

**ADDRESS given by Mr. Colin R.H. Rank (Chairman of The Joseph Rank Trust and a great grandson of Joseph Rank) at the Service of Celebration to mark 150 years since Joseph Rank's birth.**

**Monday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2004, 5:00pm  
St Michael's Cornhill, London**

**JOSEPH RANK – AN APPRECIATION**

I never met my great grandfather, Joseph Rank; he died some five years before I was born. But I grew up to the many stories about him. My father on the other hand had a close relationship with him and I know that there are those here today who have their own memories of him.

The purpose of today is to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, his life and his legacy.

**CHANGE**

Part of that legacy is preserved in the Joseph Rank Trust. Our objects state that our principal purpose is to advance the Christian faith. As Directors and Trustees we are constantly examining how best to do that. But we also have to apply ourselves to the task of adapting our guiding principals to work in a world that is rapidly changing; changing not only in a material way but also in a moral and spiritual way.

But there's nothing new in this.

We may think we have seen a lot of changes in the last 50 or 60 years. Such things as antibiotics, nuclear power, the jet engine, TV, space flight, the internet and the mobile phone to name a few but the changes that took place during the life of Joseph Rank were by comparison even more extraordinary.

He was born in a small cottage attached to his father's windmill on the Holderness Road in Hull in March 1854. The Crimean war began the same month. No one had heard of the Charge of the Light brigade or Florence Nightingale for that matter. Although electricity was known about the light bulb was yet to be invented. So was the motor car and even the railways were still fairly primitive. The horse did much of the work in distribution and agriculture. There was no phone and even the telegraph was still a novelty. Air travel was strictly for the birds and steam power was only beginning to transform industry. Darwin was yet to publish his Origin of Species and although slavery had been abolished here it would be another 11 years before the USA would grasp this nettle. Despite the British Empire being in its ascendancy, poverty was everywhere and you couldn't win the Victoria Cross because it hadn't been invented.

For anyone born at this time life was about to get very exciting.

**HIS FORMATIVE YEARS**

Joseph Rank was just four years old when his mother died and by all accounts this and the arrival of his step mother made a profound impact on his life. He did not excel at school nor did he impress his father James Rank as a responsible successor to his business. He started work in the family flourmill at 14, loved cricket and kept slightly dubious company on occasions like any normal teenager. In an attempt to make a man out of him his father did an exchange with a miller friend in Scotland and the two men tried in vain to influence their respective sons. In the end each thought the other had the better deal!

Two years later when he was 21 and still in Scotland, Joseph's father James died suddenly. He did not inherit the family mill as you might imagine but was bequeathed £500 with which he started out on his own in 1875. Starting on your own in milling in those days meant renting a windmill and putting in a lot of hard graft.

Like every other industry in the late nineteenth century, flour milling was about to experience a metamorphosis. From the mill where he was born it was said that you could see 21 other windmills

between there and the banks of the river. Within a generation all but those to be preserved for posterity would disappear.

About that time he fell in love with a farmer's daughter called Emily Voase.

But prior to his marriage he faced a serious problem. Despite his hard work and initiatives he realised he was loosing money and his £500 was now only £300. He therefore looked for another mill with a bigger capacity and had a lucky break finding a part share in a mill in Hull that suited him and soon he was making up the money he had lost.

He had learnt some important lessons not least of which was to live within his means.

### **THE GOD THAT NEVER CHANGES**

Three years into his marriage he was to have a life changing experience.

He attended an evangelistic mission run by Simpson Johnson at Waltham Street Methodist Chapel. By the end of that evening he had made an important decision to follow his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

To a backdrop of an exciting world in a whirlwind of change he had discovered the God that *never* changes. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.

Now with his business growing and his faith firmly placed in Christ there began a period of astonishing prosperity in his fortunes that would see his business attain a dominant position in the UK Flour Milling industry to the amazement and envy of his competitors. As is so often the case such growth has a price. From around 10,500 flour mills in the UK shortly after he started out on his own to the time of his death in 1943, the number had declined to little more than 500. This was a time of brutal survival.

### **THE BOOK**

The detail of that story is contained in a book that was written shortly after his death. To commemorate today's occasion The Joseph Rank Trust has commissioned a reprint of the book called 'Through the Mill' by RG Burnett and I trust you will accept a complimentary copy after the reception when you leave. I hope you will enjoy reading it.

### **THE COST**

But I want to focus for a moment on one particular aspect of his life.

It concerns our reading from Luke's Gospel about the cost of discipleship.

It seems unlikely to me that this passage failed to come to Joseph Rank's attention. By all accounts he read his bible daily and he reportedly thought hard about devoting his life to becoming a missionary. But it was suggested to him that he could be more help to the cause of evangelism by making the money to fund it. It appears that this is what he determined to do.

In Luke's story Jesus turns round to the many people who were following him and challenges them to consider the cost of becoming his disciple. He uses a figure of speech that is I believe intended to shock us. He says in effect that our love for Him should be so single minded, so intense, that our earthly love for those most near to us will seem like hatred by comparison.

That's a tough call. But judged in that light, what is left, our worldly possessions, must seem utterly worthless and not worth keeping hold of!

Jesus is clearly not looking for hangers-on. If you think becoming a Christian is some sort of crutch then you need to look more closely at this and related passages. It is quite the opposite. This is not for the faint hearted. In fact on one occasion people were so dismayed with what Jesus was saying that they thought there was no hope for any of them until He pointed out that with God there is a way.

### **THE PARADOX OF FAITH**

The picture of Joseph Rank we are handed down is of someone who wrestled with this particular dilemma. On the one hand he clearly enjoyed the complexity and the excitement of his business life and he seemed to enjoy the thrill of making money. He felt impatient and often angry with those who

got in his way. On the other hand he was constantly drawn to the simple things in life, the humanity of everyday people, things like his work with the children he taught in Sunday School. He seemed to find the growing love of his Lord at work inside himself warmly drawing him alongside his fellow man. Such tensions are not uncommon among those who find faith in God but his circumstances made them all the more acute.

It made him something of an enigma to his contemporaries. People couldn't quite make him out. He attracted both praise and criticism. He drew great loyalty from those who worked for him but others saw a mean streak in the man and accused him of driving his workers too hard for too little pay. Others would be thankful that someone like him would pay any attention to their needs and were grateful for his help.

### **HANDING THE TORCH ON**

You know, it makes no difference how fast the world is changing. The challenge of the gospel remains the same and presents itself to each new generation with the same power and intensity that transforms life. It is up to us to make sure we play our full part in handing it on.

The Joseph Rank Trust is committed to this aim. We try to be focused about how we can achieve that objective. The gift of help towards people who need help is vital to sustain body and mind *but so also* is the gift of faith to motivate them and to sustain their souls. Finding a personal faith may seem like a private affair but when the motivation in that person is powerfully redirected by the inner work of the Holy Spirit to looking outwards instead of inwards then the whole community benefits.

The lives of people like Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Shaftesbury and others have made a significant social impact on our society but what drove them to do it is often less well known. The combination of their faith and their work has left us with an enduring legacy.

### **WHO WILL FOLLOW?**

Once again we are living in a time when great fortunes are being made. But where are the Joseph Ranks of today? Men who make all they can, save all they can and give all they can. Are they out there? I hope they are.

A reporter once drew alongside a vicar after the funeral of a wealthy man. "Tell me vicar," he said, "how much did he leave?" The vicar looked at him sagely and replied, "Everything, they always do."

Today is All Saints Day. It is a fitting occasion to remember all those who have gone before in the Christian faith. Each one has played his or her vital part in establishing the Kingdom of God.

But what will be the legacy of today's children 150 years on? What great things will *they* be remembered for? Will they be motivated to serve others?

And what will *we* be remembered for?

Only time will tell.