that the condemned sermon is being offered on a Friday, rather than a Sunday, and the general public, usually present in a large, inquisitive body, has been excluded. The congregation of prisoners is hushed in expectation as Dr. Dodd, forty-eight years old, calm, dapper, handsome, with large, well-defined features and an air of long sustained comfortability,² announces his text in a beautifully modulated voice, the voice of the seasoned actor.

The events preceding this tense moment are well known to each of the listeners, since the case of the "unfortunate" Dr. Dodd has become a national *cause célèbre*, and the preacher now standing before them has been for some months the object of almost every extreme sentiment known to humanity in the broad range of sympathy, pity, outrage, derision and contempt.

Celebrated by the popular press as the "Macaroni parson" because of the refined tastes and dandified manners he affected while serving as a preacher in one of the fashionable areas of London, where he once enjoyed the patronage of royalty and the nobility as well as the aspiring

middle class, Dodd has blotted his copybook in a number of extraordinary ways. His first remarkable peccadillo must have struck even the less sophisticated of his fellow criminals as unbelievably stupid. Perhaps intoxicated by his success as a preacher of magnetic charm, particularly appealing to women, and prodded by a desire for greater fame and position, he attempted three years ago to bribe the wife of no lesser a personage than the Lord Chancellor of England to procure for him the parish of St. George's, Hanover Square, known as "the sleekest and plumpest" living in the whole of the United Kingdom. Not suprisingly, the attempt was quickly discovered, and Dodd's name struck from the list of royal chaplains. Then, incredibly compounding his folly, he forged a bond for £4,200 in the name of the Earl of Chesterfield, the fifth earl, godson and heir of the author of *Letters to his Son*, and a former pupil of Dodd's. For this second egregious felony, he was sentenced to death, in spite of a host of petitions, containing all told about 100,000 signatures, on his behalf, and a whole series of individual as well as collective endeavours to plead with the King for his life. The "crusade" for Dodd, as Professor Donald Greene has called it,³ conducted so vigorously by Dr. Johnson, was one of many unsuccessful campaigns to save the condemned preacher. Now, as he opens his sermon, he is very much aware of the gallows awaiting him at Tyburn in three weeks' time.

His text is from Psalms, Chapter 51, verse 3: "I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me."

My dear and unhappy fellow-prisoners,

Considering my peculiar circumstances and situation, I cannot think myself justified, if I do not deliver to you, in sincere Christian love, some of my serious thoughts on our present awful state.

In the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, you read a memorable story respecting Paul and Silas, who, for preaching the gospel, were cast by the magistrate into prison, ver. 23. and, after having received many stripes, were committed to the jaylor, with a strict charge to keep them safely. Accordingly he thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. At midnight Paul and Silas, supported by the testimony of a good conscience, prayed, and sang praises to God, and the prisoners heard them; and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's chains were loosed. The keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, in the greatest distress, as might well be imagined, drew his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, Do thyself no harm, for we are all here. (pp. 301-302)

Up to this point in the sermon, so far composed entirely by Dodd, we can imagine the audience of prisoners wondering, "Is this incredible man going to try to justify his actions, in spite of everything? Is he ready to defy his judges by identifying himself with Paul and Silas, and by claiming, after all his chicanery and double-dealing, "the testimony of a good conscience?" And is he expecting an earthquake and looking for Mr. Ackerman, the compassionate Keeper of Newgate, to fall on his sword?

Such speculations are soon laid to rest, as the solemn words and unmistakable cadences of Samuel Johnson conclude the *praecognitia textus* and take over the exordium of the sermon:

The Keeper, calling for light, and finding his prisoners thus freed from their bonds by the imperceptible agency of divine power, was irresistibly convinced that these men were not offenders against the law, but martyrs to the truth: he sprang in therefore, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'

'What must I do to be saved?' is the important question, which it becomes every human being to study from the first hour of reason to the last: but which we, my fellow prisoners, ought to consider with particular diligence and intenseness of meditation. Had it not been forgotten, or neglected by us, we had never appeared in this place. A little time for recollection and amendment is yet allowed us by the mercy of the law. Of this little time let no particle be lost. Let us fill our remaining life with all the duties which our present condition allows us to practise. Let us make one earnest effort for salvation! and oh! heavenly Father, who desirest not the death of a sinner, grant that this effort may not be in vain! (p. 302)

Thus, adroitly, and with a due sense of the drama implicit in Dodd's plight, Johnson turns this moving exordium away from any hint of special pleading and towards an honest, if abject, confession of guilt:

To teach others what 'they must do to be saved,' has long been my employment and profession. (p. 303)

Here Dodd breaks in with an inserted sentence of his own, as if eager to emphasize his fall from grace:

You see with what confusion and dishonour I now stand before you—no more in the pulpit of instruction, but on this humble seat with yourselves. (p. 303)

Then, in the weightier solemnities of Johnson's prose, the prisoner resumes:

You are not to consider me now as a man authorized to form the manners, or direct the conscience, and speaking with the authority of a

pastor to his flock. I am here guilty, like yourselves, of a capital offence; and sentenced, like yourselves, to publick and shameful death. My profession, which has given me stronger convictions of my duty than most of you can be supposed to have attained, and has extended my views to the consequences of wickedness farther than your observation is likely to have reached, has loaded my sin with peculiar aggravations; and I entreat you to join your prayers with mine, that my sorrow may be proportionate to my guilt.

I am now, like you, enquiring, 'what must I do to be saved?' and stand here to communicate to you what that enquiry suggests.... (p. 303)

This sermon, or address, for Dodd has provided Johnson with a unique opportunity to reveal his mastery of the ghost-writers' art. It would be hard to conceive of a greater homiletic challenge than this: to present convincingly and dramatically the ghastly plight of a proud and eloquent preacher, now reduced to the lowest level of confessional humility, yet, at the same time, somehow redeemed and elevated by the dignified manner of his surrender to the terrible reality of final punishment. In the phrasing of this remarkable exordium Johnson has managed to meet the challenge effectively by inserting a quiet note of genuine contrition:

Hear me with attention, my fellow prisoners: and in your melancholy hours of retirement, consider well what I offer to you from the sincerity of my good-will, and from the deepest conviction of a penitent heart. (p. 303)

In the main body of the address, the preacher reverts to the more conventional structure of a sermon on salvation, answering in a three-decker way the question posed by Paul's "jaylor"—"What must I do to be saved?" The terms of salvation, he answers, are faith, obedience, and repentance, and he proceeds, with Johnson's customary lexicographic skill, to define these terms and to show how, "in the short interval between this moment and death," faith, obedience, and repentance may be exerted, performed, and exercised. (p. 303)

The theme was new neither to Johnson nor to Dodd.⁴ At least two of the sermons Johnson had written for John Taylor (Sermons 2 and 3 in the Yale edition) are similar in their approaches to it, though, of course, lacking the sense of urgency with which the preacher now addresses his task. As for Dodd, he had composed, among many other devotional works, a whole volume, *Comfort for the Afflicted*, on the salutary lessons of martyrdom.⁵

To return to the Address: the faith to be exerted must undoubtedly be tempered with fear, but the fear should be devoid of desperation. Obedience, at this late hour of their lives, is "restrained to a narrow circle," (p. 304) and is best practised in submission to God's will, a sub-

mission to be expressed in constant and fervent prayer. Repentance, which is defined as "such a sorrow for sin as produces a change of manners, and an amendment of life," (p. 307) normally requires the evidence of a reformed code of living, but for the condemned prisoner time is so short that his must be a kind of death-bed repentance, "but with this advantage, that our danger is not greater, and our strength is more." (p. 307) Accompanying this repentance there must be sincere forgiveness of all connected with the prisoner's punishment—the prosecutor, the witnesses, the judges, the jailer, and even the hangman. The penitent must also do what he can to repair the injury he has caused, by leaving the world an example of contrition. He must meet death, not, like the martyr, with rejoicing, and not, like the innocent, with intrepidity, but rather with humility and self-abasement. Characteristically, Johnson adds (and here he is much more himself than Dodd), "We ought not to propagate an opinion, that he who lives in wickedness can die with courage." (p. 309)

The sermon concludes with a firm injunction not to leave the world with a false impression that there may have been a miscarriage of justice, or that no-one has been injured by the prisoner's misdemeanours. Here, Johnson appears to be looking directly at the person for whom the sermon was written, for Dodd had argued in court that he had intended to injure no-one, and that he had made full financial restitution.⁶ It is the duty of the condemned man, nonetheless, to admit the fairness of the judgment against him. "He ... who unjustly exposes the courts of judicature to suspicion, either of partiality or error, not only does an injury to those who dispense the laws, but diminishes the public confidence in the laws themselves, and shakes the foundation of public tranquillity." (p. 310) The preacher here reiterates his own confession of guilt and exhorts his fellows to do likewise, adding that they all ought "to confess those acts which have brought, or may bring unjust suspicion upon others; and to convey such information, as may enable those who have suffered losses to obtain restitution." (p. 311)

The final paragraph composed by Johnson continues this earnest exhortation to Dodd's fellow prisoners; to do all they can to forgive those who have injured or maligned them; to repress all worldly passions; to generate in their minds a love of goodness and a hatred of sin; and to associate themselves with the thief whom Christ had pardoned on the Cross.

Dodd then, in his own words, enjoins his condemned companions to pray with him to enable them to make their repentance total and universal, and their forgiveness unstinted. Even without Johnson's marginal note about the authorship of this prayer we could readily identify those parts of it which are Dodd's, since they refer to God's

“providential” justice in this life and “the terrors of (His) present dispensations” (pp. 311-312)—interpretations of the character of a vengeful and calculating deity to which Johnson would not have subscribed. The justice is “providential” in the sense that it would deter others, and enable them to escape damnation. While asking God to give them a “thorough sense” of the reprehensible nature of the misdeeds which had led to this “public and shameful” judgment, Dodd permits himself one little sting in the tail of this otherwise humble prayer. With due recognition of their own “extraordinary want of forgiveness at (God’s) hands,” he pleads that his fellow captives “freely forgive and cordially pray” for their “most inveterate *enemies, persecutors, and slanderers!*” By leaving behind no bitterness or malice, by giving themselves up to total repentance, and by meeting their punishment with fortitude, they will render their prayers acceptable and become qualified to exchange their present confinement for “the glorious liberty of the sons of God” and their “legal doom” in this world for “a comfortable declaration of mercy in the highest heavens.” (p. 312)

This prayerful conclusion is uncharacteristic of the sermons Johnson composed for others. His endings are usually quite brief and formal, repeating the text or using the liturgical formula. In other structural details, however, the address for Dodd is quite conventional: the *praecognitia textus*, partly supplied by Dodd himself, the exordium, the tripartite division of the theme, the amplification, and the application, are all according to the standard, classical formula. What makes the exercise for Dodd a little different, of course, is the unusually fervent display of emotion, befitting the desperate plight of the condemned preacher: a much more demanding exercise, in fact, than Johnson’s work for Aston or Taylor, since it called for a special combination of empathy and imagination as well as a clear and direct type of communication pitched at the level of condemned prisoners. That Johnson succeeded in adapting the address to the solemn occasion, and to the needs of the pathetic preacher who was so shortly to die on the gallows very plainly demonstrates both his homiletic and his dramatic skill.

It also reveals two kinds of perhaps pardonable hypocrisy in Johnson. Just as, when composing lapidary inscriptions, a writer was not “upon oath,”⁷ so, when preparing a condemned sermon, he might be excused for expressing views that were contrary to the dictates of his own conscience and convictions. To be precise, Johnson for a long time had deplored the proliferation of capital offences in his country, and had gone on record as opposing disproportionate punishment for crimes such as theft and forgery.⁸ Yet in the *Address* for Dodd he gave precedence to the condemned man’s “obligations to assist the exercise

of publick justice," and had him offer this pathetic avowal of his misdeeds:

For my own part, I confess, with deepest compunction, the crime which has brought me to this place; and admit the justice of my sentence, while I am sinking under its severity. (p. 310)

In the letter to the King which Johnson also composed for Dodd, petitioning the monarch's pardon, a similar note was struck:

I confess the crime, and own the enormity of its consequences, and the danger of its example. Nor have I the confidence to petition for impunity; but humbly hope, that publick security may be established, without the spectacle of a clergyman dragged through the streets, to a death of infamy, amidst the derision of the profligate and profane; and that justice may be satisfied with irrevocable exile, perpetual disgrace, and hopeless penury.⁹

In both cases, it might be said, Johnson was guilty of tactical rather than immoral hypocrisy, since he considered a guilty plea to provide Dodd's best chance both before his king and before his Maker.

Another strain of hypocrisy is discernible in his relations with Dodd, however, and it is a little less easy to defend or to excuse. It is evident from the recorded comments made by Johnson about Dodd and his plight—flippant, derogatory, and downright scornful—that the ghost-writer held the preacher in contempt. He describes him as a man of very bad moral character who for some years had "enjoyed a life of great voluptuousness"; a man who had been "canting all his life."¹⁰ When a lady who wished to have Dr. Dodd's picture in a bracelet asked Johnson for a motto, he could think of no better than *currat lex*—let the law take its course. "I was very willing to have him pardoned, that is, to have the sentence changed to transportation: but, when he was once hanged, I did not wish he should be made a saint."¹¹

Dodd was also the butt of two of Johnson's most trenchant sayings. To quote Boswell,

Johnson disapproved of Dr. Dodd's leaving the world persuaded that *The Convict's Address to his Unhappy Brethren* was of his own writing. 'But, Sir, (said, I) you contributed to the deception; for when Mr. Seward expressed a doubt to you that it was not Dodd's own, because it had a great deal more force of mind in it than anything known to be his, you answered,—"Why should you think so? Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."¹²

The other retort has passed into fame through Max Beerbohm's caricature of the Rev. Mr. Embry, who is mentioned only once in the *Life*, and who had had the misfortune to ask Dr. Johnson the innocent

enough question, "Were not Dodd's sermons addressed to the passions?" JOHNSON: "They were nothing, Sir, be they addressed to what they may." ¹³

Whatever the cause of Johnson's contempt for Dodd might have been, he also had reason to admire the man for the quality of his earlier ministry¹⁴ and to pity him in his last dreadful plight. Out of his combination of feelings, and out of his profound recognition of a fellow creature in distress came the impressive composition of *The Convict's Address*: not the first sermon to be composed by Johnson for a clergyman who was not as good as he might have been, but surely the closest in theme and time to the margin of eternity.

NOTES

1. "The Chapel will hold 350 persons; but, on occasions of condemned sermons, twice as many have crowded in." *The Public Buildings of the City of London Described* (London: John Harris, 1831). At the time of Dodd's execution, between twenty and thirty prisoners awaited a similar fate. The chaplain, the Rev. James Villette, said prayers every day with the condemned, who were issued with Prayer Books and Bibles. The Chapel was described as "plain and neat. Below is the chaplain's seat, and three or four pews for the felons; that in the centre is for the condemned.... Mr. Villette read the prayers distinctly, and with propriety." John Howard, *Prisons and Lazarettos*, Vol. I: *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (Reprinted from the Fourth Edition (1792). Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1973), pp. 213-214. Howard points out that, though the prison was burnt by the Gordon rioters in 1780, it was rebuilt on the same plan (p. 215).
2. For a portrait of Dodd "taken from the Life in Newgate the Morning of his Execution," see James Gray, *Johnson's Sermons: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), facing p. 160. For a discussion of the *Address*, see *ibid.*, pp. 159-162. For the text itself, see J.H. Hagstrum and James Gray, eds., *The Sermons*, Vol. XIV, *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 301-313. Bracketed page references in the present text are to this edition. For the most recent detailed study of Dodd's life and character, see Gerald Howson, *The Macaroni Parson: The Life of the Unfortunate Doctor Dodd* (London: Hutchinson, 1973). Howson wrongly dates the delivery of the *Address* at Newgate as June 5 (p. 187), but is otherwise reasonably reliable in his account of the circumstances of this melancholy event.
3. Donald J. Greene, ed., *The Political Writings*, Vol. X, *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 214. For a list of Dr. Johnson's writings for Dodd, see Howson, pp. 241-251, and R. W. Chapman, *Papers by Dr. Johnson and Dr. Dodd in 1777* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). In addition to the *Convict's Address*, Johnson wrote (1) the speech delivered by Dodd before his sentencing at the Old Bailey on May 15, 1777; (2) a petition to the Common Council of the City of London, composed shortly after June 6, 1777; (3) a similar petition "of the Gentlemen of London" (signed by 23,000 people), addressed to the King; (4) a letter in Dodd's name to Lord Bathurst, formerly Lord Chancellor and now a member of the King's Privy Council, dated June 11, 1777; (5) a similar letter to the Earl of Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice, also dated June, 11, 1777; (6) a petition to the King presented by Dr. Dodd's brother, Richard; (7) a petition to the Queen, presented by Mrs. Dodd; (8) Dodd's *Last Solemn Declaration*, intended as a dying speech to be delivered at the gallows, or given to the Newgate Ordinary; (9) a letter from Dr. Dodd to the King, the full text of which is given in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; (10) The Introduction and Conclusion to Dodd's *Occasional Papers*; (11) *Observations on the Propriety of Pardoning Dr. Dodd*, which appeared in the *Gazetteer*, June 26, 1777; (12) a letter, dated June 20, 1777, to the Right Hon. Charles Jenkinson, Earl of Liverpool, pleading for Dodd's life. See Boswell, *Life*, III, pp. 145-147.

4. See C.R. Carter, "The Homiletic Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson: Attribution and Dating from Biographical and Religious Sources (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 1972). Dr. Carter notes that the "chief sources" for *The Convict's Address* are "The Companion to the Altar" and ten books of the New Testament, and that the "Companion" is also the chief source for Sermons 9 and 22. See esp. pp. 261 and 270.
5. William Dodd, LL.D., *Comfort for the Afflicted, Under Every Distress* (4th ed., London: Charles Dilly, 1789; first published in 1764). Ironically, he had also written, in 1772, *The Frequency of Capital Punishments Inconsistent with Justice, Sound Policy, and Religion*. For a list of Dodd's writings, see his *Thoughts in Prison* (2nd ed., London: Charles Dilly and G. Kearsley, 1781), pp. xxvii - xxxiii.
6. For a full account of the trial, see Howson, pp. 149-164. Dodd pointed out that the act under which he was charged specifically referred to "forgery with an intent to defraud," and that this had never been his intention. He also claimed that he had made "ample and perfect restitution." Unfortunately for him, however, the repayment of the money was not, under English Law, sufficient to prevent conviction. This is still the law in England. I am indebted to Professor Brian Hogan for clarifying this point, and for drawing to my attention his useful article, "The Rise and Fall of Forgery," *The Criminal Law Review* (1974), pp. 81-91.
7. Boswell, *Life*, II, p. 407.
8. See, e.g., *Rambler* 114, Yale Ed., IV, pp. 242-244.
9. Chapman, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
10. Boswell, *Life*, III, pp. 122, 166, 270.
11. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 207.
12. *Ibid.*, III, p. 167.
13. *Ibid.*, III, pp. 248, 518.
14. For Dodd's earlier acquaintance with Johnson, see Boswell, *Life*, III, pp. 140-141. "Of his publick ministry the means of judging were sufficiently attainable. He must be allowed to preach well, whose sermons strike his audience with forcible conviction" (*Life*, III, p. 148).