

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

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SUMMER 2005

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COMMUNITY NOTES

A YEAR AGO I wrote in these Notes that we had taken the decision to leave Boxmoor. Since then things have moved slowly, there have been various complications, but we are now expecting that the four Sisters still at St Mary and the Angels will return to Fairacres this summer. We are beginning to pack up in preparation for moving and on 26 April we had a gathering at the Convent for priests who have shared in and contributed so much to our life there by presiding at the Eucharist, in some cases over very many years. Although it is sad to be marking the end of an era and to say goodbye, it was good to see so many friends, to feel their understanding and support, and to say thank you. It looked as if the rain, which began in the morning, was going to crescendo into a deluge, but surprisingly the sun came out in what felt like a blessing on the occasion, and we were able to enjoy the garden in its spring-time beauty. Sadly, when the property is sold for residential development the chapel will be demolished, though the original house is to be retained (externally at least) and the trees and some features of the garden will be carefully preserved.

We moved there in 1927 because Fairacres had become too small for our then growing Community. When Mother Mary Frances and Fr Cary were house hunting for us and saw through the trees at Boxmoor a chapel just like the chapel at Fairacres, they felt that this must be the place where God wanted us to be. The little church of St Francis at the bottom of the hill had indeed been designed by Paul Waterhouse, the architect of our own chapel, and the Sisters were warmly welcomed there and in the Diocese of St Albans generally. On the Feast of the Ascension this year the Sisters were invited by the clergy and people of St John's, the parish church, and St Francis Church to attend an evening Eucharist in thanksgiving for the life and witness of SLG at the Convent of St Mary and the Angels for so many years. Sr Tessa, Sr Catherine, Sr Julie and Sr Raphael felt it a privilege to be asked and that they were representing all the Sisters who had ever lived at the Convent.

The first Sisters who went to Boxmoor expected to end their lives there and never to return to Fairacres but as things developed the need and rightness of exchange between the Convents became evident and, with the addition of Burwash, Bede House and St Isaac's, has been a feature of our life ever since. This is somewhat unusual for contemplatives—stability in prayer and common life is often symbolized and guarded by observing enclosure in the place of your Profession—but it is something we have come to value. The opportunity to experience SLG life in different settings, and consequently to apply the Rule in different styles, has proved invaluable, and for some of us at certain stages has been life-saving. An outward change of circumstances can liberate fresh potential and enable growth. However it is clear that the Community cannot be so widely dispersed now and so for the present we shall experience what it is like for all the Sisters in England to be together at Fairacres. I hope that this will be consolidating for us, a time of gathering in faith to call on the Holy Spirit and seek God's guidance for the future. Practically, it will certainly make it easier for the whole (UK) Community to meet together in one place.

At present there are three Sisters at St Isaac's but as part of our necessary 'down-sizing' we have decided, and informed St Isaac's Trust and the Bishop of Auckland, that SLG as a group is not able to continue there beyond September 2006. Sr Anne, who is spending six months at Fairacres having completed six years as Sister in Charge at St Isaac's, still experiences a strong sense of calling to prayer in that place. She has therefore asked to spend the rest of her life at St Isaac's. It is lovely to have her with us now, it is also an important time because we will be considering her request during Chapter this year.

Sr Christine was blessed as Oblate Guardian on Advent Sunday last year. She follows in the footsteps of Sr Barbara June whose faithful ministry to the Oblate Sisters for thirteen years has been highly appreciated and valued. Since Sr Christine came into office we have received three new Novice Oblates: Jennifer on 25 January, the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, and Eileen and Kathryn Joan on 14 May at First Vespers of the Ascension.

Our small local changes take their place in a world of continual change, and as change in the Church claims our urgent attention and prayer. We prayed with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters as the life of Pope John Paul II drew to a close, and we rejoice in Pope Benedict XVI's pronouncement, in his very first homily, that he is forcefully committed to enacting Vatican Council II and to theological dialogue. He said, 'The current Successor of Peter feels himself to be personally implicated in this question and is disposed to do all in his power to promote the fundamental cause of ecumenism.' He continued: 'I address myself to everyone, even to those who follow other religions or who are simply seeking an answer to the fundamental questions of life and have not yet found it ... to assure them that the Church wants to continue to build an open and sincere dialogue with them.'

Under the inspiration of Vatican Council II monastic interfaith dialogue has been quietly gaining ground for nearly forty years. For instance, the Monastic Interfaith Dialogue Commission of Britain and Ireland supports all kinds of encounter and its news bulletins witness to many sustained friendships between monks and nuns of different traditions and cultures. The emphasis is on experience:

The dialogue we try to engage in always begins at the level of daily human life: hospitality to guests or neighbours of other traditions; the daily practice of a spiritual discipline that comes from somewhere else What especially characterizes the monastic approach to dialogue is our *determination not to restrict ourselves to an intellectual understanding* of other religions.

The Annual General Meeting of MID was held at Burford Priory on 7 May and four of us attended from Fairacres, drawn particularly by the chance to hear Raimon Panikkar who has dedicated his life to interfaith and intercultural dialogue. In the event he was not well enough to come (he is 87 and now lives in Spain), but we caught something of his spirit from watching a film about him, and hearing two of his friends talk about him, Andrea Andreotti, who made the film, and Murray Rogers, who has known him intimately since the 1950s.

In the film we saw Panikkar beaming with delight and energy as he re-visited the house on the banks of the Ganges where he had lived for ten years, studying the Vedas, and writing *The Vedic Experience*. There he had been immersed in the raw and vivid life around him, its sacredness taken for granted and inescapable, though utterly remote from any Christian or Catholic context. Pannikar, scholar, deep thinker and Catholic priest as he is, contends that the basis for dialogue is simple and accessible: the experience of being human, known as fully and deeply as we are able. His own warm and joyful humanity shone through the film, and reflects his vision of Christ. In a recent talk in Monserrat he spoke challengingly of a form of *kenosis* appropriate to our time, willingness on the part of Christians to unclthe Christ ‘of all the western garments we have clothed him with. ... to bring about a change analogous to that which the Apostles dared to enact when they did away with circumcision at the first council of Jerusalem’. It is not quite fair to try summarize here his subtle and supple argument about the nature of faith and belief (we explored this a bit in our discussions at Burford), but I cannot resist sharing with you these pregnant sentences so that they may become the stuff of your prayer, as they are of mine:

The way of *kenosis* is extremely demanding. To go beyond deeply anchored convictions involves a harsh spiritual asceticism. You risk losing everything. To be more precise, *kenosis* demands that one commit oneself to a radical reassessment of one’s faith. At this stage it is important to distinguish between faith and belief. Beliefs are many and often incompatible. As for faith, it is beyond these incompatibilities because it does not have any object properly speaking; it is rather, an act of adhering. To become truly free we have to develop a faithfulness that knows no limits. However, a refusal to absolutize our beliefs does not imply an intention to absolutize our doubts!

In a time of change (or hearing a familiar word, like ‘Follow me!’), as if for the first time) the heart quite unexpectedly begins to sing.

MOTHER ROSEMARY SLG

TO KNOW AND NOT TO KNOW

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

HUGH WYBREW

TO KNOW, or not to know—that is the theological question. Philip spoke for all the disciples: ‘Lord, let us see the Father, and we shall be satisfied’. Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?’ (John 14:8,9). The disciples knew Jesus; yet they did not know him. They knew him in his divine humanity; but they did not know him in his human divinity. They did not know that in knowing the knowable Son, they were also knowing the unknowable Father. How could they know? God had never before become human. But now they know Jesus, and so they know the Father as well: ‘If you know me’, says Jesus, ‘you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him’ (John 14:7).

Thomas too spoke for all the disciples: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (John 14:5). They knew he was going to death and glory, for he had told them so. But they could not know that his way back to the Father was the cross. How could death be anyone’s return ticket to God? Yet they did know where Jesus was going, although they didn’t know they knew. For in knowing Jesus, they knew both the goal and the way to the goal. For the goal is the Father, in whom is eternal life. Since Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus, to know Jesus is to know both the goal and the way to it: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14:6). Jesus makes known the unknowable Father, the unknowable source and goal of life; and he makes known the unknown way we are to follow if we wish to find true life.

So the theological question is not so much, to know *or* not to know, but to know *and* not to know. We know God, because God has made himself known in Jesus: yet God remains beyond our human knowledge. We know Jesus, because the Holy Spirit leads us to him who is the truth: yet we can never be sure we have fully understood the truth. We know the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit

lives in our hearts: yet the Spirit is God, and so is both within and beyond our reach. We know; and yet we don't know.

That is a fundamental theological principle, perhaps more strongly emphasised in the Eastern than in the Western Christian tradition, though present in both. We can, we must, affirm what we believe about God. But we must understand that all that we affirm can only point us in the direction of God; it can never encapsulate God. So we affirm that God became human in Jesus. Yet we don't know what it's like to be God, nor do we really know what it means to be human. So the doctrine of the Incarnation is true, and yet the truth lies beyond our understanding of the doctrine. So too we affirm that God is Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that is true; and yet that doctrine only points to, and does not encapsulate, the divine reality.

To know and yet not to know: how to affirm our faith, and at the same time acknowledge that what we affirm is beyond our understanding, is one of the most difficult aspects of religious believing. It is easy to affirm, and then to think we know the truth. The church is full of people busy affirming, and even busier claiming that what they affirm is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There are laity, clergy, bishops and even popes who give the impression they have a hot line to God. They believe not only that they are right, but that anyone who differs from them is wrong. That is no new phenomenon, even if a revived 'fundamentalism' makes it particularly divisive at the present time. The history of the Church is a history of division provoked in part at least by exclusive claims for one particular way of affirming Christian faith. The same is true of other faiths too: Judaism and Islam are no less fiercely divided than Christianity.

It's all too easy to affirm, and to think we know. There seems to be a deeply-rooted desire in people, and perhaps particularly in religious people, for certainty. Some ascribe infallible certainty to the Bishop of Rome, others to the Bible, still others to Tradition. But that is to set up idols. A certain ruler once addressed Jesus as 'Good Teacher'. Jesus replied, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good, but God alone' (Luke 18.18). Nor, we might say, is any one

infallible, but God alone. Yes, the infallible God has made himself known in Jesus, and has given us his Spirit so that we may know the truth about God revealed in Jesus. But our minds cannot fully grasp that truth. That is why there are so many differing and even divergent ways in which Christians understand the gospel and its implications. The present troubles of the Anglican Church are often said to spring from such divergent understandings. In fact they spring, not from different understandings, but from the conviction of their respective proponents that they know infallibly—even if they don't use that word—what God thinks and wants. There is no acknowledgement that finite minds might grasp only aspects of the truth; and that a fuller perception of the truth is more likely to come through patient dialogue among those of divergent views than by isolated affirmation of particular views.

That is why it's encouraging that at his first Mass Benedict XVI declared his intention of cultivating any appropriate initiative to promote understanding 'with representatives of different Churches and ecclesial communities', and expressed his wish to see the Church 'weaving an open and sincere dialogue' with other religions and with people who were looking for an answer to life's questions. Perhaps as Pope he will take a fresh look at 'Dominus Jesus', the statement published in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over which he then presided. That statement affirmed the Roman Catholic Church to be the only true interpreter of Christianity, and declared other churches and religions defective. It remains to be seen, of course, whether he has really changed his mind; and whether, too, he will listen to those in his own church who disagree with a number of his predecessor's declarations of virtually infallible truth. Will he accept that we know, and yet don't know, the mind of God?

But do we accept that we both know, and yet don't know, the truth about God, and the truth about ourselves? And do we accept that in a Christian context truth is less a matter of intellectual affirmation than a matter of knowing a person? For St John, the truth is Jesus. He is the truth about God, and the truth about humanity. That truth is not primarily intellectual knowledge, but

Opersonal knowledge; and it is to be acquired, as knowledge of any human person is to be acquired, within a communion of love. Earlier in his gospel, John has Jesus say to the Jews, ‘Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether teaching is from God...’ (John 7:18). For John, to do the will of God is to obey the new commandment of love. There can be no knowledge of true teaching outside the communion of love into which Jesus calls those who wish to follow him. There can be no communion of love without the humility which recognises that none can know the truth in isolation from others; for none of us is infallible. If all Christians recognized that to be true, how different the life of the Church would be! If all religious people recognized it, how different the life of humankind would be! Might it be that even the life of monastic communities would be different? The theological question, the question of the knowledge of God, is: to know, and yet not to know.

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VOICES FROM THE TRADITION

I

ECKHART

DAVID BARTON

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, during one of those happy spare moments that only seem to come when I am on retreat and there is no urgency to do anything much, I rummaged through the small devotional bookstall outside the chapel. Among all the usual material there was a book of sayings by Meister Eckhart. I idly picked it up, flicking through the pages with no more than a casual interest. What I read had an effect for which I was quite unprepared. It was as if the words cut through something within me, speaking with an almost audible voice somewhere in my deepest self. I was riveted. Hastily I took the book and went straight to my room and settled to read, almost forgetting to pay for it later! As I look back through the same collection today I find it hard to put my finger on which of those particular quotation impressed me so. But they did, and that day began an exploration of Eckhart that has continued ever since. Hardly a day passes when I don't reach to the shelf and take down something by him and read, or reread, even if only a little.

The odd thing about my sense of love and respect for Eckhart is that, whenever I am asked, I always find it hard to articulate why it is so. I certainly would not say that I have read him thoroughly or have anything like a full knowledge of his thought. It is more that I have found him to be someone who rarely fails to challenge my thinking, and it is for that reason I turn to him so frequently. In him I meet a teacher who shows me the truth. As on that first occasion, something shifts when I read him. And although the dimensions of the whole elude me, I also know that each detail, though it is significant in itself, is part of a deeper, larger coherence, into which, step by slow step, his writing and teaching seems to lead.

The sense of reading someone who is attuned to an infinitely larger whole is the first thing to get used to in reading Eckhart, and related to that is the fact that there is no easy way in to reading him.

He is not like, say, John Climacus with his Ladder of Ascent where step by step you ascend towards the glory of true prayer, or Mother Julian who eases our path with her warmth. Nothing is gradual or easy in Eckhart. It is as if he invites you to ascend to the very top of the mountain by the shortest possible route—straight up the cliff face! The summons to the depth of ourselves and of God is there in almost everything Eckhart ever said or wrote. And once on the journey with him, whatever arises on the way, new visions or images, it is all swept aside. Nothing matters but the summit, or to change the metaphor around, because here, height and depth are interchangeable, nothing matters until we have reached the core of our being in God. And that, though it might seem to be the place of arrival, is really only the beginning, for Eckhart invites us onward and onward into the depths of God.

Such an invitation might seem to be somewhat esoteric, for just the holy few. But in Eckhart's hands it is not. Eckhart (1260-c. 1329) was one of the great preachers of his time, and although he was a Dominican, and obviously had responsibilities within his order and to other religious, his writing and preaching was (and is) open to everyone. He lived at a time when there was a great surge of religious enthusiasm. More and more people sought to live a profoundly religious life, not in the cloister but in the world. In response to this there was a flowering of devotional writing. Eckhart too responded, first in Strasbourg and afterwards in Cologne, and his contribution was that he preached, not in church Latin, but in the vernacular. This was an innovation, and English translations certainly reflect a vivid use of language. It also made him one of the creators of modern German. But the really important issue here is that Eckhart was not concerned with a clerical elite but with ordinary men and women. To find one's ground in the depth of the Godhead was not for the specialist, nor did it require a flight from the world. It could be done in the market place. Eckhart is like a great evangelical preacher. His sermons are full of verbal tricks, and littered with images and illustrations. It is easy, even now, to feel the power he radiated from the pulpit. So, though there is no real place to begin, Eckhart both invites us and challenges us on every

page, because he was always doing so to the varied audiences he addressed. Like any good preacher he was mindful of the range of understanding within the people who came to hear him. So I read Eckhart randomly and, for the moment anyway, accept that my reading can never be progressive. Nor do I pay any attention to the bits I do not understand—and there are quite a few! I read and try to allow the sermon, or whatever, to speak to me, pausing only when something arrests me, and it usually does.

What I have found most illuminating in Eckhart's teaching and for which I am most grateful, is his 'method' for our growing into God. I say 'method', but it is hardly that. He does not lay it out like a lesson, but rather returns again and again to a central theme of our 'emptiness', and of the nature of God, as if he were pushing his hearers towards a certain frame of mind, an orientation, and beyond that to a particular *experience*. It is true that he says somewhere that specific methods of contemplation are not helpful, but that is, I suspect one of his tricks. What he means is that we should not see them as an end in themselves. But he is emphatic about the steadiness, the discipline and above all the silence of prayer. And time and again he comes back to our need for inner emptiness, to a letting go of everything. The practice here is tough and uncompromising. We are to 'go out' from our 'willing, our knowing, our reason, and every sort of selfishness'. These things must be 'utterly extinguished'. And we are to wait, empty of everything. So rigorous is Eckhart about this emptiness that he will not even encourage us to ask for grace. Our abandonment to God must be total, including even expectation. He says, 'I never ask God to give himself to me. I beg him to purify, to empty me. If I am empty, God of his very nature is obliged to give himself to me.'

So, in our emptiness we will glimpse the total outpouring of God. But Eckhart will not let us rest there. When he speaks of God it is in paradoxical terms. On the one hand he says, somewhat startlingly, 'I never give God thanks for loving me because he cannot help it'. And again, 'God loves my soul so much that his very life and being depend upon his loving me, whether he would or not. To stop God loving me would be to rob him of his Godhead.'

Eckhart can speak boldly of God like this, leaving the reader slightly breathless; but before our mind can come to rest on that idea, he goes on to speak of a God utterly beyond our reach. ‘God is a word, an unspoken word.’ ‘All scripture is vain’, that is, it cannot adequately speak of God. Eckhart pushes his language of God to the limits: God is the Silent Desert, the Divine Abyss, the ‘God beyond God’. I know of no one, except perhaps Symeon the New Theologian, who in the same way seems to hold together both the vast, unutterable mystery of God and the shock of God’s closeness to us. And if that all sounds paradoxical, hard to get the mind around, then I suspect that is just the dilemma into which Eckhart wishes to place us. He seeks to confuse our reason because he mistrusts it. And he does so because he is utterly certain of what we will find the other side of the thinking mind’s surrender, an experience that will shift the whole way we look at our lives. Most of Eckhart’s writing seems to me to be an interplay of his core experience and its fruit, the one weaving in and out of the other.

There are two little phrases which might give a clue to what I mean.

He says somewhere: ‘All suffering comes from loving, minding’. We care about so many things. Indeed being passionate about something is admired among us. We set our hearts on certain, frequently good, outcomes. We plan the future, we mull over the past—and never more so than when things are tough. In the end this becomes part of a pattern of living in which we always have one eye on the future, hanging on in the present until things get better. And when it doesn’t, (and frequently it doesn’t) our concern and suffering only increases. Eckhart says, do not love or care in that way. Why? Because it is a negation of God’s eternal presence. Where we are now is where God is too. All outcomes are in God’s hands before they are in ours. Everything, but everything, is shot through with the purposes of God. So to accept things as they are, not mind about how unsatisfactory or difficult they may be, is to open the door to a quite different set of possibilities, possibilities that are unimaginable until we give up our constant living in the past or the future. Ursula Fleming, (whose book *The Man from*

Whom God Hid Nothing provides a valuable starting place for reading Eckhart), used to work in a pain management clinic of a London hospital. She says that all her work with her patients was based on her understanding of Eckhart, and particularly of this passage. To accept things as they are, without loving or minding, is, Eckhart says, ‘to find peace in the midst of pain’.

And along with that there is another phrase I ponder much and try to make my own in the circumstances of my life. ‘We are to live without a why’, says Eckhart. The more I ponder it the more this phrase seems to me to be very close to the heart of all I have ever read in Eckhart, summing up the whole of our relationship to God and Christ and the creation around us. To ‘let go’ means, in the end, the letting go of every purpose and every construct we put onto our lives. It means the simple acceptance of everything, whatever comes, not reasoning around it, but just taking it as a given. We are often torn between doing and being, feeling and acting. ‘What should I do for the best here?’ Most people would encourage us towards such a commonsense thought. Not so Eckhart! ‘Abandon even the question’, I think he would say. Meet every person as they are, every circumstance as it is. Seek only to be in harmony with God, in you and around you. What to do, or not do, say or not say, will be apparent.

To live ‘without any why’ means giving up goals, purposes, intentions, any form of power. It means abandoning our need for self-justification and recognition. What remains is the life God gives us, moment to moment. Just that. In the seventeenth century Angelus Silesius wrote a poem called ‘the Mystical Rose’ which takes Eckhart’s phrase and points us towards the possibilities it contains:

The rose is without any why,
it blooms because it blooms,
It does not look at itself and ask if it is seen.

That poem also captures something else for which I value Eckhart: his happiness. It is hard to put a finger on, but a deep joy runs through his writings. We are children of God, and it is in our nature to be happy, he tells us. Quite simply happiness is an option, and we

can accept it or not. 'Here is time to make holiday', he says. 'God enjoys himself', and he 'enjoys all his creatures'. For me, no one is more persuasive than Eckhart in drawing us into that joy.

Recommended for further reading:

Ursula Fleming, *The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*, (Gracewing) contains extracts from all Eckhart's writings arranged thematically, with some brief comments.

Cyprian Smith, *The Way of Paradox. Spiritual Life as taught by Meister Eckhart*.

ASSOCIATES

New Members of the Fellowship

The Revd Kevin and Mrs Stephanie Parkes
291 Burntwood Lane
London SW17 0AP

R.I.P.

Vera Hodges
Elizabeth Leese
Beryl Thomas
Joan Crewdson

(We apologise for an error in the last Chronicle whereby Mrs Stephanie Parkes was designated 'Reverend'.)

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD 2005

PETER DOLL

SOMETIME late tonight or tomorrow morning, a group of politicians will get together and say, 'Right. We're in charge now. Now we can get on with what we want to do!' After all, whoever they are, they will have been through a month and more of campaigning. They will have worked hard to earn the trust of the electorate, and they have put their fate and their future into the hands of the electorate. The people—or some fairly disappointing percentage of those eligible to vote—will speak. They will put power into the hands of one party or another, and the government that will be formed will be more or less left to get on with the business of governing the country.

Now, what if, on the day of the Ascension, after Jesus had left them, the disciples had said to one another, 'Right, he's gone. We're in charge now. We can get on with what we want to do.' That, after all, would have been a normal human reaction after the departure of one on whom they had been reliant for guidance and inspiration. There was a power vacuum. How would it be filled?

It was filled, as we know, by the descent of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were filled with the power of Christ's guiding presence in the Spirit, so that they were led into truth. But even the earliest days of the church saw the church resisting the Spirit in conflicts over human power. The last few days at matins we've been listening to Galatians 2, about how Peter was frightened of offending the circumcision party in the church, those who wanted all Gentile converts to become Jews before they could become Christians. They wanted the rule of the flesh to continue, even in the community of the Spirit. Fortunately, Paul was there to straighten them out.

Perhaps there has always been a tendency in the Church to want to say, 'Right, we're in charge now'. There have been certain periods of history as well as continuing patterns of church life which have treated Jesus as if he were an absentee Lord who has left the church with the authority and the means to bind and to

loose. As J. M. Neale expressed it in one of his less felicitous verses,

So age by age, and year by year,
His grace was handed on,
And still the holy Church is here,
Although her Lord is gone.

These lines express a doctrine of Church and ministry and tradition which sees the church as an historic institution empowered and then left by its Lord to get on with things. Jesus has ascended and left behind a church with an ordered ministry and the sacraments of the New Covenant. This is an understanding which can lead to a rather mechanistic approach to ministry (a pipeline understanding of apostolic succession) and to the sacraments (Mass being something done by the priest for the laity rather than celebrated by the whole people of God).

Sadly, this is an approach to the life of the Church which seems to be becoming more rather than less common. It's evident in the kind of papal monarchy that concentrates all power in the church in Rome; it's there in the kind of evangelicalism that trumpets its adherence to the 'plain meaning' of Scripture but can't acknowledge that what is plain to them is plain wrong to others; it's evident in the sort of liberalism that finds it hard to allow truth to abide in the ancient or the traditional. It's a dangerous tendency not least because it flatly denies the important dimension of what the Ascension proclaims. Christ has not gone away from us. He continues to rule from on high. The authority of the church has always been concurrent with that of Christ. The apostles do not possess life in themselves. The only life they have is that shared organically with them by Christ. And no part of the church can claim to possess that vitality wholly. The Holy Spirit came upon and dwells in the whole church and indeed breaks out beyond the bounds of the Church.

Not content with claiming the authority of Christ for its own, the Church also neglects the glorious transformation of its humanity taken up into the Godhead by the ascended Christ. We should see in

our humanity something redeemed and glorified and behave accordingly. Instead, we live by power, as people in the world live.

Father Benson of Cowley was one whose whole devotion was centred on the living presence of the ascended Christ, into whom the church is gathered. He had no time for those who were determined to defend their own version of the truth in the name of the Church. Father Benson knew that we cannot possess the truth but rather we must be possessed by the truth. We have to learn to live life with the whole of the living tradition, not simply to repeat the formulations of the past.

I've been reminded of him as I've been finishing editing a volume of essays concerned with Anglican-Orthodox relations, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, Anglicans and Orthodox were drawn together at least in part by their common opposition to the papacy, but also by the reverence they shared for Scripture and the Fathers. But each side felt that if they were really going to get on together, the other would have to submit in all points of difference. Thus, when the Greeks built themselves a church in London in the 1670s, the Bishop of London, Henry Compton, influenced by his hatred of popery, insisted they deny transubstantiation and did not use ikons or prayers for the dead. But when the Nonjurors in the 1710s sought communion with the Church of the East, the patriarchs with whom they corresponded insisted they accept unequivocally—wait for it—transubstantiation, ikons, and prayers for the dead. If submission is the only standard we can apply in our ecumenical endeavours, then we may as well stop talking with one another.

But despite mutual misunderstanding, relations between Orthodox and Anglicans have been enduring because there is between us an underlying sense of spiritual and theological 'resonance'—a common apprehension of the sources of our Christian identity in Scripture and the Fathers which draws us together, a recognition that we are both gathered into the life of the Trinity. A prime example of this resonance at work is the great interest the Orthodox have in the writings of the Wesleys, especially the poetry of Charles Wesley. The faith he expresses is recognisably

the same as theirs, filled with the Spirit of the ascended Christ, even if expressed in a cultural context far removed from those of Orthodoxy. (And I've only just begun to realise how far it is this idea of resonance which inhabits so much of Fr Donald Allchin's work, the resonance of the thought of Christians, whether in eighteenth-century Wales, or nineteenth-century Denmark, or Stuart England, or amongst the many people and places he has explored, with the faith of the undivided church.)

We live in a world which seeks to live by its own power, by its sense of being in charge, but we in the Church don't need to live that way. Our humanity has been united with Christ's divinity and has been given a home in the heavenly places. Rather than let our church and our humanity resonate with the priorities of the world of power politics, with its equivocations and prevarications and economies with the truth, let us pray that our Church may be flooded with the unity of Christ's loving Spirit. Rather than seek to defend our own versions of the truth, let us instead live in the truth and be defended by it, so that we may call the world to account, and we may tell those politicians that actually they are not in charge, but that our God reigns in all things.

FAITH IN ASYLUM

NICHOLAS SAGOVSKY

BEFORE I MOVED to Westminster Abbey, I used to live near an Immigration Detention Centre. Three years ago, just before Christmas, I heard there was no priest working at the Chaplaincy. That meant there was no priest to preside at the Eucharist, the central act of Christian worship. I was teaching during the week but free at weekends, so I offered to help. The offer was accepted, and within a few days I was going in to the Chapel daily to take services and to talk to the asylum seekers. The Chapel was an old lecture room, with plain furnishings and nothing other than a wooden cross to mark it out as a place of prayer. In the weeks I ministered at that Detention Centre, I found myself pitched into an abyss of human suffering far beyond anything I had ever experienced. Daily I was hearing from deeply troubled people of the imprisonment and beatings and torture from which they had fled, of the terror they had experienced as they gave themselves up on arrival in Britain, and of their relief that at last they were safe. What they did not know, but I knew, was that they were passing through the Centre on a 'fast-track' procedure for those with a 'manifestly unfounded' claim to asylum. Almost without exception they were refused asylum within days of arriving here.

After about three weeks, in something of a state of shock myself, I went away to a monastery for a short ecumenical conference. I wanted to buy an icon for the Chapel, but did not have much money. There was a selection of fine icons but few that were sufficiently large and sufficiently cheap. The monk who ran the shop showed me a copy of the well-known Rublev icon which depicts three angels in a circle round a table, leaving a space to invite the viewer in. I had been praying that I might find the right icon. The Rublev icon doesn't show Jesus and doesn't show Mary, so I was very unsure it would be right for the Chapel. Then, suddenly, the monk said to me, 'You know the Greek name for this icon, don't you?' I said I didn't. I had always thought of it as an icon of the Trinity. 'What is it?' I asked. '*Philoxenia*', he replied—

and in that instant I knew this was the icon for the Chapel—because ‘*philoxenia*’ means love of the foreigner, or, quite simply, ‘hospitality’. ‘Do not neglect to show hospitality—*philoxenia*—to strangers’, says the New Testament, ‘for thereby some have entertained angels unawares’ (Heb. 13:2).

Immigration, Asylum and Human Rights

When I proposed ‘Faith in Asylum’ as the subject for this lecture, I had no idea how topical it would be. My intention was not—and is not—political provocation. It is to bring to the debate about asylum a perspective that first became clear to me in the chapel of the Detention Centre: the perspective of those who have come to Britain as a country in which they can be safe, a country which will give them a fair hearing when they make their claim for asylum. I speak, not as an asylum seeker, though after the Russian Revolution my father’s family found asylum in this country, I speak as a Christian pastor and a theologian. I hope, however, that what I have to say will contribute to the political debate because it will help to define the theological ground on which the Churches stand. I have no doubt that Charles Gore, if he were with us today, would, from his deep knowledge of the Christian tradition, his compassion for the needy, and his commitment to social justice, be speaking out on just this issue.

The wider issue of immigration to this country should not be confused with the narrower issue of asylum. Certainly, there is an area of overlap between the two, as a proportion of immigrants are refugees who have sought and been given asylum. Most immigrants are, however, voluntary migrants. Refugees are involuntary migrants. The issue of asylum is the issue of refuge from persecution, and the person who qualifies for asylum is the person who has what the 1951 Refugee Convention calls ‘a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’.

Given this important difference between immigration generally and asylum in particular, I do not intend in this lecture to discuss immigration policy as a whole, but only what is, *in terms of*

numbers, a minor issue. As I read the latest Home Office figures, net immigration in 2003 was about 150,000. In that year some 50,000 people applied for asylum and some 26,000 were granted either indefinite leave to remain or humanitarian protection. Of the net immigrants in that year about *one sixth* were people who received asylum. It looks as though the number of applications for asylum in 2004 will be down on the previous year. The number receiving refugee status may then be less than one sixth of net immigrants. Compared with net immigration and the much larger numbers of those who come here on work permits, refugee numbers are relatively small.

From the point of view of the major world faiths, however, the way we treat this needy minority is a test of the health of the whole of our society. For Jews, Christians and Muslims, hospitality and compassion are defining human virtues which indicate whether or not a person and a society reflects the hospitality and compassion of God. You may recall the way in which, during the US military campaign in Iraq, Private Jessica Lynch of the US Army was injured and in need of medical help. She was taken to an Iraqi hospital, and, despite the scarcity of medical resources, given first-class care and treatment before being reunited with her compatriots. That was a striking example of the way in which the obligation to show hospitality is interpreted by ordinary Muslims today.

It is not, of course, only religious believers who share this commitment to human beings in need. The Human Rights Movement of the second half of the twentieth century, which now unites believers and non-believers, came out of the general shock at what had been allowed to happen to the Jews: how, in the middle of supposedly civilised Europe, Jews had been systematically persecuted and deprived of human dignity, so that Hitler's 'Final Solution' in the end became 'thinkable' to ordinary men and women. The Jews, the Roma and others were victims of persecution on the grounds of their race, their religion, their membership of a particular social group. They could not turn to the state for protection because the state itself was their persecutor. When they looked to other states for the protection they needed, many were refused. Britain has a mixed

record in this respect: substantial numbers of refugees from Hitler's Germany were accepted and went on to make a remarkable contribution in British public life, but there are also shameful stories of Jews being turned away. It was in a spirit of shock, penitence, and shame after the Holocaust, and in the confident hope that such things should never be allowed to happen again, that the United Nations was born, and the major nations signed up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and other major human rights instruments. Britain signed up fully to these ground-breaking declarations, as it has done to the European Convention on Human Rights which was taken into UK law in 1998.

Charles Gore

Charles Gore's prophetic ministry was at its height about a hundred years ago. He was a Canon of Westminster from 1895 to 1902. From Westminster he went on to become Bishop of Worcester, then the first Bishop of Birmingham, and, finally, Bishop of Oxford. He became a towering and controversial figure within the Church of England, and the outstanding theological thinker of his time. Gore's most significant writing was in the field of Christian doctrine, where he maintained a robust belief in traditional Christian teaching, but much of his most significant *action* was in support of those we would today call the oppressed or the marginalised. At the end of his life a friend wrote, 'I have never known his profound humility to fail; nor his passion for righteousness; nor his eager championship of the "poor and oppressed"'.

Before Gore came to Westminster Abbey, he had already founded the Christian Social Union, an early Christian Socialist initiative which aimed to study 'how to apply the moral truths and principles of Christianity to the social and economic conditions of modern times'. Not long after, he founded the Community of the Resurrection, which continues today at Mirfield in Yorkshire. The best-known member of the Community after Gore was perhaps Trevor Huddleston who, in the spirit of Gore, opposed the apartheid regime in South Africa as an affront to the human dignity of black

South Africans. Huddleston in his turn provided inspiration for the young Desmond Tutu, who went on to train at Mirfield with the Community that Gore founded. Tutu's work as Chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been an inspiration wherever people work to overcome the legacy of hatred and mistrust left by regimes that abuse human rights. I have no doubt that our topic tonight does honour to the memory of Charles Gore, who saw Westminster Abbey both as a place to explore the riches of the Christian faith and to explore how that faith relates to the urgent problems of the day.

The Christian Tradition

Gore's own inspiration, as is clear from his many books, came from the Christian tradition which, in its care for the oppressed and the needy, builds on the Jewish teaching of the Law and the prophets. Gore often stressed his debt to the social teaching of the Old Testament. For example, the Book of Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Jewish Law, reminds the Israelites that they, who were once exiles in a foreign land, should have a special care for exiles, or sojourners, in their midst:

The Lord your God is God of Gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow [that is, those who need protection], and loves the *sojourner* [that is the resident exile], giving food and clothing. Love the *sojourner* therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Dt. 10:17-19).

The prophets frequently return to similar themes of social inclusion. I take just one example from the set reading for next Sunday:

Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness ... and do no wrong or violence to *the alien*, the fatherless and the widow (Jer. 22:3).

This teaching of the Law and the prophets is expanded and reinforced by Jesus, who describes the Judgment at the end of time when 'all the nations'—not just Christians—will be gathered before the Son of Man. There are those who are judged favourably and those who are judged unfavourably. The reason some are judged favourably is because 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was

thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me'. Those who are judged favourably are surprised at this, because they weren't conscious of anything they did specifically for him, and he replies, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me' (Mt 25:35,40). Passages such as this show why Christians feel it is not merely a duty to help those who are in particular need but, more than that, an inestimable privilege.

In this former Benedictine Abbey, it is good to recall how the Rule of Benedict speaks about the virtue of hospitality: 'All who arrive as guests are to be welcomed like Christ, for he is going to say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me"'. The Abbot should give all the guests water to wash their hands and with the whole community he should wash their feet. When they have done so, they should recite the verse, "We have received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple" (Rule LIII). As Mother Teresa so often stressed, it is in the midst of the most extreme human need that we meet Jesus Christ in new and unexpected ways.

Given this background, it is not surprising that both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible focus in various ways on the issue of asylum. In the Jewish Law (Numbers 35) it is prescribed that six 'cities of refuge' should be established. This provision was made to stop people killing each other in prolonged vendettas. These cities were places to which anyone who killed another person could flee. There could then be a proper investigation to decide whether the killing was deliberate or accidental. If it was deliberate, the killer would be punished as a murderer. If it was accidental the killer could receive asylum in the city of refuge. It was on this basis that, in the Middle Ages, abbeys throughout England—including Westminster Abbey—were established as places of 'sanctuary' for those in need of refuge. They were regarded rather as we would regard a foreign embassy: they were under a different jurisdiction, in this case the jurisdiction of God's Church.

The practice of sanctuary was, however, abused. It became increasingly unpopular because it attracted criminals rather than

refugees to the Abbey precincts. In the early seventeenth century it was abolished, and the state became in effect the sole arbiter of personal safety. Though there were waves of immigrants coming to Britain as a result of persecution abroad, such as the Huguenots and Jews from Eastern Europe, not until the twentieth century did the provision of asylum for foreign nationals become the explicit responsibility of the state. Even today the Church can play its part in the provision of sanctuary when, with other partners, it holds the state to account for its stewardship of the right to asylum.

For Christians, that which is inviolable is not primarily the holy place. That which is inviolable, and for the sake of which certain places have in the past been regarded as inviolable, is that which only God can give—life itself. This applies not only to human life but to the whole fragile, living world which we share with all other living creatures. A religiously-grounded wonder at the gift of life and the sense that human life ultimately belongs to God alone, is the reason why Christians struggle with issues of abortion and euthanasia, with slavery and the death penalty, and, of course, with the notion of human rights. Christians have had a lot to learn over the years, but at the root of our social concern is the conviction that human life and human society are fundamentally God’s gift and that we are accountable to God for the way we use that gift: that is to say, we are responsible to God for the common good. One way of looking at the challenge of being a Christian is to say that it is all about learning what it means truly to be a human being. Gore (in *Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer*) put it this way:

Each creature—inanimate, animate, rational—should find its joy in realizing its own function—that is, in being the thing it is meant to be, in experiencing the joy proper to itself, and in seeing all the other creatures realizing all their separate functions, while all together contribute to a common end.

The Problem

My concern tonight, then, is for a relatively small number of people within our society who are involuntary exiles from their own country, many of whom are daily denied what is needed ‘to be the thing—or the person—they are meant to be’. In many cases these

people have come to Britain to find themselves disbelieved, denied the possibility of working, kept waiting for months and years, and then finally refused. They have often been detained behind barbed wire and threatened with deportation back to the country and the security forces from which they fled. One of the most corrosive and undermining experiences for someone who has escaped persecution, especially for those who have suffered rape, imprisonment and torture, is to be told by officialdom that their story—their own, personal human narrative—lacks credibility; in other words, that they are lying. To a person who has suffered the loss of home, torture or rape, this assault on their human identity can make it almost impossible to function. Sleeplessness, nightmares, depression and loss of confidence are endemic amongst asylum seekers.

Time and again I have heard asylum seekers ask the agonised and outraged question, ‘How can this immigration official, or that Adjudicator, or the Secretary of State, with his or her limited experience of my country, so confidently dismiss not only what I say, but *who I am?*’. As anyone who has worked closely with asylum seekers will surely testify, one of the fundamental needs through the months and years of the asylum process is to help such people hold on to the sense of their own identity which gets eaten away by the system in a way they may never have experienced even at the hands of physical torturers.

In the present situation, where we have a political auction to buy the sympathies of voters by talking tough about asylum seekers, the churches have a key role to play—reminding politicians of all parties that asylum seekers are people too, and that there are many within the electorate who wish to welcome them hospitably. The announcement of yet more tough measures, such as increased numbers of detentions, creates waves of fear and insecurity amongst this already traumatised group. The vicious rhetoric against asylum seekers from some sections of the popular press causes immense distress; but so too do Government announcements which may be aimed at the press and completely misunderstood by frightened asylum seekers.

The question of Britain's withdrawal from the 1951 Convention on Refugees, and the 1967 Protocol that extends its remit to the present day, has been raised and will no doubt continue to be discussed. If we were to withdraw from the 1951 Convention, the giving of asylum to individuals and groups would in effect become discretionary. It would be a matter of the numbers we chose to take, not the right of those who came here to claim asylum. Under any quota system, the numbers who were granted asylum would be subject to political pressure. We would probably be turning people away, saying, 'We know you may need asylum, but we are not prepared to give it to you here as we have used up our quota for this year'. The 1951 Refugee Convention has proved a powerful instrument for saving lives and protecting people from persecution. Before we can begin to think of withdrawing from a human rights instrument which has proved so valuable a force for good we need to know exactly what is going to be put in its place. Though the Refugee Convention was drafted at a time when the understanding of 'a well-founded fear of persecution' was markedly different from that of today, it is hard to see what could be put in its place which could come anywhere near it as an effective human rights instrument.

One of the reasons people come to Britain for asylum is because they admire this country as a parliamentary democracy with a long tradition of civil peace. There is a respect for Britain's commitment to human rights and 'fair play', and international communications with Britain are good. Often there are links through the English language, through family or national groups. The fact that people, who may know very little about the reality of Britain today or what asylum means, should turn to Britain in their hour of need is in itself a kind of compliment—a compliment that, when I read the popular press or see how asylum seekers are treated by the system, too often seems undeserved.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of the asylum system of which we should be genuinely proud. Though it is subject to heavy political pressure, to which it responds with suspicious agility, as with the recent pledge to cut the number of asylum seekers in half, it remains subject to the rule of law and it still remains, though in a

worryingly attenuated sense, subject to judicial oversight. We maintain a legal mechanism by which each person's claim to asylum is tested, though in practice it is only where lawyers are working *pro bono* or for charities that asylum seekers can be confident of receiving adequate, competent legal support. The amount of legal aid now made available simply doesn't allow for cases to be thoroughly researched and well presented. Though the initial decision-making is overwhelmingly negative, in the end a substantial number of these negative decisions is overturned—but always after a prolonged period of stress for the asylum seeker and considerable expense all round. Though the administration of the National Asylum Support Service system for supporting asylum seekers is often chaotic, and it can prove hard to get attention for particular practical problems and needs, there is at least a system which should in theory provide support when asylum seekers are not permitted to work. The appalling Section 55, which meant that substantial numbers of asylum seekers were totally destitute, was thankfully overruled by the House of Lords—a further testimony to the importance of keeping the whole system under judicial, not political, control.

I have to say that I have never heard any political leader, or indeed anyone in the public domain say that they are *proud* of Britain's recent asylum policy, and I think this should give us cause for thought. Time and again the tone in which new measures are introduced is reactive and negative. It must be incredibly dispiriting to operate a system which seems determined to find reasons not to grant asylum and so is permeated by a 'culture of disbelief'.

In recent years the churches have made significant contributions that have helped to turn round public policy on inner city regeneration, and on unemployment and the availability of 'good work' for all. Amongst the churches there is a wealth of first-hand knowledge of the experience of asylum seekers at every stage of the process, often including first-hand knowledge of the countries from which they come. The churches have a unique contribution to make when political leaders give ground to the vitriolic hostility towards asylum seekers in some sections of the popular press—perhaps

because this hostility is reflected back to them by focus groups. The churches have a duty to speak out for the pride we should take in the human rights instruments that we have and for the absolute necessity of sticking by them if our own humanity as hospitable human beings is not to be diminished. The churches can also contribute to public debate about reforms to the asylum system by ensuring that the voices of the real experts—the refugees who have come through the system—receive a hearing.

The Proposal

My proposal is that we need to look for ways to assess and to rethink the asylum system from the point of view of ‘faith in asylum’. This is by no means new territory. Recently, the Asylum Rights Campaign, a coalition of all the major organisations working with asylum seekers, from Amnesty International to the United Nations Association, produced an in-depth study of the British asylum system, called *Providing Protection in the Twenty-First Century*. Its first recommendation was that

An independent panel should carry out a comprehensive and systematic review of the whole asylum system, based on an objective evaluation of the evidence taken from all parties involved.

This is exactly what I am arguing for. It is the sort of work that is done by Royal Commissions, whose whole function is to assemble the evidence on an issue, take it out of the political domain, and make well thought through recommendations which serve the common good. The ARC recommendation goes on to say:

Any reform, premised on the panel’s conclusion, should refocus efforts to establish clearer and simpler procedures, which concentrate on well-resourced, quality initial decision-making, undertaken with the upholding of international human rights law as its primary concern.

Much in line with this, the Church of England General Synod called last year for its own study of issues surrounding asylum. It asked for a study of the arguments which have been advanced to provide ‘a more positive approach to asylum seekers’. This study is now complete and has been published under the title *A Place of*

Refuge. This is just the time to be asking what will be the next steps for the Church of England—together with its ecumenical partners and colleagues in other faith communities.

By contrast, the Government published (in February this year) what it called its five year strategy for asylum and immigration, a paper entitled *Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain*, without any detailed discussion to show on what the strategy is based. The whole package presupposes an unquestioned faith in the asylum system to determine who is a genuine refugee and who is not. It is this underlying faith which I am arguing needs to be tested: *we have to know to what extent the system currently fails the very people who trust it with their lives, and what can be done to reform it.*

* * * * *

So what would an asylum system premised on faith in asylum look like?

- 1) It would address the reasons why people seek asylum.
- 2) It would recognize the survival skills and political courage that are to be found amongst asylum seekers. It would ask searching questions about the number of people with a genuine claim to asylum who are prevented from travelling to Britain in the first place.
- 3) It would approach initial interviews in a positive spirit, not so much seeking to catch applicants out, but to establish as fully as possible what are the relevant facts of the case
- 4) A reformed system would work throughout with the best available Country Information, presenting it in an unbiased way.
- 5) It would provide proper legal support. It is absolutely crucial that there should be confidence in the quality of decision-making, something which under present conditions is just not possible to have.
- 6) It would minimize the use of detention, especially for children.
- 7) It would not leave people in limbo for months and years after refusal.

It has not been my aim in this lecture to offer a blueprint for a reformed asylum system, I do however believe that the churches

have their distinctive part to play in bringing such a reform about. By working with representatives of other faiths, they can act as a catalyst to bring into being an independent Commission which has the standing and expertise to review the whole working of the asylum system from the point of view of 'faith in asylum', based upon a commitment to human rights and a commitment to the practice of hospitality.

Conclusion

Over the West door of Westminster Abbey are the statues of ten 'twentieth-century martyrs' from all round the world. One of them is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out early against Hitler's persecution of the Jews and who eventually went to his death for his active opposition to Hitler's regime. In accounting for the stand he had taken, he used to quote a verse from Proverbs (31:8-9)

Open your mouth for the dumb
For the rights of all who are left desolate
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
Maintain the rights of the poor and needy.

Emboldened by the example of Bonhoeffer, and of my predecessor as a Canon of Westminster, Charles Gore, I have tried tonight to 'open my mouth' for the rights of many, whose courage and faith I admire very much, and who have been left desolate, not only in their own societies, but also in ours. I am very conscious that the matter of 'judging righteously' is not for one individual to determine. This is something to work at together, because the command to 'maintain the rights of the poor and needy' is a command to us all. We are together called to have 'faith in asylum'.

Nicholas Sagovsky is Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey. The above is an abridged version of the Gore Lecture delivered by him in the Abbey on 15 February this year. The full text can be found on the internet under www.westminster-abbey.org (see Concerts and Events)

MORE THAN ANOTHER BELOVED

NICOLA MASON

I Saw Him Standing

Under the dark trees, there he stands,
there he stands; shall he not draw my eyes?
I thought I knew a little
how he compels, beyond all things, but now
he stands there in the shadows. It will be
Oh, such a daybreak, such bright morning,
when I shall wake to see him
as he is.

He is called Rose of Sharon, for his skin
is clear, his skin is flushed with blood,
his body lovely and exact; how he compels
beyond ten thousand rivals. There he stands,
my friend, the friend of guilt and helplessness,
Oh, such a daybreak, such bright morning,
when I shall wake to see him
as he is.

He is called Rose of Sharon, for his skin
is clear, his skin is flushed with blood,
his body lovely and exact; how he compels
beyond ten thousand rivals. There he stands,
my friend, the friend of guilt and helplessness,
to steer my hollow body
over the sea.

The earth is full of masks and fetishes,
what is there here for me? Are these like him?
Keep company with him and you will know:
no kin, no likeness to those empty eyes.
He is a stranger to them all, great Jesus.
What is there here for me? I know
what I have longed for. Him to hold
me always.

Rowan Williams
after the Welsh of Ann Griffiths

HAVE YOU EVER been in love—all your thoughts and attention occupied by the person you're crazy about? When you're with them you can't take your eyes off them, can't get enough of them, and when you're apart you can't think of anyone or anything else, although, of course, you have to and you do your best to attend to all else that's necessary. You want to talk about the one you love to whomever will listen, finding connections to bring any conversation round to another opportunity to talk about them and how marvellous they are, and you can imagine nothing more wonderful than being in their arms forever. For you, no one else really exists. Try to remember or imagine something of that state and bring it to your reading of this poem; don't let the fact that it's about Jesus put you off or make you take it less seriously—hear the naked longing, how captivated the speaker is by the object of her love and his beauty, how praise for the sheer wonder of him breaks out. *How he compels beyond ten thousand rivals*. And what she's seen and knows of him makes her long for more.

In this poem Rowan Williams has captured the visceral intensity of desire that pulses through the hymns and letters of Ann Griffiths and the continual straining to convey what she has seen of God that so fuels that desire. The art of translation, and perhaps particularly poetic translation, is a creative one and requires more than simply giving the correct literal equivalent of the original version—the translator needs to be faithful to the author's meaning and intention and to find a way to render it for readers in a different time or within a different culture. This poem was my own first introduction to Ann Griffiths (1776-1805), the bicentenary of whose death falls later this year, and it made me seek out her work with all speed; there I discovered that although (as Williams is at pains to acknowledge)¹ this is not at all a literal rendering of her original hymn, it is very true to her vision and thought as a whole.

I also discovered someone whose circumstances were not immediately conducive to the contemplative prayer, the fruits of which are so evident in her writings. She was a farmer's daughter

¹ See 'Foreword' to *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, Perpetua Press, 2002.

and a wife who, from the age of eighteen, had been running the household of a working farm in the Berwyn Hills of mid-Wales, sometimes having to hold in tension her absorption with God and other practical demands: 'I am sometimes absorbed so far into these things [contemplation of eternity] that I completely fail to stand in the way of my duty with regard to temporal things'.² She was no stranger to struggle and self-doubt either ('at present very cloudy and doubtful about myself, with the question beating upon my mind whether a true work has begun in me or not'; 'I have never talked with you or written to you with such a low view of myself as at this time'), finding some relief in sharing what she could of her story with a trusted spiritual friend, John Hughes, a teacher and preacher who at one time had lodged at the farm, and with whom she discussed the things of God.

Although she had very little formal education (two years' schooling with a local Englishwoman), John Hughes 'opened up the fields of theology to her',³ and her sustained meditation on scriptural and doctrinal truths both excited her desire and expanded her vision. Her passionate fervour was joined to a keen intelligence ever eager for a deeper understanding of God, yielding the theological insights we find in her hymns and letters. In the hymn from which 'I saw him standing' comes, Ann speaks of Christ as 'an object worthy of my whole mind' and it is clear that all of her, every faculty, is absolutely engaged by him.

She was converted in the evangelical revival of her time to the Calvinistic Methodist movement brought to North Wales by Thomas Charles of Bala, a movement which stressed humanity's corrupt and fallen state and its guilt before, and helpless inability to make restitution to, the holiness and righteousness of God. A cornerstone of its preaching, therefore, was the doctrine of the Atonement—Christ's sacrificial death on the cross making full restitution for us, thus honouring God's holy law. Ann fully

² All quotations from Ann Griffiths' letters translated by H.A.Hodges in *Hymns to her God*, by A.M.Allchin, Cowley Publications, 1987. All translations of the words of her hymns also by H.A.Hodges and quoted in *Ann Griffiths* by A.M.Allchin, University of Wales Press, 1976.

³ Saunders Lewis in *Homage to Ann Griffiths*, Church in Wales Publications, 1965.

accepted this and praised the saving work on Calvary with fervent gratitude—any reading of her letters will show how keenly conscious she was of her own sin and her need for a Saviour—but her whole orientation was God-ward, focusing on the way in which the beauty and perfection of the plan of salvation glorified its author, rather than on the personal benefit gained from it: ‘Thanks for the lawfulness of the way of salvation; and that because it glorifies its author more than because it rewards those who travel along it ... ; I can never glorify [God] more than, or so much as, by believing in and accepting his Son. Heaven help me to do this, not for my own pleasure alone, but out of reverence for him.’

For Ann, the work of our redemption is to be seen within the mystery of the Incarnation. Thus she writes in a letter about the Passion:

This word is on my mind tonight, ‘Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart.’ I think there is a high and peculiar calling for all who are partakers in the covenant to leave their own ceiled houses to see their King wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. No wonder the sun hid its rays when its Creator was pierced by nails. It is a marvel to me to think who it was that was on the cross, he whose eyes are as a flame of fire piercing through heaven and earth at once, unable to see his creatures, the work of his hands. My mind is too overwhelmed for me to say anything more on the matter.

What chiefly prompts her marvelling love is ‘*who* it was that was on the Cross’ rather than *what* he suffered and we see her mind stretched almost to breaking point as she contemplates the full wonder of the Creator entering his creation. For her, the ‘mystery of Godliness’ is one she can never stop thinking about and she longs to penetrate deeper into that mystery. Again and again we find her speaking of her longing to gaze on the person of Jesus—the one in whom we have been given ‘an object to worship’—to feast her eyes on him who took our ‘fleshly human dress’: ‘to gaze everlastingly upon the Person who took man’s nature’ and, more than that, not just to gaze but ‘to *delight* in his Person and to *worship* him for ever

as God'. Note that the sight, the delight, is joined to worship; she delights in him for who he is and she wants to see—and in seeing fully understand—not for her own gratification but in order to worship God as he should be worshipped, as the angels do: 'to penetrate ardently with the choir above into the endless wonders of the salvation wrought on Calvary'. She longs to join in their vision and selfless praise. What she knows and has glimpsed partially 'in the shadows' she longs to see fully:

It will be
Oh such a daybreak, such bright morning,
when I shall wake to see him
as he is.

The text at the heart of this poem is a verse from the Song of Songs (5:10): 'My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand', which begins the answer to a question in the preceding verse, 'What is thy beloved more than another beloved...?' (Song of Songs 5:9a). There is a sense in which Ann was always contemplating that question, seeking a form to describe what he had revealed to her of himself, and she would naturally have turned to Scripture for help, in particular the imagery of the Old Testament. She belonged to a time which interpreted the Old Testament in the light of the New and saw Christ prefigured in Old Testament types. We have already seen how the figure of King Solomon 'on the day of his espousals' (see Song of Songs 3:6-11) suggests to her the person of Christ in his Passion and how that association uncovers deeper levels of meaning, and in all her writing she employs Biblical quotation, imagery and allusions with imaginative skill, fashioning them into something rich and new, with the power to enlarge and transform our own contemplation of God. Here the poem's allusions to the verses of the Song of Songs (5:10 ff.) evoke the picture painted there of the surpassing beauty and loveliness of the beloved, how he is 'altogether lovely' and the eager longing with which he is sought.

The closing verse of that chapter declares, 'This is my beloved and this is my friend' (Song of Songs 5:16) and in this poem we hear what kind of a friend, 'the friend of guilt and helplessness', a friend

without whom we would be truly sunk, the only one who can save us in the swirling waters of our life and death. Ann's apprehension of God, the generosity of his love and self-giving, 'how he compels beyond all things ... all rivals', makes all the sharper her perception of her sins including anything that might dishonour him by 'giving the first place to secondary things'. She is constantly brought up against herself and her inability to remain steadfastly true to her vision of God's love and glory, her 'failure to abide'. But he saves us in spite of ourselves—in Jesus he rescues us from our helpless, hopeless state—and chooses to do so from love: 'I going astray, he a shepherd; I powerless to return, he an almighty Lord. O rock of our salvation, wholly self-dependent in the matter of saving sinners'.

It is easy to sentimentalise images of Jesus as friend and shepherd, but Ann would never do so any more than she would presume to employ an intimate style to speak of or to him; there is no direct second person address in her writings, no 'you' or 'thou'. Always she remembers just who and what he is; more than another beloved, he is God and nothing can compare with him. 'I am full of shame and reverence, rejoicing and marvelling at the thought that he for whom it is a condescension to look upon the things of heaven has also given himself as an object of love to a creature as vile as I.'

The world and all its trinkets cannot now satisfy my affections, which have been captured, which have been widened in the day of the power of my great Jesus; he and nothing else can fill them, incomprehensible though he is—O to gaze upon his Person, man and God as he is.

Mind and heart alike have been captured and the longing for union, for the fulfilment of vision, in the place where it will 'never again belong to me to say "I will go and I will return"' is compelling. *What is there here for me? I know what I have longed for.* We talk of love being blind, meaning blind to the supposed faults and peculiarities of the beloved; with Ann the reverse is true. Love and knowledge were continually widening and purifying her vision in a way which may help her readers to come out of their own ceiled houses and catch a glimpse of what she saw and longed for with such ardour.

DANCING WITH ANGELS

A bedtime story

SISTER STEPHENIE THÉRÈSE SLG

‘SWEET DREAMS!’ Marianne’s mother called as she turned off the light and shut the door.

‘Sweetdreamssweetdreamssweetdreams’, grumbled Marianne, ‘I never have any dreams!’. But this night was going to be different.

Marianne wasn’t quite sure where she was, nor in fact how she got there. Timidly she began to snoop around. Somewhere in the building someone was playing music, pretty music. It had a nice rhythm that made Marianne want to dance, even though she didn’t know how to. She was clumsy, so much so that she was embarrassed even to dance in her own room with the door shut and locked. Marianne made up for her lack of grace by being grumpy.

Marianne wasn’t grumpy now, she was curious. The room she was in looked a bit like the changing room in the gym at school, only a lot cleaner and brighter. Even the light, she was beginning to notice, was different, clearer. But how can light be clearer?, thought Marianne, it is clear already! She rounded a corner and squeaked with surprise. There on the wall was a big sign. It read:

NO ADMITTANCE WITHOUT WINGS

The music was louder now, and Marianne deduced (rightly, as it turned out) that ‘admittance’ was to the room with music. Wings? This is weird, thought Marianne, but not as weird as the next sign which read:

WING RENTAL

Terms and Conditions

STYLE	PRICE
Standard	2 Our Fathers
Deluxe	2 Our Fathers + 3 Hail Mary
Super Deluxe (<i>adult only</i>)	2 Our Fathers+Hail Mary+Gloria

‘Weird.’ This time Marianne spoke out loud. Below the signs were several desks and very worn kneelers. Marianne contemplated the sign a little longer. She knew the Our Father, she had learned it at Sunday School. She didn’t know what a Hail Mary was, but she thought it might be Catholic since they liked Mary so much. I know what the Gloria is, but I don’t know all the words by heart, thought Marianne. ‘Couldn’t have super deluxe anyway’, she grumbled out loud as her courage was picking up.

‘Come on, don’t dawdle!’

Marianne nearly jumped out of her skin. ‘Who are you?!’

‘I’m Richard, your guardian angel. Sorry to be late, but I had the 6—8 shift at the gates and we had a busy time. Why can’t you humans stop going to war? You really do have an unhealthy obsession about it.’

‘Gates? What gates?’ asked Marianne, who was now so thoroughly confused she wasn’t even scared.

‘The PEARLY GATES! For heaven’s sake, what gates did you think I meant?’ When Richard said, ‘for heaven’s sake’ a voice came out of nowhere and said, ‘*stop swearing Ricky*’. This gave Marianne the creeps.

‘The pearly as in heaven Oh. I see’, but she wasn’t sure she did see. ‘I didn’t hear you swear, Rick, er Richard, what was that voice on about? And what WAS THAT VOICE?’

‘Oh, that. Gabriel, my Novice Master. Mind you, I haven’t been a Novice for centuries now, but he can’t let go.’

‘But you didn’t swear.’

‘But I did. You see, “for heaven’s sake” is a swear term around here.’

Crikey, thought Marianne.

‘Exactly’, replied Richard. ‘Now get going—on your knees. I am supposed to be taking you to the dance.’

‘Dance? Me? WHO are you?’ Marianne squeaked again. The thought of dancing terrified her.

‘I am your Guardian Angel. Now, KNEEL!’ Only then did Marianne notice his wings, how could she have missed them? They must be super duper deluxe, she thought.

‘KNEEL! Two Our Fathers. Fast!’

Ricky calm down, it's her first time here.

That's all right, Mr Gabriel', piped up Marianne. Richard was, after all, *her* guardian angel, 'I have a short temper, too. I understand.'

Richard rolled his eyes, not sure who he was more irritated with, Gabriel or Marianne. 'KNEEL!!!'.

Marianne knelt and said her Our Fathers. When she got up, she began to feel different—but not in her shoulders as she expected. No, her feet were, well they were ... 'full of grace', Richard finished her thought for her. 'Yes', she said in a whisper.

'Turn around and let me tidy your wings and then we'll be off.' Marianne turned around and was tidied. What is happening to me? wondered Marianne. I hate it when Mummy tidies me, and I hate to be bossed around (she had to admit that Richard was a tad bossy).

'No, I'm not', said Richard as he grabbed her hand. Marianne gasped, they were, well flying! She had wondered how to work the wings, but they seemed to work themselves. Thank God, Marianne thought. 'Yes, thanks be to God' Richard softened, 'the first time is always pretty wonderful'.

They went into a room that was so large it didn't seem to have any walls. Marianne decided it might not have any walls given how strange things were around this place, which she couldn't bring herself to call heaven yet. No clouds. No harps. No white robes. And dancing!! Boy, were the Baptists gonna be surprised, she thought. The size of the room though, isn't what stood out most. It was colour. There was colour everywhere, colours Marianne did not know the name of, colours Marianne had never seen before. Just colour.

Richard gave a gentle pull on her arm—he was a softy really and remembered the first time he saw the dancing. Marianne came out of her reverie and looked at Richard wide-eyed. 'Ready?' he whispered. She nodded.

Another gasp escaped her. There wasn't a floor ... they were dancing on air! Yes, she was dancing and twirling and spinning and suddenly she began to laugh. Not in that disruptive laugh she used

in the classroom, but a gentle, clear laugh that harmonized with the music, with the colour, with the light, until she realized her laughter was music, was colour, was light!

‘Goodness!’, she squeaked, ‘Harriet!’ Harriet turned and smiled at Marianne. Marianne smiled back, thinking Harriet must be a Catholic and know the Hail Mary because her wings were gilt-edged. But it was such a shock since Harriet was the scrawniest and most unpopular girl at school, she even ate her lunches alone and had no one to swap brownies with. And here she was, dancing with angels. Radiant.

Dancing with angels, thought Marianne, I too am dancing with angels. She closed her eyes and soared.

‘Marianne, Marianne! Time to get up!’

‘Mummy, Mummy, I had one!’

Marianne’s Mum looked quizzically at her. ‘One what, dear?’

‘A sweet dream. I had a sweet dream!’

‘That’s good, Marianne’, her mother said, a bit concerned. She caressed Marianne’s cheek just to make sure she hadn’t a fever, but Marianne knew that ruse and batted her hand away.

‘Mom! I’m not sick! And can I have a packed lunch today? I want to eat lunch with Harriet and she always brings her lunch.’

‘Harriet? Is she new?’

‘No, no. Harriet’s always been around. She dances, Dances with angels.’

‘Like me’, whispered Marianne to the empty room.

BOOKS

DIFFICULT GOSPEL: THE THEOLOGY OF ROWAN WILLIAMS, Mike Higton, SCM Press, 2005, £14.99.

Some books are such a pleasure to read that there is a sense of disappointment on reaching the last page, and a need to turn the book over and begin again. This was, for me such a book, and I lingered awhile, turning back to earlier pages, pondering again some of the passages that had made me pause. What is the reason for this sense of pleasure? There seem to be a number of things on different levels. In part it was the fascination of being taken on a conducted tour of someone's thinking, someone who in this case is a significant figure for us all, upon whose leadership a great deal rests for our church at the moment. Inevitably I found myself wondering if I would discover clues about the way his mind is going during current, difficult debates. At a deeper level it was the thought-provoking nature of the content. There is much to learn and digest within these pages, passages to which I know I will return in order to give them more time because of their depth. And not the least of the pleasures is that of a well-written book, by an author who is clearly engaged with his subject matter and has an evident desire to draw his readers into the same enthusiasm and interest.

It is also a welcome book, because most of us need to know more about the man who is now Archbishop of Canterbury. When Archbishop Rowan's appointment was announced in 2002 there was a mixed reception—liberal relief and evangelical disappointment (and worse). A somewhat warmer reception was given by the press. Invited to give the Guardian lecture at the Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival, the then Archbishop of Wales was introduced as 'The Guardian's candidate for Archbishop of Canterbury'—a startling statement to any regular *Guardian* reader! There followed the Dimpleby Lecture on the BBC, a series of televised conversations on Channel 4, a Downing Street lecture and a notable dialogue with Philip Pullman on the stage of the National Theatre. For a while it seemed that a new relationship between church and society was

becoming possible, with an Archbishop capable of posing serious questions to our society, in a way that could be heard, and sufficient independence of mind to side with someone like Pullman as he asked questions of the Church. Then, without warning, the issue of sexuality and the priesthood exploded, and the Archbishop's agenda was no longer of his own making. Subsequently he has been the object of criticism by conservative, evangelical and liberal alike, the once loyal *Guardian* now the mouthpiece for friends who fear he has lost the plot and doubt his capacity to handle the situation. And it is certainly true that no Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation has faced so complex and threatening a crisis. The question we all ask, whatever position we might take, is 'What will he do?'

Inevitably that is a question we carry into our reading of Higton's book. But although its subtitle is 'The Theology of Rowan Williams', and there is a final chapter on Sex and the Gospel, this is a book that was planned well before the current impasse and is therefore, thankfully, far wider in its conception. And therein lies its strength. Here is an opportunity to get behind the smoke of the current row and learn something of the stature of Williams as a thinker and leader. Intended for the general reader, Higton's book has succeeded in distilling at least some of the essence of this Archbishop's rich and generous mind into 150 readable pages—and that is no mean feat, since the published list of books and articles runs to 31 sides of A4. He achieves this by taking a conscious stand as a guide, dividing the book into obvious chapters on God, Christ, the Bible and the church and several times inserting material of his own (including a touching description of his daughter's birth), to provide a framework around which he can gather various aspects of Williams' thinking. This sounds clumsy, but it works. And it does so partly because it is an aspect of the author's own personal engagement with the material, but also because he is, at the same time, extraordinarily adept at allowing Williams to speak for himself. I had expected more evaluation, but the core of the book lies in Higton's summaries of Williams' thinking, interspersed with numerous deftly handled quotations. Only on one occasion does the

author stand back to make a comment of his own, and then it is a thought provoking question about whether Williams has the right balance between the 'No' of the cross rather than its all encompassing 'Yes'. Is Williams' writing too unrelentingly aware of the possibilities of self deceit and the dangers of cheap grace, he asks, instead of relaxing in the Sabbath rest of God's love?

It is a powerful question and one that in the end comes back to the reader, like so many others in this book. For what is so striking about so much of Williams' writing is that it is not in balanced academic volumes, but is produced as specific pieces for specific audiences. He emerges here as someone deeply concerned to place the message of the cross back into the core thinking of the church at large, opening us to its challenge so that we can experience its grace. 'The theologian's job may be less the speaking of truth', he writes, 'than the patient diagnosis of untruths, and the reminding of the community where its attention begins'. I frequently wondered throughout this book if Williams was not emerging less of a theologian (though he is that, with considerable brilliance) and more of a prophet. Prophetic speech is rarely balanced in the way a theologian might wish.

And this points to something else about Williams that Higton reveals. At a very early stage he seems to have come to a coherent vision of the Christian Faith that has, from then on, informed the whole of his work. In an article written in the mid-nineties Williams resisted Don Cupitt's claim that the theologian needed to explore new insights and salvage religious language by fearless revision. Instead he referred to Ramsey's claim that theology rests on a 'non-negotiable ... central complex of commitments'—'the only rationale finally for theology'. Earlier he had written of the need for a vision that 'offers a sufficient imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity without evasion or untruthfulness'. In the introduction Higton writes of being aware that he is dealing with material that 'hangs together': Williams 'has something like a feeling for the vision as a whole' Proof of that emerges as the book progresses. One of the remarkable things about reading its pages with an eye to the references at the back is the way

in which Higton can set side by side quotations that have several decades between them, and the two flow together like a continuous sentence.

This book makes clear to us all (should we have doubted it before) just how much this Archbishop has to offer to the Church. More importantly it reverses some of the pressing questions of our time with which we started. Rather than ask, 'What will he do?' we should perhaps be asking how we can find space for some of the things that this most capable and gifted Archbishop has to say to us. His is a demanding vision, but, as Higton says, it is one that has the capacity to awaken us to the central mysteries of the Christian faith. At one level there is a sense of frustration that the agenda has been hauled away into the anxiety about sexuality. If only we could put all that on hold ... But in the end, in God's world, we have to accept that nothing really happens by accident. And one of the mysteries about which we are frequently uncertain is that of the Church. Perhaps that, under Williams' leadership, is the learning we now need. And about the nature of the Church Williams has in past years spoken some challenging things. As the author of a book on Aruis he is uniquely well versed to negotiate a path through potential schism. There is enough material here to piece together something of the conversation that Williams wishes to initiate among the Archbishops and, through them, among all of us. 'Is this a disagreement deep enough to break communion?' Williams was asking over other matters in the '80s. His final conclusion in that instance was no, despite the continuing conviction of the rightness of his own viewpoint. The alternative was the need 'to accept for myself the brokenness of the Body'. Doing so means setting aside, painfully, a straightforward confidence, not in right argument, but tellingly, in our own purity. 'So long as we still have a language in common ... we must embrace the reality of living in a communion that is fallible and divided.' To develop a collective view around such a proposition will be tough. I am left with the sense that the possibility of the survival of the church as we know it lies, somewhat dauntingly, here: in my own need for prayer, for reconciliation, and thus for a new and deeper understanding of the

church's nature. 'The decay of peace begins with you and me', Williams wrote in 1994. Yes indeed. This is a book that should be acquired and pondered by everyone.

DAVID BARTON

JESUS IN HISTORY, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA, Ed. Leslie Houlden. Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford: ABC-Clío, 2003. 2 volumes 984 pages. £122.00

There are ideas one has never had, but which seem absolutely obvious once someone else has pointed them out. Such is the idea of producing an encyclopaedia of Jesus. By ranging across the history of theology, art, music, literature, sociology, and history, it is not hard to fill a two-volume work such as this, containing nearly a thousand pages.

Leslie Houlden has succeeded triumphantly in producing a work that avoids such pitfalls and truly informs the reader. It is interesting enough for one to read it through, despite the encyclopaedia format. It is very strong on theories about Christology, with long entries on all the traditional sources (Nicea, Chalcedon, and so on), the orthodox Fathers (Athanasius, Augustine) and the famous heretics (Apollinaris, Nestorius). But it also handles modern writers on Christology (Newman, Barth, Rahner, Bonhoeffer), and—this is more surprising, but very welcome—people who have written on the 'historical Jesus' and produced what are known in the trade as 'Jesus books' (J.D. Crossan, Tom Wright: I missed Gerd Theissen). And there are plenty of articles on writers between the patristic age and the present (Aquinas, Bonaventure, Luther, Calvin).

On the place of Jesus in the history of culture, there is a splendid, long article on 'Jesus in Art' by Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, an acknowledged authority on the subject, and on 'Jesus in Music' by Roderick Swanston. More surprising but very interesting pieces include two by the editor himself, respectively on 'Jesus and Sexuality', and 'Jesus and Old Age'. There are many

excellent black-and-white illustrations, and a useful glossary of technical terms.

Perhaps the easiest way to give a sense of the coverage is to pick a letter of the alphabet at random and list the articles. Here is H. Harnack (Adolf von). Harvey (A.E.). Hebrew Bible, Hebrews (Letter to the), Hellenistic Religions, Hengel (Martin), Hinduism, Holy Sepulchre, Holy Spirit, Homer, Hymns; in each case one must understand 'Jesus and/in/in relation to'. Even from this it can be seen that Houlden has cast his net very wide. Homer? It turns out that some people (rather a select few, I suspect) think the Gospels are modelled on the Homeric poems. Anthony Harvey? He has written an excellent book (*Jesus and the Constraints of History*, 1982).

The project involves 117 contributors, mostly from Britain and North America. The most prolific contributor, with forty-two entries, is the editor himself. His explanation, 'it is sometimes easier to write oneself than to recruit others', will resonate with anyone who has ever produced a multi-author volume. But this necessity has resulted in some fine articles, for example on the death, family, origins, parables, and teaching of Jesus, all of which raise fresh questions. Especially interesting is his piece on the *absences* of Jesus. By this he means the strange neglect of the actual details of the Gospel narratives in many doctrinal accounts of Jesus' role and status. 'Experiment', he suggests, 'by searching standard works of Christian theology down to our own day for references to his deeds or words (as distinct from his role in Christian conceptual patterns); and notice a similar omission from Christian creeds and the analogously formed eucharistic prayers, which tend to move directly from Jesus' coming to his death, leaving him unconsidered between the two' (p. 420). Some people would have written a whole book on this remarkable *aperçu*, where Houlden is content simply to mention it and move on. The whole work, despite its many authors, bears his distinctive stamp, and this not least in its style: he has succeeded in persuading most contributors to follow his own example in writing proper prose, rather than adopting a standardized

‘encyclopaedia’ style suggesting authorship by machine. Very properly, and in the same spirit, every article is signed.

It could seem that the focus on Jesus might distort the presentation in some articles. For example, to present von Balthasar or Barth ‘on Jesus’ can give a slightly skewed impression of those theologians, since it involves extracting a theme from a larger whole and presenting it without a full context. Occasionally, on the other hand, a contributor seems to veer away from the work’s focus on Jesus altogether, to produce a general article on a topic, without special reference to him—I noted this in Kenneth Stevenson’s otherwise excellent article on Baptism. But by and large the centrality of the figure of Jesus in Christian theology means that both dangers are avoided.

This is a tightly packed work, full of deep learning attractively presented. May it become a best-seller.

JOHN BARTON

WE SHALL SEE HIM AS HE IS, Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex, 2004. £10.00.

The republication of this remarkable book, first published in 1988 and for some while unavailable, is to be warmly welcomed. It has been beautifully produced in a hard cover and it is a book to which frequent return should be made. Although at first sight it may seem in places somewhat repetitive, careful reading and reflection reveal that spiritual truth of this nature and depth is inevitably approached in a spiral manner, witnessing to its manifold character, and to the experience of gaining and losing and then regaining, that is the hallmark of all Christian pilgrimage further into the life in Christ.

Father Sophrony was one of the most significant spiritual teachers of the Church in the twentieth century, and this book, which is his spiritual autobiography, reveals the extent to which his own spiritual odyssey was a response to the tragedies and darkness of those times. He was a Russian Orthodox priest who lived

between 1896 and 1993, and who as an émigré created in 1959 the monastery in Essex whose initiative and care have produced this book. Fr Sophrony's writing is a living testimony to the spiritual experience of the Fathers, which was brought to life for him by close personal encounter with St Silouan of Athos, who died in 1938.

Fr Sophrony is frank about the immense difficulties of describing in words a spiritual experience wrought over many years of prayer and suffering. Nor is there any element of self-promotion in what he attempts: simply a desire to testify to the life-giving realities that lie at the heart of Christian belief. Perhaps the best way to introduce this vivid testimony is to identify some of the salient and recurring themes to which he bears witness.

The first is the cost and depth of repentance, which he regarded as the foundation and doorway of Christian faith. For him this was precipitated by rejection of a prolonged exposure to oriental meditation and mysticism, which for a while had led him away from orthodox Christian belief. It was exacerbated by the demands that he made upon himself as a profoundly artistic person, and by the intensity of his very Russian approach to existence. But his repentance was not self-preoccupied as it was fuelled by heightened sensitivity to the appalling sufferings caused by the two world wars and the revolution in Russia.

Fr Sophrony lived in response to a profound encounter with Christ, whose person he revered and whose divine nature was to his mind fundamental to all Christian prayer and belief. Much of this book is a profound meditation on the meaning of the Incarnation, and especially of the *kenosis* or self-emptying that was most fully revealed in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross. Into this prayer of self-giving and self-sacrifice Christians are called to enter by their own road of repentance and suffering. For this prayer flows from the heart of God the Trinity, revealed as the hidden miracle of divine indwelling in human nature for the salvation of the world. Following the example of St Silouan, Fr Sophrony came to a profound vision of the unity of all humanity and of the need for prayer for the whole Adam. The hallmark of this prayer is Christ-

like prayer for enemies, for ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself’.

One of the consequences of this costly transformation of human nature is a new understanding of the nature and purpose of human existence, called from nothingness by divine love to become a person, an hypostasis that is the object of divine love. In the end there is no other basis for human existence in time or in eternity. The description in Genesis of human beings as made ‘in the image and likeness of God’ takes on vast meaning in the light of the divine humanity of Christ. To this measure of existence all human beings are called, as their union with Christ and with his self-sacrificial prayer enlarges their hearts and minds with ever-deeper compassion. The Christian at prayer is caught up within the very life and love of the Trinity, sensitive to the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit, whose acquisition is, in the words of St Seraphim of Sarov, the goal of Christian life.

There can be no doubting the singularity and the cost of Fr Sophrony’s discipleship, both on Mount Athos and later in Paris and England. This accounts for the sometimes rather tortured style of this book and its inherent demand. In a way it is best re-read in parts as a spiritual *vade mecum* after a first full reading. It is well set out to this end, which was what the writer probably intended as his style is meditative rather than analytical or descriptive. It is a fascinating and precious corpus of spiritual testimony that builds a bridge between the patristic and Athonite tradition and the tragic condition of much human life in the modern world. It is a vivid demonstration of the meaning and cost of the prophetic words of our Lord to St Silouan: ‘Keep thy mind in hell and despair not’.

DOUGLAS DALES

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS: Ruth Bidgood, Seren Books, 2004, £9.99.

The publication of this collection of Ruth Bidgood’s poems, poems which covering a period of more than thirty years, will surely bring wider recognition of the work of this remarkable writer. This is not

yet a 'Collected Poems', though that must surely be on its way, but it is a substantial and carefully chosen selection from a body of work which, when we see it together, shows remarkable consistency and at the same time a constant capacity for growth and development.

The basic themes of Ruth Bidgood's writing are the specific character of places and people, houses in particular, and the vital importance of memory in holding together past and present in a living relationship. Above all there is the sense of the healing power of memory; one recent poem affirms directly 'What is forgotten cannot be healed'. This is a theme which occurs in a multitude of ways throughout the collection.

But if there is a constant rediscovery of such themes in these poems, there is also the striking variety of ways in which they are treated. Humour, anger, dismay, amazement, all help to colour and diversify a constantly renewed sense of the beauty of the historic borderlands of mid-Wales, Radnor and Brecon in particular. We are introduced to a great variety of people and places, sometimes to places of a quality which seems to open up usually hidden dimensions of existence; angels become a haunting presence in these poems, at times a particularly powerful presence.

One of the most interesting features of the whole collection is the constant occurrence of 'found poems'. These are the result of the poet's work in local archives. In the course of the last thirty years she has become something of an authority on the family history of the region. Some of these poems are direct transcripts of texts from seventeenth and eighteenth century documents; letters above all; a young woman expresses her sense of resentment at the way she feels she has been exploited by her relations; a young man, with effortless superiority, offers wise counsel to his still younger sister about to venture out into the world. Others have grown out of fragments of legal documents. We see a Radnorshire farmer's wife wrestling with problems over her husband's will; a recusant squire venting his anger against the obstinacy of his tenants. The variety of character and circumstance, the mixture of pathos and humour which these poems contain never ceases to fascinate and delight.

Among the poems of place there are certain places which stand out; Nevern in North Pembrokeshire, with its memories of Brynach, Pennant Melangell in the Berwyns, Patricio in the hills near Abergavenny. One recent poem is on Merthyr Clydawg, on the Herefordshire side of the Anglo-Welsh border.

Clodock; it sounds rustic, and English.
Clydawg, the lost Welsh is back: he seems
An off-beat martyr ...

In a few lines something of the fascination of the place and its church is sketched in, finally giving us a glimpse of

This place of shifting boundaries,
Strife, loss, perpetual haunting, garbled names,
Welshness in the soil's depth,
Unacknowledged riches,
Uncomprehended power.

It is part of the triumph of these quiet and outwardly unpretentious poems that they make explicit something of those 'unacknowledged riches', that 'uncomprehended power'. In a much earlier poem we hear of a seventeenth century Puritan iconoclast, who after a busy day breaking down pictures and statues in the local churches finds himself at night haunted by images he thought he had left behind.

While the great Angels he had left for dead
Still cried aloud God's message
In the forbidden language of beauty.

DONALD ALLCHIN

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

The Gift of Theology: the Trinitarian Vision of Ann Griffiths and Elizabeth of Dijon, by A.M. Allchin. SLG Press, 2005. £3.00.