FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

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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,

AS I WRITE, the commemorations for the centenary of the ending of the First World War have just come to an end. The national commemorations have been moving, especially seeing people of all generations and backgrounds standing together in silence to mark the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Sadly, though one hundred years have passed since the end of 'the war to end all wars', we are still far too familiar with situations of violence and unrest, and with the fragility of the relations between many countries round the world. Peace remains a far-off dream for many, and many of the political situations of our world seem impossible to resolve.

In the Community's *Way of Life* document, we read the following:

> The formative Rule of the Community was drawn up in the stress of the First World War, with a view to bringing light into the world by contemplation and what was then called 'reparation'. This teaching linked the Sisters' personal and common life with the purposes of Jesus in his Life and Passion, and with the urgent needs of the contemporary world. It is vital for us to make those connections too.
>
> (Our Share in the Work of Christ)

Though it can often be tempting to give up when we see the state of the world, and compare our small efforts, the consecration of the Community and its Associates to the work of prayer remains vital. The *Way of Life* goes on to say:

> Turning continually to the gaze of God as we meet it in Jesus aligns us with his mind and his peace and draws us

more and more to engage with him in the overcoming of evil and the work of unity and reconciliation.

This is, of course, all God's work, and one in which we participate by being open to pray and serve in the places where we are put, however mundane the daily living out of this may seem.

Mentioning the early years of the Community leads me on to think of past Sisters. Sadly, this summer saw the death of our Sister Edmée of the Way of the Cross. She will have been well-known to many of you, particularly to those who are Priest Associates. She served for many years as their Link Sister with the Community, and only laid down that responsibility not long before her final illness. Since her death, I have heard from many people expressing their gratitude for her wise counsel, often given firmly in what those who knew her would recognise as a 'Sister Edmée tone of voice'!

Over the years, she was faithful to her belief in the Song of Songs as a text about the relationship of the soul and God, not always a popular point of view in academic circles. She believed passionately in the need to return to a way of reading the Bible which recognised the different senses of Scripture, and which was comfortable with metaphor and allegory. To this end, she studied Hebrew to a high level and spent many years in study, resulting in the publication of her book, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God*: *A Study in Biblical Intertextuality.*[1]

Prayer was central to her life, just as she saw it as central to the Song of Songs. This was obvious to all who knew her and drew on her wisdom. The Homily and the Tribute from her funeral are printed in this edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle* and give a flavour of her life.

There have also been beginnings since the last edition of the *Chronicle*. We received Helen Bush as Novice Oblate Helen Margaret of the Divine Compassion at Vespers on 6 August, the

[1] Edmée Kingsmill, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Feast of the Transfiguration; and Margaret Leeke was admitted as a Oblate Postulant at Vespers on 14 November. Please hold both in your prayers as they continue to discern the way forward into Oblature.

Many of you will be aware that the question of the buildings at Fairacres has been on the minds of the Community for some time. Anyone who has stayed in Fellowship House, St Seraphim or St Columba will be aware of the length of the Cat-run, the alley down the back of the building, and the changes in ground level throughout the site. After many months of conversations with architects and other professionals, we have made the decision to have a major renovation and partial rebuild of the site to make the buildings fit for purpose and supportive of the life of Sisters.

As a consequence, this means that we will need to be closed for guests from the late summer of 2019, for between a year and eighteen months, and shall not be able to hold the usual autumn Associates Retreat. The Llangasty Retreat in July will not be affected. We will miss having guests, but we hope that those of you who visit the Convent for Retreats and Quiet Days will be able to benefit from the work done, when next you come. As you will imagine, this is an enormous undertaking for the Community and we would greatly value your prayers for the process.

The Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 127 that

> Unless the Lord builds the house,
> those who build it labour in vain.
> Unless the Lord guards the city,
> the guard keeps watch in vain.

And, of course, that is something we have to bear in mind as we go forward with our plans. Whatever we do with our buildings, as with any aspect of the life of the Community, has to be according to the will of God and the building up of his Kingdom. I think again of those early Sisters at the beginning of the history of the Community, living the SLG life while thousands lost their lives in

the Great War, discerning the will of God for the Community and seeking to be engaged with him 'in the overcoming of evil and the work of unity and reconciliation' (Way of Life).

As we approach Advent, Christmas and the New Year I join with all the Sisters in wishing you every blessing.

With prayers from all of us here at Fairacres,

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG
Reverend Mother

ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2019
24th – 28th July 2019

Llangasty Retreat House
Llangasty, Brecon, Powys, LD3 7PX www.llangasty.com

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Sister Clare-Louise SLG

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Tel: 01597 823020

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There will not be an October Retreat for Associates this year due to planned building works.

ADVENT HOPE

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

WE OFTEN hear the word ‘hope’ during the season of Advent. But what is it for which we hope? As Christians, we know the answer to be that we hope for the coming of our Saviour, the One who is to come to save and redeem the world. At some point, though, we tend to identify not only with the Christmas message itself, but with our own Christmas celebrations and preparations for the feast.

Perhaps we are looking forward to this Christmas in hope. We may have had good memories of Christmas in the past, and now we have things to which we are looking forward with anticipation, such as celebrating a new friendship, or the children getting old enough really to enjoy Christmas, or the arrival of grandchildren. Or we may simply be hoping that this Christmas will outshine others. The Christmas myth of a *heile Welt* (or ideal world) remains with us.

On the other hand, perhaps we are afraid of how this Christmas might be. There may be less good memories, things which have gone wrong over our lifetime: a loss in childhood or later; or constant arguments or grim silence; jealousy; abuse, substance addiction; poverty. We may be missing a loved one or ones this year; or the effect of losses in previous years remains intense. We may have loved ones overseas and know the acute pain of separation. In this country, a TV series, ‘Long Lost Family’, has helped to show just how many people have ‘someone missing from their lives’: a birth mother or father, or a family member not previously known about, now sought with such longing intensity. We might have had to face a medical diagnosis or a devastating financial or job loss; or we might be lonely or depressed or unable to afford the celebrations expected. We may have too much to do, too many responsibilities. Perhaps visits made or received each

Christmas have become a mere matter of routine and duty, or even of dread, and are not really enjoyed.

We all have our share of sorrows over the course of a lifetime. We watch as loved ones suffer, or die, and we see the end of things which we have held dear: a relationship, health, a job or project, our EU citizenship. Sometimes we did not even see the loss coming; or we had no idea that the assumptions upon which we had built our lives could be taken from us so suddenly and permanently.

It is right for us to grieve and to mourn over these things. As Dylan Thomas wrote, 'Do not go gentle into that good night'; rather, we may 'rage against the dying of the light'—for ourselves, or for a loved one. The more deeply we go into this process, the more God is able to reach us. One of our elderly Sisters has at the moment coined the phrase 'crying and dying'. It sounds quite dramatic, but perhaps figuratively she is acknowledging the hard things in life, and is in a sense saying: *Sunt lacrimae rerum* ('There are the tears of things').[2] If we do not go more deeply into these 'tears' and work with them, then, to quote T. S. Eliot, we may find it true that, 'We had the experience but missed the meaning'[3]

During Advent, as we prepare for the 'glad tidings of great joy', looking more widely than our personal lives, we tend also to become more and more aware each year of the critical state of the world. The United Kingdom is now divided by Brexit, and by the views and underlying assumptions which have led to it. The United States of America is experiencing a similar division regarding the Presidency of Donald Trump.

Our perceptions are limited, and there is much which escapes our knowledge and comprehension. Our own joys and certainties may be built on less firm ground than we thought. Our prosperity has often been built on the exploitation of human beings, animals and the environment, in ways of which we were unaware. We know

[2] Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 1, line 462.
[3] *The Four Quartets*: The Dry Salvages II.

more now, perhaps, of the evils of slavery and of the exploitation of the working classes. When I was growing up, so many institutions and edifices seemed sacrosanct. I remember the tall, mighty buildings, blackened with age and heavy industry, in the centre of my native Birmingham. Now I wonder where the money came from to build such magnificent structures. Surely they were built *by* the toil of the working classes. Yet also, they must have been built out of profits made *from* the toil of the working classes, from their labours in what William Blake referred to figuratively as 'dark Satanic Mills', the workshops of the Industrial Revolution and afterwards, which made this country prosperous:

> And was Jerusalem builded here,
> Among these dark Satanic Mills?

During the commemorations this November for the centenary of the end of the First World War, we learned that, although millions from British colonial nations served in the armed forces, there were also many who were deployed as labourers; for example, Indians, Egyptians and Africans. These workers were not given the recognition afforded to those in the armed forces.

That was one hundred years ago. Now we are hearing, for instance, about the exploitation of the tropics. Soya production in Brazil is contributing to the deforestation of the Amazon rain forest. The area of land planted with soya beans in Amazonian states now covers millions of hectares. Increasing demand for meat contributes to high prices for grains, meaning that US farmers grow corn rather than soya beans, which are instead sourced from Brazil. Production of palm oil is also expanding rapidly at the expense of the tropical rain forests and has become the most widely-used vegetable oil in the world. One-half of packaged food on supermarket shelves contains palm oil: biscuits, bread, crisps, chocolate, milk, toiletries, detergents, etc. It is used increasingly as a biofuel; after a few moments of Internet research, I found a picture of a bus bearing the proud slogan, 'Soybean powered. This

bus runs on biodiesel.' Yet the loss of the rain forests to produce soya is a disaster for orangutans and for other endangered species, such as the Sumatran tiger.

In the midst of our unease, we long for the magic of Christmas. During Advent, I have a sense of nostalgia for home-made mince pies, hot from the oven! The tradition of the Christmas markets in Germany and in other countries in continental Europe often feels magical, with the aroma of Glühwein (mulled wine) and cinnamon. I was in Berlin recently and saw the stalls being set up in preparation for the main Christmas market around the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche (Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church). I found that my sense of anticipation was held in check not only by the cold, dark, damp November afternoon, but also by the knowledge that on 19 December 2016 a terrorist had driven a lorry into people at that market, leaving 12 people dead and 56 injured. There is thought to be a risk that Christmas markets could be targeted again this year. The Christmas market tradition has spread to the United Kingdom. The Frankfurt Christmas market in Birmingham, which began in 2001 and was developed in conjunction with Birmingham's partner city of Frankfurt, has the reputation of being the largest outside Germany and Austria (which remains true, even with the size currently halved, due to extensive building works in the city).

Another element in the collective awareness of some in Berlin is the desire to preserve the memory of the resistance fighters who opposed national socialism and the German Third Reich. Many were executed, a high proportion of them in Berlin. Regarded as traitors at the time, they are now looked upon as heroes who died in the cause of freedom and humanity. They followed their consciences, but inevitably had many fears and uncertainties, and they often spent months in prison before execution.

Fr Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest, was one such opponent of the regime. He was imprisoned, as many were, after the failed attempt

on 20 July 1944 on Adolf Hitler's life. He was arrested on account of his membership of the Kreisau Circle, which met to plan the future of Germany after its anticipated downfall, something considered treasonable by the Nazis. Fr Delp spent months in Tegel Prison in Berlin and was executed at Plötzensee Prison on 2 February 1945. His writings were smuggled out of Tegel Prison. Among them were extensive reflections on Advent and Christmas. He wrote in contemplation of death, knowing that he could be condemned and executed at any time, but seeking to keep hope alive. I quote from the Introduction by Thomas Merton in October 1962 to *Alfred Delp SJ*: *Prison Writings*, a book which I can recommend, since few of Fr Delp's writings are available in English translation:

> In his Advent meditations, with all the simplicity of traditional Christian faith … Fr. Delp proceeds to describe the ruin of Germany and of the western world as an "advent" in which the messengers of God are preparing for the future. But this golden future is not a foregone conclusion. It is not a certainty. It is an object of hope.

Very little is certain in life. Each year, keeping hope alive may seem a little more challenging, as we learn more of the truth of our world or as our experience of life increases. Yet we see from what Fr Delp wrote during his last Advent before his execution, that this is not a new thing:

> This year (1944) the temptation to make an idyllic myth of Christmas will no doubt be less in evidence than usual. The harsh realities of life have been brought home to us as never before. Many who spend Christmas in dug-outs and shelters that would make the stable at Bethlehem seem cozy by comparison will have little inclination to glamorize the ox and the ass. They may even stumble on the idea of asking themselves what really happened on that holy night—was the world made a better, a more beautiful

> place? Did life acquire a blessing because the angels sang *Gloria in excelsis*, because the shepherds were astounded and hurried to pay homage, because a king lost his nerve and ordered the innocents to be massacred? (50-1)

These are questions which we may be asking ourselves; in fact I have already heard them expressed this year. We cannot change much of what happens, but we can travel consciously on the journey with God. Often in Berlin words of Fr Delp are sung in the Liturgy as a refrain: 'Let us trust in life, for God lives it together with us.' Fr Delp wrote at the end of Advent:

> The events which affect us are doubly interwoven. In one way they are accidents that result from a logical sequence of causes which apparently we cannot escape. But their deeper significance as opportunities for the healing and cleansing of our soul is even more important. (43)

That does not, of course, make everything all right, and Fr Delp writes of his intolerable circumstances: '… I too long to be able to breathe again, to be relieved of my troubles. … Each day I have to steel myself for the hours of daylight and each night for the hours of darkness' (51). This is where hope and trust come in. He wrote for the First Sunday of Advent 1944:

> Ultimately we have to concede that there are many questions to which we can find no answer and that there are countless things in heaven and earth for which we possess no explanation whatsoever. (45)

and for the last Sunday of Advent:

> Unless we have been shocked to our depths at ourselves and the things we are capable of, as well as at the failings of humanity as a whole, we cannot possibly understand the full import of Advent. … life, fundamentally, is a continuous Advent; hunger and thirst and awareness of lack involve movement toward fulfillment. (22)

We cannot continue indefinitely in our own strength. Eventually we reach the end of our own resources, whether mental, physical or spiritual. This is the point at which God may be able to break into our lives. Fr Delp again: 'On one point let there be no misunderstanding—left to ourselves with only our own strength to rely on, we shall never find freedom' (38). We cannot, however, make it happen ourselves, or decide how it should happen: 'The encounter with God is not of our choosing either in regard to the place or the manner of it' (25).

All we can do is hope and trust in this God who promises: 'God whose coming we celebrate is and remains the God of promises' (52). We never know what grace might break upon us, and when, and we need to be ready and watching, in order to perceive the moment as it comes:

> I am perfectly aware that only extraordinary grace can re-awaken us and heal us; I also know that the divine impulse is forever prompting us, yearning to be allowed to do its healing work. (76)

Fr Delp was himself well aware of such moments of grace:

> There are times when one is curiously uplifted by a sense of inner exaltation and comfort. Outwardly nothing is changed. The hopelessness of the situation remains only too obvious; yet one can face it undismayed. One is content to leave everything in God's hands. (27)

How they had longed, at the time of the birth of Jesus, for the coming of the Messiah! How Fr Delp had hoped for liberty, for the future of a Germany ruled with righteousness and justice! We too long for redemption. Yet we cannot turn back the clock and we cannot go back, as a society, to our thoughtless naivety with regard to the world and the exploitation or extermination of humans, animals and the planet. We can, though, look out for that moment of transforming grace. We cannot make it happen, but we can prepare for it. Perhaps it might come to us in a moment when

candles are lit, in a warm, welcoming, darkened living room. Or in a moment of quiet reflection by the crib. Or in the anguish of whatever burdens we are carrying right now. We can look for the star. Even if our faith and sight are dim, we can still make the choice to look within the parameters of our vision, and hope that it might be given to us to see further into the distance. To conclude with Fr Delp's words at Christmas in 1944:

Why do so few ever see the star?
Only because so few are looking for it.[4]

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ASSOCIATES

New FLG

Revd James Lawson	1 November 2018
Judi Knutson	21 November 2018
Revd Canon Bruce Duncan	23 November 2018

R.I.P.

Ann Moss FLG	13 August 2018

[4] *Prison Papers*, Christmas, p. 67.

THE MEANING OF LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE[5]

SISTER EDMÉE SLG

THE POSSIBILITY of my life's pilgrimage having any meaning whatsoever showed its first signs when, aged twenty-seven, I was asked by a close friend to be the godmother of her child. I agreed, but realized that, in order to qualify, I would myself need to be baptized, since I had not been baptized as a child. So the friend and I toured the local churches in search of one which appealed to us, until we arrived at a very High Anglican church. The friend had a huge black Labrador which charged straight up the aisle and into the sanctuary. Just at that moment a cheerful verger appeared who, far from shooing the dog angrily away, welcomed him warmly. My fate was sealed. I became a High Anglican, but with not much thought of becoming a Christian.

Nevertheless, meaning had entered, and my pilgrimage began. After two of the worst years of my life, I found myself in an evening school which included in its teaching the requirement to meditate for two half-hours of every day. Within a few months, against the teaching of the school, which was Gnostic and took a very superior line about the Church, I began, insensibly, to become a Christian. Every derogatory remark made during the lectures against Christianity served to increase my desire to know more about Christian doctrine and practice. However, I learnt a lot in that school, and its discipline provided the indispensable preparation for what was to follow. In 1966 I joined the contemplative community of the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres in Oxford.

In such a context, it might be expected that the meaning of life's pilgrimage becomes clear. But I am not entirely happy with this phrase. That we, in the convent, are on a pilgrimage cannot be

[5] A paper given at the New London Synagogue, 23 September 2009

doubted. And that it is meaningful is also beyond doubt. Each one of us has, in our very different ways, felt ourselves called to praise God, to obey the great commandments to love him with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbour as ourself. And, because our *raison d'être* is prayer, we are required, in the words of our Rule, 'to open our whole being to God, that we may gather and hold to his love the concerns of the temporal … for the healing of the ills of humanity and the world's disorders.'

There is, of course, immense meaning in all that, and the call to obey the demands of our Rule constitutes for each one of us our life's pilgrimage. But can we talk in the abstract about the *meaning* of life's pilgrimage? I am inclined to think in terms of 'task' rather than 'meaning'. Is it not a task which gives meaning to a pilgrimage? Without a task, life's pilgrimage is meaningless. Our task, as Sisters of the Love of God, is to keep on going on. And this 'going on going on' must apply to many tasks; the task of a mother, for instance, which has come to seem to me to be one of the most important tasks of all for the future of our world. But there are countless tasks, and, whether great or small, it is a blessing if we can recognize what is our own particular task, to shoulder it, and to be faithful to it insofar as we are able, and insofar as we allow the grace of God to be at work in us.

So, looking back, I am profoundly thankful for the task life has given to me and conscious of the leading of a wonderful Providence, only hindered by sin and stupidity. But I think I will leave whatever meaning there has been in my pilgrimage to be decided by some heavenly tribunal!

TRIBUTE TO SISTER EDMÉE

ZOË PARKER

I WANT TO SAY a few words about Edmée as I knew her because she was such a singular person. It was appalling and distressing to see her personality fade into the fog of the terrible illness that is dementia. More so because she had a wide-ranging curiosity and intelligence that was one of her defining qualities. The last time I saw her there was that mystery—she was there and she was recognisably Edmée, but she was also partly absent and diminished and reduced to being a version of her former self. Our mutual love was as strong as ever and the feeling of her way of being, her Edmée-ness, will remain with me, making me want to smile at the thought of it, as long as I live.

I knew her because she was my mother's closest friend and she showed me what friendship could be. I learned from Edmée that friendship is not judgemental, but will always seek to protect and nurture the other.

The second place I lived in, as a very small child, was a flat that Edmée shared with her siblings Dorothy (Dot) and Brooke (Brookie) and my mother Eveline (Evie). I remember that flat at 33 Collingham Road in Kensington, and Edmée's presence there, with great happiness. Whatever may have been going on in the adults' lives, there was a sense of joy and love surrounding my sister and myself as small children and Edmée did much to provide this atmosphere.

I remember making fudge with her (she always had a sweet tooth) as both naughty, because frivolous and not good for you (my mother was rather a health food fanatic), and fun, because the process was quite messy and the end product was so delicious to a child.

As friends, Edmée and Eveline shared some qualities—they were both beautiful women born to literary and perhaps somewhat

distant fathers and rather dominant, difficult mothers. They each had unique and contrasting ways of being and a certain kind of charisma. When my mother became ill, much later in her life, Edmée did everything she could to help her. Edmée didn't make any fuss about it (she was not what gets disparaged now as a virtue-signalling kind of person). But almost every time I saw her she would tell me of some person who was unhappy or troubled, whom she was helping. Although her life was removed from most people's ordinary existence, the level of her interest both in world affairs and in the lives of others meant that she was very involved in many lives, bearing people in mind and paying them attention, even if she had never met and would never meet them.

To be known by Edmée on a personal level was to be very fully and roundly known, somehow. I felt I could be absolutely honest with her about various aspects of my life and she would always love me, empathise, try to understand and manage to do so, on some level that really mattered. She was partisan as a friend and godparent and she always took my side, just as a parent might, and I will sorely miss the feeling of that affirmative loyalty from someone who had known me all my life.

Everyone whose life is woven into ours teaches us something about ways of being in the world and what it can mean to be a human being. I am profoundly fortunate and honoured to have known Edmée very well and to have been shown what a wonderful human being living a truly useful life looks like. The lessons she taught me were lessons of love, and there can be no more important lessons in a life. I would see her once a year for a few hours and those hours would keep me going for another year as I carried away a feeling of love, joy and peace that would sustain me, and still does now. I can feel her hug, its warmth and strength, and will take it with me to comfort me for the rest of my life. Thank you, Edmée darling—for everything that you were and are and will be.

SISTER EDMÉE OF THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Homily Preached at the Funeral Requiem,
14 September 2018

DAVID BARTON

Do not stir up or waken love until it is ready.

Song of Songs 3:5

IN THE POETRY of the Song, references to sleep are metaphors for prayer. And it was for prayer that our dear Sister Edmée, over fifty years ago, stood where her coffin now stands and was clothed as a novice. She had come from a very different kind of life. She had been a dancer, dancing at the Gala performance of Sleeping Beauty for the reopening of Covent Garden after the War, and then with the Bluebells dance troupe in Paris. She had modelled for *Vogue*. But she had discovered meditation—which she did for two-and-half hours a day. And she had read widely in Christian devotional literature. After talking with her brother, Brooke, I found out that she was probably much as we always knew her: a strong character, feisty, passionate about what she saw to be right, with a sharp and often critical mind, and a pointed turn of phrase. Coming here cannot have been easy; she remembered her noviciate as a tough time. In a much later talk she said that what she had learned from her community was to 'keep on going on'. 'As we learn to shoulder the task that is in front of us and are faithful to it, so we begin to sense the grace of God working in us.' That awareness of the centrality of grace is characteristic. Her dedication of 'the Way of the Cross' was a deliberate choice. She always battled with herself. An abiding, grateful memory was Sister Jane's care for her in the Novitiate. The grace of God came through the forgiveness and love of this community. Right to the end she was deeply conscious of that, and of how much she needed it. In return she loved this community fiercely.

And the Song of Songs was a thread that ran through everything. Long before she came here, she remembered reading it for

the first time on the underground on her way to work. Its words ran through her like an electric charge, she said. Arriving here, she would have found the Song weaving its way in readings and antiphons through the daily monastic offices. The silent prayer of this community drew her in, deepening the meditation she had learned. John of the Cross talks about the kind of prayer in which nothing much seems to be going on, yet we find ourselves lost in the silent mystery of God and become aware of the immensity of the compassion that pours out to us.

It is part of the nature of such prayer that there are no words with which we can speak of these things. We need metaphor, and for Edmée, exploring the long tradition of monastic interpretation, the Song was the biblical, God-given metaphor of an inner life wholly given to God. Its erotic language expresses something of God's compassionate longing for us. The desire of the bride is the image of those who find themselves caught up in the slipstream of God's calling. 'It's not sexual desire,' she wrote later, 'which The Song intends to arouse, but Love … the Eros of God, available to each one of us, however wounded, however wretched, however old.'

You always sensed that deep inner grounding in Edmée. That, along with her innate intelligence, created a woman of considerable authority. She had a kind of holy wisdom that demanded attention. Quite soon her talks and writings on prayer and silence were valued. She was a gifted, perceptive spiritual director, a rock to those who came to talk with her. She could be tough, but it was always wise counsel. Someone once asked if he might see her once more, as he tried to come to a hard decision. But the answer was no. 'It will serve no purpose,' she said. 'It's time for you to decide.' She looked after the Priest Associates here. There were those who got a card that simply said, 'We haven't seen you for a while. Isn't it about time?' But no one could ever doubt the compassion that underpinned the firmness.

By the early eighties, Edmée had read her way through all the commentaries on the Song by the Greek and Latin Fathers. Her brother, who was a Hebraist, advised her that if she really wanted to make progress she needed to learn Hebrew and study the Song in its original context. I think at this point Edmée's frustration at her own lack of higher education began to show itself. Ballet school during the war was just not enough. There was a conversation with (by now) Mother Jane when she apparently said 'My problem is that I have a scholarly mind, and nothing whatever to be scholarly about!' (You can hear her saying that!) The upshot was that she was given permission to go to Leo Baeck College to study Hebrew. In the end she stayed over two years, gaining a much treasured Certificate in Hebrew Studies.

The work to achieve that must have been extraordinary. And she loved it. Those were happy years, with friendships that lasted for the rest of her life. There is a photograph from that period of what I guess was a Purim celebration. Edmée, her face made up as it was in the *Vogue* modelling days, but with a much blowsier dress than she would have worn then, and bouffant hair, arm in arm with a bearded Rabbi, fully clothed in her habit—wimple, veil, and all! It is a side of her the sisters know well. She, along with Sister Isabel, could reduce everyone to helpless laughter at recreation, dressing up and acting out some skit they had written.

Returning to Oxford, by now fully equipped in Hebrew, she continued her study. To her, the academic consensus that the Song was a collection of erotic songs rendered it a dead text. She was convinced that there was a consistent line between the Rabbinic interpretation and that of the Early Greek Fathers. The Song's origins must come from writers equally steeped in scripture and grounded in prayer. She determined to set out the alternative, though actually traditional, view. So this former student of the Rambert School of Ballet and Leo Baeck College went forward for

a DPhil, and gained it at the age of 73. *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God*, the book based on her thesis, appeared six years later.

The academic jury is, no doubt, still out. But to read the book is to encounter passages that simply turn to gold. For many of us it has been a treasure. Reading it again, I sense that deep below it all she was also affirming a whole way of reading scripture; in the context of prayer, (her context was always that of prayer) its words become *sacred* text and are life-giving. She once spoke to a retreat about the way the prayer of silence unites our outer and inner selves. It gifts us with God-given new eyes. We must wake up to this gift, and cherish it. This applies to scripture, certainly, but also to the whole of our lives.

This was how she sought to live, and even in the ups and downs of her last illness, and the bits of Edmée that were never quite redeemed (and there were those), she never seemed to lose that sense of being grounded in God. In the last weeks of her life it shone. She was wonderful to be with.

A few days before she died, I read her a passage from John Taylor's *Christlike God*. She had lost her powers of speech by then. But as I read, there was a new alertness and brightening of the eyes. I had no doubt that she understood. And these words, it seems to me, sum up the life of this remarkable sister:

> Thinking about God and loving God, thinking further and loving more, is a pendulum of wonder and incomprehension, illumination and darkness, loss and possession, abasement and bliss, which, once started, must continue for ever as we move further into the infinity of God. For all eternity we shall be travelling further and further into the knowledge and love of this God who is our home and our rest. (p. 279)

East Oxford

Here, population density
is marked by rows
of narrow, Victorian houses:
bowed front windows,
red brick, gray slates,
recessed, dark entrances.
Some are beautifully tended,
painted and planted,
some of appalling squalor.
These streets and sidewalks
were not designed
for automobiles parked
bumper to bumper.
Yet above the babble
of close-packed lives
the mosque's sonorous voice,
bells of church and convent
slice the noisy secularism,
offer a gentle invitation:
'Remember the Other
Who dwells in the midst.'

Bonnie Thurston

Oxford: Cornmarket, College, Convent

It is no longer a sweet city
of dreaming spires.
Now the young and gowned
jostle for sidewalk space
with the world's face.
Carfax is the crossroads
of motley humanity,
the Cornmarket a blur
of commercial enticements.
Beneath this bellow and bustle,
in Medieval college chapels,
in convents tucked away
amid Victorian row houses,
an ancient, sacred impulse
quietly contends with
cacophonous modernity
which sinks in chanted Psalm,
as language is obscured
by the movement of sound,
monophonic, emptied out, holy.

Bonnie Thurston

A SERMON FOR MICHAELMAS 2018

DOUGLAS DALES

Someone who is often interrupted by other people can seldom sense the presence of angels.

THIS WAS the considered view of St Guthlac, one of the early Anglo-Saxon saints, who lived as a hermit on a small island in the fens at Crowland in the eighth century, dying in AD714. Not much hope for us, then, bombarded by communication, endless visual images, and surrounded by the demands and chatter of other people! Actually, angels impact our lives in hidden and rather oblique ways all the time. As St Bonaventure said, they open the shutters of the soul to let in the light of God's reality and love. One of the ways of sensing their presence is to consider moments in life when we find ourselves alongside them in our common service of God.

The first context is in the care of children. St Theophan the Recluse once said, 'of all holy vocations, the care of the young is the holiest.' He lived in Russia in the nineteenth century and wrote as a hermit and spiritual director, having been a university professor and then a bishop. The new-born child in particular brings the reality and purity of God very close to us, dispelling for a moment the dark shadows that so often disfigure human lives and behaviour. In Matthew 18:1, the BCP gospel for this feast, Jesus tells us that each child has its guardian angel, to whose patience and self-effacement falls the arduous duty of trying to guide and protect a human being, while not actually manipulating them. In our care of children, we are called to work sensitively with their angels, remembering that the only category of people that Jesus said should have millstones tied round their necks before being dropped in the sea were those who abuse children (cf. Matt. 18:6). On the authority of Jesus, the child stands at the heart of the Church,

mediating to us the presence of Christ himself, 'for of such are the Kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 19:14).

The new-born child also alerts us to the reality of the human soul, whose presence almost shines through the fragile beauty of a baby. There is another moment, too, when the soul can be sharply detected: when a person is dying and the departure of the soul is imminent. The soul is a mystery: to what extent is it distinct from the person, while being united to it? St Bonaventure offers much reflection about the nature and significance of the human soul within the loving purpose of God. For when we pray, we are never alone: not only are our prayers part of the ongoing worship and communion of the Church on earth and in heaven; we also pray with the soul and alongside our guardian angel, and they with us. Thus the words of Jesus take on a further deeper meaning: 'where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst' (Matt. 18:20).

Part of prayer is intercession, and here our prayer unites actively with that of the angels, whose ministry is profoundly intercessory. Through our prayer for others, we are called with them 'to put love in where love is not.' This alerts us to the stream of loving compassion that flows continually from God and is brought to people, often in ways unknown, by angels as 'messengers' of God. In this ministry, humans also have an active share, as St Paul indicates, serving as 'angels of the Lord.' One of the privileges of a parish priest is being able to knock on doors unannounced, and very often to be in the right home and family at that moment in time, listening to their problems and supporting them in their need. One of the blessings of a monastic community is to be able to offer friendship and kindness to guests, whose time of retreat may be marked by a word spoken in the right way by one of the community. Once again, sensitivity to the needs of people should alert us to the presence of angels in our midst and to our common vocation with them as servants of the Lord.

Another part of prayer is contemplation, and this surely brings us alongside the angels, whose paramount vocation is the worship of God. There is a delightful story about a hermit in Sinai who climbed the holy mountain to witness the dawn, as the golden light spread across the numberless summits of pink granite. Suddenly he heard the cry of the angels echoing around and among the mountain peaks: 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' We join angels and archangels at the heart of the consecrating prayer of the Eucharist, reciting these solemn and joyful words. Only profound concentration and reverence in worship will alert us to the presence of the angels at this moment around the altar. This is why worship can open the eyes of those without faith and convert them to God, as once happened to a school friend of mine in a Paris church. It is in the worship of God that human beings and angels unite, and we need to seek their help with our private prayers and also our worship in church.

One of the strongest indicators of our union with the angels in worship is music. Western plainchant has become formalised with great beauty over many centuries. But its root is almost charismatic and is certainly contemplative in origin. In the first life of St Dunstan, for example, it is recorded how he learned a chant from an angel in a vision of heaven, which he later dictated to his clergy and monks. Every time Dunstan heard it sung, it moved him to tears, recalling the reality of what he had witnessed. The plainchant setting *Kyrie Rex Splendens* is attributed to him. Certainly in the long night watches in the ancient church at the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, the cry of the monks as they chant the psalms conveys the heavenly and spiritual root of the music, which becomes the true language of the soul in worship.

The feast of Michaelmas reminds us that our life, our worship, and our care of other people, is caught up within something much greater than us, a dynamic of divine worship from which flow healing, light and truth, to combat the darkness in the world and to

overcome evil: 'Holy God, holy and strong, holy and immortal, have mercy upon us!' The ministry of the angels is to form us to become their companions in the eternal love and worship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

~ ~ ~

BROTHER LAWRENCE
and
THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

SISTER STEPHANIE-THÉRÈSE

Biographical Notes

BROTHER LAWRENCE was born Nicolas Herman about the year 1614 at Hérimésnil in Lorraine. During the Thirty Years War he became a soldier, but was wounded in 1635, and left the army. He served as a footman to M. de Fieubet, but his naturally religious temperament drew him to the religious life. In 1640 he entered the convent of the Discalced Carmelite Friars of Paris as a lay-brother, given the name Lawrence of the Resurrection, and set to work in the kitchen. After fifteen years his war wound became troublesome so he was appointed sandal-maker to the community, and buyer of their wine. As his spiritual gifts became known, he was interviewed by the Abbé de Beaufort, vicar general to Cardinal Noailles. The small book we know as *The Practice of the Presence of God*[6] is a record of their conversations (CN), a collection of letters (L) written by Br Lawrence, and Spiritual Maxims (SM) found amongst his papers after his death in 1691.

[6] The edition used here is the critical edition published by ICS Publications, 1995.

The Practice

What is the 'practice of the presence of God'? I will let Br Lawrence define it in his own words:

> The holiest, most ordinary, and most necessary practice of the spiritual life is that of the presence of God. It is to take delight in and become accustomed to his divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him all the time, at every moment, without rule or measure, especially in times of temptation, suffering, aridity, weariness, even infidelity and sin. (SM6)

It is a matter of recognising him present with us, speaking to him at every moment, asking for his help to know his will, offering our actions to him beforehand and thanking him afterwards when the task is finished. Thus in this continual conversation we are taken up in praising, adoring and ceaselessly loving God for his infinite goodness and perfection (see CN42)—that is, loving God for himself.

The practice is an application of our mind to God or of God's presence by using either the imagination or the understanding (SM20). The habit is formed by the repetition of acts and by frequently bringing the mind back into God's presence (SM22).

> It would be appropriate for beginners, he writes, to formulate a few words interiorly, such as: 'My God, I am completely yours,' 'God of love, I love you with all my heart,' or 'Lord, fashion me according to your heart,' or any other words love spontaneously produces. (SM30)

The word 'spontaneously' is important. The remembrances are not to be laboured and involved outpourings, but quick ejaculations or arrow prayers of a moment. 'My most typical approach,' he writes in a letter, 'is this simple attentiveness and general loving awareness of God, from which I derive greater sweetness and satisfaction than an infant receives from his mother's breast' (L2).

Br Lawrence lists three means to acquire the presence of God (SM chap.6). First, there must be great purity of life; your mind and heart and actions cannot be focussed entirely on God if there is a lot of clutter in your life. Second, you must adhere with great fidelity to the practice—fostering an awareness of God within performed, 'gently, humbly and lovingly, without giving in to disturbance or anxiety'. So you must not give up or get unduly anxious about what or how you are doing it. Finally, this inner awareness of God's presence is to precede our activities, accompany them from time to time, and at their completion.

So your heart must be empty of all other things because God desires to possess it exclusively (L3). The practice is 'a means of being completely disposed to God', a resolution within 'to give all for all' (L3). The conversation takes place 'in the depths and centre of the soul', where the soul speaks to God heart to heart (SM23). The practice is not an outward display, but secret and hidden between the soul and God in the deep and profound peace that the soul enjoys in God (SM23).

It is a 'simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God', which Br Lawrence calls the 'actual presence of God—a quiet and secret conversation of the soul with God that is lasting' (L2). This recollection is going on hidden deep within the soul, so what is happening on the surface? Br Lawrence advises that we must

> perform all our actions carefully and deliberately, not impulsively or hurriedly, for such would characterize a distracted mind (SM8). He writes, we must continually apply ourselves so that all our actions, without exception, become a kind of brief conversation with God, not in a contrived manner but coming from the purity and simplicity of our hearts. (SM7)

Therefore, during our work and activities, even during our religious exercises and vocal prayers, 'we must stop for a moment, as often

as possible, to adore God in the depths of our hearts, to savour him, even though in passing and stealthily' (SM9). He writes in a letter to a soldier rushing into battle with a sword in hand that 'a brief lifting up of the heart is enough' (L6).

Again he writes to a woman that 'a brief remembrance from time to time, a brief act of adoration, occasionally to ask [God] for his grace or offer him your sufferings, at other times to thank him for the graces he has given you' (L9). Note the emphasis both times on 'brief' and also the variety in the recollections—adoration, petition, offering, thanksgiving. You must through these brief recollections bring God into all aspects of your life. This is not a practice you withdraw for. No. You can lift up your heart to God 'during your meals and conversations' as he writes to the same woman (L9). 'You need not shout; he is closer to us than we may think,' he adds in the letter, paraphrasing the great St Teresa.

> We must act very straightforwardly with God, and speak to him freely, asking him for help in events as they happen (CN17).
>
> By turning inward and practising the presence of God, the soul becomes so intimate with God that it spends practically all its life in continual acts of love, adoration, contrition, trust, thanksgiving, oblation, petition, and all the most excellent virtues. Sometimes it even becomes one continuous act, because the soul constantly practises this exercise of his divine presence. (SM36)

To embark on the practice, Br Lawrence assumes there will be mortification of the senses, especially the mind. He writes, 'Beginners must take care that their minds do not wander or return to creatures. The mind must be kept fixed on God alone, so that seeing itself so moved and led by the will, it will be obliged to remain with God' (SM30). In a conversation with the Abbé de Beaufort, Br Lawrence says,

> Thoughts spoil everything, that's how trouble starts! We must be careful to reject them as soon as we notice they have nothing to do with our present occupation or our salvation, and begin again our conversation with God, which is where our good is found. (CN23)

Elsewhere he says,

> Please note that to arrive at this state, mortification of the senses is presupposed, since it is impossible for a soul that still finds some satisfaction in creatures to completely enjoy this divine presence; for to be with God, we must abandon creatures.

Now as we have described things so far it sounds relatively simple and straightforward, but that does not imply that it is easy, especially for beginners. But it is well worth persevering with the practice.

> [This practice], somewhat difficult in the beginning, secretly accomplishes marvellous effects in the soul, draws down abundant graces from the Lord, and, when practised faithfully, imperceptibly leads it to this simple awareness, to this loving view of God present everywhere, which is the holiest, the surest, the easiest, and the most efficacious form of prayer. (SM31)

Let us consider a few things Br Lawrence says to others about this practice. To a nun he writes, 'Do not be discouraged by the repugnance you feel on the side of nature. You must do it violence. … Continually resolve to persevere until death in spite of all the difficulties' (L4). And elsewhere, 'We must remain faithful even in times of aridity, when God is testing our love for him' (CN5). Again to a nun,

> The mind is extremely flighty, but the will, mistress of all our powers, must take hold of it and bring it back to God as to its final end. … An easy way to keep the mind from

> wandering during the time of mental prayer is to keep it as still as possible—not to let it take flight—during the day. You must keep it faithfully in God's presence; and once you are accustomed to think of him from time to time, it will be easy to remain calm during prayer, or at least to bring the mind back when it wanders. (L7)

Br Lawrence several times talks about the comparison of the practice to mental prayer. Beaufort recalls him saying in conversations that 'the periods of mental prayer were not at all different for him than other times … he neither desired [retreats] nor asked for them, since his most demanding work in no way turned him away from God' (CN20). In another later conversation he records Br Lawrence saying 'it is a big mistake to think that the period of mental prayer should be different from any other. We must be just as closely united with God during our activities as we are during our time of prayer' (CN46). So inevitably this practice will benefit your times set apart solely for prayer as you move from active recollection to still recollection.

Take heart! In a letter to a nun Br Lawrence shares his own journey with the practice:

> I had trouble doing this exercise, but continued in spite of all the difficulties I encountered, without getting disturbed or anxious when I was involuntarily distracted. I was faithful to this practice during my activities as I was during my periods of mental prayer, for at every moment, all the time, in the most intense periods of my work I banished and rid from my mind everything that was capable of taking the thought of God away from me. (L12)

And he continues with the encouraging, 'By repeating these acts they become more familiar, and the practice of the presence of God becomes more natural' (L12).

Elsewhere he writes, 'Since much time and effort are required to acquire this practice, we must not get discouraged when we fail, for

the habit is only formed with effort, yet once it is formed we will find contentment in everything' (SM29). And in a letter commenting about a young nun he writes, 'It seems like her heart is in the right place, but she wants to advance faster than grace would allow. You don't become a saint in a day!' (L8).

So patience and perseverance are key words in the practice. And we must not expect or depend upon 'spiritual experiences' with this practice—they will probably occur if you persevere, but Br Lawrence warns us that 'we know by faith that God is infinitely greater and completely other than what we feel' (CN9). And 'we must watch over all the movements of the soul, since it can become entangled in spiritual things as well as in the most base' (CN7).

Br Lawrence reminds us that 'We do not always have to be in church to be with God. We can make of our hearts an oratory where we can withdraw from time to time to converse with him there, gently, humbly and lovingly' (L9). So place is not important and one's life becomes fluid with the practice so that the 'prescribed hours of prayer … are nothing more than a continuation of this same exercise.' (L2)

To sum up this section I can do no better than to quote Br Lawrence from a letter he wrote to a nun:

> It is impossible to avoid the dangers and hazards which life is full of without God's actual, constant help; let us ask him for it continually. We cannot ask him for it unless we are with him. We cannot be with him unless we think of him often. We cannot think of him often unless we habitually practise this holy exercise. (L8)

I mentioned that though the practice is simple, it is not necessarily easy. It took Br Lawrence ten years of the practice before 'enjoying continual inner consolations' (L1). During the first ten years, he writes in a letter, 'I fell often, but I got back up just as quickly … It seemed to me that all creatures, reason and God himself were against me, and that faith alone was on my side' (L2).

He writes in the same letter, ‘I gave up all devotions and prayers that were not required and I devote myself exclusively to remaining always in his holy presence’ (L2). For Br Lawrence felt it was ‘our goal … to be the most perfect adorers of God in this life, as we hope to be throughout all eternity’ (CN52), for ‘our only concern in this life is to please God; everything else is folly or vanity’ (L8).

He believed that ‘by this continual attention to God we will crush the head of the devil and force weapons from his hands’ (SM8). Br Lawrence’s practice was underpinned with a strong and unshakeable faith and a deep and enduring love of God. ‘Neither finesse nor learning is required to approach God, only a heart resolved to devote itself exclusively to him, and to love him alone’ (CN41). It is not a matter of training or learning but beginning, starting the practice NOW, today. As he wrote to a nun, ‘better late than never’ (L4).

This is not a practice which will take us into flights of fancy or ecstasies, for Br Lawrence says ‘except for wonder, we should not let ourselves be carried away!’ (CN10). There will be consolations, though, a sense of joy so deep and pervasive that you can barely contain yourself—a state Br Lawrence often found himself in. This practice inflames the soul ‘so intensely with the love of God that one is forced to perform various activities in an effort to contain it’ (SM24). ‘There is no way of life,’ he writes to a nun, ‘more agreeable or delightful than continual conversation with God. … We can continue our loving exchange with him, remaining in his holy presence sometimes by an act of adoration, thanksgiving, or anything else that our minds can devise.’ So, be creative!

In a letter to a woman seeking guidance from him, Br Lawrence writes, ‘This [practice] is, in my opinion, the essence of the spiritual life, and it seems to me that by practising it <u>properly</u> [key word] you become spiritual in no time’ (L10). Six days before he died he wrote to a Blessed Sacrament nun, ‘He is in our midst; let us not look for him elsewhere.’ Over the years, the decades, his

message did not change, expand or develop. It was always the same, put simply: 'do not leave him alone' (L10).

This practice is a gift, not something we can manufacture, but a discipline to draw us closer to God. Br Lawrence writes in his Spiritual Maxims (37):

> It is a grace God bestows only on a few chosen souls, since this simple awareness remains ultimately a gift from his kind hand. … For the consolation of those who desire to embrace this holy practice … he ordinarily gives it to *souls who are disposed to receive it*. If he does not give it, we can at least acquire, with the help of ordinary grace, a manner and state of prayer that greatly resembles this simple awareness, by means of this practice of the presence of God.

The key phrase here is 'souls who are disposed to receive it.' And we dispose ourselves to it by a faithful and disciplined practice of the presence of God. Saying that God bestows it on only a few chosen souls sounds somewhat forbidding and exclusive. But in a letter to a Blessed Sacrament nun Brother Lawrence is more encouraging. He writes:

> I know that, to reach this state, the first steps are very difficult, and that we must act purely in faith. Furthermore, we know we can do anything with God's grace, and he never refuses it to those who earnestly ask him for it. Knock at his door, keep knocking, and I tell you that he will open to you in his time if you don't give up. (L15)

He writes to this same nun, 'I don't know how [God] could leave me alone, since faith lets me touch him, and he never withdraws from us unless we first withdraw from him. Let us take care to remain near him. Be with him always' (L13). Those last words are so very, very important and sum up the practice: 'Let us take care to remain near him. Be with him always.'

LETTERS FROM TAMIL NADU

SARAH MILLER

1 March 2018

I HAVE BEEN in South India now for six weeks on my placement with USPG (United Society Partners in the Gospel) and am living in the city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu State, at the Church of South India College of Arts and Science for Women. It is a higher education college with 1500 students studying for their first degrees, and some postgraduate courses. I am staying in the hostel, home to 150 students, and am offering help and support with spoken English. The students read and write advanced English, for example Shakespeare and Milton, but are less confident with speaking it. Each day I meet with small groups during English language classes for conversation, and the hostel students come and find me in the evenings for more practice. This is a good chance to get to know them, as well as developing confidence with their language skills. It works both ways; I am learning Tamil from them. It is a privilege to hear about their lives and aspirations. They are all highly motivated and talk about their plans to be doctors, medical scientists, government administrators, beauticians, lab technicians, or teachers. One MA student is going on to music school in Chennai when she graduates in May as she wants to train as a professional singer—in films! Many will get married, arranged by their parents; some will be supported in their careers by their husbands, which is what most of them hope for. In Hindu tradition the bride and groom will meet for the first time on their wedding day. Traditionally they then live with his parents on a permanent basis, though this is now changing, as more young people want their own homes and greater independence.

Hospitality is a sacred duty here, and as a guest I have been shown great kindness by the college community. Meal times are a prime example. I am served by a member of the kitchen staff or by a student, and they sit with me as I eat, making sure I have enough

and that I am enjoying the food. They have their own food later; this is the Indian custom. It's another opportunity for conversation and for me to practise saying, 'This food is delicious!' in Tamil (it almost always is) and to learn more new words and phrases.

I have attended Sunday services at the Church of South India Cathedral in Madurai, and at the local church, Rachanyapuram, with the students. Services tend to be about two-and-a-half hours in length, and the sermon about forty-five minutes. Most churches are open to the elements on two or three sides, with ceiling fans to reduce the possibility of melting in the heat (about 34°C today; the temperature will increase steadily until it peaks at around 42°C in May). At the Cathedral there were about 500 at the English service and about 1000 at the Tamil service; this is typical of the size of congregations in India. Here at the Women's College, I join the staff for prayers each morning in the chapel at 9.00. They stand in a large circle for a reading from the Bible, a reflection and a prayer. The women staff wear the sari and always look elegant, smart and colourful. I have bought some Indian tunics with the help of the hostel wardens. Putting on a sari will need more serious initiation; it is quite a skill—all those pleats, and safety pins in the right places. At 9.15 a.m. the whole college community gathers around the chapel (open on three sides) for assembly. The choir leads a hymn in Tamil or English, and then a student reads from the Bible and leads a prayer. I join the hostel students for prayers at 5.20 p.m; there is often a strong breeze blowing through the chapel, tempering the sultry evening heat. The students sit on the cool marble floor, cross-legged, and sing and clap Tamil choruses as they gather for worship.

Last week I visited Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary on the other side of the city. I am going to spend a week there from March 3rd, helping with English teaching; it will be good to meet the women ordinands (a small minority) and to hear about each other's experiences of ministry. Visits to CSI schools are also planned, and

I have been invited to preach at Vespers at the American College on the evening of March 11th (the Chaplain said 15 minutes max!). This is a large higher education college in Madurai founded by American missionaries in 1881.

I love travelling across the city by auto-rickshaw, a small, yellow vehicle which accommodates three passengers in the back (at a squeeze)—hand signals only plus vigorous hooting at every turn. People and cows tend to wander across the road without warning, so frequent swerving is necessary. Madurai is bustling with life from early morning until late at night, small shops and businesses open all hours, selling anything and everything; banana stalls, flower stalls with garlands of sweet-smelling jasmine, tailors with old-fashioned hand-operated machines working outside their shops. One Sunday morning, I saw a man standing perfectly still at a busy road junction, deeply absorbed in his yoga and meditation, right in the middle of all the noise, traffic and hectic jostling. India surprises me every day.

22 March 2018

I am now nine weeks into my placement in Madurai. Here at the CSI Women's College I've been meeting small groups of students during class library periods for English conversation practice. We sit outside the library in the open air corridor, three students at a time for about fifteen minutes for each group. Some are more confident than others. I try to help them relax and have a go. For example, I ask them to imagine they are standing in the canteen queue at lunch time, and a student they haven't met is next to them, and to have a pretend conversation: What's your name? What subject are you studying? Where do you live? For most students this will be the first time they have spoken English with a native speaker. My hope is it will give them the confidence to practise and develop their conversation skills further.

A big day for the college was Convocation (Graduation) on March 1st. Five hundred students who had completed their degrees over the

past two years came back to receive them from the Vice Chancellor of Madurai Kamaraj University, with which this college is affiliated. The Bishop, as Correspondent, was also on the platform. The ceremony was attended by around a thousand people and took place in the hostel courtyard, which was covered in colourful awnings for the occasion. Afterwards there was lunch for everyone, a delicious meal with several vegetarian dishes. It all just appeared like magic. I was talking to the catering manager afterwards, lost in admiration at the scale of the operation. He said airily that he had an industrial kitchen for big functions with a hundred cooks.

I recently spent an excellent week at Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS), assisting with English classes and sharing in the life of the college. I had an enlightening session with the Master of Theology students. TTS is the only college in India to offer Social Analysis as a theological discipline; subjects for MTh dissertations include honour killing, alcoholism amongst youth, and child labour. Evangeline, a final year Bachelor of Divinity student from Madras Diocese, was telling me about the practical placements she had done whilst at TTS. She had spent time in a cotton factory, seeing at first hand the conditions so detrimental to health that the workers, most of them women, suffer: no protection for their ears from the deafening noise, nor for hands which get chafed and injured, nor for noses and mouths from breathing in the fine fibres. She had a spent a term in Bangalore with an advocate who seeks legal redress for abused women, and several months in a port city working with neglected children. Evangeline said these experiences, along with her studies in feminist theology, had been transformative in her training for ministry.

A highlight of my week was going out into the country to visit the TTS Rural Theological Institute, where thirty BD students at a time spend six months. They experience village ministry, learn how to grow crops, and in teams take responsibility for cleaning, cooking and buying food for the student community. We were invited to

join them for supper cooked on a wood fire under the stars. There were no sounds apart from the cicadas and the gentle murmur of conversation.

TTS students with families live in small bungalows in the Madurai compound, and I was made welcome in several homes. I had lunch with Sheela, a Masters student, and her husband, Titus. They had met whilst training as social workers and have a five year old son, Rio. The food they had prepared was beautifully served on banana leaves, used on special occasions. Sheela hopes to be ordained in the Lutheran Church. I enjoyed tea in the home of Toshi, a Baptist PhD student and his family from Nagaland in the North East of India, on the border with Myanmar, and heard about their experiences as non-Tamil speakers living far from home.

The week at TTS gave me an insight into a vibrant college community and the lives of people from different churches and different parts of India preparing together for ministry. It was lovely staying in the guest house with trees all around and squirrels scampering amongst the branches. The compound is beautifully shady, which helps with the heat. Another guest was Reverend William Allberry, a retired priest from London who visits TTS each year to teach English. One evening we went to the famous seventeenth-century Tirumalai Nayak Palace in Madurai city centre. At dusk, we took our seats in the vast courtyard for an impressive sound and light show. The great pillars and throne room and balconies around us were lit up in exotic colours, whilst the voices of actors with sound effects brought the history of King Tirumalai to life: his building the palace, intrigues at court, wars with the King of Mysore, hunting with elephants, and a curious incident about a thief gaining entry to the palace in the dead of night through a high window after sending a monitor lizard with a rope up the wall. The king was so impressed at the thief's ingenuity that he took him on as a member of staff. The story may of course be apocryphal.

28 April 2018

With temperatures of around 38°C in Madurai and high humidity, it was refreshing to spend Easter in Kodaikanal, high up in the hills. There it was 19°C, and the mountain air fresh and clear, a completely different climate. I was there from Maundy Thursday until Easter Day, a guest of St Peter's Church, one of the two English-speaking churches in Madurai-Ramnad Diocese. St Peter's is high up on a hill, with panoramic views of Kodai. The Easter Day service was at 5.45 a.m., outside the church; we started in the chilly dawn mist and then afterwards, an hour later, had tea and Easter buns in bright sunshine.

At the CSI Women's College students are now writing exams until mid-May, when the academic year ends. Before classes ended, the college held cultural competitions; students were buzzing with enthusiasm and took part in sports, craft, and performing arts. The off-stage craft categories included vegetable carving (my favourite was daisies with white radish petals and orange carrot centres); fireless cooking (an array of colourful food and drink, including bright pink beetroot juice); recycling (the winning idea was earrings made from plastic bottles, decorated with nail varnish); clay modelling (the theme was robots); henna decoration (intricate designs traced on hands, wrists and forearms, usually for special occasions such as marriage); and *kolam*, pictures made on the ground from tiny coloured beads (the theme was natural disasters: volcanoes, tsunami, forest fires). On-stage in the college auditorium categories included classical Indian dancing, mime and group singing. The theme for the singing was Village Songs. Each group composed their own tune and lyrics about rural culture and issues. The winning song was about the use of mercury to speed up crop growth and the adverse effects on agricultural workers and consumers. The mime groups focussed on environmental issues such as climate change and water shortage.

Following the competitions there was College Day, when the Bishop came and distributed prizes, and the Principal made a speech about the events of the past academic year. There was an air of excitement and celebration as students showed off their trophies and certificates. On the last day of classes, there were events to say farewell to the third year students soon to leave. The younger students put on song and dance shows; speeches were made and gifts presented. At the hostel event, I was invited to cut the cake with the words 'Not an ending, but a beginning' inscribed on it. Extra reinforcements were brought in to help the hostel kitchen staff produce lunch for the whole college; huge cauldrons of rice and *sambar* (lentils) were cooked on wood fires outside, and everyone ate in the open air, sitting under the trees.

I have now come up to the Nilgiri Hills for three weeks to cool down again and have a rest. I am staying at Hebron School in Ooty, where they have a guest flat. My brothers, John and Christopher, were pupils here in the 1960s when our parents were working in Andhra Pradesh as CMS missionaries. John, Christopher, Catherine and I were all born in Andhra during those years. Each May our family would have a holiday at nearby Kotagiri, and I am looking forward to spending some time there, too. Ooty is a bustling hill-station town which I am enjoying exploring. Modern Stores (established 1951) sells everything from Kellogg's cornflakes and Walker's shortbread to Pond's cold cream. Willy's Coffee Pub, tucked away down a side street and up an obscure flight of stairs, was recommended in Lonely Planet; otherwise I would never have known it was there. It serves excellent cappuccino and has a lending library in one corner. The dog-eared collection is eclectic—*The Wind in the Willows*, *War and Peace*, *To the Lighthouse*. I spent ages looking for *The God of Small Things*. I didn't find it, but got absorbed in *Life Class*, a novel by Pat Barker, which I decided to borrow. The proprietor said I could have it for two weeks and pay the fee of 26 rupees (about 30p) on return—very trusting and very reasonable.

Having consulted the Principal of TTS, the Bishop of Madurai and USPG, I have decided to extend my placement in India to July 17th. I am looking forward to being at TTS again for six weeks from June 4th, helping with English teaching.

31 May 2018

As I wrote in my last letter, I left Madurai at the end of April for the Nilgiri Hills, where I enjoyed discovering new communities and rediscovering people and places associated with the Miller family. For two weeks I was at Ooty, where the mountain air was sharp and fresh with the smell of eucalyptus. I stayed at Hebron School, which my two older brothers attended in the 1960s when our parents were missionaries in Andhra Pradesh. Hebron is now an international boarding school with 360 pupils from around the world, most of whose parents are engaged in Christian mission work. The staff is from several different countries including India, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Germany. I enjoyed getting involved in the school community, which was welcoming and friendly, and full of energy and enthusiasm. The staff room and dining room were the scenes of animated conversations about Indian culture, academic life, faith and music. I joined one of the school families for a trip to Bandipur Tiger Reserve and we spotted a large tiger in the evening sun, cooling off in a pool, swishing its tail in the water. The drive to Bandipur was spectacular, on mountain roads with steep hair-pin bends and distant views of the plains.

Then I spent two weeks in Kotagiri, a smaller, quieter Nilgiri hill station. I was based at the Kotagiri Medical Fellowship Hospital where my Danish godmother, Dr Lydia Herlufsen, spent nearly thirty years from 1941 building up healthcare provision for local people, including outreach clinics for the remote Nilgiri tribal communities. I was able to meet retired nursing staff who worked with Dr Lydia; it was wonderful to hear their memories. KMF is still serving the rural community. A two-day asthma and respiratory

camp was held while I was there, giving local people the opportunity to consult a specialist doctor and support staff from Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore and get a diagnosis, medicine and advice on managing their condition.

When our family was in Andhra we had our annual holiday each May in Kotagiri. A retired priest and local historian, Reverend Philip Mulley, helped me find the bungalows we used to stay in. He and his wife Evelyn took me on a tour of Kotagiri and the surrounding area, which is lush, green and mountainous. We walked through tea plantations to Catherine Falls in bright, clear morning sunshine and stood at the view point looking down the steep wooded slopes to the distant water below. We found two of the original Miller holiday bungalows still standing: Mount Pleasant, which is now a science lab for the CSI School next door, and North Harpster. Plains View, which was situated on top of a hill surrounded by tea plantations, had been demolished, and a palatial house built on the site by a tea estate owner. We did venture up the drive, and I could see why our parents chose Plains View for holidays; the elevated position has glorious views, as the old name suggests. We visited St Luke's Church, Kotagiri, where I was baptised by my father, Reverend Jeffery Miller, in 1966. The current pastor, Reverend Jeri Rajkumar, found the entry in the baptism register, written in my father's own hand. Directly below was recorded the emergency baptism of a baby at the KMF Hospital, signed by Dr Lydia. It was moving to see both entries together.

I visited the local community broadcasting station, Radio Kotagiri, located within the Keystone Foundation, which promotes economic development and conservation in the Nilgiri Hills. I spent two mornings with Radio Kotagiri staff, hearing about their work and seeing a programme broadcast live. A safety officer was interviewed over the telephone about safety in the workplace. Programme content reflects local needs and interests, which include

agriculture, health, education, food and conservation. Staff take regular field trips to rural tribal communities to make recordings and involve local people in making programmes. I was interviewed about my past involvement in community radio in Wythenshawe, Manchester, and my passion for audio broadcasting was reignited. Radio is a powerful and simple way of giving communities a voice.

May 22nd was my last day in Kotagiri and the anniversary of my baptism. I helped lead morning worship in the KMF Hospital chapel, Revd Philip Mulley translating my address into Tamil. Then there was tea with the staff. Later, Revd Philip and I walked to St Luke's Church and said prayers there. It was a special day, marking the end of a rich and exciting four weeks.

17 July 2018

I am writing this in Mumbai airport as I await my connecting flight to Heathrow and return to the UK. I left Madurai this afternoon, waved off by kind friends from Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS), my home for the last six weeks of my USPG placement. I developed English conversation groups for the Masters and PhD students. Around thirty met each week in small groups, developing their confidence with spoken English, sharing their academic interests and research, and getting to know each other better. The groups reflected the diversity of the TTS postgraduate community: students from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and the far North-Eastern States of India: Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalia and Mizoram. In one group each of the six members spoke a different mother tongue. All five groups want to carry on meeting, taking it in turns to lead discussions. Philip, a PhD student from Kerala, asked me to help him with English corrections to a 15,000 word assessment paper, a theological perspective on ecology and sociology. It took us a meticulous ten hours over four days. Towards the end we speeded up, and he was doing the corrections himself. During the course of our meetings I had an insight into the challenges of student life at TTS, where the daily routine revolves

around collecting water in buckets for washing. The water shortage in Madurai is so severe that water only comes through the pipes in student accommodation for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. The practical issues also include regular power cuts (so no fans to temper the sultry heat or electricity to recharge computers and phones) and mosquitoes, which infiltrate rooms at night, another cause of poor sleep. Despite these and other challenges, the students are enthusiastic, highly motivated, and committed to their studies. It was a privilege to work with them and share their life.

I visited a project of TTS, Arulagam, meaning 'grace' in Tamil. It is home to around twenty women who have suffered violence and abuse and are rebuilding their lives in a safe, supportive environment. They learn traditional weaving techniques; I was fascinated by the old wooden looms, clacking rhythmically as towels, mats and bed sheets were created in bright colours. Tailoring was also taught and products sold—beautifully worked napkins, bags, purses and table cloths. One of the women, a long-term resident, had just married the son of the tailoring teacher. Women stay at Arulagam for as long as it takes them to become independent or return to their families.

Just before my time at TTS, I was invited by the General Secretary of the Church of South India Synod to visit CSI Centre in Chennai and had a stimulating five days there. I visited all the departments which resource CSI: Pastoral Concerns, Mission and Evangelism, Ecological Concerns and Social Empowerment. In the Youth Department I met two young men, Ashish and Manish, who had just finished a three-week CSI placement in a Rohingya refugee settlement near Chennai. They had befriended the young people there and learned about their lives and aspirations. They said it was both heart-breaking and inspiring. The Rohingya people had experienced such trauma and hardship, yet they could still hope for

the future, including the hope that they would eventually return home to Myanmar.

I return to the UK having rediscovered the country of my birth, which has welcomed me warmly. India has exhausted me and cared for me, challenged and soothed me, infuriated and charmed me. It has allowed me to share and develop my passion for communication and to experience the lives of contrasting communities. India has taught me to trust that 'all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well' despite uncertainty and apparent chaos; that bright sun always follows the rain, however dark the storm; and that companions are always provided for the journey.

BOOKS

A History of the Athonite Commonwealth: *the Spiritual & Cultural Diaspora of Mount Athos*, Graham Speake, CUP, 2018.

ISBN: 978-1-108-4432-3.

This remarkable book is a fine companion to the author's earlier definitive work, *Mount Athos*: *Renewal in Paradise*.[7] Dr Graham Speake is an authority on the history of Mount Athos and its monasteries, being the chairman of The Friends of Mount Athos. This new book provides an astonishing and rich panorama of the many ways in which monastic life on Mount Athos has influenced Christian life across the Orthodox world for over a thousand years. The book is highly readable and it is also very well illustrated.

One of the many merits of this book is how the author discreetly reveals his own spiritual understanding of the distinctive charism and mission of the Holy Mountain. His empathy and sensitivity towards the life and work of the monks is rooted in a close familiarity over many years with the extraordinary revival and mission of the Holy Mountain today, as it serves generously the relentless pastoral and spiritual needs of so many pilgrims coming from Greece and elsewhere in south-eastern Europe, and also from Russia and Ukraine.

The book begins with a judicious and well-informed consideration of the roots of Christian monasticism and of Orthodox monastic life in particular. Part One considers early monastic life in the deserts of Egypt and the Holy Land, the formation of urban monasteries in the Byzantine Empire, and the role of monks in the iconoclastic controversies, as they defended the use of icons in Christian worship. Then the crucial role of monastic missionaries is considered, taking Christianity to the various Balkan countries in

[7] Yale University Press, 2002; second & extended edition, Limni, Evia, Greece, 2014.

the early Middle Ages. The scene is thus set to reflect on the unique influence of Mount Athos.

Part Two of this book begins with consideration of how Athanasius created the Great Lavra on Athos. It then describes how links were created with Georgia and also Kiev, where the Cave Monastery became the cradle of Russian monasticism. There is also a fascinating chapter about Sava and the role of the Serbian monastery of Hilandar. Two fine chapters deal with the spiritual significance of Gregory of Sinai and Gregory Palamas and their role in the Hesychast crisis of the fourteenth century. The story of how Athos promoted the spread of monastic life in Bulgaria and Romania is remarkable and deserves to be more widely known. Then the focus moves to the emergence of renewed Russian monastic life under the leadership of Sergius and his successors. Once again the influence of Athonite monasticism was crucial.

No less interesting are the chapters which tell of the revival of Greek Christianity under Ottoman rule, and the crucial roles of Paisy Velichkovsky and Nicodemus in collating the *Philokalia*—an extensive body of monastic teaching collected on Mount Athos, which had a profound impact in Russia in the nineteenth century, and which continues to influence many Christians today. The closing chapter relates the way in which Athonite monasticism has taken root successfully in England, America and France. This is an outstanding book in every way, and a most valuable contribution not only to Church history, but also to a fuller understanding of Orthodox Christianity across the world today.

DOUGLAS DALES

From Darkness to Eastering, Bonnie B. Thurston, Wild Goose Publications, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-84952-556-5; available in ePub and PDF formats.

'Light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it': this hope-filled stance is the bedrock of belief of the 86 poems contained in this collection. These poems examine, through metaphors, images and experience of natural and liturgical seasons and cycles, the relationship of darkness to light in our lives. Home-grown from 'the loam' of her life Bonnie unapologetically explores the reality and meaning of darkness, as well as the ambiguity of growth in darkness, admitting in her introduction that she does not want to 'sugar coat' it. She thus gives us fair warning of the challenging nature of what lies both within the pages of the book, and within each of us.

The book is divided into five sections, with the poem 'Prerequisite' preceding them: Lent–Darkness, Holy Week–Transition, Holy Saturday–Waiting, Easter–New Beginning, and Eastering–Growth. Many of the poems, however, are much less overtly Christian than the framework within which they sit. But Bonnie uses the framework to understand and interpret the nature of life and death, suffering and joy. She interweaves cosmic, creational, and natural images with liturgical seasons and language, to make sense of her experience. This results, without doubt, in a complexity, not so much in the individual poems themselves, but in the collection as a whole. Metaphors of light, darkness, winter, spring, silence, fruitfulness, frigidity, and so on, all roll and gather meaning. They cross-fertilize, and this exchange results in a depth of perception that is rare.

These poems, therefore, are not to be read at speed. Perspective and understanding grow and change, and any apparent ambiguity or contradiction is only a result of her writing from both 'within' and 'on' her journey. There are times she is in the depths, of winter, and of self. She has known what it is to feel life to be 'a trudging

procession/ of frigid weeks'. (Winters of the Heart, 16). And In 'Does God know?' (20) she describes with unparalleled candour her experience of: 'staring over the edge/ of the abyss/ into impenetrable darkness,/ into the silence/ / of utter absence'. The 'Eye of Despair' (21), too, could only be written by one who knows (incidentally this is one of my favourite poems). But there are times when she can declare joyfully: 'Winter has passed./ I stand barefooted/ on fecund earth' (I can only Hope, 35). Nature in its fullness becomes sacramental (104,105,106) and plants parables for life (Plant Parable, 92). The cosmos, too, is said to be Eastering (85). However, this emerging from 'winter to spring' or 'night to day' is not immediate either in nature, or in herself. There is a 'gradual greying of jet black night, before the rose trumpet of dawn' (Prerequisite, 12). It is not straightforward either, it can be slow and sometimes faltering: 'There are many thresholds,/ doors opening into the void,/ false starts, things frozen, still born' (Winter Turning to Spring, 29).

Waiting is key. Bonnie acknowledges the difficulty of waiting in seemingly barren spaces: 'There is a dormant place/ a fallowness in the heart/ that awaits awakening' (The Heart is a Field, 41), and: 'Here the world waits/ with nothing to do/ but listen into mystery,/ embrace the darkness/ of profound unknowing,/ watch toward inky East ('… I will give you rest', 64). It is precisely this *mystery* 'hidden behind/ appearance's mask' (Winter Sunday Morning, 18) that she is seeking to understand, the truth that 'though the darkness deepens,/ somewhere God remains.' (Altar of repose, 55). What emerges is the value of barren landscapes (and inscapes): 'This where we live', she declares, 'this human space,/ waiting before the cave' (Holy Saturday (1), 65). It also explains why two-thirds of the poems are found in the sections of Lent, Holy Week and Holy Saturday. It is the 'enforced solitude/ of wearying winter weather', she tells us that 'can lead to introspection' and 'One can accept or reject/ its searing invitation/ to examine internal fires' (Lent in a Russian Novel, 19).

Silence and stillness are prerequisites to discovering that darkness is the matter from which all life is created. Stillness 'calls creation to attend/ to some great mystery', that is to say, 'to hear the song/ sung in the depths of life,/ to find the joy/ wrapped in suffering,/ darkness, and obscurity (Winter Sunday Morning, 18). She therefore urges us to not evade the emptiness: 'if you are quiet,/ strive for inner stillness/ waste few words,/…/ you will hear within/ the vast emptiness/ which they fear/…/ in the beginning, God/created, made everything/ from darkness and silence./ What surfaces, emerges/ in your empty spaces,/ might be a full moon/ on your darkest night (*Ein Sof*, 30). There is a cultural critique here of the way we 'scrabble to fill/ the world with noise' be it speech or electronic, things she says that, 'our grandparents/ couldn't imagine' (*Ein Sof*, 30). So she warns us, 'There is devilish danger/ in perpetual motion,/ consistent clamour./ Stillness precedes awakening' (Prerequisite, 12). This is deeply challenging stuff.

In her introduction Bonnie states that she wants her poems to function as both 'passport and ticket' for the journey (11) and although the framework of *From Darkness to Eastering* is seemingly linear, the themes and concepts within are much less so. Eastering itself, she explains, is not an end point but a new beginning, an invitation to greater 'awareness' or 'awakening', the finding of God in all things, so that one can say with her that even if 'a thick … cloud/ stands sentinel between me/ and the beauty of heaven', it is still there, we just can't see it (*Noche Oscura*, 31). Paradox pervades creation (March Snow, 25), and as such will continue to evade comprehension: 'it remains unruly/ and incomprehensible' (In Our Own Image, 61–2).

Her mind stumbles in the darkness (Winter Night, Longest Night, 14) but she knows too that 'We learn full aliveness/ in sparseness and scarcity' (Winter Turning to Spring, 29). Examined, interior darkness disperses (Dispelling Darkness, 15). This becomes an invitation, then, to understand better that darkness and death are

‘creative spaces’. So she tells us, ‘better not to fear/ the darkness’ (Better, 109) because we are all ‘a one way street toward/ the matter from which/ [we are] constructed,/ the stuff under foot/ into which God breathed/ will again breathe, Life’. (Dust to Dust, 108).

The journey from Lent to Eastering, then, is not a once-and-for-all cycle. Like the seasons of the year it is one that repeats itself over and over. This is no more evident than in the last two poems of the collection, which function as an invitation to return to the beginning. The difference this time being that the dark, barren winters of ‘Lent’, that at first seemed so devoid of fruitfulness, have now been re-imagined: The loam has become ‘living loam’ (Veriditas, 93), and attention has become key to finding ‘resurrection in [our] muddy garden’ (Ticket to Eternity, 99).

Christ is both model and way: ‘The cosmic grain of wheat/ has fallen and died./ That death is requisite/ for all this flowering/ is the passing shadow/ of impenetrable mystery./ hidden in the lilies/ is a darkness/ to be left undisturbed.’ (Easter’s Shadow, 88). And in one of the most animating and exhilarating poems in the collection she writes: ‘here God emptied himself/ so completely/ that life could rush in./ God emptied himself alive./ … / Death gave birth to Life./ Here life won’ (Holy Sepulchre/ Church of the Resurrection, 82–83)

Although not all the poems were written for this collection, and some have been published before, they belong together and form a seamless whole. The book itself has pleasing dimensions, and the poems are written in an uncluttered font that can hold with grace the weight of words. To drive the point home, the title ‘From Darkness to Eastering’ cleverly repeats on the top of each page in increasing shades of pale. The generous space around each poem gives the reader space to pause and to ponder, while the front-cover photo of worn stone steps leading up from darkness follows us through the chapters of the book and offers a repeated and powerful invitation to life. Leaving our confines takes courage—something

Bonnie has in abundance. She is totally unapologetic about the darkness, and the ambiguity she fights is that of easy answers to it. She does not want to 'make light' of the darkness in any sense, and it is by this refusal of a monocular perspective that she avoids easy platitudes and presents us instead with the paradox of life: the co-existence of darkness and light, joy and suffering, understanding and unknowing, stasis and anastasis. Landscapes and inscapes are intertwined to help us understand better that darkness not only gives way to light, but is required in order to perceive light.

These poems are more than a simple manual for life; they are much more personal than that. Bonnie leads by the example of her extraordinary honesty, and her openness to this process in her own life, and in her willingness to share that with us. In so doing, she becomes a trusted and wise companion along the way. The challenge I found in reading these poems was in my resistance to facing the depths within myself. But, if we allow them, these poems have the potential to take us by the wrists and wrench us up out of our graves (The Harrowing of Hell, 71). May these poems awaken us, so that with her we too might declare: 'There is nothing/ that does not contain you,/ nowhere your voice/ is completely silenced.' (Interpretation of Tongues, 105). Amen!

SARAH WEBSTER

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