

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BELFAST HUGUENOT AND HIS SERMONS

Raymond Gillespie

Some years ago as I was finishing some work on the emergence of Belfast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries I engaged in a 'mopping up' exercise to discover if there were any lesser known sources that I had missed. As part of that process I wrote to the archivist at St Anne's cathedral in Belfast to enquire whether they, as successor to the old corporation church, might have any records relating to the older church. The reply was not encouraging – all they had was the eighteenth-century parish registers but the archivist thought that there might be something in the library, then currently being established by the dean. Indeed there was. Enquiries elicited the fact that they had some sixty-one original sermons preached by the vicar of Belfast between 1747 and 1772. These were bound in six manuscript volumes and had been transferred from the old diocesan library. It did not take much detective work to discover whose sermons they were. They had been given to the diocesan library in 1911 by Rev. Kivas Brunskill, rector of Donaghendry, in whose family they had been for almost a century, having passed down from the original preacher James Saurin, vicar of Belfast in the middle of the eighteenth century.

As Saurin's name suggests he was not a native of Belfast, indeed he was not even Irish. He had been born in London on 6 March 1720 and baptised eleven days later by his father, Louis Saurin, the minister of the conforming Huguenot Savoy church in London. The Saurin family were Huguenots. However, they were not ordinary Huguenots. Louis Saurin's brother, and James's godfather, was Jacques Saurin who had also spent time in early eighteenth-century London before moving to The Hague where he acquired a reputation as one of the great, indeed possibly the greatest, preachers of the age and there he mixed with princes and politicians. Louis himself was not without influence and political connections and through these he acquired the deanery of Ardagh and precentorship of Christ Church cathedral in Dublin yet he never shed his French background, being involved with the conforming French congregation in Dublin. When he wrote his will in 1746

he did so in French.

James Saurin grew up in Dublin and was educated in Trinity College, together with his nephew (son of Jacques), and was probably ordained in 1739. His movements for the next few years are something of a mystery but he seems to have stayed in Dublin. In June 1747 he was appointed vicar of Belfast and he remained there until his death on 4 August 1772. He never received preferment in the church or in either local or national politics and he does not seem to have wanted it. He was content to be vicar of a relatively wealthy parish and he married into the urban elite of the town. His wife was the widow of the constable of the castle of Belfast and agent to the earls of Donegall and together they had four children one of whom would become bishop of Dromore and another attorney general for Ireland. By all accounts Saurin was a conscientious clergyman. Since he recorded when and where he preached his sermons it is possible to track his movements and, with two exceptions, he rarely missed more than a week or two in his pulpit in Belfast, occasionally being in Dublin and on two occasions in Bath, possibly for medicinal reasons. Hardly surprisingly he was a much loved clergyman. When he died the *Belfast News Letter* recorded that he had 'gained the love and esteem of all ranks and denominations in this place'. He had done that, according to the obituary, through the faithful discharge of his duties but also by his care for the poor. In the harvest crises of 1750/1 and 1756 he had certainly been in the van of measures to relieve the plight of the poor, including the establishment of the Belfast Charitable Society.

What is unusual about Saurin's collection of sermons is that they are concerned with the Sunday-by-Sunday world of parish preaching rather than with special events. There are no political sermons or confutational ones, he rarely attacked Catholics and never mentioned the Presbyterians who dominated his own town. Rather, his sermons dealt with the great truths of religion and in particular how those truths were to be applied in the lives of his hearers. In Saurin's lifetime Belfast was a town being physically and economically transformed as it moved from being just a port to a more wide ranging commercial centre. As its population grew the inhabitants had to learn to live in

a changed environment and Saurin's sermons told them how the truths of Christianity would help them to do that. Thus he spoke of the need for order and the problem of social sins – pride, anger, fraud, luxury, time-wasting and ambition. He emphasised that charity was not simply a religious duty but a social imperative since it underpinned the existing social structure and the poor should not be oppressed by the greater. Saurin was a man of his time believing strongly that God had ordered the world through His providence but also that 'all society is founded upon a mutual compact and agreement, a reciprocal trust and confidence in each other which is the only true cement that keeps us together'. Saurin saw his task as building that trust and confidence to make Belfast society work and his sermons were the means of doing that.

This is a truly significant collection of sermons, certainly the largest surviving set of parochial sermons for Ireland and among the largest for the British Isles. That they should have been preached by a Huguenot and a nephew of the great Jacques Saurin is probably no accident. Yet James Saurin was in his own right a preacher of distinction with a stylish turn of phrase. His sermons still have much to tell us about the world in which they were crafted. Fortunately a selection of them is now available in print as *Preaching in Belfast: a selection of the sermons of James Saurin* published by Four Courts Press, Dublin in 2015. It is a collection to enjoy as well as to learn from.