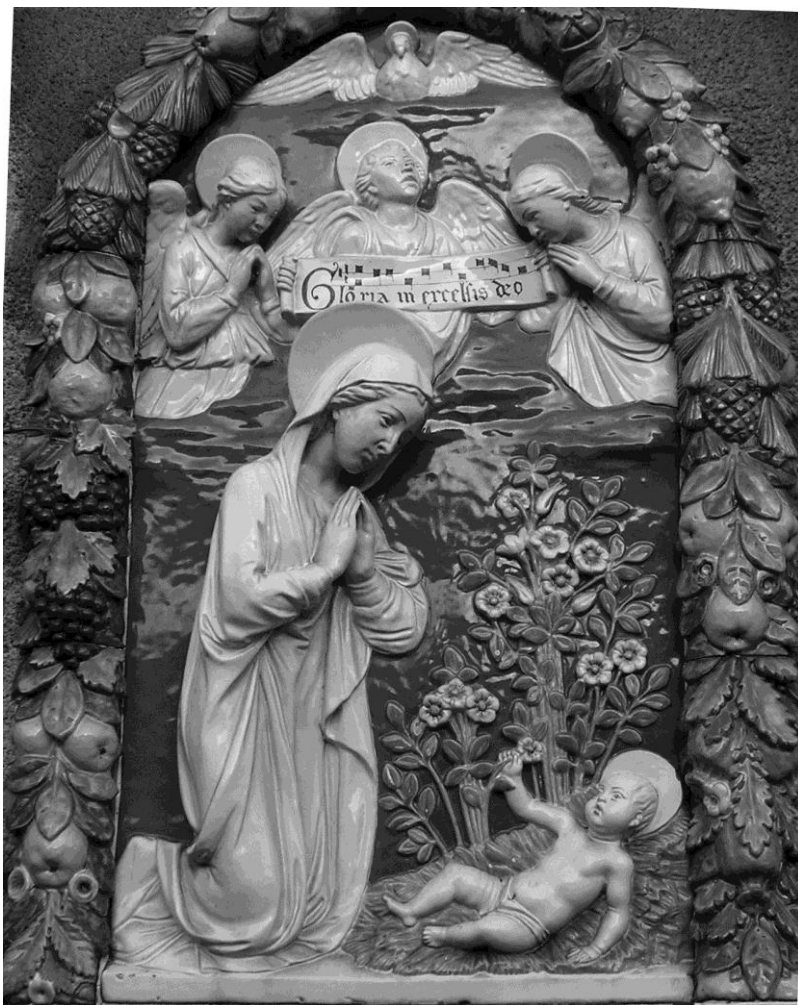


FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



WINTER 2014

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Cover Picture:

Plaque after della Robbia, in Fellowship House Garden, Fairacres.

Photo © Sister Catherine SLG

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COMMUNITY NOTES

DEAR FRIENDS

I began the Community Notes of the summer edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle* by mentioning the deaths of two Sisters and a number of SLG's friends. I am again beginning these Notes for the winter *Chronicle* with three more deaths.

First, the Revd Louise Lancaster, our Oblate Sister Louise of the Transfiguration, died on 18 July at the hands of her husband, Roy, who then committed suicide. Such events always give us heavy hearts, especially when those concerned are known to us personally. Louise had been an Oblate Sister for a number of years, making Life Oblature in 2009. Her funeral took place in Leeds, where she lived and ministered. I am glad that Sr. Rosemary, our Oblate Guardian, and five Oblate Sisters, were able to attend. Our prayers go out to both families.

On 27 September another friend of the Community, Bishop Michael Scott-Joynt, passed to heavenly glory. At 6ft. 7 in. Bishop Michael was the tallest member of the House of Bishops, the epitome of the gentle giant. He trained for the priesthood at Cuddesdon and served initially in the Diocese of Oxford. In 1987 he became a Priest Associate of the Community and came regularly for retreat, disciplined in this as in all aspects of his life. His connections with the Religious Life extended beyond his association with SLG. He was for many years Bishop Protector to the Franciscans. After three years as Bishop of Stafford, he moved to Winchester where he served from 1995 until his retirement in 2011. He had a care and affection for the Church in the Congo, often accompanied on visits to that country by his wife, Lou. Bishop Michael had a deep empathy for those in need and was a wise and caring pastor. Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, also a Priest Associate, who preached at the funeral, recalled one of Bishop Michael's clergy describing him as the 'Admiral on the Bridge who was always delving with his screwdriver into the engine room'.

Bishop Michael had been a warm supporter of women's ordination to the priesthood from the beginning. Latterly his commitment to the Church's teaching on marriage made him no less unpopular with those of different views. Our prayers go out to Lou and to all the family.

Shortly afterwards we were again saddened to learn of the death of Brother Tom Shaw SSJE on 17 October at the age of 69. Brother Tom was a member of the American branch of the Society of St John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the descendent of the English Society from which SLG was founded. In 1995, at the end of his term of office as Superior of SSJE, Brother Tom was elected Bishop of Massachusetts. In 2006, our centenary year, he led our week of retreat prior to the main festivities. Last year, soon after announcing his retirement as Bishop, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. For the few months remaining to him he was able to live at Emery House, the SSJE property north of Cambridge, similar in design to Bede House, the SLG house in Kent we owned for just over forty years. Emery House is in a most beautiful setting, surely a fitting place to prepare for death. Brother Tom was a potter and had the use of a studio there. He made the very large vessel which SSJE use for holy water during Paschaltide, and which sits beside the Easter candle in their Chapel during that season. Here at Fairacres we continue to treasure some flower vases he had made. Brother Tom's funeral was held at Trinity Episcopal Church, Boston, the monastery church not being large enough to hold the numbers expected. In the event, neither was Trinity Episcopal Church. We were glad that Sr. Helen, herself from Cambridge MA, was able to represent SLG at the funeral. Brother Tom was greatly loved and respected both as Brother and as Bishop and will be missed not only by his Community and the Episcopal Church but also by the many individuals who came to him for spiritual direction and counsel.

While there have been a number of losses to SLG this year, there have been many blessings as well. A very happy event, which I should have mentioned in the last Community Notes, was the Diamond Jubilee of Profession of Sr. Freda of the Holy Guardian Angels on the Feast of St Alban, 22 June. Ordinarily we would not celebrate St Alban on a Sunday, but we certainly did this year. For some of us sixty years in profession is quite difficult to imagine, for it means that Sr. Freda entered community while we were very small or not yet born! Such examples of faithfulness and perseverance are a cause for much thanksgiving, and an inspiration to those of us who are younger in the religious life.

Another very happy event was our Open Garden afternoon on 7 September for our neighbours. They streamed in steadily and many lovely encounters took place. It was a perfect early autumn day for visitors to enjoy the garden and the tea tent in particular. Gallons of tea were drunk and countless cakes consumed. For the first time at such an event, SLG Press had its own tent with cards and publications for sale. The cards proved especially popular. At the present time it is only our guests who have easy access to the SLG Press Shop, so we are trying to find ways our neighbours can visit it.

We continue to seek to share our life with those who are considering a vocation to the Religious Life. In the past two years we have had a number of women living alongside the Community. In July one of them, Victoria, entered the novitiate as a postulant but soon realized that this is not the life to which she is called. But we give thanks for her brief time with us, and for the challenging questions she asked. We wish her well in her new job and in her life as she continues on her earthly pilgrimage.

Sr. Judith, our Novice Guardian, and I are members of a group called 'New Life', made up of representatives from a number of Religious Communities who, with two lay people, are exploring ways people can be made more aware of the existence of Religious

Communities within the Anglican Communion. With this in mind, three Sisters attended the Greenbelt Festival this year and met some interesting young people. Many assumed we were Roman Catholic Sisters and were surprised to learn that we are Anglicans. Sr. Stephanie Thérèse and I attended a Vocations Day at Wellingborough in October and were inspired to meet with and to share in the thinking of people who are seriously considering their sense of calling to ministry in the Church.

After many months of preparation, our Visitation began on 8 July. Bishop Michael Lewis, our Visitor, was accompanied by a team of four, and they all gave themselves to us generously while they were here, making it a very positive experience for the Community. It was quite an administrative challenge to ensure that Sisters met with the team member of their choice, in addition to Bishop Michael, especially as there were staff and group meetings as well. But there was only one double booking and that concerned the writer of these Notes! We have now received their report and are working on the suggestions made in it. We have the first follow-up meeting with Bishop Michael at the beginning of Lent next year.

After the Visitation we welcomed Brother David Vryhof SSJE to lead our week of retreat. It was, as always, a great blessing to have a Brother of the SSJE Community with us. The Associates retreat at Llangasty came at the end of the Community's and I was able to join them for part of it. A similar time in July 2015 is booked for this retreat. At present we are awaiting confirmation of a leader for it. Details will be on the website as soon as possible. The shorter weekend retreat in October 2015 will be at Fairacres. This is an experiment, mainly because we know that the cost of staying at a retreat centre is prohibitive for some who would otherwise be glad to participate in such a weekend. As you know, there are no set charges for guests staying at Fairacres, but donations are welcome according to what each can afford. Saturday

is currently a ‘Sabbath’ day, but two Sisters will ensure that there is worship during the day, and a midday meal provided. Details of both retreats are on p. 9.

We are fortunate in the many excellent homilies our celebrants preach to us and we include two here. Douglas Dales, a Priest Associate, contributes one on Our Lady, given at Fairacres on the Feast of the Assumption. The other is by Andrew Teal, our Warden, responding to ‘the fierce encounters we have heard about in the news this week’.

It is a privilege to be able to include in this issue the address Ellen Davis gave to the graduating class of Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Missouri. She reflects on the capacity of Psalm 119 to sustain us in our spiritual life. Ellen, a friend of SLG for over thirty years, is Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke University and one of the leading biblical scholars in the United States. She is active in theological education in the Anglican Communion and the author of a number of books, the most recent being: *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship and Ministry* (Westminster John Knox, 2014).

Bonnie Thurston offers another of her poems, reflecting on her, and our, perceptions of Mary. She is a noted New Testament scholar, spiritual director and retreat leader, as well as a poet, who lives in West Virginia. *Maverick Mark: the Untamed First Gospel* was published in 2013 by Liturgical Press, and her latest book of poetry, *A Place to Pay Attention*, by Cinnamon Press, at the end of November.

Sister Edmée contributes a reflection on how the hart and the gazelle in the Song of Songs may be understood. Sister Avis Mary has reflected on our need to begin to pray from where we are, from ‘below’, rather than striving to match up to unattainable ideals.

We are grateful to Rachel Severn, the Company Secretary of SLG Charitable Trust, for her article about the Association of Provincial Bursars. A number of us have attended their conferences

over the time we have been members of this very helpful association. Rachel is currently a member of its Executive. Sister Susan has written a thought-provoking review article, and Sister Christine, Oblate Sister Carol, and Canon Michael Paternoster have contributed to the book reviews section.

This October marked the beginning of a year of events to celebrate the fifth centenary of the birth of St Teresa of Avila. We kept Teresa's feast day, 15 October, by having a Teresian recreation in which every Sister brought something related to Teresa. The 'somethings' ranged from Teresa's most mystical thoughts to a collection of pots and pans! That same evening two Sisters attended the Eucharist at the Carmelite Church in Kensington which launched the celebrations. A group of Sisters are meeting weekly to read Teresa's *Life* and will continue to read her works throughout the year of celebrations.

At the end of the liturgical year the Eucharistic liturgy frequently exhorts us to 'watch', 'stand ready', and 'keep awake', themes which lead us into Advent. At the same time, in the Northern hemisphere, nature is doing the opposite. As the sap returns to the roots of the trees and the leaves are falling off, some creatures bed down to hibernate as the colder weather approaches. Isn't it a temptation to do likewise? But followers of Christ are called to wake up. With so much warfare happening at the moment, the temptation to hibernate and bury my head in the sand is powerful. The scale of suffering in the world seems too great to cope with on our own and nothing we can do will change things. But it was while, seemingly, doing nothing that Jesus accomplished the salvation of the world. His apparent defeat was total victory. A text by Fr. Gilbert Shaw above our Intercession Board reminds us that Christ's power issues from apparent defeat:

In stillness nailed, to hold all time, all change,
all circumstance in and to Love's embrace.

This year the Gospel for the Feast of Christ the King is the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25: 31-46). The parable ends with a serious warning and demonstrates the overall power of the King: *all* is in his hands. From the Letter to the Hebrews we know that ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (10: 31). But we also know from the Gospel of John that those hands belong to a God who is a God of love, for that is God’s nature. God is love (1 John 4: 6).

But even in the face of terrible suffering and cruelty, there are examples of truly heroic acts of brave and loving individuals. In this country we have heard of people attempting to rescue those surfing and losing their own lives in the attempt. We hear of healthcare professionals volunteering to nurse those with the Ebola virus. We hear of peacekeeping forces seeking to prevent further conflict. We hear of those in the emergency services who daily face many distressing and life-threatening situations.

In contrast to such a seeming mountain of evil God did not send ‘twelve legions of angels’ (Matt. 26: 53), but his son in the form of a vulnerable baby. As we read in the Letter to the Galatians:

... when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem
those who were under the law, so that we might receive
adoption as children. (4: 4-5)

As we celebrate once again the birth of Jesus, let us take heart, knowing that ultimately, *evil has* been overcome. Because of this great truth, at Easter we will be able to sing:

Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the vict’ry thou o’er death hast won.

On behalf of all the Sisters, I wish each of you a very blessed and happy Christmas and the New Year.

SISTER MARGARET THERESA SLG

ASSOCIATES

NEW

FLG

Valerie Searle	14 August 2014
Claire Sillince	18 September 2014
The Revd Thomas Gerard Reilly	3 November 2014
Fay Roberts	15 November 2014

Priest Associate

The Revd Damien Feeney	14 September 2014
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RIP

Oblate Sister

Oblate Sister Louise of the Transfiguration (The Revd Louise Lancaster)	17 July 2014
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Priest Associate

The Right Reverend Michael Scott-Joynt	27 September 2014
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FLG

The Revd Elaine Constantine	11 June 2014
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RETREATS 2015

22 - 26 July 2015

23 - 25 October 2015

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Powys, LD3 7PX
www.llangasty.com

Retreat Leader
Still to be confirmed

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Llandrindod Wells
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Garments of righteousness'**

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OXFORD OX4 1TB
Email: bursary@slg.org.uk
Tel: 01865 241849

Mater Misericordiae

I came to our Lady late
thoroughly put off
by a Protestant childhood,
and ages of bad art;
rich Renaissance drapery,
fat, satisfied looking
low country burgers wives,
cheruby gilded Madonnas,
modern blonds
in blue nightgowns.

She would not
recognize herself
except perhaps as refugee
with a hungry infant,
widowed mother of six kids,
the worn, waiting woman
in pediatric ICU,
one whose child turned out
so irreparably different
from all the rest.

I came to our Lady
in extremis to learn
surrender, suffering,
virginal, nurturing maternity,
silence of pondering hearts.
I came with nothing
but a sack of regrets
and a list of needs.
I came to our Lady late
and lively love her.

Bonnie Thurston

TRUSTEE OF INEXHAUSTIBLE TREASURES

Homily for the Feast of the Dormition/Assumption

DOUGLAS DALES

Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest: Thou, and the Ark of Thy holiness

Psalm 132.8 [LXX]

The Greek word in the Bible for holiness, *ἁγιασμος*, has a threefold meaning: holiness, consecration, and sanctification. It describes a process of divine remaking, of consecration through the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 2: 13 and 1 Pet. 1: 2), of life in Christ, ‘who was made unto us wisdom from God, both righteousness and sanctification and redemption’ (1 Cor. 1: 30). These words of St Paul conclude his profound observation that ‘God chose the foolish things of this world to put to shame those that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the strong; and base things that are despised, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that exist.’... ‘For the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men’ (1 Cor. 1: 27–8 and 25). As we consider the mystery of the Mother of God, we see these truths already expressed by her in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46–55). In her we see how holiness leads to consecration and finally to sanctification; and how through such costly self-consecration redemption flows to restore human beings to the righteousness of God Himself.

In his great homily for the Feast of the Dormition, St Gregory Palamas (d.1359), monk of Athos and Archbishop of Thessalonica, has much to say about this constellation of divine virtues at work in her earthly life and, through her eternal life, in the formation of the Church and of the saints, of whom she is Mother. He begins by desiring to celebrate with the highest honours her memory as ‘the ever-Virgin Mother of God, the Holy of Holies, through whom the

saints receive their hallowing'¹ because she alone gave birth to Christ the eternal Word and Son of God, the Life-giver. It is her nearness to God that accounts for this feast of her passing and that points us to the heavenly reality of her existence, as well as to the glory of her ministry of prayer for the Church. It is her union with God in Christ that is the foundation for the traditional belief about the mysterious manner and significance of her death.

The spirit of Mary's obedience to the call of God confirms words from Isaiah: 'For thus says the high and lofty One, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with the person that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to restore the hearts of the contrite' (Is. 57: 15). If the root of Mary's childhood formation lay hidden in the holiness and providence of God her Redeemer, the spirit of her self-consecration was encapsulated in her sincere and personal response: 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord: be it unto me according to your word' (Luke 1: 38). God's holiness enabled her consecration of herself, even as a very young person. Perhaps Psalm 131 brings us very close to the secret of her prayer and her obedience:

Lord, I am not high-minded: I have no proud looks.

I do not exercise myself in great matters: which are too high for me.

But I refrain my soul, and keep it low, like a child that is weaned from its mother: Yea, my soul is even as a weaned child.

O Israel, trust in the Lord: from this time forth for evermore.

Embedded in her memory, however, were the terrible words spoken to her by Simeon, when Mary and Joseph brought their

¹ All quotations are taken from Homily 37, 'On the Dormition of the Mother of God', in *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies*, ed. C. Veniamin (Mount Thabor Publishing, 2014).

first-born son to the Temple in thanksgiving and offering to the Lord. He predicted the future suffering of the child as a divisive presence within Israel, whose torment would break his mother's heart: 'A sword shall pierce through your own soul, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed' (Luke 2: 35).

The memory and authority of Mary lies behind these very private stories that surround the birth and childhood of Jesus. Her motherhood led her along the path of estrangement from her own kin, demanding loyalty to Jesus, and finally to the foot of the Cross itself (John 19: 25). Should any mother have to witness the torture and murder of her own child? Yet as we meet today, this is happening across the world, as Christians witness to Christ, in faithfulness to his own prayer for them and for us: 'Consecrate them in the truth: for your word is truth' (John 17: 17). St Gregory speaks of her 'co-operation with and sharing in the sufferings of, and the self-emptying of, the Word of God' (cf. Phil. 2: 7). This continued long after the resurrection of Christ, as Mary met with the apostles and the other women disciples in prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 14). St Gregory concludes:

She was the sole support and consolation of all who saw or heard her, assisting by various means in the proclamation of the gospel. ... As a result of this, her death, too, was life-giving.

But her ministry was manifestly self-effacing and hidden.

The most moving icon of the Dormition is one that shows Christ present at the deathbed of Mary, who is surrounded by the apostles and other disciples gathered from far and wide. In his hands he cradles a little child that represents the soul of Mary, forever safe in the embrace of her divine Son. St Gregory has this to say about the message of the icon:

into his hands she entrusted her God-bearing spirit; and through him her body, her spirit's companion, was soon

translated into a heavenly place of eternal life, as rightly befits her whole life from the very beginning.

Belief in the Assumption of Mary rests therefore upon an argument of congruity as well as ancient tradition. It was appropriate that she who had been united uniquely with God the Word, in body and in spirit, should share immediately in the promise of resurrection that is held out to all who put their trust in Christ, who are ‘sown in weakness, but raised in power’ (1 Cor. 15: 43).

The passing of our Lady thus sheds light on two profound truths that lie at the heart of Christian belief in the resurrection of the human person: for this feast is a celebration of Easter. The first truth is the inviolable character of the human soul. The child-like figure in the hands of Christ the Saviour represents that unique and indestructible core of human existence, known only to God and safe in His hands, if it is entrusted to Him in life and in death. We affirm this at Baptism, and also at a funeral. It is of crucial importance today as we confront dementia in a secular society. For personality is the expression of the soul: it is, of course, largely expressed through the functions of the brain but it is not a function *of* the brain, and the person remains intact even if the brain falters. The second truth concerns the sanctity of the human body, and its union with the soul as the seat of the Holy Spirit’s presence: as St Paul says, ‘your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit which is within you, which you have from God; and you are not your own’ (1 Cor. 6: 19). This truth is not only the foundation of all Christian ethics and pastoral care; it also underpins our prayer, as we seek ‘to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is our spiritual worship’ (Rom. 12: 1). It is, of course, enshrined in the reality of the Eucharist, as we receive the life of Christ into our lives, and thus become united with his risen Body, in life and through death.

St Gregory concludes:

It was right, therefore, that the body which brought forth the Son should be glorified with him in divine glory, and that the Ark of Christ's holiness should arise with him who rose on the third day, as the prophet sang in the psalm (cf. Ps. 132: 8).

He also affirms that

the Mother of God is so much closer to God than others who draw near to Him, that she is able to intercede more powerfully than any of them, and by this I mean not just human beings but even all the ranks of angels. ... Nor is this solely because no one longs for Christ as she does, and no one is so longed for in return, which would be in accordance with the laws of nature; but because she is truly His throne; and where the King sits, there stands His throne.

St Gregory's message to us is clear, inspired by the supreme paradigm of the Mother of God herself:

God requites us according to the measure of our love for Him; and the person who loves the Son is loved by him and by his Father, and becomes a place for them both to dwell, secretly living within a person and going about with them, as the Lord promised (John 14: 21–3). But who could love the Son more than his own mother ... or who could be more loved by the only begotten Son than his own mother?

St Gregory defines her unique role within the eternal life of the Church thus:

She was the first to receive the all-pervading fullness of him who fills all things (Eph. 1: 23; 4: 10) and she brought him within the reach of us all. ... For the trustee of inexhaustible treasures sees to their distribution. Why would such never-dwindling wealth be locked away?

He prays to her to

give to our souls and bodies abundant grace, sufficient for every need; and if we are unable to contain it, to increase our capacity and to give us more, so that saved and strengthened by your grace we may glorify the pre-eternal Word, who took flesh from you for our sake, together with his Father without beginning and the Life-giving Spirit, now and for ever and unto unending ages. Amen.

The Revd Douglas Dales is a Priest Associate of SLG and ministers in the Diocese of Oxford.

OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Homily for Trinity 11, Year A

ANDREW TEAL

Today's readings, quite diverse in their contexts, have a golden thread; they all witness to a hard encounter. In Jeremiah 15: 15–21 the prophet speaks to God of the pain of being his spokesman, and calls for retribution. God's promise is that Jeremiah will be delivered from the hold of ruthless men. Writing in Rom. 12: 9–21, Paul exercises his moral authority through short ethical injunctions in order to refocus the Roman Christians. They are to enter deeply into their vocation. Hard as it is, they are to be apostles of forgiveness, agents of blessing, in humble solidarity with the lowly. And they are never to let an imperative sense of justice lead to vindictiveness. Judgement is God's; our role is hospitality, which purges the tendency to vendetta. Moderation and service, not violent response, is the Christian path. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ and Jesus's acknowledgment of Peter's faith (Matt. 16: 16–17), give way to Jesus's reprimand to Peter in today's gospel (Matt. 16: 21–28). By spelling out the path of discipleship he counters the apostle's impulsive response: the destiny of the Son of Man is to be handed over to the ruthless, and to endure suffering even to death. All three readings remind us of the necessity of fierce conversations and hard encounters with the Lord in order to prevent our instant emotional response.

This week we have been made aware of what could very well become a major threat to world peace, the emergence of what a 'caliphate' the size of a large European country might be. An ideology which leads to bullying terrorism is a frightening thing. The public beheading of a journalist, dispensable because he represents the great enemy, the enforced marching of Syrian soldiers in underwear into the desert to be executed or converted, and the connections of the Islamic State to groups in Africa and the

West is a very dark epiphany. The saddest aspects of these reports were the words and nervous laughter of those committing the atrocities—they were like little frightened schoolchildren, vying to outdo one another to prove that they belonged

The prediction of the Passion (Matt. 16: 21) confronts us with what is necessary in our Christian pilgrimage: to take up our cross. At the time of Christ the condemned criminals carried the horizontal bar upon which they would be executed and would have been subject to taunts, shame, and an agonizing death. The path of the Christian community, of each of us, must be one where daily we lose—surrendering pride, ego, status, comfort, life. Easy to say, but sacrifices we avoid for the most part.

Our response is to trust faithfully in God's power. The current battles in Iraq may yet again lead to intervention to save the innocent, and even armed intervention as the last resort, if it complies with Augustine's insights about the justification of conflict. However, let us not delude ourselves: the powers that urge toward human destruction, division, and death are at work. We must bless, pray, model harmony, extend hospitality, living peaceably 'if it is possible, so far as it depends on you' (Rom 12: 18), overcoming this evil with good.

The outlook is not cheerful; the fierce encounters we have heard of in the news this week cast us onto the rock which is Christ, and demand that we set our minds on the divine imperative. Let us pray without ceasing for the peace of the world, the deliverance of those ensnared in evil, and for the grace to love God and his creation—whatever.

The Revd Andrew Teal is Chaplain and Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, and Warden of SLG.

READ, PRAY, TRUST¹

Reflections on Psalm 119

ELLEN DAVIS

For most of you, this evening marks the end of your formal education. Think of it: from now on, your only exams will be of the medical variety; it is likely that you will never write another twenty-page paper, that emblem of the academic life practically non-existent anywhere else. However, it is not to celebrate the end of the gruelling and the irrelevant that we gather this evening. We are here to witness to the commencement of the promising, and maybe a little scary, not-yet-charted ‘rest of your life.’ Especially we are here to pray for you as you enter into your ministry. Being a graduate and not a student means that you will no longer have a designated set of people known as Faculty directing many aspects of your life, including your prayer life, which is our focus this evening.

I thank you for this undeserved honour of being your preacher. Undeserved, because with respect to much of what lies ahead for you, I am clueless: I don’t belong to the Reformed tradition, as most of you do, and I have never been a pastor, as most of you will be. Therefore I focus now on what we do share: we are all people of prayer, or at least people trying to pray, trying to do our part in maintaining a life-giving relationship with God. Speaking for myself, it isn’t easy, nor is it clear most of the time whether we are doing a decent job. Sad to say, what it is to be in relationship with God tends to get murky and muddled after you leave seminary, where there were clear standards of expectation on things such as chapel participation, as well as a great deal of guided theological

¹ An address given to the graduating class of Western Theological Seminary, Holland MI, USA, 12 May 2014. It will be published as “Gospel Wisdom for Ministry: Sermons for Theology Students,” an essay in the forthcoming book *Preaching Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard Lischer*, edited by Charles Campbell and Jennifer Copeland, Cascade Press.

reflection. But now you will be mostly on your own in tending your relationship with God—unless you find a really good spiritual director, which I would heartily recommend.

So now I bring before you the most skilled spiritual director I know, the genius of poetry and prayer who has given us Psalm 119. Biblical scholars call it a wisdom psalm; and having lived with it now for some years, I believe it might be the single best lesson in spirituality in the whole Bible. It is a very long psalm, and there is a reason for that, because spirituality is not the kind of thing that lends itself to quick study. This psalmist is taking us on a slow, winding journey of 176 fairly repetitive verses. In the course of our travel we are gradually being inducted into a spirituality for the long haul, one that can sustain us now and for the rest of our lives. I realized that what this psalm might say has particular resonance for those in the Reformed tradition, because the spirituality in which it instructs us is so deeply rooted in Scripture. It is teaching us an intimate hermeneutic, a way of reading Scripture that draws us into a profound and loving relationship with the One whose voice we hear on every page, if only we know how to seek out God through the written word and hold fast to what—or who—is disclosed to us. In short, the psalmist is teaching us how to read, pray, and trust.

In the manner of the best teachers in every age and setting, the psalmist teaches by sharing with us his own struggles, in this case his struggles to find God in the words of a text. He presents himself as a young man, though he could be an older man remembering what it was like to be young. He is a young Torah student, and that means he is a lot like us, more like us than he is like Moses, say, or Abraham, or Elijah. Like us and unlike them, this psalmist does not experience God as a three-dimensional, speaking character who says, ‘Leave here; go there; do this now.’ Our psalmist doesn’t hear God speaking out of the fire, or in the thunder of Sinai, or even in a still, small voice, giving directions that are unmistakable, if not always logical. Our psalmist was not present at Sinai, when the

divine finger inscribed the commandments—‘black fire on white fire,’ as the rabbis say. Those holy words have cooled down by his time; the psalmist knows them much the same way we do, as black ink on parchment or paper. And so he has the same difficulty we have: how on earth can you learn to read in a way that enables you to find the reality of God in a book, even if you call it a holy book?

This is a tough situation, spiritually speaking, even if we are all used to it by now. Yet the greatness of the psalmist is that he does not try to get used to it. He is honest enough, and desperate enough, for a living connection with God, that he repeatedly cries out for hermeneutical help: ‘Open my eyes that I may see wonders in your *torah*, your teaching.’ He believes there is a real connection to be made through these texts, though often it is maddeningly elusive. ‘Do not hide from me your commandments,’ he pleads. ‘I cling to your testimony, Adonai; do not put me to shame’ (v. 31). Acute longing and vulnerability is the tone of the whole psalm: ‘My eyes pine for your speaking’ (v. 82); ‘My *nefesh*, my soul, my whole being, clings to the dust’ (v. 25); it ‘dissolves in anguish’ (v. 28). Now, that’s vulnerable.

Our young psalmist is reading Scripture the way people of my generation and before read love letters. Electronic communications have probably eclipsed the ancient drama of the love letter, but for centuries, reading a love letter was a common, yet never ordinary, experience. Probably for most people it was their sole experience of reading a text with total attention, in a state of utter vulnerability. Imagine it: you might wait weeks, even months, to hear from the beloved. You planned your days around the mail delivery; you ran to the mailbox; sometimes you approached it with trepidation. When the letter finally came, you went to a quiet place and read it over and over; you returned to it for days. When you knew every word, you added it to a bundle of letters tied up with a ribbon, and put it in a shoebox. Sometimes those letters were kept for generations, especially if the romance ended in marriage and

children. But sometimes, after a painful break, you threw them away, or better still, you ceremoniously burned them; and then you were physically ill. ‘My soul, my *nefesh*, my whole being, dissolves in anguish.’

Don’t tell me the poet of this psalm is a legalistic pedant, though a lot of people think so; but they cannot have read it. Our psalmist is melting with unfulfilled longing: ‘My whole being dissolves.’ This psalm is the Song of Songs of the Psalter. That is, it is one extended expression of longing that meets with an answering passion, yet is never sated. Intense longing makes for a passionate reading of texts, for a hermeneutic of intimacy, whether you are reading love letters or Torah. Moved by intense longing, you try to connect with another heart and mind, a life that seems essential to your own life. You never tire of reading every word, carefully probing every ambiguity, playing with every hint that points to more than is actually written. Our psalmist, whether young in years or young in heart, is a playful reader; but this is the serious play of a child. If you read this psalm carefully, you will come across that word again and again: ‘Your *torah*, God, your Teaching is my plaything’ (v. 174; cf. vv. 16, 24, 47, 77, 92, 143, etc.). I have noticed that most translators try to come up with something more grown-up sounding than the word ‘plaything.’ The point is that the psalmist never gets tired of Scripture, any more than a child gets bored with her favourite toy.

Reading God’s Word like this is the farthest thing from a head-trip, a merely mental exercise. This is heart-reading, and it changes a body. It will change yours, if you stay at it. ‘You widen my heart,’ the psalmist prays (v. 32). Poring over words that come from God and reveal God, you may feel your own heart stretching. ‘You widen my heart’, and, ‘I *run* in the way of your commandments;’ both are signs of health, of spiritual athleticism. It is good when God widens your heart, but it is painful. How could it not be painful to have your heart stretched? An older priest, a wise and

compassionate woman, tells a story from some years ago. She had gone to see a psychiatrist, because she was struggling with depression. She was depressed about the state of the world, the terrible suffering and inhumanity she witnessed or read about. ‘Why do you let these things bother you?’ the psychiatrist asked. ‘You can’t do anything about them. The aim of therapy is to be well adjusted.’ That remark was clarifying for her; it was even healing, although not in the way the psychiatrist had intended. She recognized it as the counsel of despair, and not the word of the gospel. ‘We certainly can do something about these things,’ she said. ‘We can bring them in prayer before God.’ The aim of prayer, like the aim of poring over God’s word in Scripture, is to let our hearts be stretched to embrace the world, to embrace its agony and nurture its difficult hope. The aim of prayer is, by the grace of God, to develop a more capacious heart for the world in its suffering, not to be ‘well adjusted,’ that is, conformed to the world in its sickness.

The psalmist, our director, reads Scripture with a lover’s passion and prays like an athlete in training. But there is something more here, something that makes this psalm not just a keeper, but a lifeline. It has the capacity to guide us through a lifetime in ministry. What is most distinctive here is the persistent note of vulnerability, utter vulnerability before God. You could call it ‘trust in God,’ and that would be perfectly accurate, but the spiritual genius of this psalmist is to show us that the other side of trust is vulnerability. Trust is the disposition of heart and mind that characterizes those who are vulnerable; if you are in control of a situation or a relationship, then you don’t need to trust. Most of us would prefer to be in a situation where it is not really necessary to trust God, where we are sailing along with a fair wind at our back. It is when the wind is against us that we are forced back on trust in God. And that is where the psalmist is: ‘The way of trust have I chosen’ (v. 30), he says; ‘I have trusted in your word’ (v. 42).

So total is his choice of trust that the final stanza of the psalm is pure supplication: ‘Save me ..., I long for your rescue ..., I have wandered like a lost sheep.’ Stop right there: what kind of way is that for authoritative biblical teaching to end? ‘I have wandered like a lost sheep.’ This, the very last line, is where the psalm delivers its shock value, where it totally violates our good professional sense. You don’t publicize your cluelessness and then expect people to take you seriously; as we all know, you need to project self-confidence if you are going to succeed in ministry. ‘I have been wandering like a lost sheep.’ This is biblical wisdom? Would you post that on your Facebook page?

Yet that final line of the psalm up-ended and re-directed the life of one person whose work is known to us; it eventually became the impetus for half-a-century of fruitful ministry. ‘I have been wandering like a lost sheep; seek your servant.’ That line haunted the eighteenth-century slaver, John Newton, until he finally renounced the slave trade and began to study for ministry. There is a faint echo of the verse in his most famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*: ‘I once was lost, but now am found.’ You don’t need to be as lost as Newton was to discover in this psalm the wisdom essential for any ministry that is to be fruitful over the long term, namely the difference, the total incompatibility, between *self*-confidence and trust in God.

Self-confidence may be widely promoted as a professional asset for pastors, but the Bible presents it quite differently. From a biblical perspective relying on your own strengths is a mode of arrogance. Repeatedly our psalmist talks about the people from whom he needs to protect himself, namely, the ones who aren’t thinking about God as they confidently pursue schemes that work to their own advantage; he calls such people ‘the arrogant’ (vv. 78, 85, etc.). Our psalmist would tell us that we need to choose either self-confidence, which is a form of spiritual blindness, or the way he himself has chosen, radical trust in God.

As we consider the consequences of that choice for ministry, one particular verse of declaration and supplication claims our attention. First there is the psalmist's declaration: 'I trust in your word' (v. 42). And then the plea that follows from that: 'Do not take any word of truth entirely out of my mouth' (vv. 42-43). All of us should become practiced in that plea; it belongs on our own lips. 'Do not take any word of truth entirely out of my mouth.' Think about what we are called to do. Whether it is pastoral ministry; preaching or leading worship; teaching; counselling; chaplaincy; spiritual direction; or community work, all of us with a theological education bear the responsibility regularly to speak some word of truth about God, and human life with God. In other words, we need to speak about things that are greatly beyond our understanding. If we imagine that we are in a strong position to speak authoritatively about God; if we are perhaps afraid to admit how much we do not know, or how much we ourselves may struggle with confusion and doubt, even as we keep turning back to God to try again; if we choose the way of *self*-confidence over the way of vulnerability and trust in God, then we are likely to be among those arrogant of whom the psalmist says, 'They twist, they manipulate me with lies' (v. 78).

Unfortunately, some of us know about that manipulation. We know what it is to have someone who claims to be an authority on the things of God—a minister or teacher or spiritual guide—mess with our minds and hearts. Sustained exposure to that kind of deceptively confident manipulation is damaging; it takes a long time, sometimes years, to recover spiritual health. How different is the ministry of someone like our psalmist, who chooses the way of trust and thus invites others into a genuinely safe space, where it is all right to be uncertain, even about important things. In this space we can all be vulnerable before God and one other, even those who are 'in authority'. Whenever two or three or more gather thus in Christ, a little truth about God may be spoken and shared, and gradually we may grow together into the true body of Christ.

Therefore, Western Seminary Class of 2014, this is our prayer for you:

- that you may foster the creation of safe, nurturing spaces for the body of Christ to grow, each of you in the ministry to which you are now called;
- that you may be sustained in that ministry by the practice of reading Scripture with a lover's eye, with your heart and not only your head;
- that through reading, prayer, and truthful sharing of the Christian life, God will stretch your heart wide to embrace the world in its pain and faltering hope.
- Above all, we pray that you may have the courage to lose your *self*-confidence and trust in God, the courage to be wide open in vulnerability to God and neighbour.

And let all the people of God say: *Amen*.

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THE HART AND THE GAZELLE

SISTER EDMÉE SLG

The *Monastic Diurnal*, which we were using when I entered the Community in 1966, contains many antiphons taken from the Song of Songs. From the start I sensed their purifying effect on a straying imagination, and I came to understand that the Song is a redirector of the passions. A single antiphon at one of the Hours can be a reminder of the love which had brought one into the religious life in the first place. Divine *eros* purifies human *eros*, which explains why the Song has been the most read and the most commented upon book of the Bible in monastic history.

But the purifying effect of the Song is not confined to those who have undertaken the monastic vows. In the early Middle Ages congregations of Sephardic and Oriental Jews introduced the liturgical practice of chanting the Song entire in the synagogue each Friday evening, that is to say, on the Sabbath eve when the Law requires the fulfilment of the conjugal obligation. Of course, this very practice has been adduced in our day as evidence of the erotic character of the Song which, according to this view, is recited for the purpose of sexual arousal. It would be difficult to argue against such a view were it not that it overlooks the laws of purity which supersede the conjugal obligation and render a husband and wife forbidden to each other almost as often as not. But it is not sexual desire which the Song intends to arouse but *love*, a love which on the one hand hallows the sexual act and enables it to be approached, in the words of an ancient writer, as ‘the most sacred of all sowings’,¹ while on the other hand it makes joy in companionship possible and provides that restraint which is both the mark of true love and its ennobling element. Nevertheless, in

¹ Plutarch, *Praecepta conjugalium*, cited in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 18 n. 65.

following the citations of the hart and the gazelle we will find that they lead precisely to that ascetic calling which has so benefited from this work of a poetic and mystical genius.

* * *

The background in Proverbs

The Song of Songs is attributed to, or dedicated to, the biblical metaphor for wisdom—Solomon. It is to this aspect of the book—apocalyptic is the other—to which the animals belong. The hart and the gazelle—both male when paired in the Song—occur five times, while gazelles, in feminine plural, occur twice with hinds, a female animal. Translations vary giving ‘does’ where others give ‘hinds’ or ‘roes’. It makes no odds. They are all deer-like animals, fleet and sure-footed on mountains (cf. ‘He made my feet like hind’s feet, and set me secure on the heights’, Ps. 18: 34) and they are allowed for food. A passage at Proverbs 5: 19, where the hind and the doe are symbolic of the breasts of Lady Wisdom, provides a clue, I believe, to the animals in the Song:

Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice on account of the wife of your youth.
A loving hind and a gracious doe,
let her breasts fill you at all times,
that with her love you may be continually intoxicated.

The ‘wife of your youth’ is the language used of Lady Wisdom in the first nine chapters of Proverbs: ‘Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her and she will guard you ... she will honour you if you embrace her’ (Prov. 4: 6–8). The vocabulary of ‘wife’, and also of ‘mother’, is used of Wisdom elsewhere: ‘She [Wisdom] will come to meet him like a mother, and like the wife of his youth she will welcome him’ (Sirach 15: 2). Similarly in the Wisdom of Solomon: ‘I loved her and I sought her from my youth, and I desired to take her for my bride’ (8: 2). The language of the Song

links especially to that of Proverbs: ‘How fair are your breasts, my sister, my bride ...’ (4: 10)²

The adjurations

The first appearance of the animals is an adjuration which occurs at 2: 7 and again at 3: 5. Both the animals in the Proverbs passage are female as also in the adjurations in the Song, but with the difference that gazelles replace the second animal of Proverbs:

*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,
that you stir not up nor awaken
love ‘til it please.*

One commentator, Othmar Keel, asks an interesting question about this verse:

To obligate oneself or another through a solemn oath is a frequent OT occurrence; the God of Israel is regularly called on as guarantor in such a case. To call on another deity in this way would be idolatry (Jer. 5: 7, 12: 16). What does it mean here at Song 2: 7 and 3: 5 when gazelles and does take the place otherwise reserved for God?³

Keel does not pursue the implications of his question and is evidently unaware that an answer has been suggested by those commentators who have noted wordplay on two epithets for God. André Chouraqui, to give only one, writes that both animals provide ‘a clear allusion in the text to Elohim (*ayyelo*th), and to Tsebaoth (*tseba*oth) the Lord of Hosts—[understood] as witness

² ‘Breasts’ are a difficulty for the modern reader since we have become accustomed to associating them with pictures of lush females manifesting their secondary aspect. But their primary function is to provide nourishment for growth, and for the wisdom writers they are a metaphor for the nourishment required for growth in righteousness and wisdom.

³ Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 92.

and as guarantor.⁴ It seems that the poet, the author of the Song, intends these animals to be representative of God because they represent wisdom, and Wisdom, whenever it can in our terms carry a capital letter, is representative of God.

To what, then, does the adjuration point? And what does ‘love’ mean here that it must not be awakened? Translations often give ‘he’ instead of ‘it’, notwithstanding the Hebrew, because ‘it’ is incomprehensible if the adjuration is not seen to point to something other than to the male figure. The something other is found at 5: 2: ‘I sleep but my heart is awake.’ It is this sleep which is not to be disturbed. The line provides a major clue to the meaning of the Song and explains its resonance with mystics down the centuries, two of whom are particularly clear on this verse. First, Gregory of Nyssa in his commentary on the Song of Songs writes:

This sleep is like death. In it each sensory function of the body is lost; there is no vision, hearing, scent, taste, nor feeling, but the body’s tension is loosed ... Once all these senses have been put to sleep and are gripped by inaction, the heart’s action is pure; reason looks above while it remains undisturbed and free from the senses’ movement ...

Teresa of Avila, in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, refers to this state several times:

Indeed, the soul does not even find itself awake in order to love. But blessed sleep, happy inebriation that makes the Bridegroom supply for what the soul cannot do ... For while the faculties are dead or asleep, love remains awake.

This state of prayer, which Teresa, like the poet, calls ‘love’, since it is love that motivates prayer, is not often described, although the well-known saying of St Antony of the Desert clearly

⁴ André Chouraqui, *Le Cantique des cantiques suivi des Psaumes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 49.

points to it: ‘That prayer is not perfect in the course of which the monk is aware that he is praying’.

Genesis 3: 21

In the verse that follows (5: 2) the ‘bride’ fails to respond to the knock of the beloved by her declaration: ‘I have put off my garment, how can I put it on?’ The Hebrew vocabulary of this line is that of Genesis 3: 21: ‘And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife *garments* of skin and he *clothed* [*put on*] them.’⁵

This act of God, by which he clothed the glory of Adam and Eve with mortality, inspired the ascetics of early Christianity, especially those of Syriac Christianity, with a fierce asceticism intended to cast off the garment earned by disobedience. *The Odes of Solomon*, written by another Wisdom poet two or three centuries after the Song, contain some striking links, among them the same declaration: ‘I removed from me the garment of skin’ (*Ode* 25.8) This poet was, the evidence indicates, an ascetic, probably an Essene, before he came to believe in Christ as the awaited Messiah.⁶ The discovery of the last fifty years or so that Jewish ascetic communities existed long before Christians began to live in communities enables us to speculate that Jewish ascetics similarly practised a fierce asceticism for the same purpose, and that the author of the Song was one of them. Whatever be the case, it emerges from these two extraordinary lines, ‘I sleep but my heart is awake’ and ‘I have taken off my garment’, that the author was a contemplative and an ascetic.

He must, moreover, have been a master of the spiritual life and possibly the leader of a community the members of which, he could see had become so fixed in an ascetic praxis that they failed—in the

⁵ The word ‘skin’ at Gen. 3: 21 is in the singular, not in the plural as usually translated. The word ‘garment’ can also be translated ‘tunic’. The Hebrew of both words is the same.

⁶ See James Charlesworth, *The Earliest Christian Hymnbook: The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 2009).

person of the ‘bride’—to respond to the knock of the beloved. The ‘bride’, who is here, it seems to me, a metaphor for the ascetics, then goes out to seek the beloved who has departed following her failure to respond to his call.⁷ She is found by the watchmen (cf. Isaiah 62: 6) who smite and wound her and remove from her that final covering she thought she had removed but which, she now discovers, can only be removed by a power greater than any she possesses. What then follows is her vision of the beloved, Song 5:10–16, described in language which connects to every theophanic passage in the Bible from Deuteronomy to Revelation.

The messianic character of the Song

The second mention of the animals is made by the bride:

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart. (Song 2: 9)

‘My beloved’ is one word here in Hebrew, the ‘my’ being attached to ‘beloved’. Hebrew letters are also numbers and the form ‘my beloved’ occurs in the Song twenty-six times, which gives the numerical value of the divine name YHWH. Moreover, all forms of ‘beloved’ occur thirty-three times which points to 1 Kings 2: 11: ‘and he [David] reigned for thirty-three years in Jerusalem.’⁸ Further, *dôd*, ‘beloved’, differently vocalized in Hebrew, provides the name ‘David’ which further supports the messianic interpretation of the early centuries, notably that of the targum, the Aramaic translation of the Song.

That the beloved is likened to the two animals which represent Wisdom is a departure from the wisdom books of Proverbs, Sirach, and The Wisdom of Solomon, in all of which Wisdom is hypostasized as female. In the New Testament the Messiah is the Wisdom figure, and thus the Christological interpretation of the

⁷ The ascetics would have been male, but the bride here represents the feminine principle not the female gender. The contemplative is, so to speak, passive to God and consequently ‘feminine’.

⁸ Which must surely be the basis for the tradition that Jesus was thirty-three when he died?

Song, which held the field until the rise of Humanism in the late medieval period, manifested an understanding that preserved the continuity of the two Testaments—a continuity about which the Church Fathers were insistent.

But the ‘bride’ is also portrayed at times as a wisdom figure, notably in all references to her breasts, and as Wisdom herself, most clearly at 6: 10:

*Who is she who looks down like the morning star,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
terrible as the bannered hosts?* (Song 6: 10)

In the history of Christianity, especially in the Latin West, Mary is also seen to represent Wisdom, most of the texts for her feasts in the *Monastic Diurnal* coming either from verses in the Song, as the one above, or from the Wisdom passages in Sirach. In the Song the ‘bride’ figure is a series of metaphors: the Temple, its worship, Jerusalem, the land of Israel, the people of Israel. The long passage at 7: 2–6 describes, under the metaphor of her body, a tour of the land of Israel with the Temple at its beginning and end, and its worship at the centre. But that the beloved and the ‘bride’ can both be seen as representing Wisdom is evident, it seems to me, in the messianic verse which concludes the Song.

The despatch of the beloved

*O you who dwell in the gardens,
the companions hearken to your voice;
enable me to hear it.
Go my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or a young hart
upon the mountains of spices.* (Song 8: 13–14)

There are two voices in these two verses. The first verse uses a word, widely translated as ‘companions’, which a French writer

well translates as a ‘groupe des ferventes’.⁹ That the address is *to* Wisdom from a devotee is suggested by a verse in Proverbs where the address is *from* Wisdom:

Now, O children, hearken to me:
blessed are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.

(Proverbs 8:32–33)

The second voice at Song 8: 14 is, it seems to me, that of Wisdom instructing the beloved to go. This imperative, meaning ‘go/pass through’, is usually translated ‘flee’ which is quite correct but ‘flee’ has the wrong connotations in English, implying flight from an enemy. Here I think the instruction is to ‘pass through’ and, if that is so, what is intended could mean ‘pass through the heavens’, a meaning consonant with the links in the Song to the early Jewish mystical literature known as *Heikhalot* (meaning Temples). A major clue to the meaning here lies, it seems to me, with the two animals, and we must probe further in order to discover the reason for the exhortation to the beloved to be like them.

In Deuteronomy, a much earlier book, redolent with wisdom elements, there are three chapters in which animals allowed for food are listed. First: ‘With all the desire of your soul you may sacrifice and eat flesh in all your gates according to the blessing of the Lord your God which he has given to you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and as of the hart’ (12: 15). Second: ‘As the gazelle and as the hart is eaten, so you may eat of it; the unclean and the clean together may eat of it’ (12: 22). Third: ‘These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat; the hart and the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep’ (14: 4–5). Fourth: ‘You shall eat it within your gates, the unclean and the clean together, like the

⁹ André Robert, *Le Cantique des cantiques: Traduction et commentaire* (Paris: Gabalda, 1963), 326.

gazelle and like the hart' (15: 22). And at 1 Kings 4: 23 there is a description of the food provided daily for Solomon—the putative author of the Song. Among the animals listed are the hart and the gazelle.

If we see the 'bride' here as Wisdom, then her exhortation to the beloved, that is, to the Messiah, is made from the perspective of heaven. Go, she says, and be food for the world. And so a Messiah is born in Bethlehem, *beith\lekhem* meaning 'house of bread', or 'of food', and is laid in a manger, that is, in a trough in a stable from which cattle eat (Luke 2: 4–7). And in due time this Messiah would declare: 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever' (John 6: 51).¹⁰ And at the Last Supper in another Gospel, this same man 'took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat, this is my body"' (Matt. 26: 26), which is done at every Eucharist when the priest holds up the consecrated bread and, quoting John 1: 29 and 36, says: 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world', after which he distributes the bread to the congregation to be eaten.

These texts are not adduced because I believe the poet foresaw them but because they are the realization of his understanding of Wisdom as food and, in the metaphor of breasts, as drink, an understanding articulated by the Wisdom figure in Sirach: 'Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more' (24: 21).

Finally, I want to quote a verse plucked from the Wisdom of Solomon, and familiar to all of us from our Christmastide liturgy. Its context is one of doom and judgement, and thus its use at such a joyful season appears to some to be cheating. But the Word in John's Gospel declares: 'For judgement I came into this world' (9: 39), which provides something of a corrective to the season's

¹⁰ The word for 'bread' in Greek, *artos*, like bread in English, in Hebrew and in Aramaic, also bears the general meaning 'food'.

festivities. I quote it here because it seems to me that it expresses explicitly what I believe the conclusion of the Song expresses implicitly:

While all things were in quiet silence,
and that night was in the midst of her swift course,
thine Almighty Word, O Lord,
leaped down from heaven
out of thy royal throne. (18: 14–15)

* * *

‘SPIRITUALITY FROM BELOW’

The Way of Humility as the Essential Path to God

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Perhaps we are reeling from some sudden and massive betrayal in a relationship, or within our family or community life; or someone dear to us has been mistreated, or we have become the victim of a terrible criminal act. The voices of others, or of some internalized ‘ought’ of our own, may then be pressing us to ‘forgive’—but perhaps we can’t, or can’t *yet*, reach a place where forgiveness and healing are possible, and to our pain is then added the sense of being even a failure at forgiveness.

Perhaps we are coping with some great loss, such as a major bereavement. Perhaps we have lost our work, a job to which we have given ourselves faithfully for so many years, but have been made redundant or had to retire. In such circumstances we may hear from well-meaning friends, or from our own internalized ideal conceptions of the spiritual life, that we ‘have to let go’, ‘must move on’. Often our inability to do so then compounds our inner suffering. If friends or family say such things to us, we can feel that they, too, do not understand and that we are isolated from them. In not being able to do what is required of us, it often seems that God has abandoned us, or we have abandoned God.

Perhaps we teach in a failing school, or are a novice in a religious community, or an anxious parent, or a desperate partner, or caring friend, and whatever we try to do for the best, however hard we try, we appear to meet with non-acceptance or failure, and are near the end of our own resources. In such situations we may be hearing, from within or without, ‘try harder’—yet the harder we try, the worse things get.

All these can be ‘limit situations’, that is, where a serious situation has arisen and we come up against our own limits and limitations, our own boundaries. What is old and familiar no longer

helps us. We have moved into a situation which is beyond previous experience, a crisis situation. Words, concepts, spiritual attitudes which have helped before no longer work in the way they did, and we have to find new adaptations and expressions.

Recently a friend said to me when we met, referring to a difficulty which I have been facing, ‘Has anyone been able to say anything to you which you found helped you at all?’ I found this question in itself very helpful. She was asking, in effect, if anyone had been able to ‘give me a word’, in the sense in which during the first centuries of the Christian Church individuals would seek out one of the Desert Fathers and ask for a ‘word’, some words of guidance, something to take away for their spiritual life. My friend was not adding to those inner or outer voices which say: ‘Forgive!’; ‘Let go!’; ‘Try to do better!’ She was well aware that I would know them, and she made no attempt to start from there.

In response, I told her of ‘a word’—three words to be precise—which I have heard recently and which has proved life-giving, and something I can internalize. It comes not from someone speaking to me directly, but from a book. Those words are ‘Spirituality from Below’. Although I had heard the expression before, it had not made much impression upon me; indeed, it is not particularly elegant, even a little boring; but the timing was just right for it to speak to me with great significance when I encountered it again.

Fr Anselm Grün OSB, a monk of Münsterschwarzach Abbey in Germany, the author of over 300 books of popular spirituality, is making a great impact in the German-speaking world. As yet, only a couple of his books have been published in English. He has a gift for reinterpreting the truths of Christian spirituality in a way that speaks to many struggling with the challenges of faith in the modern world. He combines traditional spiritual insights through the centuries with those of modern psychology and storytelling. He has developed the concept of ‘spirituality from below’. The book ‘Spirituality from Below’ (*Spiritualität von unten*), written together

with a fellow monk, Fr Meinrad Dufner OSB, was first published in 1995 by Vier-Türme-Verlag, Münsterschwarzach. Books in the same series with related content are ‘Prayer as Encounter’ (*Gebet als Begegnung*, 1990), and ‘Spiritual Accompaniment and the Desert Fathers’ (*Geistliche Begleitung bei den Wüstenvätern*, 1991), both by Anselm Grün. All three books are still in print.

Grün and Dufner reinterpret for today St Benedict’s fundamental teaching on humility. They explain that humility, or in Latin, *humilitas*, derived from *humus*, meaning earth, is equated wrongly with suffering humiliations, a word of the same ultimate derivation via the Latin *humilis*, humble. The German word for humility, *Demut*, does not help. It is derived from the Old High German word *diomuoti* (Middle High German *diemuot*, ‘servementality’) and it describes a particular attitude towards other people, the social virtue of serving. Humility means, however, coming to terms with being formed from the earth, being subject to the natural processes of birth and death, being subject to gravity. If we try, like Icarus in ancient mythology, to fly, to come close—too close—to the sun, we shall find that the wax holding our wings together melts, and we fall and drown in the sea.

Humility is about the truth of our relationship with God, and is a religious virtue. Spirituality from below is the way to our true self and to God, through descending into our own reality. It describes the steps we need to take in order to come to the true self. It is about experiencing helplessness and failure as the place of true prayer and the opportunity for encounter with God. It is the spiritual path which leads, through the experience of failure, to crying out to God from the depths and to deeper relationship with God.

In Anselm Grün’s thinking, the Desert Fathers were the first to develop a spirituality from below. According to them, the way for anyone wishing to practice a spiritual life leads through the desert

of one's own self. Acquiring self-knowledge is essential for this, and only so can there be a true healing and wholesome spirituality.

In contrast, a 'spirituality from above' may be understood as the ideal of what a good Christian is—a good religious, maybe, or a good church member, or a good Catholic or Protestant—together with the attempt of the Christian to reach that ideal. This spirituality comprises biblical ideals from both the Old and the New Testaments (and St Paul was rather good at formulating them for Christians). It consists of what we have heard in sermons, in a religious rule, in the examples given us by the saints, in our unconscious ideas about how to please others and gain their approval. It may be the image of a ladder, or a mountain, or stages which we have to surmount in order to reach the top, to be 'top of our game' as Christians. 'Spirituality from above' is not to be denigrated. Ideals are important, and sometimes we have simply to make an effort in the Christian life—prayer, self-discipline, *ascesis*, and conscious practice of the virtues, such as ordinary courtesy, are essential. To strive to grow as Christians and to aim for perfection are good things; we do have to begin somewhere in training ourselves for the journey.

In following the example of the saints, we can only go so far along the same road as they followed, because we have to find the path for ourselves, as each of them did. We have to find our own deepest truth and reality. St Thérèse of Lisieux developed her 'Little Way', which for so many of us has been a wonderful inspiration in following Christ. But we cannot follow her into the depths of the particular suffering which was her lot in her final illness: not only terrible physical suffering, but also the spiritual agony of believing herself to be far from God.

Likewise, St Teresa of Avila achieved remarkable things for God and for the Carmelite Order. But first she had to know the sense of her own utter failure, both in childhood in her attempt to become a martyr, and in her first twenty years as a nun, when she

followed the slack practices of the time concerning convent life, rather than what she had begun to understand as God's real plan for her. She suffered at times from dramatic sickness, perhaps as a result of her inner turmoil. We shall also meet our trials and tribulations, and we have to find the way through them for ourselves.

Spirituality from above is important, but it has to be set alongside spirituality from below, accepting the reality of what does not seem perfect or ideal. Sometimes our expectations of ourselves and of what we should be are so high that we inevitably fail. We can then feel ourselves to be 'miserable sinners', as the Church of England's Liturgy used to proclaim. Many experience a permanent sense of dis-ease, or something which feels even worse, such as low self-esteem and depression, and in consequence lead lives of silent despair. Our ideals may work for us for a time, but in 'limit situations' they simply fall away, particularly when founded on lack of reality as to who we are or who we should be, or on false images of God. Alongside spirituality from above, therefore, we need spirituality from below, where all is allowed to exist which does exist.

If we cannot yet forgive or let go and move on, or we cannot try any harder, however much we are bashing our heads against brick walls in our desperate attempts to do so, then that is the reality. If we have wounds, then we need to let go of our expectations that they will all be healed, while at the same time working towards restoration, and remaining open to grace, perhaps through a healing 'word'. The wounds, failures, and inadequacies are simply there. Not repressing our wounds and the effect they have on us can enable them to be the way to greater love. The oyster turns the grain of grit into a pearl by perforce working *with* it, rather than striving to get it out of its shell. Wounds can turn into pearls. At the end is humility, serenity, and a sense of humour (despite the similarity, this is not derived from *humus*, but rather

from the Latin *humor*, ‘moisture’). Other fruits are greater openness towards others —something which would be unimaginable in the first agonies of a particular hurt—and wisdom.

We each have to hear the word of grace for ourselves. For me the word about ‘spirituality from below’ was such. Things are as they are. Things happen. We need to stay with that. As our former Reverend Mother, Sister Jane (1927-95), used to say, rather lugubriously, but with infinite hope, ‘Nothing lasts for ever.’ How things are today is not quite how they will be tomorrow, even if it might feel like it. Somehow, imperceptibly, they will be different. The situation will eventually change completely, at the latest at our death. And one day, if we are open to grace, we may become aware of previously unsuspected treasure.

**THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF PROVINCIAL BURSARS**

RACHEL L. SEVERN

As October approaches, the attention of those of us concerned with the financial management and stewardship of charities administered by religious communities begins to focus on the Association of Provincial Bursars' Annual Conference, an event always held in the first full week of October.

The Association of Provincial Bursars (www.apbursars.org.uk) exists to support its 200 plus members in the stewardship roles they undertake for Religious Institutes. For some thirty years, the Association has provided advice and information, and engaged with working groups to represent the financial and temporal interests of Religious with central government, the Charity Commission, and other legislative bodies. As well, it offers a forum where knowledge can be shared for the benefit of the whole body of members.

The Association has a predominantly Roman Catholic membership but also encourages membership from other denominations. SLG has been a member for many years. As Head of Finance and Governance for SLG Charitable Trust Ltd, and an elected member of the Executive Committee, I represent the Anglican members.

The Conference is currently held at Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. There is a very full programme which combines prayer and worship with the Annual General Meeting and seminar presentations. There is also time for fellowship and networking. It begins at 4.30 p.m. on Monday, with a welcome by the Chair of the APB, currently Sister Carmel Bateson HFB, followed by a keynote address. This year Fr Kevin Fox SJ spoke on the subject of 'Mercy in the Market Place: some reflections prompted by *Evangelii Gaudium*', the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis of November

2013. Fr Kevin's opening words referred to St Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, drawing on the maxim that if one never did anything bold, then one would never do anything great for God. Referring to extracts from the *Evangelii Gaudium*, he exhorted the Conference to encourage boldness in initiatives, creativity, ministry, and in evangelizing the Church.

Following supper, a meeting was held for new members; the Executive Committee was delighted to welcome twenty-one members this year who were attending the Conference for the first time.

The timetable for the first full day commenced at 8.00 a.m. with Morning Prayer, followed by breakfast, morning reflection, and the first seminar presentation by Jeremy Batstone-Carr, Chief Economist and Strategist for Charles Stanley & Co. Investment Service. He gave an outline of the current investment market trends and what might be expected in the coming months. Other topics covered that day were 'Accountancy (and other things) for Non Accountants,' presented by Dr Helen Costigane SHCJ; 'Insurance, Risk Assessment, Health and Safety: Could it happen to you?' by D. E. Ford; and 'Employee Life Cycle' introduced by IBB Solicitors.

A Charity Law update was provided by Robert Meakin of Stone King, Solicitors. It was an interesting and thought-provoking presentation looking at Pope Benedict's recent focus on charity. Coincidentally this was followed by a reflection on the importance of charity emphasized by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Charities Act 2006 brought developments in charitable status for Religious Organizations by introducing a wider definition of religion. The Charity Commission has since narrowed the definition, arguing that common law requirements for 'worship' still apply. Robert cited the Commission's ruling in 1999, which rejected the application for charitable status by the Church of Scientology, because belief was not expressed through worship;

thus the test for a religion in English law was not met. In addition, in this particular example, the requirements for public benefit could not be established.

He reviewed the current thinking on public benefit, a matter of great importance to all charities, but in particular to religious charities, since the removal of the presumption of public benefit following the Charities Act 2006. Robert considered recent rulings on the law of public benefit and religious charities, focusing on the Charity Commission's approach since the appeal launched in 2012 by the Preston Down Trust (PDT). This is one of the Gospel Halls Trusts of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. It was one of three appeals made since the formation of the Tribunal, the provision for which was contained in the Charities Act 2006. The appeal was heard in the Charity Tribunal, as a result of which the Charity Commission confirmed the charitable status of the PDT in January 2014.

There is time in between presentations to get together and discuss issues which may be unique to one's own organization, or may be common to many. It is particularly valuable spending time sharing suggestions, solutions, and learning from each other, not least because there is a sense of shared experience. Rather than the isolation which can at times be felt when trying to take care of, and hold safely, the temporal matters which fall under an individual's charge, there is the knowledge that we are not on our own.

On Wednesday Amanda Francis led a presentation on grant making. Amanda Francis is Managing Partner of Buzzacott LLP, Accountants and Auditors in London, and is well known and respected for her work with Religious Institutes. Amanda led us through the technical and legal requirements for being a grant-making charity, giving a clear outline of the issues to consider, the need for a clear policy, the application process, evaluation procedures, and the responsibilities which trustees hold for this area of charitable activity. This was a new topic for the APB and one

which was well received. It is the case that many Congregations have seen numbers reduce over time and have had to take the decision to withdraw from some activities such as running schools, or from their community houses, which has resulted in the sale of properties, and in some case the realization of valuable assets. While the diminishment of human resources makes a huge impact on Orders or Congregations, there is also great blessing from what can be accomplished as a consequence. Amanda is clear that some congregations now need to be considering what they wish their legacy to be and to what purpose they may wish to put the capital they now have. Grant making is proving an answer for some.

Sister Maureen Connor, Provincial Bursar of the Religious of the Assumption, followed Amanda's seminar with a practical approach to grant making, telling the Conference about two charities which they have set up, and describing the inspirational works in which they engage. She spoke from a place of very real hands-on experience. It was extremely helpful to see the theory transformed to reality and to hear how they manage the process of receiving applications and responding to them. They require reports from beneficiaries, exploring what value and benefit has come from pursuing the opportunity made possible from the charity's support. It was invaluable to hear about the challenges they have faced, how they have resolved them, and why they have taken specific decisions, such as setting up a separate website for the grant-making activity. Those interested in looking for grants would not be the same people as those seeking out the Congregation's website, and they wanted to make their grants as accessible as possible to those seeking help.

Wednesday afternoon the Conference always has a 'Market Place'. This is an area set aside where organizations supporting the conference, solicitors, investment managers, banks, insurance companies, accountants, etc., have stands to pitch their wares and the opportunity to meet with attendees, both known and new. What

never ceases to amaze is the relish with which this part of the conference is engaged in by those attending—not that the ‘freebies’ have anything to do with it, of course! This is also a time when serious conversations and discussions take place about new ethical investment funds, legal issues, accounting regulations, governance matters, and where old acquaintances are renewed and new ones are embarked upon.

Then it is Thursday, the final day of the Conference, and attendees are getting weary. We have heard about internal financial controls; social and responsible investment; how investment managers select companies to invest funds with; how their health and safety records and corporate governance all influence the judgement of these managers. We have heard about new accounting standards and regulations; about fire risk assessments and risk registers; have shared a glass of wine; and been inspired by morning reflection. We close the conference with an Open Forum in which Stone King and Amanda Francis are invited to take the platform and face questions on any topic introduced to them from the floor. This year, much of the forum focused on pensions and the implications for our charities of the government legislation requiring all employers to automatically enrol ‘workers’ into a pension scheme within pre-determined time frames.

And so after lunch cases appear in the entrance, taxis line up to ferry people to the station or the bus, and we return to our communities, our offices and desks, to our ordinary lives. For those of us who are lay bursars there is the constant task of balancing the demands of the temporal with the lives of Religious; but, lay or Religious, we take what the Conference offers for the better good in the work we have to do. There was much to absorb from the numerous contributions, but *‘if you never do anything bold, you will never do anything great for God’* is an awesome philosophy.

Rachel Severn is Head of Finance and Governance of SLG Charitable Trust Ltd.

REVIEW ARTICLE

INTERPRETING CHRISTIAN HISTORY

SISTER SUSAN SLG

I started to read *Interpreting Christian History*¹ as preparation for a distance learning course in Church History. I was grateful for that stimulus and was immediately engrossed. It is a book with a broad overview, and the author refers from time to time to the limitations of its scope. It is true that he covers the history of the Church from its beginning as a 'Jewish heresy' to the challenges of post-modernism in the twentieth century. I did not, however, find it a shallow book; rather, it was thought-provoking and challenging.

Shortly before I began it, the Community had read in refectory *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World* by Elizabeth Rapley² and enjoyed it greatly. It provides a similar overview, but its focus is the history of religious orders. She describes their beginnings with the Desert Fathers in the fourth century, and continues through to the hugely 'successful' missionary orders of the nineteenth, though the Epilogue does also venture into the problems and renewal of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I intend to focus on *Interpreting Christian History*, but they both left me with a sense of recurring patterns in human behaviour, and so seem good books to read together.

Euan Cameron states his own position as someone writing as a historian, even when he is writing theology, and makes clear his own belief that there is an essential core of Christianity even if it is hidden under transitory forms. He writes, 'a strong conviction, even just a strong and faithful curiosity, should be ready to confront the

¹ Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: the Challenge of the Churches' Past* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

² Elizabeth Rapley, *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

checkered history of Christianity and learn from it' (p. xi). I kindled to that.

The work consists of an introduction and just four chapters which give a sketch of Christian history, then an account of the constantly shifting emphases in that history, followed by the response of some Church historians, and finally the reflections of some theologians on historical problems. I was left with a greater appreciation of historical perspective and much intriguing information, but also with two recurring themes or questions in my mind. The first arises from the realization of the degree to which the expression and content of one's belief are influenced by one's context. This poses the question for Cameron: is there an essential Christianity or is it all relative to the circumstances in which we find ourselves? He returns to this question in his conclusion.

The second theme is the observation that human beings have a tendency to elaborate, so although there are constant attempts throughout Christian history to go back to the radical simplicity of the Early Church, it is not easy to stay there. I noticed this in a rather particular way about the Reformation with its multiplicity of catechisms which emerged from the effort to express the simple basics of faith. Cameron points out that the more one tries to clarify one's belief, the more one has to develop it, while at the same time drawing attention to contentious issues (pp. 93–4). People are apt, also, to define themselves by differences of belief, not by the things that they hold in common (p. 54). So the effort to return to simplicity can, paradoxically, increase awareness of difference and diversity. This in itself may simply be a statement of how things are, but be unhelpful if the difference is all that is seen.

Because SLG considers itself a monastic community I found myself paying particular attention when Cameron was writing about asceticism. He notes that the emergence of Christianity as a public religion in the fourth century was accompanied by a growing contrary shift away from the public sphere (p. 68). The Desert

Fathers began as solitaries living in the desert, but a communal form of monastic life very quickly grew up to balance this movement. Both forms lived what came to be known as the ‘ascetic life’. Cameron notes that ‘the complete submission of one’s individuality and one’s property to the community rapidly became one of the defining features of the ascetic life’. Later he seems to define asceticism as ‘giving things up for God’ (p. 60). This is, I suppose, what it looks like; but it makes no mention of asceticism as training or—more importantly—the motivating desire, as Cassian, says to be ‘pure in heart’ so that one may come closer to God (cf. *Conferences* 1.4). In Chapter Two Cameron goes on to a more extended consideration of the subject (pp. 66–7). He concludes this section by noticing that the pull towards asceticism declined in the mainstream Reformed Churches of the sixteenth century because it was potentially ‘self-referential’ and ‘works-righteous’. Rather than encouraging love of one’s neighbour it might lead to neglect.

Why, then, have I stopped to consider what is only one element in Christian history, and perhaps a small one? Partly it is because SLG tries to live an ascetic life, but more so because of Cameron’s own conclusion:

Christian society largely embraced an ethic of self-denial as the highest style of life for many centuries. Much of Christian society largely ceased to be ascetic before it largely ceased to be Christian. (p. 67)

This is an observation which begs the question of connection: did people stop being Christian because they stopped being ascetic? It may be so if asceticism was seen to be so degraded that it had become self-referential, that is, seeking one’s own salvation, rather than love of God and love of one’s neighbour. But the conclusion would seem to be that it is hard, or even impossible, to be Christian without some form of asceticism.

But I diverted into monasticism and asceticism for a second reason: there was a link in my mind with Elizabeth Rapley's thought. I was left, at the end of her book, with a strong sense of pattern: time and again a man or woman with a vision would found a new group of religious or monastics; if 'successful', they would grow in power and wealth until the vision was lost and the way of life became degraded or corrupt. In other words, in Cameron's terms they ceased to be ascetic. The cycle then started again. This pattern did not stop them contributing greatly to the culture of their time, but it does seem to be closely related to Cameron's thought about asceticism, and perhaps also to his observation that human beings have a tendency to elaborate. Ultimately, along with elaboration comes loss or even failure.

The theme of elaboration is taken up by Cameron in Chapter Two, which consists of a series of thematic explorations of the shifts in emphasis and in priorities that form part of the historic Christian experience. It includes the consideration of asceticism that I have just looked at, and goes on to consider miracles, martyrdom, the Eucharist and the communion of Saints. The Eucharist particularly illustrates his point about the human tendency to elaboration. He suggests that holiness was gradually transferred from persons to things, so that there was confusion or mingling of the attributes of the sign and the thing it represented (p. 79). This tendency increased until the progressive elaboration of the Eucharistic meal meant that in the Middle Ages the rite originally devised as an embodiment of *koinonia* (fellowship, sharing) had become a sacred spectacle to be observed, with no, or very rare, participation by the laity.

Probably the most obvious example of elaboration is the monastery at Cluny and those houses under its aegis in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Here the emphasis on liturgy increased until the monks were singing the Divine Office and Masses for at least eight hours a day (cf. Rapley, pp. 14–17). They were fulfilling a

need, as the Church saw it at the time, to pray on behalf of the laity, to be ‘professional pray-ers’. But they lost the time for manual work, meditation and private prayer. It was the Cistercians in the next century who re-established them (Rapley, pp. 23–4). There is no reason why the life at Cluny should not have been ascetic in heart and mind and, as Rapley points out, life at Cluny at its height was tough (pp. 16–17), but it is not easy to live simply in surroundings of wealth and grandeur.

In the last two chapters of his book Cameron shows how a selection of historians and theologians looked at Christian history. There are names one would expect; for instance, amongst the historians are Eusebius and Bede. But he also mentions Enea Silvio Piccolomini who became Pope Pius II in 1458 and considered himself a historian. He wrote a memoir of his pontificate, which Cameron describes as almost secular in outlook. He was immensely curious about all aspects of human nature and had a frank and honest appreciation of the mixed motives of so many of the people who comprised the Church. He was also astonishingly frank about the machinations of the papal court. But he revered spectacular, personal holiness, too, and was not gullible about false forms of it. The Church he describes is a corporation, a landowner, a vast international machine, and he simply accepted that. And yet he was a poet, a rhetorician, and a diplomat rather than a career priest, and it seems that he never doubted that he was governing the inheritance of St Peter. He had neither illusions about people nor doubts about doctrines or institutions: taken all in all he must have been an unusual man. Cameron concludes that his approach was by no means complacent, yet it was unprepared for the challenges of the sixteenth century. He appears not to have seen the Reformation coming, or to realize that his own behaviour contributed to the situation which brought it about (pp. 118–122).

In Chapter Four Cameron turns to theologians and their consideration of the impact of history on theology and on the actual

faith and practice of the Church. He points out how, with increased access to libraries and the number of documents available to historians from about 1850 onwards, specialization became inevitable. Scholars knew a lot, but usually about one period of history; the sense of the long view was largely gone (pp. 155–6). Now it was the theologians who took up the baton and looked at the impact of history on the Church, and who struggled with the relation of the ideal to the actual Christian community (p. 162). As he puts it, ‘the first generation of liberal theologians rode out to hunt the unicorn of “essential” Christianity’ (p. 224). For instance, Ernst Troeltsch (1866–1928), about whom I knew nothing, was ahead of his time in that he integrated doctrine into social history. But he was also aware that to believe that social and cultural events are caused only by history meant relativism, and the risk that one would deny any absolute truth to religious statements. His key problem was how to regard Christianity as true in a way that transcended any particular historical context. In contrast to those theologians who were looking for a core, he concluded that Christianity never existed in a pure or absolute form (pp. 178–182).

So there is one recurring question: where is the essential Christianity in all the changes we see throughout the range of history? And one recurring observation: the incurable tendency of human beings to elaborate, in all spheres of their life, but particularly from the perspective of this book in word, thought, and ritual action in particular. But Cameron also poses one more question which came through most clearly at the Reformation: in the repeated history of rise and fall, divergence and difference, even perversion, where was the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised would be with his Church? (p. 123). For me that question is not clearly answered; maybe there is no single answer, except perhaps in the very continuance of the Church and the sheer fact of the men and women who form it, regardless of idiosyncrasies and context.

In his preface Cameron committed himself to a belief in an ‘essence’ of Christianity. When he comes to draw the threads together he concludes that what is ‘essential’ in Christian experience cannot be grasped by the sort of simplification which results in a lowest common denominator of belief. Each person, he suggests, must in his or her conscience reach out and grope towards that ‘essence’. But ‘the essence cannot be separated from that which is partial, faceted, even transitory, this side of eternity’ (p. 239). People are limited and each one will perceive only a facet, a limited perception; we must be real about that. He ends his search in the only place anyone can:

The wandering teacher from Nazareth steps out again and again from the clouds of dust raised by the crowds in his wake, constantly arresting, surprising and challenging. As in his lifetime, each individual must decide how to respond to his challenge. (p. 240)

Cameron writes that while history is essential for understanding today’s problems in the Church, it also contributes much towards effective ecumenism. Here at Fairacres, I tried the idea of ‘essential Christianity’ on a few Sisters over tea one Sunday and got ‘the death and resurrection of Jesus’ and ‘God’s self-revelation or manifestation’ in reply. My own response was ‘Jesus is Lord’. The two great commandments were voted out on the grounds that they are Old Testament. One Sister approached it quite differently: for her what mattered was the conviction that deep within each of us there is something which knows God, which is the ground of our faith. We are created with it, though we have to get in touch with it, own it and enable it to grow. Perhaps that is not so far away from Cameron’s idea that each of us must in conscience reach out and grope towards that essence. But in doing that we are—consciously or unconsciously—using the experience of history. This is a book that I would recommend to anyone interested in the Church as ‘other people’.

BOOKS

O Taste and See: A Biblical Reflection on Experiencing God,
Bonnie Thurston, Paraclete Press 2013, £10.99.

ISBN: 9781612614076.

This is a small, readable, well-produced book, with a particularly attractive cover, which invites you to open it and look inside. To have a whole book devoted to a profound reflection on a single phrase from a psalm is an example at its best of how *lectio divina* can lead us to new and unexpected insights about God and our faith.

Bonnie Thurston is the author of several books of theology and spirituality. Also a poet and retreat leader, she now lives as a solitary in the hills of West Virginia. Therefore, she brings the understanding of both a theologian and a deeply prayerful Christian to exploring the depths of meaning in this short phrase, verse 8a from Psalm 34, ‘O taste and see how gracious the Lord is’. She is particularly concerned that we should experience God not only intellectually, but primarily through our bodily experience.

She is aware that it can be dangerous to take a biblical phrase out of context, so her book begins with a brief discussion of the psalter, the position of Psalm 34 in it, what type of psalm it is and the setting of verse 8a within the psalm. This chapter is the more ‘academic’ part of the book and also includes something about the use of the psalter, especially this psalm, in the Church. I was interested to read that the Orthodox Church regards verse 8 as describing the act of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ; the psalm is often used at the reception of Communion.

The following two chapters consider the phrase backwards, starting with God’s existence (‘The Lord is’), which was assumed by the writers of the Hebrew Bible. The author acknowledges the impossibility of proving God’s existence and that it is often difficult for people to believe in God. She suggests that faith is a gift that has more to do with hope, trust, and admission of our need, than

with certainty. The manner of God's existence is always good. Both Old and New Testaments provide ample evidence of God's steadfast love, mercy and compassion. This is shown above all in the gift of Jesus who gave his life to reconcile humanity, and indeed the whole of creation, to God.

The second part of the book turns to *how* we might know and experience God. The author first considers seeing, in particular the nuances of the Greek word *horao*, which can suggest either physical sight or understanding. It is often used as a biblical metaphor for understanding, not only intellectually but also experientially, especially of beauty in all its forms. This can provide a way to 'see through' created things to the God who stands behind them all. Her exploration includes the book of Job and—not surprisingly—St John's gospel. In this gospel, Jesus invites people to 'come and see', to grow in understanding and to decide whether they will leave all and follow him. This invitation is for us too, if this is our aspiration and the focus of our deepest desires.

She then considers 'tasting', which in Greek implies not only to eat but also to perceive. It is another metaphor for experience, suggesting a deeper, bodily kind of knowing. We can absorb and savour the word of God through scripture (cf. Psalm 119: 103 and Jeremiah 15: 16). Feeding and eating, moreover, are recurring themes in the gospels, which culminate in the Lord's Supper when Jesus offers his body (himself) and his blood (his life) to feed his friends.

The conclusion draws together threads from previous chapters, focusing on Luke's account of the encounter on the Emmaus road, which is a dramatic example of seeing and tasting coming together in the presence of Jesus. The invitation to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' is offered to everyone; for Christians it is offered especially at the Eucharist, where it is also an invitation to a life-long journey with our gracious Lord.

Two minor quibbles: from time to time personal comments are put in parentheses, which I found slightly irritating, and the misspelling of Vaughan Williams's name twice in the introduction should have been noticed. However, the notes and bibliography are useful for further, wider reading.

I very much enjoyed this interesting book. Its blend of theology and experience shows a means of entering more deeply and prayerfully into this single phrase from a psalm. It is helpful, too, to be reminded that our body and its senses are good and can be a liberating way to God.

CAROL SIMMONS

A Simple Life: Roland Walls and the Community of the Transfiguration, John Miller, St Andrew Press 2014, £14.99.

ISBN: 9780861537136.

For the past few months, *A Simple Life* has been our refectory reading book. It has had an attentive audience, not easy to achieve in a group of people as large and with as varied interests as ours. Perhaps the attentiveness arose from the fact that many of us knew Roland from retreats he led for us; but it is more likely that the easy writing style of the author was a stronger contributing factor. John Miller set out to give an account of the history of the Community of the Transfiguration without critical comment, and he has more than achieved his purpose. His careful compilation of the facts written in a straightforward narrative style make the book a good read.

Roland Walls was a memorable character, who never tried to fit into the mould of an Anglican priest, yet priesthood was the centre from which he loved and served Christ and the people who came his way. He learned his pastoring under Father Herbert Kelly, the founder of the Society of the Sacred Mission, himself a man whose vision of the Church and priesthood was often unconventional. In Roland he had an apt pupil of great heart and great intellect who made his mark first in Cambridge, then in Sheffield supporting the Sheffield Twelve, ordinands and newly ordained priests in the

‘worker priest’ movement of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. When it became evident that the Holy Spirit was nudging some of this group to live together in community, he recognized a call to be involved in this work as well. From this response grew the Community of the Transfiguration, which began as a Fraternity, drawing on the model of the Little Brothers of Jesus and the teaching of Charles de Foucauld. When Patty Burgess asked if she could join them, they changed from a fraternity to a community.

This has never been a large community, at most four professed members at any one time, and it was never the intention of its members to be large or influential. Roland himself was for a time the rector of Rosslyn Chapel, until retreat work and a sense of calling to a more eremitic life of prayer became predominant. John Halsey, one of the original members, worked underground in the Roslin mine until it closed, then in a car-repair garage. Patty provided a place for the ‘tearaways’ of the area to hang out, as well as doing much pastoral visiting in the parish. Above all, they made the manse where they made their home a place of equality and no judgement for hundreds of people over the years. For instance, men-of-the-road, academics, married couples and their children might all sit down for a meal together, or gather for worship in the tiny chapel. The simplicity of their life made this possible, though most people who knew them commented that the buildings were rather cold! This degree of identification with those of slender or no means is a particular calling to which most of us have to respond in less austere ways, but to know that it is possible for some encourages the rest of us.

The intention of the Community was that it should be ecumenical, with the hope that they would have a Roman Catholic member. Over the years it became clear to Roland and to them that Roland himself would be this member; after much prayer and discernment he was received into the Catholic Church on Advent Sunday 1981. Two years later he was ordained as a Roman

Catholic priest, and thereafter the Community observed the Catholic teaching on reception of communion by non-Catholics—in effect, this is not possible. When Roland celebrated the Eucharist the others attended but did not receive communion; when John celebrated Roland did not receive. As John commented some years later:

I don't think anyone chooses to experience pain for its own sake. So, what has it been for, this pain at the Eucharist? Perhaps in some minute way we were able, through Roland's entry into the Roman Catholic Church and our consequent division, to help the whole Church to move towards that unity for which Christ prayed and died.

(p. 179)

Chapter 12 of the book describes their association with L'Arche, and the mutual influence on both communities of this friendship. Roland and Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, developed a friendship that lasted until Roland's death. Jean Vanier had begun his work simply, looking after two men with mental and physical disabilities in an ordinary house. Although the work expanded to a worldwide organization it was in this core simplicity that the two men met. Roland was aware that his community would never attain world renown or be capable of working with government bodies as L'Arche did. However, Jean Vanier celebrated their smallness, their 'littleness' in the sense in which Thérèse of Lisieux lived it. However large and well-organized L'Arche has become, a simplicity of response to the people who live and work in their houses is essential. Vanier himself felt that the Community of the Transfiguration had an affinity with this response. He believed that there was 'a kind of mystery—that the little has to remain little. Then it is and remains a sign; not a solution' (p.167).

Since this book was written Patty Burgess has died, leaving John Halsey as the sole professed member of the Community. They

had already made provision for the Community to ‘die’ before Roland’s death in 2010. This need not be viewed as a sadness; to be a sign in their own lifetimes of God’s love in Christ was enough.

There are many good and amusing anecdotes throughout the book, many of which Roland told at his own expense. But there is also a factual record of the difficulties the Community met as their life developed. This will be a valuable resource book when the time comes for a more critical evaluation, and we must thank John Miller for his diligence in collecting this material and presenting it in such an accessible form.

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

Seeing in the Dark: Pastoral Perspectives on Suffering from the Christian Spiritual Tradition, Christopher Chapman, Canterbury Press 2013, £16.99. ISBN: 978184825292

At the start of the Decade of Evangelism my then bishop, deeming that an essential first step in effective evangelism was to see that the faithful we already had were better informed and better equipped, asked me to organize a Diocesan School of Prayer. Since it seemed to me that most ordinary church members are insufficiently warned in advance, in Confirmation classes and Sunday sermons, of the absolute certainty that they would encounter periods of aridity when prayer seemed dead and God either absent or inattentive, I included a session which I called ‘Praying in the Dark’. Consequently, coming across the book under review, *Seeing in the Dark*, with the subtitle *Pastoral Perspectives on Suffering from the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, I thought this must be exactly the sort of thing I would have recommended then had it been available.

It is not, and it is not intended to be, in the least like John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* or Elizabeth Moberly’s *Suffering, Innocent and Guilty*. It makes no attempt to explain suffering; it simply accepts as a fact of life that we will all encounter pain, sorrow, disappointment, frustration—sometimes trivial, sometimes

life-threatening, and the important thing is not *why* it happens but *how* we respond to it. This, therefore, is a book for someone who is going through a really bad patch, or for someone—friend, pastor, spiritual director—who is trying to empathize with and help such a person.

Recognizing that every situation is unique and that a standardized ‘one size fits all’ pattern for coping with life’s difficulties is frankly unhelpful, Chapman explores a range of metaphors such as darkness, journeying through the wilderness, isolation, and so on. He then selects from the rich tradition of Christian spiritual writing (much of it, I suspect, unknown to all but the most well-read of church-goers), a number of ‘witnesses’ to whom he evidently feels personally drawn. It is an idiosyncratic list, with some surprises. I had not expected to find George Eliot, or the author of ‘Guide me, O thou great Redeemer’. The medieval béguine Hadewich and the twentieth century Jewess Etty Hillesum were new to me. Others cited are more predictable: the Carmelites St John of the Cross and St Thérèse, the poets Herbert and Hopkins, Mother Julian (in my view, the best chapter), and Simone Weil. I confess I do not warm to St Ignatius Loyola, however sympathetically presented. Inevitably, trying to distil insights from such a wide range of authors within the compass of a paperback of less than 200 pages means that the treatment of each is rather superficial. One hopes that readers will follow up any they find particularly helpful and congenial; enough bibliographical detail is given for them to know where to start looking. Each chapter is followed by suggestions for further reflection, which I personally found unhelpful; but it may be that readers who find the metaphor explored in that chapter best describes their own situation would profit from working through the suggestions. For myself, I think it would be more profitable to go back to the sources and go more deeply into them.

MICHAEL PATERNOSTER

BOOKS RECEIVED

From Bloomsbury

The Lent Factor: Forty Companions for the Forty Days of Lent,
Graham James, 2014, £9.99. ISBN: 9781480184042.

Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton,
John Moses, 2014, £20.00. ISBN: 9781441180629.

From Canterbury Press

Learning to Walk in the Dark, Barbara Brown Taylor, 2014,
£14.99. ISBN: 9781848256156.

The Bright Field: Meditations and Reflections for Ordinary Time,
ed. Martyn Percy, 2014, £18.99. ISBN: 9781848256125.

Holy Luck: Poems of the Kingdom, Eugene H. Peterson, 2014,
£10.99. ISBN: 978-184825-624-8.

City of Gold: Faith in the Streets, Sara Miles, 2014,
£12.99. ISBN: 9781848256217.

Journey to the Empty Tomb, Paula Gooder, 2014, £12.99.
ISBN: 9781848255715.

*Part of the One Church: the Ordination of Women & Anglican
Identity*, Roger Greenacre,
ed. Colin Podmore, 2014, £24.99. ISBN: 9781-848256279.

From Paraclete Press

Practicing Silence: New and Selected Verses, Bonnie Thurston,
2014, \$19.99. ISBN: 9781612615615.

OUR REVIEWERS

CAROL SIMMONS is an Oblate Sister SLG.

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