FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

COMMUNITY NOTES

ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
John Sclater

WHEN PRAYER FALLS SILENT
Sandy Ryrie

THE DISHONEST STEWARD
Jeremy Sheehy

HOPING IT MIGHT BE SO
Kenneth Mason

LUCY MENZIES, SCHOLAR AND MYSTIC
John Hunter

LIGHT AND WORD IN SOLITARY PLACES
Donald Allchin

BOOKS

Leslie Houlden Michael Scott-Joynt

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COMMUNITY NOTES

GREEN AS GRASS, red as a beetroot, brown as a berry; cool as a cucumber, stiff as a post, keen as mustard; bright as a button, clear as a bell, sharp as a knife; bold as brass, good as gold, hard as iron; sweet as a nut, fresh as a daisy, old as the hills; quiet as a mouse, slow as a snail, merry as a cricket; proud as a peacock, mad as a coot, blithe as a lark; thin as a rake, fit as a fiddle, dead as a door nail; happy as a sand boy, safe as houses. … Once I started thinking of similes (a distraction in choir of the sort familiar to most of us) they came thick and fast and the cumulative effect was enough to cheer me up and make me feel more lively. You might like to try it! What makes reciting all this so satisfying? Whether the effect is to fuel one's distractions or cure insomnia in the small hours, isn't there something magic in those well-worn phrases?

The 'something', surely, is an accurate match between the specific, the concrete, and some more elusive quality or abstraction. Not to put too fine a point upon it, we are given a hint that the fabric of the universe, however mysterious, does hang together, there is a web of connections. Old sayings, riddles, rhymes, songs, names, proverbs, litanies, and chants, not to mention scriptures, can—*quick as a flash*—let us into a secret which our forebears knew. A spark leaps across the gulf between differences, we understand, albeit intuitively; and that is something to celebrate.

Recent visitors to Fairacres will have realized that we have been experimenting during the summer with a different arrangement for receiving Communion at the Eucharist. We value the symbolism of gathering in a circle round the altar but the architecture of the chapel does not lend itself to this, except on the occasions when there are rather few of us. So we tried a practice we have encountered in various monasteries and parish churches whereby Communion is distributed from a 'station' at the sanctuary step. It didn't work for various reasons, so we are, more or less, back to where we were. And this is one instance of something which we are constantly up against at present: trying to find a proper match between the buildings we live in and the life and meaning we wish to express. The chapel at

Fairacres built in the 1920s was suitable for the liturgical emphasis of that time, and made a strong statement about the hidden life of an enclosed Community. It was all symbolic and consciously so: the (now faded) blue tiles in the sanctuary represented the sea of glass around the throne of God, the red tiles down the centre of the choir the blood of the Lamb by which we approach the throne, the five arches in the roof the five wounds of Christ through which we pass, and the screens around the sanctuary were embellished with the words of the Gloria. At the Eucharist we were invited to enter, even on earth, into the life of heaven and the beatific vision. In the 1960s when the Community set up Bede House the 'huts' made a strong statement about the rediscovery of the solitary life in that place. At St Isaac's now, the simple wooden buildings, including the tractor shed which has been converted into a chapel, speak of something earthed and unpretentious and have a significant effect on the life that is lived there.

At Fairacres, although we have extensive buildings, we often lament the lack of a room where the whole Community can meet together informally for discussion. In the Chapter House, designed in the 1950s, the Revd Mother presides from an imposing stall and there are wooden benches along the walls: it is uncomfortable, difficult to see and hear each other, and very much focused on 'the Superior'. But it is also simple and beautiful, especially when the sun shines on the parquet floor, and it well expresses the traditional structure of a monastic community. Here very clearly the physical space defines and serves a particular organizational structure; we are conscious that it is not the only model that is important for us today, it does not quite fit us as we are or as we hope to be. We want to meet as friends, to see each other face to face and give everyone an equal chance to speak. Community understood in this way also requires a particular, different, kind of space and we have tried in various ways to improvise it. The latest, nicely biblical, suggestion is that the need is urgent enough for us to consider, on occasion, hiring a marquee!

On 24 June, the Feast of St John the Baptist, when Bishop Richard Harries, our Visitor, came to install me as Revd Mother for a third term of office, he asked the Community, 'Will you support

[Mother Rosemary] with your prayer and love, in mutual service and obedience as she takes up the charge now laid upon her?' And the Sisters replied: 'We will. Mother Rosemary we gladly welcome your leadership among us.' That moment expresses a necessary mutuality and it challenges me to discover with my Sisters what kind of leadership, what forms of obedience, what structures, are truly welcome among us. What in the structures we have, and in their implications, 'makes for peace and builds up our common life'? What sets us free to grow in response to God's call?

The Anglican Communion is having to ask these very questions, so it is fitting that we should too. The recently published Windsor Report, commissioned by Archbishop Rowan to investigate issues raised by the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, and the Rochester Report, about including women in the episcopate, require us to become more aware of how and what authority is exercised among us and the basis of our *communion*, in every sense. In a monastic community where we meet each other daily in every possible situation, and where we are vowed to remain together for the rest of our lives, we have particular opportunities to face these questions. They are real questions to which we need, but do no know, the answer—if indeed there is any single answer. In SLG the questions surface in very little things and yet they stretch us to think big. I am glad to have been blessed and installed, again, on St John the Baptist's Day for 'he [Christ] must increase and I must decrease' and it is he, Christ the bridegroom within her, who stretches the Community and the Church beyond their evident limitations. Let us pray to be so stretched that the Church may be recognizable in our generation: 'fair as the moon, clear as the sun and terrible as an army with banners' (Song of Songs 6:10).

Oblate Sr Debbie made her Promises on the Feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August; Oblate Sr Susan Mary of the Peace of God made her Promises on Feast of St Martin, 11 November. We have elected Sr Elizabeth of the Word of God Incarnate to Profession in Life Vows and we look forward with her to celebrating that on the Feast of St John of the Cross, 14 December.

MOTHER ROSEMARY SLG

ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

JOHN SCLATER

FOR THIS FEAST of St Michael and All Angels I would like to begin by sharing with you one of my favourite stories from the life of W.H. Auden. He became, of course, one of our most distinguished poets in the twentieth century but, as often happens with people of creative genius, his life was not always easy. Auden was born in 1907 and came to realize fairly early in life that he was homosexual, that he was gay, as we would say today. He was remarkably open about this fact of his life in an age when denial was so powerful, the subject was taboo and sexual relations between men were illegal. Living a lifestyle that expressed the truth of who he was can't have been easy for him at that period in England. We have moved on a great deal since those days, but the present debate within the Anglican Communion shows us how powerful still is the spirit of denial, fear and prejudice.

When he was thirty years old Auden came here to Oxford and was introduced to a member of the editorial staff of the Oxford University Press who was himself a poet and an author, this man was Charles Williams. Now many people took Charles Williams to be a saint. T.S. Eliot, for example, said that Williams was the nearest thing to a saint he had ever met. Auden himself said: 'For the first time in my life I felt myself in the presence of personal sanctity.' Later in life Auden said of this encounter with Williams in Oxford: 'I had met many good people before who made me feel ashamed of my own shortcomings, but in the presence of this man—we never discussed anything but literary business—I did not feel ashamed, I felt transformed into a person who was incapable of doing or thinking anything base or unloving.' The story is told in Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Auden.

I begin with that story today because it seems to me that for Auden that encounter was like a kind of annunciation, a visitation, a glimpse of the life of heaven. People can go through a lifetime and not be graced with such an encounter. I am sure we have all had the experience that good people, in spite of all their goodness, can

somehow secretly or unconsciously accuse us, we are made to see ourselves in the light of some ideal, and we are made to feel wanting. What we see in today's first reading from the Book of Revelation (ch. 12:7-12) is that the forces of evil are precisely the forces that accuse us; the shadow, the darkness is cast upon us and we are made to feel outside the pale. 'Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels waged war upon the dragon. So the great dragon was thrown down, that serpent of old that led the whole world astray, whose name is Satan, or the Devil … Then I heard a voice in heaven proclaiming aloud: This is the hour of victory for our God, the hour of his sovereignty and power, when his Christ comes to his rightful rule. For the *accuser of our brethren* (my italics) is overthrown, who day and night accused them before our God.'

It is so significant that the serpent of old is called 'the accuser of our brethren'. In Charles Williams it seems that Auden and many others met a man who, like St Michael and his angels, had won a victory. It was an inner victory so that he was no longer an accuser of his brethren. In his presence one felt not accused, ashamed, but rather transformed and set free. It was said of Williams that 'he saw the gold in others, making it shine'.

William Blake once said, 'As a man is, so he sees'. That is such a hard truth to learn isn't it? That what we see outside us is a projection of our own mind. How we see others is reflecting back to us how we see ourselves. I am sure we are all familiar with those processes that go on so easily in our head—we judge, we criticize, we condemn, we accuse. What we are doing towards others, summed up in the word *accusing*, is a reflection back to us of what we are doing to ourselves. Other people are acting like a mirror to help us see our own inner processes.

If you think of those times when you have felt closest to the Divine Presence, at one with yourself and God, at home in yourself, are not these times when all that accusatory chatter seems miraculously to evaporate?

There are lots of things we could say about St Michael and All Angels, not least in importance is that we remember them as those

who assist us towards a victory over 'the accuser of brothers and sisters' who lives within each of us.

Within any close-knit community such as a monastic one the spirit of accusation can be extraordinarily powerful—you don't need me to tell you that! St Benedict in his Rule calls it the spirit of 'murmuring'. Being so subtle and crafty this power disguises itself, slips underground into the unconscious and only reveals itself when it is projected onto others. We fail to see that we are looking into a mirror … until, until perhaps we meet someone like Charles Williams in whom the spirit of accusation has been vanquished, and then we see mirrored back to us our own true image, and we feel transformed by a sense of the Divine Presence, seen outside us and felt within us. In that moment nothing has changed in our external circumstances, and yet everything has changed, we see the whole world in a new way.

If I were to choose two books from my own life-time's reading which most speak to me of this victory of St Michael and All Angels over the accusing voice within, they would be, first, *The Revelations of Divine Love* by Mother Julian of Norwich, and second, your own pamphlet by Dumitru Staniloae, *Prayer and Holiness.* It so happened this pamphlet originated as addresses given to the monks of Chevetogne. We often overlook the treasure close to home, so if you haven't read it, I recommend it.

So for this Feast Day of St Michael and All Angels I hope you might like to remember the story of Auden's encounter with Charles Williams. Let us leave the last words to Auden himself writing in his *New Year Letter:*

> We fall down in the dance, we make
> The old ridiculous mistake,
> But always there are such as you
> Forgiving, helping what we do.
> O every day in sleep and labour
> Our life and death are with our neighbour,
> And love illuminates again
> The city and the lion's den,
> The world's great rage, the travel of young men.

RETREATS 2006

We have decided, after several discussions, to extend the Retreat programme for 2006 by offering both a weekend and a five day retreat. The closure of Bede House has meant that several people who would have spent a five day individual retreat there, are now unable to do so. While what we offer is not the same, we hope that it will meet a need among those who are linked to the Community. The continuance of the weekend retreat provides for those who like this length of time. This is an experiment. We cannot be sure just how many takers there might be for a longer retreat. But it seems an appropriate thing to do in the centenary year. We are aware of a need for space for silent prayer. The focus of both these retreats will be the deepening of the contemplative life to which we are all called.

We have now booked Llangasty Retreat House near Brecon, a beautiful area of Wales, for 26-30 July, 2006. We expect the cost to be approximately £160.00; and we are booking 24-26 March, 2006, at a retreat house in London. Further details will be published in the next issue of the Chronicle.

Arrangements for 2005, see page.

DAVID BARTON
Warden, Sisters of the Love of God

WHEN PRAYER FALLS SILENT

SANDY RYRIE

FACED with the horrors of war and other terrible, complicated and incomprehensible things in the world, we may feel frustrated because there seems to be nothing we can do. We are helpless before the terribleness and intractability of the world's problems. We can, of course, pray. But in situations like these, how are we to pray?

We may find ourselves unable to pray as we would like. We may not be able to find words to express our feelings and thoughts in prayer. And we may also find that we don't know what to pray for. Situations in the world of human affairs are complex, good and evil are inextricably mixed, and we often don't see a 'solution' for which we should pray. Moreover, given the dynamic of events, the reality of human power and the apparent inevitability of certain outcomes, it is often hard to believe that our prayers will do any good. Can prayer really bring a war to an end?

So perhaps our prayer falls silent. We find ourselves silent not because we have entered deeply into silent prayer, but because we can do no other. We have no words.

It may be, however, that this wordless inarticulateness is a kind of silent prayer. The prayer of silence is not a matter of moving beyond the stage of words, of mastering a new skill superior to the skill of speech. We don't get into prayer of this kind by first becoming good at verbal prayer, and then doing something better. It is not necessarily a reaching up towards the sublime heights of contemplation. At times it involves simply going down into a place where the power of words is taken from us, where the skill of ordering our thoughts, producing ideas, working out solutions and expressing our wishes deserts us, and where we have to acknowledge our inability to pray. Paradoxically our inability to pray itself becomes our prayer.

The prayer that arises out of our inability is not, however, an ineffective or hopeless way of praying. The prayer of silence may

be thought of as a kind of vigil. This is something we are familiar with in our society today. A group of people who are concerned about some issue can feel that by standing together in silence outside a significant building or symbolic place, they are doing something relevant and important. There is another vigil that is going on all the time, a perpetual silent vigil kept by people all over the world who stand before God in silence for the sake of the world. When we engage in silent prayer we take part in this vigil. In doing this we are not alone but are linked with thousands of others who are doing the same. Even at times when we are not consciously praying we can know ourselves to be a part of this world-wide community of those who by day and night are observing this vigil. And from time to time during the day or night we can deliberately take our place alongside them, joining in this silent vigil.

This is a vigil not of protest but of penitence. Standing in silence before God we acknowledge that we are a part of the chaos and disorder of the world, and that all of us together are in need of God's mercy, compassion and healing. And it is a vigil of hope—hope that the God who brings life out of death will bring order and blessing out of this chaos.

The prayer of silence is a sharing in this perpetual silent vigil, and it is a real and valid way of praying. Our prayers are made effective not by the power of our words, or the clear formulation of our requests, but by the sincerity of our intention and the depth of our feeling as we stand before God wordlessly and perhaps without well-ordered thoughts. This silent vigil can be our prayer even when we can find no other way to pray.

THE DISHONEST STEWARD

JEREMY SHEEHY

IN THIS year of St Luke's Gospel, the reading for this Sunday (Trinity XII) takes us in Chapter 15 straight on from the parable of the Prodigal Son into the more difficult and puzzling parable of the Dishonest Steward—rather more difficult and challenging indeed for

the preacher—and I have to admit that it is very hard to know how to make sense of it, whereas it is relatively easy to wax lyrical over the parable of the prodigal son.

I must admit, too, that for ordinary parochial purposes I do find myself wondering whether it really belongs in the selection of Sunday readings at all, or whether the context of weekday liturgical reading of the scriptures, when usually many of those present will have a scriptural awareness, might not be a better place for it.

But here we have it, and it has been read, so let me therefore try to say something sensible and comprehensible about it. There are, I think, two key issues which the commentators have raised since the earliest days of biblical commentary of which we need to be aware as we try to decide between the various interpretations that might be on offer.

The first, (and I will try and say why this is significant to our interpretation and not just the sort of thing that scholars enjoy quarrelling about when they have nothing better to do), is when the parable ends. That may sound strange to you. But if you look at the texts you will see, I hope, what I mean. Is the end of the parable when the steward (or manager, as our translation had it, but I'm going to continue to call him the steward because it is what many of us are used to) says to the second debtor, 'Take your bill and write eighty', or is our verse 8, 'The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence, for the sons of this world are wiser in their generation than the sons of light', part of the parable as Jesus tells it? You see, if the parable ends with the second debtor, then 'the master' or 'the lord' in verse 8 is Jesus, and the evangelist is supplying the moral of the tale, and Jesus has approved the steward's action. But if 'the master' is the steward's master, then we have to find a reason why he might commend the action and supply, furthermore, some possible moral for the whole tale.

In many ways, it is easier if 'the master' commending the dishonest steward is Jesus and the whole point of the parable is that we should be attentive and, when necessary, decisive. That makes the parable an example of what some commentators call 'the

parables of crisis'.[1] But it is a strange story to tell in order to make that point,[2] and the subsequent change in tone at the beginning of what we call verse 9 from 'the master' to 'And I tell you' does rather sound, I think, like a switch from the last bit of the parable to exhortation by Jesus.

So much for my first key issue as raised by the commentators, or at least those whom I got to read whilst I was thinking about this morning's homily. What about the second? Well, we are told the steward had been dishonest and wasted the master's goods. Is what he does with the two debtors further example of dishonesty, or is it proper and right dealing? In other words, does the steward's behaviour change or does he continue in his dishonesty? On first appearance, it must seem like further dishonesty, further wasting of the master's goods.

But there has also been a quite influential line of interpretation to the effect that what the dishonest steward is doing is to show his repentance and his change of heart by setting some arrangements right.[3] By commending this behaviour the parable will also be telling us that even at the final hour repentance will be valued and rewarded. Basically, this solution to the problem of the meaning of the parable depends on the intricacies of the Jewish law of usury, which here would see the steward as abandoning, whilst still acting as his master's agent, interest that was actual, but not strictly speaking illegal (at least according to some authorities). As one commentator describes the abandonment of the interest: 'His action was legal, because he was still an accredited agent; it was also righteous, because, perhaps for the first time in his business career, he had done what the law of God required'.[4] If this is a correct interpretation, then the point of the parable is similar to the other

[1] See, for instance, G.B. Caird, *St Luke,* Pelican Commentary, Penguin, 1963, and L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke,* The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 243.
[2] I was pleased to see that Fr Eric Franklin comments on such an interpretation in his contribution to the Oxford Bible Commentary that it 'avoids the real shock that is at the heart of so many of Jesus's parables' (p. 948).
[3] For details of this, one should refer to such commentaries as C.F. Evans, *St Luke,* TPI Commentaries, SCM, 1990, pp. 596f., and I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* Paternoster, 1978, pp. 614ff. The details are not appropriate in a sermon, I think.
[4] Caird, p. 187

gospel teaching that warns us against too much ingenious and detailed avoidance of the general message of the law of God and calls us to a whole-hearted service of the way of God. The point of the parable would stand alongside Jesus's warning to those who tithe their herbs and forget their other obligations and his censures of the way the law of Corban could be used.

The problems I have in taking such a line are that, firstly, even if a Pharasaic audience might have appreciated the points, I find it difficult to believe that the disciples, to say nothing of the tax collectors and sinners whom St Luke tells us drew near to hear him, would have grasped the point Jesus was making; and, secondly, such a message would fit in Matthew's gospel, but it stands out rather like a sore thumb in Luke's gospel, which generally does not assume a knowledge of the details of the practice of Judaism among those who heard it. Perhaps this interpretation may tell us something about the original meaning of the parable when Jesus told it, but when Luke knows the parable and uses it and sets it in his gospel he may have a new meaning for it, to emphasize the proper stewardship of earthly goods and wealth.

Decisive action in crisis, proper stewardship of the riches of this life, the call to last minute repentance, the importance of full-hearted obedience: the moral might be any of these. It feels a bit, reading the commentaries, as though you pays your money and you takes your choice! But let me finish with one final thought: I do wonder, but I am not enough of a New Testament expert to take the discussion any further, whether there might be a note of humour here. I think there is more in Jesus' teaching that is meant to make us smile than we sometimes realize. It might be instructive if the commentators, as well as all the other helpful information they provide, could tell us something about the jokes of first-century Palestinian Judaism. Might the context be more stand-up comedy than anything else?

HOPING IT MIGHT BE SO

KENNETH MASON

CHRISTMAS EVE, and twelve of the clock,
‘Now they are all on their knees,’
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
‘Come; see the oxen kneel

‘In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,’
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

THOMAS HARDY’S poem ‘The Oxen’ is a generous work, offering sympathy to many kinds of people and many varieties of sentiment. Christmas anthologies regularly print it, seasonal readings frequently include it; you can have it plain, illustrated, or set to music.

And this popularity seems not to depend on the faith of those who sustain it. Believer and unbeliever alike—if so sharp a distinction can be allowed in this case—find something in it which speaks to them and for them. If the overall mood of the poem is nostalgic, it is a nostalgia which many varieties of faith and desire find agreeable. It gets under the guard of orthodox zest and orthodox doubt alike, evoking a realm of the imagination where scruples or anxieties about truth can be allowed to wait. In this respect it is like Christmas itself.

On the face of it, the poem's meaning is simple. Hardy speaks in four brief verses of the traditional myth of the oxen kneeling at midnight on Christmas Eve; they do this—though Hardy finds no need to say so—in honour of the Christ Child who honoured them by being born in their stable and laid in their manger. There was a time when this belief was accepted and shared without question in the circles he describes, the mid-century rustics around the hearth who were so close to the 'meek mild creatures' that they could be thought of themselves as a flock. But the poem speaks for a later time, in which the old myth has few to uphold it. Nevertheless, Hardy or his imagined speaker is prepared to think of himself as one of that few. The confession is made delicately, economically, and also, we notice, conditionally. If—and we do not know that this condition will be met—someone else took the initiative, he feels that he would go with him to see, 'hoping it might be so'. The poem ends then with a convergence of feeling, purpose and hope, all made tentative by that *if*. If we are looking here for precision we find our look avoided, except in the way the balance of desire and uncertainty is conveyed.

Something of Hardy's fabled irony is at work here. As we warm to what he says, making the poem our own, filling out his indications with our own meaning, we recognize in it an appeal to many who may be quite unlike ourselves; believer and unbeliever, sceptic and fantasist, find themselves on common ground. We can at least all imagine ourselves feeling and hoping in a way that the poem allows.

Hardy achieves this polyvalence by the way he presents and reiterates his central image, the kneeling oxen. He does nothing to explain the idea; he relies for immediate impact, on the reader's prior knowledge, implying that he and the reader together are part of a community which shares this myth, whether its members believe it or not. In the first verse we are given sight of it through the authoritative assertion of the elder, and in the second through the consenting minds of the fireside flock. In the third verse, even in the face of modern doubt, it is still affirmed as a 'fair fancy', and then as an invitation, 'come; see'. And in the fourth verse it is the object

of the speaker's quest, and perhaps of ours as well. On such a count the poem's engagement with the scene, its composition of place, is complete. But in several ways Hardy also distances himself as author, and his speaker, from this engagement.

It begins with the sense that he is calling up the memory of a lost age, the age perhaps of John Clare or William Barnes, when a poetic description of 'hearthside ease' at Christmas might celebrate a present fact. This is reinforced by the archaic words used to recall it, 'barton', 'yonder comb', and by the mention of childhood knowledge. And though the scene of the oxen is said to be 'fair' it is also 'a fancy', something existing in imagination but not, it may be, outside it. Besides, Hardy makes no direct reference to Christ and his birth, that is to the conviction that once sustained the legend. Something that could once be taken for embroidery on solid cloth is now left looking for a foundation elsewhere, it may be in folklore or superstition.

Besides, again, Hardy's account misses the most dramatic elements in the legend. In its full-blooded version the cattle do more than kneel; they talk in human words, and yet—and here the legend exposes its own teasing irony—it is fatal for any human to overhear them. Did Hardy fail to mention this because he had not heard of it, or is he turning the legend's irony to his own purposes? He can profess himself willing to go and see, if someone will take the lead, perhaps because he knows perfectly well that no one will. The question is interesting, but still not of radical importance. It can only, as it were, add a few grace notes to a strong clear melody. The legend of the oxen was once a matter of shared trust, beyond doubt or question. Now it invites inquiry, stimulates a desire for direct experience. Time was we could say we knew; now we require proof. Whether proof should be available or not is secondary.

Hardy here speaks for all those who feel themselves deprived of a faith which once served them well and bound them to their fellows, but which time and change have swept away. It seems now that the old, finely imagined form of faith can be recovered only by contradicting it, by subjecting it to experiment, and so replacing faith by sight, or else by holding it as a personal conviction against

the same consensus that once supported it. Something that was once a fair and living fancy, shared in quiet and easy fellowship, has become only the echo of a lost childhood, appealing but powerless.

Ralph Vaughan Williams used this poem as a solo aria in his Christmas cantata, *Hodie.* It is preceded there by the gospel account of the shepherds who come, find and see the Babe lying in the manger, and it is followed by the further account of their return, praising God for what they have heard and seen. It comes then as a commentary on the bald report that there was a manger and that Christ was laid in it, on the content of this report, but even more on its status. By restoring the connection between the gospel narrative and the legend of the oxen it sets both in the same uncertain perspective. These things were once perceived as reported facts. Now we are unhappy with reports if we cannot verify them ourselves.

J.S. Bach, at this point in his Christmas Oratorio, sets his solo commentator reflecting on the way God compensates for the weakness of human faith with the power of his wonders:

> Let this wonder, these works of God,
> Always be the strength of your weak faith.

It does not trouble him that 'these works' only enter our experience in the form of written assertions, as human witness. For him the gospel narrative puts the believer in the same position as the shepherds it tells of. The story of the wonder ministers to faith as though it were the wonder itself. Vaughan Williams, following Hardy, replaces this here-and-now assurance with a wistful, infinitely qualified declaration that 'it might be so'.

In Luke's original account there occurs the statement that 'Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart'. He places this between the shepherds' arrival, when they tell everybody what the angel had told them, and their departure. Vaughan Williams extracts the statement about Mary from this position and makes it the head of a new section. It is as though Mary and the shepherds are, for him, different models of reaction to the central event. They very simply see, rejoice and spread the news. She, in greater detachment,

lets herself be addressed by everything said or done, and then waits for further insight. They know and proclaim: she attends and reflects.

Vaughan Williams has been described as a Christian agnostic whose personal attitude to the church and its faith was complex, perhaps impenetrable, but we can see that in the choice, ordering and setting of these texts he was attempting to articulate that attitude in its most positive aspect. If he restored to Hardy's poem the explicit link with Christ which Hardy had left unstated, he also subscribed himself to Hardy's opinion that

> So fair a fancy few would weave
> In these years! …

Where Bach had found a support for faith in the mere form of its content, Hardy and Vaughan Williams find the whole notion of faith perplexing. Nevertheless, without abandoning their agnosticism, they allow the matter of faith to address and fascinate them.

When Christian agnosticism expresses itself in this manner it lends itself to comparison with John Wesley's notion of 'the almost-Christian'. Here we have someone who is familiar with the story, able, it may be, to discuss it intelligently, responsive to its moral challenge and sensitive to the intimations of transcendence, but without the faith-commitment that bring it, and the believer with it, to life. Even so, it is proper to recall that agnosticism can be described in other terms, and may exist in other varieties. There is an agnosticism that does not so much oppose faith as express it, which is in truth required by it.

> In order to arrive at what you do not know
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> T.S. Eliot

When Jesus is tempted by the proposal that the true Son of God will take God at his word and cast himself off the pinnacle, he resists it with the word which is also God's, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'. When Moses asks God for a vision of his glory he is told, 'You may not see my face and live'. There is the same pattern here as in the legend of the oxen. As soon as you

set yourself to go and see, to turn faith into experience, you fall into something that is less than faith, and not more.

It is because the pattern is the same, of faith wrestling with what is given to experience and what is withheld from it, that the legend of the oxen can stand for the whole Christian story, the whole incarnational gospel, in an exploration of this kind. Whether the story to which faith responds is, so to speak, taken straight, embroidered with legends or reduced to putative essentials, we still have to ask, what is going on in the mind that entertains this story? Faith, we may say, accepts the story as God's account of himself, but how, and in how many ways, does it move beyond the story to the God who tells it?

Faith here requires agnosticism as it recognizes that the mind must reach out beyond the form it has grasped toward God whom it cannot grasp. Knowledge—and it does not matter here what guarantees we have that it is real knowledge—is never more than a pointer to the glory that shall be. Unknowing is a constant, indispensable element in the knowledge that accompanies faith.

But now that we speak of agnosticism some clarification becomes essential, for agnosticism is often, and rightly, seen as an opponent of faith or as indifference to it. There is an agnosticism which is really practical atheism combined with a lofty dismissal of cosmic questions as too great for the likes of us. There is an agnosticism that finds plenty in religion to discuss, but nothing to compel decision. And there is the agnosticism which denies in detail each several element of the faith that was once assented to, but maintains that essentially, where the believing heart reaches out to the heart of the matter, nothing has changed. These are all tragic conditions, and God has no desire to leave anyone trapped in them.

Nevertheless, there is a fashion of not knowing, of being agnostic, which is not self-deceiving, which is seriously affirmative of truth. Can we make the *distinction* we need to make by attempting to give an account of it?

A positivistic attitude, whether on the side of faith or the side of unbelief, would have us think that the propositions of a religion must be either altogether true or altogether false, in either case

within a wholly self-consistent system. This may be where some believers, and perhaps some unbelievers, start. A faith that admits inconsistency within its beliefs, or allows the line of conviction to be blurred, is not worth subscribing to or, on the other hand, attacking. And there are, it seems, just about enough people striving ingeniously to defend such brittle systems as to show that this description is not merely an ideal construction; people really do live with such beliefs and press them upon others.

But the same evidence that demonstrates the existence of such positivistic faith, also shows that people seldom adhere to it beyond the period of first discovery. The believer comes, with experience, to see that the evidences that minister to faith, the images, narratives, traditions, and even the dogmas of faith are not all of a kind. Witness, testimony and direct experience mingle with historical hypothesis and traditions of interpretation. Stories may be chronicles or personal confessions; they may be parables or myths. Images may be received as powerful symbols with transformative potential, or as memorable and enlightening figures of speech. All these things may be acknowledged as truthful in some way, truthful that is, as presenting and communicating God's way with humankind. But the kinds of truth involved and the relationships between them are sure to be beyond enumeration.

The decisive truth, for the believer, is that through these evidences God himself testifies to himself. As a system it is consistent in him. For us its consistency is more like that of a social network than that of a mechanical device. And because God's supreme testimony to himself was made through Jesus Christ, some of the truth within this system of truth will be of the kind we call fact. Now, with this admission the positivist in us will make a desperate demand for a clear statement of naked facts. We have to disappoint him. There are no naked facts, except perhaps immediate sensations. Beyond them everything is commentary, everything is interpretation. The stories, images, analogies and comparisons are all there to help us to contribute, by our own faith and prayer and action, to that commentary.

Agnosticism here is called for in at least two ways. We might like more facts, or at least greater certainty about alleged facts, and have to be content that we can't have them. But beyond that, we have to recognize that what we know in faith about God can never be more than analogically related to God in himself. Revelation cannot bridge this gap because the human mind, however well it is enlightened, cannot comprehend the full majesty of God's reality. Part of the effect of real revelation is to convince us of this unbridgeability.

Further, just as there are no naked facts, there are no clear boundaries to the region of truth as perceived in faith. The believer is not someone who possesses a store of certainties as it were, in case they are needed. Rather, he or she prays, worships, and lives in trust, guided and formed by the images and doctrines that speak of Christ, discovering in the course of experience how resourceful these image are. It is not a matter of walking a clear path, maintaining an even course, keeping firm control. There are bound to be challenges, ambiguities and doubts, but these do not frustrate the venture of faith; the human body can suffer weaknesses or pains and still be a long way from dying.

We have approached this comprehension of faith as though it resulted from a process of maturation; a zealous youthful enthusiasm is chastened, informed and developed through experience. The resulting conviction is less hasty, but much more resilient and resourceful, knowing better through experience who it is that Christians believe in. But it is possible to see the same state of faith as something one could approach from the other direction. Unbelievers too, beginning from a position of denial, may nevertheless find that the images and testimonies of faith engage them, fascinate their imagination, and begin to shape their responses to life. Even while holding back from actual worship, since their starting point assured them that there is no one to be worshipped, they may come to occupy the same imaginative universe as the believer, moved and inspired by the same symbols. Perhaps this is why, in the New Testament, salvation is pledged both to those who explicitly confess faith in Christ (Rom. 10) and also to those who

respond in love to his presence without knowing that they are doing so (Matt. 25:31-40).

The patience of regular worshippers in church is often challenged by the discovery, at Christmas, that the church is suddenly full to overcrowding, the usual seats are occupied, and participation in 'our' worship has to be shared with a great many unfamiliar visitors. It might be easier to exercise the appropriate patience if we could put aside any idea of an intrusion that can properly be resented, and try to understand what is happening. These people, like ourselves, are there by God's invitation. We may have passed on the invitation ourselves, sending out leaflets and publishing notices, but that is not the main reason they are there. It is rather that, to them, Christmas is a 'fair fancy', a garden of the imagination whose appeal they cannot resist. They may, like many a regular worshipper, believe the main story, or not, or something in between conditional upon the season; they may know of, and possibly believe, the doctrine of the incarnation. They may simply be thinking of church at Christmas as a custom that ought to be maintained, like holly or Christmas pudding. These are the kinds of reason they might give if reasons were demanded, but there will also be reasons they cannot give, feeling no need to articulate them.

Christmas is hospitable to all these reasons, and especially the inarticulate ones. It offers everyone a vision of Christ—a vision that comes to us under the guise of lights in dark places, cheerful music in a cheerless season, the memory of past kindnesses, the sense of a duty to benevolence or hospitality, and a longing for peace. It names his name in the expectation that it will be honoured, especially by the children and through the children who are welcomed and indulged for his sake.

When Hardy wrote of the *gloom* in the penultimate line of his poem, we may suppose that he meant more than the darkness of midnight on Christmas Eve. It is a gloomy world in which the public imagination loses touch with faith, and is opened up to trivial fantasies and some which are seriously dark, violent and deceitful. Faced with such threats it is natural that people should appreciate the memory of gentler fancies, and that Christmas should continue

in the public favour, as it may seem at times, with a desperate cheerfulness. It is certainly a matter for thankfulness that when the church says, 'Come and see', many should offer to go with it 'in the gloom, hoping it might be so'.

LUCY MENZIES, SCHOLAR AND MYSTIC

JOHN HUNTER

'LUCY MENZIES, scholar and mystic, born 1882, died 1954, who in her later years worshipped and meditated here.' These words are inscribed on the memorial tablet in the church of All Saints', St Andrews. For the past fifteen years or so she has been commemorated in the Calendar of the Scottish Episcopal Church; and November 2004 marks the fiftieth anniversary of her death.

Who was Lucy Menzies? What were her claims to saintliness? And how did her commemoration in the Calendar come about? To take the third question first: some years ago, it was thought desirable to include in the Episcopal Church's Calendar some new names, people of more local significance, who had made a particular contribution and one more recent than those hallowed by time. Perhaps one from each Scottish diocese? The Liturgy Committee and the Faith and Order Board were set to consider this. I understand that it was probably Martin Reith (late of the Company of the Servants of God) who suggested Lucy Menzies' name. His suggestion was duly put to our local chapter and was discussed. I was, I believe, the only person present at that meeting who had known Lucy. I felt she was indeed a strong candidate and in due course her name was included in the Calendar.

As to her claims, I would like to quote from Robert Atwell's book, *Celebrating the Saints*, where he writes:

> The Communion of Saints is the company of those who have willed that their own life-stories be shaped and transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ … Over the centuries the Church has come to recognise particular individuals within this company … those who by custom are specifically called

> *saints* and in and through whom God's purpose of love, mercy, peace and justice have been specifically revealed.

Such a one I believe was Lucy Menzies. Some words that she herself wrote in her book *The Saints of Italy* would strike an immediate chord of recognition in all who, like me, were lucky enough to know her:

> God's greatest gift to man is the gift of the power, tendency and opportunity to learn goodness. The saints accepted this gift. They trained their spiritual natures, they perpetually renewed their lives by contact with the source of all being. Few of them have not some gift of healing or restoration to pass on to us.

That is what Lucy did. To draw these thoughts together here are words from a sermon preached some years ago by one who also knew her well, the Reverend Marie Louise Moffet:

> Not all the Saints were on the grand scale. But Lucy Menzies was one of those who reflected God, who showed some facets of that unimaginable reality, someone whose life was so obviously dedicated to Him that the rest of us who knew her could be encouraged on our pilgrimage and touched by His love through her.

And now to the first question: who was Lucy Menzies?

She was the grand-daughter, on both sides, of distinguished Presbyterian ministers. Her father, Allan Menzies, was born in 1845, and after serving in several parishes was appointed in 1889 Professor of Biblical Criticism at St Andrews University, where for a time he was slightly suspect on account of his Broad Church views. He was, however, to prove immensely popular and won the deep respect of students and colleagues alike, both for his breadth of learning and his warm and generous nature. Lucy's childhood was spent in a loving and happy home, blessed by the harmony and companionship of her parents' marriage as well as by their scholarly and independent outlook. She and her elder sister May were educated by their father at home until in the Spring of 1897 they were sent with two St Andrews friends, one of whom was my mother, to a finishing school in Heidelberg. The school seems to have been a liberal-minded and forward-looking establishment. More was taught there than deportment and ladylike manners. A

photograph shows a group of Lucy's friends wearing the extraordinary hats that were in fashion at the turn of the century, and another shows them setting off on a cycling trip. After leaving the school, Lucy travelled elsewhere in Europe.

Both her parents died within a few months of one another in 1916 and of the years immediately following this, I know very little. I was born in October 1924, so I must have been christened, with Lucy as my godmother, early in 1925. I do not remember a time in the 1920s when Lucy was not living in St Leonard's Cottage, a delightful bungalow, with a beautiful garden, which she had built in St Leonard's Road next to University Hall.

Her first book was published in 1918 by Dent. It was called *General Foch at the Marne,* and is a translation from the French of Charles le Goffie. Languages were a part of the Menzies ambience. Felicitously translated, the book reads smoothly and vigorously, and already Lucy's Introduction with its retrospective passages on St Joan of Arc shows the intuitive understanding that was to mark her out all through her life, and was to lead the way to mysticism. This was followed in the same year by a fine memoir of the life of her father, as a preface to his work, *A Study of Calvin.*

In 1922, published by Allen and Unwin, came *The First Friend, an Anthology of the Friendship of Man and Dog,* compiled from the literature of all ages from 1400 BC to 1921 AD. There are eighty extracts in the book, and considering how few works of reference were available in the early nineteen-twenties—no www. for a start—this does suggest a compiler of very wide reading and learning, especially as many of the extracts are translations from foreign tongues, ancient and modern No signs of incipient mysticism here, but there is a passage in the introduction that is worth quoting:

> There is one last comforting reflection which comes to everyone fortunate enough to possess a dog. Your dog believes in you more than you believe in yourself. Whatever the world may think of you, to one faithful friend you are the wisest and most splendid of beings. Should the public fail to see the good things in your book, should your friends be sought after and promoted while you are forgotten, still to your dog you are as wise as Socrates, and mighty

> as Napoleon. If encouragement and belief in one's powers are a help in moments of despondency—and who will say that they are not—no fortunate owner of a dog need ever be without them.

In 1923 came *A Book of Saints for the Young,* first series and second series. Children loved her, because she loved them with a rare and selfless love. Both books were brought out by the Medici Society, and each contains about a page and a half about the life of a particular saint—fourteen saints in each volume. Each saint has an illustration—a colour reproduction of an Old Master. The stories are told gently, simply, vividly, above all, unpatronisingly. They are, of course, of their time. But as I sat in the University Library and copied out parts of the introductions to each volume, I found myself, hardened elderly cynic that I am, much moved by what I read. Here is an extract:

> Religion was not a tiresome business to the Saints. It was a happy way of life. One of the wisest of them said, 'Love cannot be idle'. And as you come to know them better you will notice that they were never idle. They were often trying to help others, and if they could not do that they were at least cheerful and patient, and suffered whatever came to them gladly. And when we meet a saint—for we do meet one sometimes still—courage and cheerfulness are among the marks by which we know him. It was St Francis of Assisi who said, 'It is not fitting when one is in God's service to have a gloomy face. Always show a face shining with holy joy.'

Lucy herself did just that, even at the end of her life when she suffered a great deal of pain as well as growing blindness.

In 1924 came *The Saints of Italy,* published also by the Medici Society, from which I have already quoted. It is a pocket dictionary of the innumerable Italian saints, intended for the traveller in Italy in order to enrich his understanding of the country. Four years earlier Lucy had published *St Columba of Iona*, giving an account of his life and times and his influence on the history of Scotland. It was published by J.M. Dent, and reviewed anonymously in the *Westminster Gazette;* only a little later did Lucy discover that the reviewer was Evelyn Underhill. She revised the book in 1949 for the Iona Community and this was reprinted in 1954. A facsimile

edition of the original was printed in 1992. In the 1949 edition Lucy wrote:

> It is characteristic of the saints that they tend to be transformed by what they seek. In spite of Columba's tempestuous nature it is eventually the man of prayer who wins through. A background of prayer and continual tendency towards God shine through his life.

The review of this book was to be an important link between Lucy and Evelyn Underhill. Soon after, apparently by chance, Lucy was lent a book by this writer of whom it has been said that 'she did more than anyone else to make available to English-speaking Christians the spiritual treasure of the whole Church'. Lucy said of her: 'Her writings opened a new world. No one else ever made me conscious of God as she did.' A correspondence started between the two women, certainly as early as 1923. Of their first meeting Lucy wrote, 'Intimate talk was easy, and I came away on wings, knowing I had found a true and understanding friend'. They corresponded frequently for many years, until Evelyn Underhill's death in 1941. This link was to be a vital factor in Lucy's spiritual growth, and Evelyn was to become a kind of spiritual director to Lucy for twenty years. It was not long before Lucy was helping her with retreats.

In 1924 Lucy was confirmed in the Church of England, and according to Margaret Cropper (in her biography of Evelyn Underhill), this was to bring her great peace of spirit. The circumstances I do not know, unfortunately, but as she told her friends, she always felt she was *both* Episcopalian and Presbyterian—an instance of personal ecumenism remarkable at that time.

In 1927, Mrs Harvey, the then warden of the retreat house at Pleshey in Essex, needed to retire on grounds of health. She and Evelyn Underhill were both very anxious that Lucy should take on the wardenship, though Evelyn was doubtful if Lucy's health would stand up to it. Evelyn wrote to her: 'The need of securing someone who does it for pure love and is a person of prayer overrides everything else.' Lucy took on the job at the end of 1928, and a decade of partnership followed between the two women as warden and conductor of retreats. This was a very important period in

Lucy's life. In the meantime she had continued to publish books characterized by scholarship and religious insight. In 1925 there was her life of St Margaret, the Saxon princess, born in Hungary, who became Queen of Scotland when she married Malcolm Canmore, and who purified and revived the religious life of Scotland. Someone had said to Lucy, 'There were no medieval mystics in Scotland. The Scots were always more interested in reality.' Lucy replied: 'But it is surely because Reality is the sole quest and joy of mystics that we find Margaret's life transfigured by it.'

It was Evelyn Underhill who suggested the title of Lucy's next book, *Mirrors of the Holy,* published in 1928. Bishop Barkway wrote of this:

> The title of her best known book is an admirable clue to her own character. She was truly a mirror of the Holy. She reflected that with which her thoughts were constantly occupied, and like a mirror hid herself behind its reflection. The self-renunciation after which others strive is often distorted and unattractive; her self-abandonment was so complete that it drew no attention to itself.

The book is a study of the lives of ten women saints, between 1098 and 1914, each one clearly understood and perceptively described within the particular geographical and historical context of her life. Lucy shows how the cultivation and discipline of prayer and adoration transform the practices of everyday life, in a way that could only have been written out of personal experience. The book is rich in short passages of spiritual depth; for example this from Elizabeth Leseur:

> People do not understand that one can be very detached from all human things and live a keen spiritual life and yet find pleasure in the interests and occupations of the world: it is only when one has understood eternity that one can fully understand that delight.

And from Lucy herself: 'The temper of the saints had also a little sparkle in it; "a delicate humour", it has been said, "was their crowning glory".' Which reminds me of an occasion when she took me to a concert performance of 'Carmen' in the Younger Hall. (She was an excellent godmother and I still have and love some of her presents). After the interval the girl singing Carmen announced to

the audience: ‘I hope you’ll excuse any imperfections in my voice, but I’m singing with a very sore throat.’ Lucy said to me afterwards, ‘I noticed expressions of pain on her face, but I put that down to the flute playing so horribly out of tune’.

I said earlier that Lucy’s wardenship of Pleshey was to be a vitally important part of her life. I quote now from Martin Reith’s long article on Lucy which he intended to publish but was prevented from doing by his early death. This is part of what he wrote: ‘Not long ago an experienced retreat conductor said that of all the retreat houses he knew it was at Pleshey that he found the most spiritual, prayerful atmosphere’. Then Martin Reith goes on:

> It is a fine spring morning in the 1930s, and some men and women from every walk of life have managed to get a week-end off, and are going to spend it very profitably. In ones and twos they are arriving. The front door is opened, and with the most welcoming of smiles and old-world courtesy the warden ushers them in. Miss Menzies has been up, as usual, since 6 a.m. She will have an hour’s rest or less, after lunch, and will eventually go to bed at midnight. It is her usual routine and late into the night retreatants will find themselves drawn to go and speak to her about their problems, their anxieties, or their doubts. When people came to Miss Menzies they discovered that she ‘spoke to the heart, and was a presence’.

What was it about her that made her the kind of person to whom our Lord could bring people? Lucy Menzies always had time for everyone. One retreatant commented,

> She was so interested, genuinely, in you, that she got you to talk about yourself. Uncritical, quick to see your point of view, utterly humble, very rarely speaking about herself—probably hardly ever thinking about herself—such a person’s lack of self-assertion puts others at their ease. All she had to give was at anyone’s disposal, and those who sought her advice discovered that she had the most level-headed understanding of life. Her certainty had been achieved through suffering patiently borne. Her beatific calm and gentleness were never a mask for weakness or for self-deception, only for her rock-like spiritual strength. Nothing and nobody ever got past her when she felt the truth was concerned. In her soft,

husky voice, with never a hint of self-importance and usually with a delightful humour; charity and truth mingled as she spoke.

Of her time at Pleshey, Bishop Barkway wrote: 'There she left a lasting heritage in the spiritual atmosphere and way of life which she established, and, more obviously in the lovely chapel which might almost be called her creation. She spent herself unsparingly on her retreat work.

> There was nothing conspicuous in her appearance to the eyes of strangers. What they saw was a slight, self-effacing person with wistful eyes looking out through tinted glasses, a forehead with a tiny wrinkle as she strained to hear, the loveliest of smiles. When she spoke there was a hint of a lilt in her soft, husky voice, signifying that here was another fellow mortal who would understand and sympathise ... When you found her, you discovered something very rare—a heart at leisure with itself, which is the essence of the rarest of all virtues, that of humility—not thinking badly of yourself, but not thinking of yourself at all. Everything was immediately referred to God ... She seemed to be completely in rapport with you, and without explanation to see your point of view and be completely at your service. The quiet humour which glinted in her eye and suddenly flooded out in an unexpected phrase of disconcerting penetration, the old-fashioned courtesy which made her so acceptable a warden at Pleshey and delightful hostess to children and grown-ups in her home were the shining colours on the veil of self-effacement.

Her writing continued. In 1931 she translated François Malavel's book on mysticism from the French, put into English for the first time, with an introduction by Evelyn Underhill.

In 1938, to her tremendous regret, Lucy had to retire from being warden at Pleshey, largely because of her failing sight, but on other grounds of health also. So she came back to St Andrews, to the delight of her many friends. Her failing sight did not prevent her from further writing, as I shall relate. She moved from St Leonard's Cottage to a little old house in North Castle Street, which she restored This had the double advantage of being nearer to her sister, now widowed and living on The Scores, which overlook the Castle and the sea; also of being just across the road from All Saints'

Church from which she drew much strength. Dean P.H. Wilson was rector at this time, and there was a great meeting of minds, a meeting of spiritualities, between the two. If you are thinking that this was a situation with which Barbara Pym might have had tremendous fun in one of her novels—an elderly spinster and a High Church priest—no, it wasn't in the least like that. A meeting of minds and of spiritualities. I discussed this with Dean Wilson's daughter, who told me that her father referred people to Lucy for spiritual guidance, and now, looking back, I can see this was so, without of course knowing who these people were. Later, an article in the *St Andrews Citizen* described Lucy at this time as 'sitting in her little ancient house like a very benevolent and non-predatory spider, radiating long filaments of kindness and friendship in all directions'. That's how I remember her (though I wouldn't have likened her to a spider): immensely kind, beatifically calm, totally uncomplaining, universally popular, never uncharitable, always hospitable, always selflessly interested in others, never obtrusive.

Writing of Lucy Menzies in his book about the Scottish Episcopal Church, Professor Gavin White says: 'She combined with the Underhill view of God present in everything, a sharp edge which cut through to the heart of things'. She did indeed, but the sharp edge was always applied with the utmost charity.

And a further point: she was always realistic. I remember her once saying in her slow gentle voice: 'I've been to church four times today. Far too much.' And she wrote to a friend: 'I must tell you that I have always found great difficulty with prayer; it really is a matter of blood and tears. I want to tell you that though I know prayer is everything, I find it almost impossible.' (I, at any rate, find that cheering.) And of suffering, to another friend: 'It's no use, really, trying to fathom why there is suffering. But we've got to accept it gladly. Don't try to understand. Just be in God. God gives us our circumstances and environment to make something of. It is within these circumstances that we are to achieve sanctity. The Lord's way for you is just where you are—and if I may say so, a jolly good way too.' 'God present in everything.' 'She cut through to the heart of things.' Her own physical suffering at this time was acute.

INSERT PHOTO OF LUCY MENZIES HERE

Warden at Pleshey in the Nineteen Thirties

In 1939 she made the first translation into English of the Abbé de Tourville's *Letters of Direction on the Spiritual Life;* again it had an introduction by Evelyn Underhill and I quote from what she wrote there:

> There is a twofold realism. On the one hand by a vivid sense of the presence and transcendence of God, a confident self-giving to God. On the other hand by an acceptance of human nature as it really is, and its limitations and weakness, and a determination to find the raw material of its sanctification in the homely circumstances of everyday life; yet without any reduction of the splendours of its supernatural destiny.

I have quoted this passage because it describes very cogently the personality of Lucy Menzies as I knew her, as she gave me cups of coffee, as she took me as a child to the cinema, which I loved.

Evelyn Underhill had appointed Lucy as her literary executor and after her death in 1941 Lucy settled to her task, bringing out works that had not yet been published. In 1943, for instance, she provided the material for Charles Williams's edition of *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill,* which included the earliest letters of spiritual guidance written to Lucy herself in the years between 1923 and 1941.

In 1947 Longmans published Lucy's *Father Wainwright,* a record of the fifty-six years spent by that great priest first as curate, then as vicar, of St. Peter's, Wapping, until his death in 1929. Lucy went and lived there for a time, to absorb the atmosphere of what was then an area of grinding poverty, hunger and human misery.

In the early fifties, she edited the retreat addresses of Father Edward Keble Talbot, who had been a member of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield from 1906, and its Superior for eighteen years. It was a particularly laborious task, as it involved piecing together notes from Father Talbot in his practically illegible handwriting.

In 1953 Lucy's last completed book was published. She had undertaken to travel to the monastery of Einsiedeln in order to translate the writings of Mechtild of Magdeburg, the first mystical works to be composed not in Latin but in the vernacular German.

By then Lucy's health was very poor, as was her sight, but the task was accomplished. In the introduction she wrote:

> All mystics, from whatever century or country they come, have a conviction of the supreme value of their inner experience of God. Vision and love are one act in which all blessedness is found. They find all natural lovely things moving towards the expression of the inexpressible.

For people like me who find the concept of mysticism difficult, that is a helpful statement.

In June 1954, Lucy was made an honorary Doctor of Divinity by the University of St Andrews. (Lucy was almost certainly alone in ascribing this honour chiefly to the reputation of her father.) In his presentation address Professor Baxter said:

> Possessing deep historical scholarship and linguistic equipment both wide and accurate, Miss Menzies brought to the understanding of St. Columba and Queen Margaret the rarer gifts of intuition and insight, and as the list of her writings lengthened, so this unusual insight deepened into an unusual spiritual charm … For ten years she was Warden of the Retreat House of Pleshey, that centre of spiritual peace and contemplation, and if she largely made that place a haven for others, it ripened in her those gracious qualities and lovely virtues which we who know her most admire.

Another book was planned and had been begun, a life of Evelyn Underhill. But before it could be completed, Lucy had died., Written instead by Margaret Cropper, the book was published in 1958.

I would like to quote the whole of the sermon which Father Macdonald preached at Lucy's funeral, when that fervent and memorable preacher excelled even his customary standard. But here at least is an extract:

> Evelyn Underhill once wrote: 'There are two ruling factors in all the varied types of Christian holiness. The first is the stream of tradition which lies in the New Testament and in which all these lives are bathed. To that tradition each adds something …From that tradition each takes inspiration, formation and power'. Lucy Menzies, took and possessed all three—inspiration, formation and power. 'The other factor in Christian holiness', Evelyn Underhill went on, 'is the social life, the time and place within which the

> saint emerges, with its special incitements to heroic virtue and its special demands and needs.' Lucy Menzies found that in the life of the church, past and present—in the intense reality of God and his saints, in the inner life of quiet and retreat of the mystic, in the pain patiently borne, and not least in her fellow men, women and children.'

Above the mantelpiece in the room where Lucy died there were two texts, the one in the centre was simply 'Eternity'. The other was from George Herbert:

> Be useful where thou livest, so they both want and wish thy pleasing presence still. Find out men's wants and will, and meet them there. All worldly joys go to the one joy of doing kindnesses.

All who knew Lucy knew how totally her life fulfilled Herbert's words.

Her grave is in the Eastern Cemetery here in St. Andrews, where she lies with her parents. On the tombstone are engraved Celtic signs and also these words from the book of Wisdom: 'But the righteous live forever, and in the Lord is their reward.'

The above is a shortened version of a talk given at All Saints' Church, St Andrews, 26 November, 2002.

Editor's note*:*
*An excellent brochure, '*All Saints' Church, St Andrews*', (Jerrold Publishing 2003), tells the story of this Church, which was finally completed and consecrated in 1923. As even the photographs testify, this building, much loved and frequented by Lucy Menzies, is surely one of the most beautiful churches in Scotland*.

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LIGHT AND WORD IN SOLITARY PLACES

DONALD ALLCHIN

INTRODUCING the new edition of R.S.Thomas's *Collected Poems 1945-1990,* published in 2001, Andrew Motion takes up thoughts which he expressed at the remarkable meeting of tribute to R.S. Thomas held in the nave of Westminster Abbey on 28 March of that year, 'Although he was always prepared to engage with large abstract ideas, (especially with ideas derived from his close reading of Kierkegaard, let alone the scriptures) his priority was to embed his thoughts in physical realities. The storm-surrounded hills of Wales, its isolated farms, its "square fields" and "simple geometry", are the precisely observed landscape of his spiritual search.'

It is this priority he gave to embedding his thoughts in physical realities, which I intend to look at in this article, with particular reference to some of the places in North Wales where R.S. lived during the last years of his ministry as a country parson and the first years of his retirement. These are places found at the end of the Llyn Peninsula, the seaside village of Aberdaron, with the church of St Hywyn almost on the beach, the rocks and inlets of the promontory beyond, and Mynydd Mawr, from where one looks across to the island of Enlli/Bardsey, the Island of the Twenty Thousand Saints, one of the three major pilgrimage places of pre-Reformation Wales.

In the first thousand years of its history, (for the monastic foundation almost certainly goes back to the first part of the sixth century), these three things, the life of the community on the island, the life of the community around St Hywyn's Church at Aberdaron, and the life of the dispersed lay community of the farming and fishing families who were tenants of the Abbey, and who lived all over the end of the Peninsula, were, I believe, closely interwoven with one another. R.S. was not, I think, particularly interested in the details of this history, insofar as they are known, which is not very extensively. But in another way he was, I believe, deeply aware of the inter-relatedness of these places. It is a way which allows us to identify a small group of his poems, among them, 'Sea-Watching',

'The Moon in Llyn', 'Thicket in Llyn' as 'Llyn poems' where it is possible to see how his thoughts came to be embodied in these physical realities, places which he knew and loved at the end of the peninsula.

The breaking of the wave
Outside echoed the breaking
Of the bread in his hands.

The crying of seagulls
Was the cry from the Cross:
Lama sabachthani. He lifted

The chalice, that crystal in
Which love questioning is love
Blinded with excess of light

This poem, from *The Echoes Return Slow,* is for R.S. Thomas an unusually clear and direct sacramental statement. There is an explicit parallel drawn between the liturgy of the natural world, of the sea and the sea birds outside, and the liturgy of the Eucharist being celebrated within the church's walls. The outer and the inner liturgy here correspond and coincide. Central to that inner sacrament is the cry of desolation from the cross, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?', the deepest of the memories in the mystery of that Friday. To that ultimate question which the celebration of the Eucharist always poses, in its showing forth of the death of Christ, a response comes which is also entirely overwhelming, in a light which is blinding and in which love speaks to love. As Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century, here is 'the love of the Father crucifying, the love of the Son crucified, and the love of the Holy Spirit triumphant in the invincible power of the Cross'.[5]

If the poem of R.S. Thomas is unusually explicit and direct, so perhaps is this first beginning of a commentary on it. R.S. himself is in general so carefully and wonderfully discreet and indirect in his statements of the innermost mysteries of faith, that it seems at first altogether inappropriate to bring such a massively traditional

[5] Vladmir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* p.150

theological affirmation to their illumination. But insofar as this comment comes from the Eastern Christian tradition, with its stronger and more powerful apprehension of the apophatic nature of all Christian affirmations, its sense that such affirmations never begin to contain the mysteries to which they refer, but at the most point towards them in paradoxical and ultimately silent amazement, the two statements may be allowed perhaps to stand side by side.

For this is a poem about the celebration of the Eucharist in the Church of St Hywyn in Aberdaron, the church which stands at the furthest point of the Llyn Peninsula, one of the places from which, for a thousand years, the crossing would be made to the Island of Enlli, the ultimate goal of this way of pilgrimage. R.S. was for eleven years the priest of that church, the ministrant at that altar, and he was in some ways very conscious that coming to this church, on the edge of the sea, in the village of Aberdaron, he was entering into an old tradition of pilgrimage, 'this is where he had crawled out, far as he could go, repeating the pilgrimages of the saints'.[6]

Of course, he did not usually put it like that. His stated and primary interest in the island was as a bird-watcher, as an active supporter and member of the Bird Observatory, and it was in this capacity, rather than as a representative of the Church, that he became the first Chairman of the Bardsey Island Trust Council, after the island had been bought by the Trust, so as to safeguard it from falling into the hands of owners who had no idea of its particular value and significance. How far the specifically religious significance of the island, as a place of monastic life, was important to him, I find it difficult to say; but I think I would dare to say now, more important perhaps than he would have easily admitted.

What right have I to make such a statement as that? Not in fact very much, but during the 1970s and 1980s, I happened to be coming regularly (usually twice a year) to the end of the Llyn peninsula, to visit a small number of Anglican Sisters who had come to this part of North Wales in order to live as solitaries. One of them, Sister Helen Mary, lived for some fifteen years on Bardsey Island itself. During my visits I would often call on R.S. and his wife, first in the

[6] *The Echoes Return Slow*

vicarage at Aberdaron, and then after his retirement at the cottage in Rhiw. Sometimes I would find him at home and free and then we would have a good deal of conversation. Sometimes he was away, sometimes, especially in the vicarage days, he would be busy and then I would simply greet him and go on.

He was, of course, aware of the existence of the Sisters; they were after all his parishioners, though most of them did not go often to church, and he had a general concern for their well-being. But he never got to know any of them well, nor, at least in our conversations, did he show any particular interest in their way of life. He was, however, concerned when Sister Helen Mary first began to live the whole year round on Enlli as to whether she would be sufficiently practical and down-to-earth to get through the winter without becoming a nuisance to the farmer and his wife at Ty Pellaf. He was surprised, and in the end quite impressed, by the way in which this elderly English nun, who as a young woman in Vienna and Munich in the 1930s had been training as a concert pianist, managed to live very peaceably and sensibly through the winter storms of Enlli.

It was only after his death, and also after Sister Helen Mary's, that a friend brought to my attention his poem published in the *New Welsh Review* in the summer of 1990, a poem called 'Insularities: For a Nun on Her Island', and I began to understand a little more of what the presence of the Sisters at the end of the peninsula may have come to mean to him. It was only then that I noticed that this was one of the poems of which he spoke in his diary book *A Year In Llyn,* telling us in a rather uncharacteristic way, something of its genesis:

> And speaking of poetry, here is an example of how a poem is born. As is commonly known, the Bardsey lighthouse now works automatically, day and night. Looking at it the other day I recalled the nun, who for years now, has lived an eremitic life there. The light flashing, and the equally bright example of the nun were what made me play with the idea until a poem, a fairly long poem, started to take shape in my mind.[7]

[7] .R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies,* London 1997, p. 162.

The automised light
Reminds of a devotion
Which is not automatic.

So many years now
Praying to a god
White-headed as the sea

Gesticulating at her window.
Rising in the small
Hours, bruising belief

On the darkness, she crumbles,
Her own ministrant, the dawn
On a depopulated altar.

She is her own tide too,
Returning thirstily to a shore
Littered with her amens.

Knowing the initial reticence of these two very different hermits, the poet and the nun, I am sure that one of the first things that Sister Helen Mary would have made clear in response to any question about the actual shape of her life, would have been her conviction of the primary importance of prayer at night, getting up very early, before dawn to enter into a long time of silence. This conviction clearly struck R.S. His poem begins with the contrast between the 'automised' light (had he invented that unpleasant word, or found it in some technical brochure?), and the devotion which was not automatic, but free and conscious and willed. He saw at once the parallel between her offering of prayer made in the solitude of the island and his own as ministrant of the parish at the altar of St Hywyn's Church on the mainland. 'She crumbles,/Her own ministrant, the dawn/On a depopulated altar'… Her life and prayer too, constantly ran up the shore of the infinite, leaving that shore littered with amens.[8]

Another essential aspect of her life which seems to have intrigued him was her continuing concern, in the silence and

[8] The word 'crumble; seems to have had a particular resonance with R.S. in relation to prayer and a sense of the presence of God. See A.M. Allchin 'Generously As Bread: A Study of Poetry of R.S. Thomas'. New Blackfriars, L1601, 1970. pp. 274-80.

solitude of the island, for the life of the world around, her sense of the relatedness of what she was doing to the public dramas and agonies of those years. Old copies of *The Guardian Weekly* or *The Tablet* rubbed shoulders in her little day room, with the works of St Isaac of Syria or St Maximus the Confessor. What R.S. wrote on that subject is so topical to our present situation that it demands quotation.

NEW MIDDLE EAST CRISIS
(The unconscious irony
Of the Press!) THE UNSTABLE
POUND PLUMMETS. (Trident surfaces
Among the tears of the poor).
The news is washed up months
Late on her unpunctual
Island. Learned enough to have heard
Of Nietzsche, she gives no sign
She remembers, finding God's
Son new-born each day
On her surprised door-step.

'Insularities' is not one of R.S. Thomas's greatest poems, though it has interesting points of comparison with his treatment of the life of another woman given to prayer, his 'Fugue for Anne Griffiths'. But it has its importance for what it suggests of R.S.'s quiet gratitude in discovering others who were also following a solitary path not altogether unlike his own. In one verse in the last section of the poem he writes simply

A solitary neither
Proves nor disproves God.
What we call narrowness
Perhaps is vocation.[9]

Do we see in the plain quality of these lines a reference to his own calling as well as to hers? At least there seems to be in the poem a kind of pleasure in the discovery that the island of pilgrimage is again a place of constant and non-automated prayer.

[9] *The New Welsh Review,* III, I. Summer 1990.

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BOOKS

The Original Story: God, Israel and the World, John Barton and Julia Bowden, Darton Longman & Todd, 2004. £19.95 pbk. 289 pp. ISBN 0-232-52485-8

John Barton is among the leading Old Testament scholars of our day, with a gift for presenting unfamiliar material in a congenial way without compromising on 'the way things are'. Julia Bowden is an experienced teacher of RE. So they are well matched to write a guide to the Old Testament, as currently studied and considered, for students of school level and above, together with anybody else who wants to know about it.

The method they have chosen is cumulative. Instead of dealing with one topic, finishing with it, and then moving on to something entirely different, they move from one large aspect of the Old Testament to another, looking at various parts of the literature in its light. The object is to see it from one angle after another, deepening our understanding as we go. So, to begin, after a few useful introductory instructions, there is an account of the order of events as reported in the Old Testament, then of the geographical setting, and finally something on the different types of works that make up this collection of writings. Studies of major themes follow: such as the picture of God himself and the view of humanity and of human suffering. Then historical matters: how reliable is the account put before us, and in what terms? Two more major sections deal with the institutions of old Israel, such as prophecy, worship, law and story-telling, and finally the major methods of interpretation that have been brought to bear on these writings in the last century and more. We could scarcely ask for more; and all is put before us with clarity, scrupulous fairness and balance, and with all kinds of aids to our understanding—cross-referencing, quotes from major scholars, issues to think about and explanations of key terms. It is a most efficient guide to study.

One may be allowed two questions. There must be doubt about the public for this kind of book on this subject. The Old Testament scarcely figures in our schools at the relevant level. There are

ordination courses where there is still some rather cursory treatment of the subject. Are there many lay groups keen to study the Old Testament and would this kind of careful, critical treatment appeal to any of them? Certainly it would not remain long on the list of fundamentalist-style groups, for it is too open, too careful to say how the questions currently lie. In fact, it is scrupulously fair to current Old Testament studies, adopting what might once have been deemed an Anglican equity and fairness.

But (and here is the second doubt) can modern Old Testament studies still hope to be considered theologically and Christianly significant? It is all done so historically, so firmly showing that these things were all so long ago and in so different and strange and small a world. Yes, there are some fine thoughts about God, but also some hopelessly outmoded ones—and what a long way round to the good ones, when they are amply attested elsewhere. Yes, this is part of our essential Christian heritage, but only when treated and understood in ways utterly different from those so excellently described here. This area of consideration, which is bound to strike the sensitive Christian student, claims attention from time to time here, but only to be put aside without discussion and without connection with the main thrust of the argument. It is not, any of this, the fault of the authors: it is a fact of academic life, which the Church is in no position to face, yet on we go, reading these ancient books, taking the rough with the smooth and often hardly knowing what to make of them, even when we know very well the kinds of things which this book tells us so admirably.

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DELIVER US FROM EVIL: Reading the Psalms as Poetry, Alexander Ryrie, Darton Longman & Todd, London, 2004, pp.151. £9.95 ISBN 0 232 52538 2,

Sandy Ryrie's *Deliver Us From Evil* is attractive, well-constructed and beautifully written. It will open a way into appreciating the Psalms as 'Addressing God as Person' (the title of his final chapter) for those to whom they are not so familiar; and those of us who use them daily will often find themes freshly highlighted and meanings valuably explored.

His book has, though, revived in me an unease about the line of interpretation of the Psalms, and in particular of their treatment of the hard realities of 'Evil and Distress', which he has come to value and which his book so skilfully describes. He begins with three excellent chapters introducing the Psalms and how they have been used and interpreted down the centuries; there are four especially good pages on 'the language of myth' (24-7). At the end of a fine exploration of the range and character of the 'imagery' of the Psalms, he states the theme of the book: 'Could it be that the images that we find in the Psalms reveal something about the mystery of evil and of deliverance from evil?' (p. 24).

Sandy Ryrie next describes the range of words used in the Psalms to express 'Evil and Distress'; and then follow three comprehensive chapters on 'Images of Distress', and two on 'Images of Deliverance', richly illustrated with quotations, before the final chapter. Everything is clearly sign-posted and well-organized to illustrate not only the content and character of these remarkable texts but—and here is my concern—a particular understanding of 'Evil in the Psalms' as 'a power that operates mysteriously both in the affairs of the world and in human hearts to corrupt and spoil human life' (p. 47), 'something transcendent—a hostile power which is at enmity with God' (p. 53), 'which is both suprahuman and, in some measure at least, independent of God' (p.84).

Of course Sandy Ryrie has excellent authorities, quoted effectively in his text and fully noted in his bibliography, on whose expertise he has so usefully drawn; and of course he would have written a longer and much less focussed book if he had noted why

others read these texts, with regard to 'Evil and Distress', in other ways! Nor is it possible to say simply that he and his authorities are wrong; I shall only suggest why it may be both more accurate, and more conducive to discipleship today, to understand them differently.

There certainly is abundant material in the Psalms which encouraged Jews later, and then Christians, as Ryrie notes, to develop the belief 'in a personal devil' which he is careful (p. 85) not to ascribe to the Psalmists. But it seems to me that at times in his book the distinction between this belief and belief in 'a hostile power' 'which is both suprahuman and, in some measure at least, independent of God' has worn very thin.

Of a very few of those who composed and developed the Psalms, Ryrie and his authorities may perhaps be right. But I should say that mostly their use of mythological language is not that of people for whom its original applications remained matters of live belief and practice—tempting though it is for us moderns to read this language over-literally! But the ancient, vivid, hallowed language, including but not limited to that of the royal cult, was to hand to express in urgent prayer, and in struggling trust in God's presence to protect and deliver, the intractable difficulties, dangers and terrors—the evils—that were their daily experience; and that remain today most peoples' experience in societies that do not share the astonishing, untypical securities of many of us privileged to live in the G7 countries: life-long hard labour, poverty, illness, arbitrary and unjust government, oppression of believers by those who believe differently or not at all, physical violence… And with a greater consistency than I think Ryrie allows, the Psalmists with the rest of their people struggled to keep believing, in the face of all this daily suffering, that *everything* was ultimately the responsibility of God whose will and concern was that that they should trust him and live obediently the life that He had given them.

So for me the line of interpretation that Ryrie describes so well and attractively ran and runs a risk that I'm confident he would not welcome; a risk of dividing piety from praxis, prayer and praise from accountability and obedience. MICHAEL SCOTT-JOYNT

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Christians Observed: Narratives for Today's Church, by John Watson, the Alpha Press, 2004. £13.95. ISBN 1-898595-45-3

The Parish: People, Place and Ministry, edited by Malcolm Torry, Canterbury Press, 2004. £14.99. ISBN 1-85311-586-X

Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments, by Scott Hahn, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004. £10.95. ISBN 0-232 - 52559-5.

Dark Prayer, When all Words Fail, by David Wood. Cairns Publications, 2004. £8.00. ISBN 1-870652-42-8.

RECENT FAIRACRES PUBLICATIONS

Abhishiktananda, A Memoir of Dom Henri Le Saux, by Murray Rogers and David Barton. £2.50.

Friendship in God: The Encounter of Evelyn Underhill and Sorella Maria of Campello, by A.M Allchin. £3.00.

Christian Imagination in Poetry and Polity: Some Anglican Voices from Temple to Herbert, by Archbishop Rowan Williams. £3.50.

The Reflections of Abba Zosimas, Monk of the Palestinian Desert, translated by John Chryssavgis. £2.50.