

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills; from whence cometh my help.

Psalms 121:1

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Cover photo: Mount Pembroke on the Kaikōura range,
viewed across Milford Sound, New Zealand

CONTENTS

COMMUNITY NOTES	2
<i>Sister Clare-Louise SLG</i>	
SISTER ELIZABETH OF THE WORD OF GOD INCARNATE	8
<i>Sister Christine SLG</i>	
GOD AND THE CORONAVIRUS	11
<i>James F. Wellington</i>	
MIRACLES AND HISTORY	13
<i>Sister Benedicta SLG</i>	
PLAYING WITH MATCHES	21
<i>Brother James Koester SSJE</i>	
LIVING HOLY SATURDAY TODAY	25
<i>Sister Stephanie-Thérèse SLG</i>	
FAITH, FAMILY & FRIENDS	30
<i>Douglas Dales</i>	
NATURAL EPIPHANIES	33
<i>James F. Wellington</i>	
IN MEMORIAM	35
RECENT PUBLICATIONS FROM SLG PRESS	37
REVIEWS OF BOOKS	
Rowan Williams, <i>The Way of St Benedict</i>	41
Timothy Radcliffe OP, <i>Alive in God: A Christian Imagination</i>	45
Mark Oakley, <i>The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry</i>	48
Stephen Platten, ed., <i>Oneness: The Dynamics of Monasticism</i>	49
Sr Helen Julian CSF, <i>Franciscan Footprints: Following Christ in the ways of Francis and Clare</i>	51

COMMUNITY NOTES
SISTER CLARE LOUISE

Dear Friends,

I spent some time as I thought about these notes trying to find an alternative to ‘we live in unprecedented times’! We do, but it is becoming a rather over-used term with the current situation bringing to a head a number of different issues in our modern times. Perhaps, instead, the best place to start is with Scripture and the reminder of God’s over-arching promises.



But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him.” (Lamentations 3:21–4)

This verse sprang out as me as Lamentations was read as part of our Office in Holy Week. The Book of Lamentations has of course been associated with the liturgy for Holy Week over many hundreds of years. The desperate lament over Jerusalem fallen to her enemies and of its people enduring famine and violence, gives voice to the despair of peoples and nations over the centuries. The book gives permission and shape to grieving, not just for the Church but also for the Jewish people who read it in Synagogue on the ninth day of the Hebrew Month *Av* (July or August), the commemoration of the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple. It easily fits with the events of Good Friday. Yet in the midst of this vivid lament comes a passage of sheer trust in God. It is worth exploring this in the light of the current crisis.

Before I do that, I will pass on some Community news from the past months. First, I must let you know with great sadness of the death of our Sister Elizabeth of the Word of God Incarnate who died on January 3rd having been diagnosed with cancer only four months before. Sister Elizabeth was a New Zealander, and after her diagnosis was able to travel back there to be with family for a final visit. We had the privilege of being able to host her brother Phil, who arrived shortly after her death and stayed for her funeral.

Without a chapel available in the Convent we had to do things rather differently from our usual customs for a funeral and we were very grateful to

Fr Darren McFarland and St Andrew's Church, Headington, who hosted us for the funeral and the buffet lunch following. Sister Elizabeth had been Choir Mistress and had actually prepared her funeral service well before receiving her diagnosis; Sister Judith made the final adjustments and the result, I think, would have been very much appreciated by Sister Elizabeth. The homily preached at the funeral is in this Chronicle.

Even before our world was abruptly changed by the COVID-19 virus the Community was entering a time of change and disruption. When last I wrote we were looking towards moving out of the Convent, ready for the building work to commence. We are now living in five rented properties (four houses and a flat), and our own properties on Fairacres Road and Parker Street. Our staff are largely based in St Michael's.

Our temporary Chapel is the former workroom in St Michael's, smartened up by being decorated and having its wooden floor sanded and re-polished. It is rather smaller than we are used to, but seems to work well, and we were able to have Sr Elizabeth's coffin here overnight before the funeral.

Until social distancing was introduced, we met each day for the Eucharist and we were eating lunch together daily at 76 Fairacres Road, which we were also using as a meeting place for the Community. Other offices and meals were held in our own houses, though there was a fair amount of sharing of worship and meals in the various places. This was especially true at Christmas when small groups of Sisters met to cook and eat Christmas dinner together, an occasion which seemed to be enjoyed by all.

One of the first events to be held in the temporary Chapel was the reception into First Promises of Oblate Sister Helen Margaret of the Divine Compassion on the feast of Candlemas, and we are glad to welcome her as an Oblate Sister of SLG. Sadly our Oblate Sister Kitty of the Transfiguration (Kitty Platt) died later in the year, on 19 April, having been an Oblate since 1987. Oblate Kitty was a permanent deacon, and Oblate Maureen Hilary remembers that:

The ordination of women began while Kitty was still in London but she decided to remain a deacon as she was near retirement age. She had been the first woman trained at Westcott house when Bishop Mark Santer was

principal. In Kensington she was in charge of Women's Ministry ...she was a much respected person in her ministerial life before dementia took over quite young.

COVID-19 and social distancing brought a new level of change and disruption to us all. Since the end of March we have been unable to meet, worship or eat together and, like all of you, our celebration of Holy Week and Easter was quite unlike anything we might have imagined ever experiencing. Again, like many of you, a lot of Sisters have turned to live-streaming of worship now that we are unable to meet for the Eucharist. We are all probably rather better than we were on various platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, having been on a steep learning curve!

Since lockdown began each individual house and group of Sisters has developed its own rhythm of prayer, office and meals. Some Sisters regularly watch a live-streamed Eucharist from different places including the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield and St Mary's Church Iffley (one of our local parish churches) and each house fits a period of intercession into one of the offices during the day. I think you would find it all recognizably SLG, despite differences reflecting the circumstances in which we find ourselves.



Fortunately, it has been possible for our building work to continue, though with some disruption and delays. The builders have been able to maintain social distancing and, with some adaptations because of sub-contractors who are not working and suppliers who have been unable to supply products, they are continuing the building. At present that appears mainly to involve demolition, the stripping of the inside of the building and digging very large holes! It has been quite difficult for Sisters to see familiar bits of our building



disappearing; one of our rented properties has a good view into the garden and we can see what is happening. Andrew, our maintenance man has access on site and has been taking photos of the progress; some of his pictures are shown here.

Thanks to the kindness of one of our neighbours we still have access to the Convent garden via a gate put



into his garden fence. That means Mark, our gardener, has been able to continue tending the garden, the beekeepers have been able to visit the hives, and some of us have been able to walk in the garden which, despite some areas being fenced off, continues to look very beautiful.

One big decision that the Community has had to make is to postpone the election for a Reverend Mother which was due to take place on June 1st this year. The logistics of holding an election while maintaining social distancing

would be tricky at the moment. Instead I will continue in Office and in mid-September we will reschedule a date for an election, hoping that by then we will have more clarity about ongoing lockdown or social distancing measures.

So, back to Lamentations and its promise that the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord never fail. Remember that the writer of Lamentations puts this passage at the heart of a writing that pulls no punches in describing the reality of his situation. To give just a flavour of the text:

*My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.*

(Lamentations 2:11)

Reading this, many of us may realise that, given what some experience, we are probably no more than mildly inconvenienced by coronavirus. However, while we give thanks for the blessings of life and safety that we have, that doesn't mean that the suffering caused is not real, nor that the anxiety caused is any less valid.

Many of our usual routines, habits and supports have been taken away; who would have imagined that we would be unable to gather to worship together because of a virus, or that shopping, going out and meeting would all be curtailed? And we worry how long this will last and what changes it will bring to our lives in the future. What will the long-term economic effects be? Perhaps most fundamentally, we have been shown that there are things which the best of human effort cannot control; we are not masters of the universe.

Into all that, Lamentations 3:21–4 brings a Gospel (good news) message of hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never fails; truly, His mercies never come to an end. A frightened writer observing a ruined and devastated city could write those words and add, 'the Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore will I hope in Him'.

In the light of that faithfulness, what can we learn, practice and pass on? Many of us will have been challenged by our changed circumstances but will also have taken the opportunity to reflect on our lives in that light. I know I have found myself more grateful, less likely to take for granted things

like the beauty of our garden or the opportunity to go for a walk. I am grateful that the daily routine of our life can continue to structure the day, that habits of prayer built up over the years can provide support when the outer props disappear. Though we couldn't hold our Easter Vigil together in one place, I was moved by the ways Sisters managed to keep Holy Week and Easter nevertheless, constructing simple liturgies, lighting candles and dwelling in the Word of God. I look forward to being able to worship together again, but I also appreciate all that the silence, space and insights our pared-down liturgy have offered.

Just like our experience of having to move out of our buildings and seeing parts of them disappear, the current situation reminds me that God isn't dependent on the externals to do His Will and manifest His Love. Things we took to be essential may not be; other ways of doing things may well be just as real. While we will have a long path ahead of us as the country, and the world, seek economic recovery, and most of all, as we show genuine concern and support for those who have truly suffered personally and financially during this time, we also need to look to the truth that *His steadfast love never ceases* as the real solution, not just to the COVID crisis, but to all the other issues that trouble our world whether they be economic, social or ecological.

A lot is being said about a new normal; quite what that normal will be is as yet unclear. However, as we turn to God, an underlying truth continues to sustain us:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him."

The Sisters join me in prayer for all of you, and thank you for your prayers for us.

God Bless,

CLARE-LOUISE SLG



SISTER ELIZABETH OF THE WORD OF GOD INCARNATE
(CELIA ELIZABETH PARTON)

26 AUGUST 1950–3 JANUARY 2020

Homily at the Requiem, 14 January 2020

Jer. 18:1–4, 6; Rom. 8:19–27, 31b–39; John 14:1–3

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

It is rare for those of us who live in community to reveal to each other much about our personal relationship with God; nor how we perceive our dedications and how they affect our lives as religious. A dedication is a means of leading us further into the mystery of God's love for us as we see it in Jesus. This was as true for Sr Elizabeth as for any Sister, but we can perhaps glimpse the reality of her dedication to 'the Word of God Incarnate' through the readings she chose for her funeral. She had prepared the leaflet for the Requiem well before she died, even before she knew she was so ill.



It was characteristic of her to have done this work precisely, and with an assurance that this was what she wanted said and sung. We experienced this precision in so many ways: in her work in the Bursary and Laundry; in the complex cross-stitch designs she sewed at recreation; and especially in her training of the choir. I doubt we ever came up to her standards and she was often in despair at our lack of confidence in our own ability to sing the chant. But we benefited greatly from her wide knowledge of plainchant, a greater knowledge than just how to sing it well. Indeed, when she and I were discussing our hopes for using the time well during the imminent building works, she revealed that she wanted to begin a study of a particular aspect of the chant.

She was born Celia Elizabeth Parton in Christchurch, New Zealand, the youngest of three sisters and a brother. When Celia was fourteen, their mother died of the same cancer that claimed her. The others were working

or away from home by that time, so it fell to her to keep house for their father, which she did until she entered the religious life.

Her musical knowledge was, in general, very broad, and built on foundations laid in her years at Cashmere High School in Christchurch which had, and has, a specialized music programme. She loved opera and it was one of her holiday pursuits to listen to opera CDs borrowed from the public library, which we were always invited to share with her.

After she left school she worked for some years in Smith's Bookshop in Christchurch, the New Zealand equivalent of Blackwell's in Oxford or Heffers in Cambridge. She was in her element surrounded by books, for she was an avid reader; her fine mind and retentive memory benefited greatly. In due course we too benefited: as well as absorbing the contents of her wide theological reading, she used novels as a form of spiritual reading, finding in them an understanding of the complexity of human nature which has been redeemed in Christ. She remembered in detail the plots of innumerable books. Through gifts from her family, we acquired the complete Harry Potter series; you had only to ask her the name of a character and she would immediately know it and the book in which it appears.

But it would be wrong to imply that fiction was her sole spiritual reading. She was brought up a Methodist, so it was almost axiomatic that she would know how to read and reflect on Scripture. Out of this background, New Testament Greek became a subject of extensive study. An example of the thoroughness with which she approached it was the compilation of a personal lexicon of New Testament Greek words. Each was given its English translation, its use in Scripture, the Hebrew equivalent, and translations into French and German. This work must have been an asset in the New Testament Greek class we held here for several years.

After some years with Smith's, she entered the Community of the Sacred Name in Christchurch as Sr Celia, even then suspecting she might be called to SLG. Eventually she joined us in 1998, taking the name Elizabeth, and found the SLG a place where she could develop the call to the contemplative life which had been with her for such a long time. It cannot have been easy to adapt to another culture and religious tradition, to be reshaped

by God the potter into a vessel of equal or better service than the original (cf. Jer. 18:1–6). This did not mean her love of her family or country was any the less; indeed we were kept well abreast of all NZ news, especially at the time of the earthquakes. But to respond fully to the call to a life of prayer, she needed to see it through to the end within the community where she had found it best fulfilled. A tough thing, indeed, for any natural family to accept.

The Gospel reading from John (14:1–3) is one of several assigned for use at a funeral. It is a comfort to know that there is room for us all in the Father's house, but for Sr Elizabeth it had an extra layer of meaning. During her time as Guest Sister she had a sudden insight that the work of preparing a place for a guest was a participation in the same work of Jesus who goes ahead to prepare a place for each of us in His Father's kingdom. An insight such as this, the practical application in the here-and-now of Our Lord's teaching, arises out of much pondering on Scripture.

To concentrate on the use of the mind in one person's vocation would be to give a wrong impression of the whole person. She had a wonderful sense of humour and an often-unexpected wit, and was a loving friend and sister, both within her family and in Community. The photo above has caught well her laughing smile in a humorous moment. All her life she had a magnetic attraction for soft toys; in her childhood they all went to bed with her, threatening to leave her no room to sleep. In the convent, where we keep our cells as bare of extras as possible, the ones who found their way into her orbit lived in the department where she worked.

Over many years Sister Elizabeth compiled a commonplace book of quotations around the subject of death. This could have been seen as a morbid exercise, but they were recorded to sustain the hope by which we live as Christians. Her preparation for death in the past few months, 'responding to the call as of a challenging friend', as she once wrote, reflected the light of that hope and promise.

Another extract from her commonplace book, the opening lines of a poem by Emily Dickinson, for me reflects both the core of Sr Elizabeth's being, and the faith which were the foundation of her life and living:

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –

May she rest in peace, and rise in glory.



GOD AND THE CORONAVIRUS

JAMES F. WELLINGTON

‘It’s all because of same-sex marriage’ a neighbour said to me. ‘What is?’ I asked, puzzled. ‘The coronavirus, of course,’ he said. ‘it’s God’s way of punishing us for allowing gays to marry each other’. Somewhat surprised, and being in a hurry, I simply said, ‘Oh, I don’t think God works in that way’, and left it at that.

Later in the day, while on Facebook, I came across a number of posts from Christians, offering their thoughts on the theological origins of COVID-19. The theme of Divine Judgment featured strongly, though the precise motive for the holy wrath took different forms, depending on the chosen whipping post of each contributor.

Two things, in particular, disturbed me about these posts. First of all, there was the deeply misguided and grossly insensitive opportunism which was on display, even worn as a badge of honour, by my brothers and sisters in Christ. A virus is killing thousands of people and plunging so many families into grief and loss, and the message from the followers of Christ is, ‘You deserve it’.

Secondly, I felt an inner shame and revulsion against the caricature of my God which was being presented to the world through such a superficial analysis. To be sure, the Bible is awash with plenty of stories and images of God’s wrath, mainly, though not exclusively, in the Old Testament. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, Noah and the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, to name but a few.

Throughout the Old Testament there is an overwhelming concern to protect the holiness of God from human contamination. This concern forms the basis for the laws excluding certain people from public worship. And indeed, the expulsion, annihilation and destruction of those who suffered in the three stories above can all be read in this light. The Holy God cannot live with unholiness, and therefore the unholy have to be eliminated. This is the assumption on which my neighbour and the Facebook contributors base their theological interpretations of human catastrophe.

What if, however, that assumption has been surpassed? What if the image of a Holy God who has to be protected from His unholy creatures no longer holds sway? What if, far from demanding His own protection from unholiness God plunges, in person, straight into the mess that human beings have made of His creation? What if God says, as He did through the mouth of the prophet of the exile, ‘Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?’ (Is. 43:18–19).

In the Incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh, God has done all these things. He is no longer the Untouchable who demands justice, but the Crucified One who forgives His murderers. He is no longer the disgusted Creator who drives His disobedient creatures out of His presence, but the generous Father whose unconditional love welcomes back the wayward son. He is no longer the harsh lawgiver who decrees death for marital infidelity, but the merciful rabbi who refuses to condemn the adulteress. Christ is the ‘new thing’ which God does. And all our theological interpretations have to be funnelled through Him.

So, if we are looking for God in the coronavirus crisis, we do not start with divine judgment. We start with divine love and mercy. And we do not have to look very far to see Him at work. We see Him, first and foremost, in the dedicated health professionals and carers, who regularly attend the victims of this dreadful disease. We see Him in those who place themselves daily on the line for the sake of those within their care. We see Him in those who willingly and tragically lay down their lives for those whom they are

seeking to save. This is the God whom we see and worship and adore in Christ, and not the caricature which belongs to the ‘former things’ and the ‘things of old’.

James F. Wellington is a retired Church of England priest, with a Permission to Officiate in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. He holds a doctorate from the Archbishop’s Examination in Theology for a thesis relating to the origins of Jesus Prayer, and has published widely on prayer, faith and Eastern monasticism. He is a conductor of retreats and quiet days on the Jesus Prayer and other aspects of spirituality.



MIRACLES AND HISTORY

A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by Bede

SISTER BENEDICTA SLG

There is still a question mark against that part of the material in Bede’s writings that concerns miracles. This has caused them to be either ignored by historians or treated to a cautious defusing so that they become safe to handle; at best they are considered as primitive survivals of white magic¹ or as a different kind of truth,² In Bertram Colgrave’s introduction to his edition of the *Ecclesiastical History*³ he expresses the doubts felt about miracles in the query, ‘How is it that one who is supposed to be our greatest medieval historian can spend so much time telling wonder-tales?’⁴

This essay was originally published in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, edited by Gerald Bonner (London: SPCK, 1976).

¹ Cf. Loomis, ‘The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede’, *Speculum* xxi (1946), 404ff.

² Cf. C. W. Jones, *Saints’ Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1947).

³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). All quotations here from the *Ecclesiastical History* (EH) are from that edition.

It seems to me that the answer to this question is not to be found only in seeing miracle stories in the light of anthropology and folklore, or even in terms of theological definition, but by looking also at the miracles recorded by Bede in relation to miracle material used by other medieval writers, particularly historians. Miracle stories are not the perquisite of the simple-minded and uneducated; they are there in the writings of some of the most sophisticated men of the Middle Ages: even Abélard has them.⁵ Miracle stories were told and retold in the circle that included Anselm of Canterbury, Hugh of Cluny and Hugh of Lyons; John of Salisbury was as concerned with miracles as the more credulous Herbert of Bosham; there is hardly a medieval chronicler who does not have miracles to record. Accounts of miracles were part of the material available to all writers in the Middle Ages. It is useful for theologians to see how this was understood and integrated into the Christian scheme of things; it is useful for others with different concerns to discover the sources, conscious or unconscious, of this way of understanding reality. But for the historians there are two more important questions: first, how far is a miracle story an account of events and facts? and second, what use did medieval writers make of this material when it became articulate in their writings?

It is clear, first of all, that Bede and other writers who record miracles believed they were recording facts about events. People believed they had witnessed these events, and they told Bede what they believed had happened; there is no question of deliberate fraud or falsehood. But to believe that what you write about actually happened is not in itself a guarantee that it did, and with miracle material it is peculiarly difficult to find any valid way of checking the personal affirmation. The essence of a miracle is in itself unverifiable, especially after a lapse of time; all that can be said is: here was an event that caused wonder, that was said by sincere and truthful men to be the direct intervention of God in human affairs. Certainly, something was thought to have happened; the rest is interpretation.

⁴ *EH*, xxxv.

⁵ E.g. Peter Abélard, *Sic et Non* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 1525–6, *Patrologia Latina* clxxviii.

In considering this interpretation of the material the first thing to take into account is a world-view very different from our own. In a pre-scientific world which did not depend on the modern notion of causation, what distinguished a miracle from other events? For us, the interesting question about a miracle is ‘how?’: how was this effect caused, how did it work, what were the mechanics of this event? In the sixth century, exegetes had asked that question, too:⁶ how did Peter walk on the water? Did the water solidify or did Peter become light? It was not asked again until Robert of Melun (c. 1100–1167) and Robert Pullen (c. 1080–c. 1146) took it up. For Bede and his contemporaries, the important question was not ‘how?’ but ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ It was not the mechanics of the miracle that mattered, but its significance. For Bede the world was shot through with divinity and a miracle was not just any inexplicable event but an event that was also a sign of God’s relationship with man. Bede himself records the extreme of this view when he sets down what Trumbert, ‘one of those who taught me the Scriptures’, had told him. Chad had said: ‘The Lord moves the air, raises the wind, hurls the lightnings and thunders forth from heaven so as to arouse the inhabitants of the world to fear him.’⁷ Here the external world is seen as an extension of man, inextricably bound up with his relationship to God. It was not until the twelfth century that miracles were seen in a different context, with nature as an entity in itself; significantly it is only then that miracles can properly be described as ‘wonder-tales’.

Bede certainly believed that miracles happened; it was an integral part of his understanding of reality. What is remarkable is the way in which he controls and uses this material. He was not primarily interested in the external marvellousness of miracles. His most usual word for miracles is not *miracula* but *signa*. It was what was signified that mattered; the wonder itself was secondary. Like St Gregory the Great he saw that ‘it is a greater miracle . . . to convert a sinner than to raise up a dead man’.⁸ In his account of the only instance of this, the supreme

⁶ Cf. Augustinus Hibernicus, *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, Archive of Celtic Latin Literature (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 2147ff, *Patrologia Latina* xxxv.

⁷ *EH* iv.3, 343.

⁸ Gregory the Great, *Dialogus*, Fathers of the Church, 39 (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 264–5, *Patrologia Latina* lxxvii.

miracle, in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede follows just that presumption: Drythelm returned from the dead, but upon that fact Bede spends no time at all. This happened, he says, *namque ad excitationem viventium de morte animae*,⁹ ('in order to arouse the living from spiritual death') and the other importance that it has for Bede is that it happened in Britain, in *Brittania factum est*. There are few, if any, instances in Bede's works where he tells a story simply for the sake of causing wonder: the wonder is always subservient to the main issue, which is salvation. This is a use of miracles which comes from inside; they are events made integral to his main theme, a part of his deepest convictions about the dealings of God with man. This integral use of miracles has an appearance of simplicity but, to quote Henry Mayr-Harting, 'the appearance of naiveté here is very deceptive indeed'.¹⁰ Bede understood the material he was using from the inside and was not concerned to assert or emphasize the marvellous elements in the traditions he received. As with his other material, Bede verified very carefully just what the best traditions were, about a holy man or miraculous event. With St Cuthbert he submitted his account to the brethren at Lindisfarne, for instance, and they could find no fault in it. He had recorded the consensus of opinion about the meaning of the life and miracles of St Cuthbert as it was seen by those who still lived in that tradition. They agreed that he was right about what had happened and why: the significance of Cuthbert's life was to be seen through the details of events rather than in isolated facts devoid of significance.

Bede was careful also to name the people who were witnesses to miracles, as well as giving his written sources, which he does not do when relating political or military events. This is because the miracle is for Bede part of a living tradition and its interpretation is vital. The witnesses are 'true and religious men', those in fact who can be relied upon to judge events rightly and see what is significant about them, rather than the most accurate observers of facts. This oral tradition of good men, *ex traditione maiorum*, is a source no longer available for historians; it belongs to the close-knit society of another age, where what is agreed to have happened is held to be a

⁹ *EH* v.12, 489.

¹⁰ H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Batsford, 1972), 50.

stronger guide than the observations of individuals. The fact that this source is not available now does not invalidate Bede in his use of it.

Bede is concerned primarily with the moral truth and inner meaning of miracle stories and secondarily with their significance within the story he is writing, whether it is the life of Cuthbert or the missionary saga of the conversion of the English people. He does not leave the miracles as marvellous anecdotes, though, incidentally, he uses the dramatic implications of the material to the full simply as a storyteller. But beyond this moral and missionary bias, Bede uses miracle material from within in yet a third way. I would like to look briefly at a few of Bede's miracle stories and show how an unprejudiced attention to the points Bede is making leads right away from an obsession with wonder-details and gives at least three dimensions to the material used.

First, there is one of Bede's most famous stories: Cædmon's gift of song,¹¹ Bede is certainly saying what a wonderful thing it is that this unlettered man learned to sing; he is also saying what a splendid instance this is of God's goodness towards the English nation; he is also concerned with the moral edification of Cædmon's death. But the story is far more than that, it is also a piece of literary criticism. Bede introduces the story by contrasting Caedmon's poetry with that of other writers; none of them equal him, he says, *nullus eum aequiperare potuit*, and he asks what makes Cædmon a better poet than the rest.¹² The answer is given in vivid and dramatic form based on the traditions at Whitby about the poet and used by Bede in a subtle and sophisticated way. First, he makes it clear that Cædmon had always been a frustrated poet, not someone who had never wanted to sing; it was with this unresolved tension uppermost in his mind that Bede pictures Cædmon going to sleep one night. Then, in the long tradition of poets and prophets, Cædmon dreams. He does not dream of a saint or an angel, as in a miracle story, but of *quidam*, 'someone', who stands beside him. And what does he tell Cædmon to sing?

¹¹ *EH* iv.24, 414–21.

¹² *EH*, 414.

Canta, he says, *principium creaturarum*,¹³ the basic subject of all poetry. Cædmon wakes with the tension of his life resolved; he adds more verses, turning the *principium creaturarum* theme into its Christian dimension, ‘praising God in fitting style’. Next day he is examined about his experience, not by the ‘reverend and holy men’ who would judge a miracle, but by *multis doctoribus viris*, men of skill and technical ability. From then on, Cædmon was subject to the ordinary disciplines of a poet—metrical form, style, melodious verse—his gift was not simply a wonder, unconnected with abilities and skills. Significantly, too, the subjects he wrote about were history and moral instruction; the subjects proper to a Christian poet are those Bede himself wrote about. Bede is of course writing about a divine gift of language, and his main point is that God has acted towards the poor and simple; but Bede is also talking about literature and the essence of poetry. Cædmon, he says, was inspired by God and therefore in the mainstream of inspiration that runs through great poetry; he chose subjects within the Christian economy which improved his verse and he developed a technique to express his inspiration. But Bede asserts that it is the divine gift of poetry that made Cædmon supreme; the others just did not have what it takes.

There is here no dwelling on a wonder for its own sake, and it is revealing to contrast this with other miracle stories about the gift of language. For instance, Roger of Hoveden tells how at the funeral of St Hugh of Lincoln a thief tried to ply his trade; he was rooted to the spot, ‘impelled to compose rather inferior Latin verses whether he would or no’.¹⁴ Walter, a lay-brother at Clairvaux, was visited in his sleep by a saint who taught him the mass of the Holy Spirit; when he woke up, he remembered it, but had the ability neither to learn more nor to use what he had learned.¹⁵ Or there is the story of the dumb lay-brother, William of Ford, who had his speech restored at the prayers of a saint, only to find to his disgust that he spoke low-class English rather than aristocratic French.¹⁶ These are in-

¹³ *EH*, 416.

¹⁴ Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, iv, ed. W. Stubbs. (London: Longman, 1871), 143.

¹⁵ *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense*, edited by B. Griesser (Rome, 1961), 240.

deed ornamental ‘wonder-tales’, and the contrast with Bede need not be stressed further.

Another instance of this subtle use of the miracle story is in Bede’s account of the dream of Bishop Laurence.¹⁷ Laurence, faced with a crisis in the affairs of the English Church, spent the night in the church of St Peter and St Paul. He dreamed of St Peter, who chided and whipped him; next day he could show the king his wounds. A story of primitive incubation, no doubt; also a story about God’s concern for the English people; but for Bede it is far more than this. It is the chief of the apostles who chides Laurence, asserting his own responsibility for the Church in Britain and the responsibility of Laurence as his representative in the line of the Apostles. Bede’s theme here is authority in the Christian Church; through the story he says that authority derives from Christ through the Apostles to the bishops, that it centres on the see of St Peter, that it is a matter not of domination but of a responsibility that cannot be evaded or abandoned, and that it is exercised in service and suffering after the pattern of Christ Crucified. This is a serious and indeed vital theme, presented under dramatic images; it resolved an otherwise insoluble conflict. Mellitus and Justus returned to England and the king received baptism; he was ‘greatly alarmed’ (*extimuit multum*) by the dream of Bishop Laurence—and well he might be.

A third instance of this contrast between Bede’s use of miracles and that of other writers is to be found in the matter of cures. To take only one example: Roger of Hoveden describes the cure of a woman of Wye¹⁸ by that dubious person Abbot Eustace of Flay, as follows: ‘She drank the water from the fountain he had blessed and at once vomited two large black toads, which at once turned into two huge black dogs and then into asses.’ The keeper of the fountain sprinkled her with water, and ‘at once the creatures ascended into the sky, leaving behind a bad smell’. It is perhaps unfair to take such an extreme example, which is only a wonder-tale (unless perhaps it is used in a study of

¹⁶ John, Abbot of Ford, *Wulfric of Haselmere* Book I, c.14, ed. Dom Maurice Bell (Taunton: Somerset Record Society, 1933), xlvi, 28–9.

¹⁷ *EH* ii.6, 154–5.

¹⁸ Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica magistri*, iv, 123.

delusions) but it is the wonder-tale in its extreme form. In Bede there is no such thing. Take, for instance, the story of the cure of Herebald by Bishop John of Beverley.¹⁹ It is an immensely interesting story, with its interaction of spiritual healing by the bishop and physical cure by the infirmarian. Herebald, travelling one day with the bishop fell from his horse and fractured his skull. The bishop prayed for him all night and then when he came to him in the morning asked him if he knew who was speaking to him. Herebald answered, ‘I do, you are my beloved bishop.’ John then asked if he thought he would live and Herebald answered that he would, if it pleased the Lord and with the bishop’s prayers. The bishop then laid his hands on him and blessed him. Herebald showed marked signs of recovery, so the bishop placed him in the care of a medical man with instructions to bind up Herebald’s head.

It was Herebald himself who decided it was a miracle, not the onlookers: it was a miracle for him not because it was unusual but because it was significant. He was, he said, cured in order to make good deficiencies in his baptism; and this cure of the soul was to him and to Bede the true miracle.

It is clear that we are misled if we class Bede’s accounts of miracles as ‘mere wonder-tales’; it is to place an emphasis on the wonder that is not there in Bede himself. There is a use of miracle material that can be called merely decorative, external, concerned chiefly with the element of the unusual, even if for a moral purpose. In Florence of Worcester, for instance, miracles are prodigies, like the movements of the stars or an eclipse of the sun; in *Ordericus Vitalis*, miracle material is recorded in lumps, taken whole from the shrine of a saint or a saint’s life; in William of Malmesbury, who is in some ways closer to Bede, miracles are often mere wonders. In the *Gesta Regum*, for instance, in one section the miracles at the death of Pope Gregory are put alongside the story of the witch of Berkely *non superno miraculo sed inferno praestigio* (‘not a heavenly miracle, but a hellish illusion’),²⁰ a story of a magical statue of Venus in Rome, a *portenta* of Siamese twins,

¹⁹ *EH* v.6, 464–9.

²⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors and R. M. Thomson, Oxford Medieval Texts, 1–2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988), 1187–93, *Patrologia Latina* clxxix.

and the miracle of the uncorrupt bodies of the royal English saints, in such a way that what they have in common is simply their sensational value.

Bede is not, then, concerned with facts for themselves in the miracles; and indeed as his use of the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* shows, he could alter facts to suit his theme if necessary. Do we then err if we look for factual information in the miracles recorded by Bede? I think there is historical information there, and that it is as great as in the rest of his work, but it is subject to more layers of use and interpretation than the other material. It is essential, therefore, to be aware of the use Bede makes of this material, his preconceptions about it as well as the aims and purposes he has in using it, and to realize that the events reach us essentially through interpretations. Bede is using his miracle material from the inside, and he shapes it according to his purposes. If we try to see the miracles as a simple record of facts we show ourselves more credulous and naive than Bede himself; perhaps it is not only in Bede's miracle material but in all his material that we should exercise some degree of this gift of discernment.



PLAYING WITH MATCHES

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, 9 February, 2020

Isaiah 58: 1–9; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2: 1–12; Matthew 5: 13–20

BROTHER JAMES KOESTER SSJE

Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, wherever in the world Christians gather for worship, Scripture is read. It is not read for our entertainment or our amusement, or even for our edification. Rather, Scripture is read when Christians gather for our transformation. Something happens to us when Scripture is proclaimed in our midst. We do not know how; we may not even be aware of it; we often cannot see it; but we are changed when Scripture is read. Scripture changes us.

The Brothers of St John the Evangelist remind ourselves of this in our *Rule of Life* where we say,

... the life we live is permeated by Holy Scripture; it has a central place in our worship, our preaching, our meditation and reading, and our study. Through the scriptures the living voice of God is continually active to convert, nourish and transform us. The more we open ourselves to their riches, the more we have to share with others. And the more we open the scriptures to others, the more we discover in them for our own lives.¹

It is this dynamic relationship with Scripture, which has the power to ‘convert, nourish and transform us’, that is central to our life as Christians. And because of its power to do just that—transform us—interacting with Scripture is like playing with matches. Scripture is dangerous. It is dangerous because it rests not ‘with plausible words of [human] wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that [our] faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God’ (1 Cor. 2:4).

Father Richard Benson knew this because he reminds us that ‘in reading Holy Scripture we gain the mind of God and Christ’.² He goes on to remind us elsewhere that the ‘simple reading of Holy Scripture, not for study, but as having a sacramental power to soothe the soul, may bring much comfort, and it tends imperceptibly to form the thinking habits according to the mind of God, so that it is very profitable’.³ Like Paul, in the epistle for today, who tells us that his words are ‘not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But ... God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’ (1 Cor. 2:6b–7).

It is this wisdom that comes from God to which Father Benson points, when he tells us plainly, if ‘we want strength for any work of God, we do well to seek it in Holy Scripture. Those minds have been the greatest which have been most filled with it. The misery of our day is that we have so many

¹ Society of St John the Evangelist, *Rule of Life*, chapter 20, ‘Holy Scripture’, 40.

² Richard Meux Benson, *Instructions on the Religious Life, First Series* (Oxford: Society of St John the Evangelist, 1927), 58.

³ Richard Meux Benson, *Further Letters of Richard Meux Benson SSJE* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1920), 13.

books that we have scarcely any time for reading the one which is all-important'.⁴ And Father Benson wrote that in 1874! Imagine what he would make of life today, inundated as we are with news around the clock, the internet, and who knows what more to come. He would be dumbfounded. Yet, I think he would say exactly the same thing he said to this Parish in the Autumn of 1870.

It was October 1870 when a letter from the Wardens of the Church of the Advent in Boston, arrived at the Mission House here in Oxford, asking Father Benson if members of the Society would be available to assist the Rector of that Parish for a number of months. The invitation was so significant, and so unexpected, that Father Benson thought it best if he himself travelled to Boston to investigate. His departure was set for All Saints Day. The day before, he wrote to members of this Parish, encouraging 'you to be diligent in your attendance at all the means of grace, and in your prayers'.⁵

'Be diligent in your attendance at all the means of grace, and in your prayers.' That was Father Benson's word to all of us in 1870, and I believe that it remains his invitation to us 150 years later, just as his invitation to we Brothers remains 'to live for God'.⁶

In many ways the invitation he laid out for his parishioners is no different than the one he laid out for us in the Society. Both those in the parish and we in the Society are to be about the transforming work of God, and that cannot happen unless we are all 'diligent in [our] attendance at all the means of grace, and in [our] prayers'. And Father Benson assures us it will happen.

Writing in 1886, Father Benson tells us that 'none can come to Christ ... and go away as they came. ... Our coming to Christ changes everything.'⁷

It isn't that Father Benson wants us to go through the motions of showing up in Church on Sundays, or for us to simply live a life of routine. People go

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Serenhedd James, *The Cowley Fathers* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019), 59.

⁶ Richard Meux Benson, *The Religious Vocation*, chapter 1: 'Of the Objects of the Society' (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 37.

⁷ Richard Meux Benson, *Spiritual readings for every day*, 'Christmas' (London: J. T. Hayes, 1886), 260.

through the motions and live a life of routine all the time, and nothing is ever different from one day to the next. No, what Father Benson was insisting for all of us, is that we engage in the hard work of transformation, and ‘to live as ... those who have been with Jesus’.⁸ That is what Father Benson wanted for everyone. You and I can be diligent in all manner of things, but it is only by living with Jesus that we can discover what Paul means when he says, ‘no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God’ (1 Cor. 2:11–12). And we all know that the gift of the Spirit is the gift of fire.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit... (Acts 2:1–4a)

So when Father Benson speaks to us about being ‘diligent in your attendance at all the means of grace, and in your prayers’, he is encouraging us to take seriously the transforming grace of God that comes to us through faith, not in human wisdom, but in the power of God (see 1 Cor. 2:5), made manifest in a life of prayer, worship, Sacrament, Scripture, and community. This is the way we can truly live as people who have been with Jesus, for it is through all these means of grace that Jesus is present, not simply to us, but to the world which God loves, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him’ (John 3:16–17).

So when we heed Father Benson’s admonition to be ‘diligent in your attendance at all the means of grace, and in your prayers’, like playing with matches, everything is set ablaze by the Spirit of God. The work of transformation continues, not simply in ourselves, but in the world, and the power of God made manifest in prayer, worship, Sacrament, Scripture, and community changes, transforms, heals, and blesses all that it touches.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

We cannot come to Christ and go away as we came. Our coming to Christ changes everything, and it begins when we open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our hands. Father Benson knew that. Paul knew that. And you and I are in the process of discovering that.

Brother James Koester is a native of Regina, Saskatchewan. He was ordained in the Anglican Church of Canada in 1984. He served in parish ministry for five years prior to making his way to SSJE, where he was Life pProfessed in 1995. He had filled a variety of roles within the community prior to his election as Superior in 2016.



LIVING HOLY SATURDAY TODAY*

SISTER STEPHANIE THÉRÈSE SLG

Holy Saturday is suspended between two worlds, that of the darkness and death of Good Friday and of the restoration of the Light of Christ in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Holy Saturday is essentially a day of solemn vigil, prayer and meditation. It focuses on the grave, but Christ's tomb is not a place of corruption, decay or defeat. He is life-giving and a source of power and victory; joy and sadness are intermingled.

The emptiness of this day is reflected in the Church's prayer: there is no Mass celebrated on Holy Saturday, and here at the convent where the Paschal Vigil is kept at 4.30 a.m. on Easter Sunday, the evening of Holy Saturday is still and vacant. The Divine Office is pared down and simplified, no hymns, simple chanting. Everything seems to be taken away, and we are left alone in the Great Silence of the Triduum. This vacuum follows the celebratory Eucharist of Maundy Thursday and the intense Liturgy of Good Friday. We are bereft. God, who cannot die, lies dead in a tomb.

On the first Holy Saturday the disciples did not know the end of the story as we do. Their Sabbath was a day of confusion, desolation, failure, fear and loss. Even though we know the events of Easter Sunday, we, too,

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can experience these things in our lives, and when we do we must strive to make this Holy Saturday place a place of waiting and a place of hope.

A Place of Waiting

Waiting is what Isaiah did when God was absent. ‘I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him’ (Is. 8:17). Isaiah also says:

They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

(Is. 40:31)

So this waiting on the Lord embodies power and strength in the face of God’s hiddenness.

Holy Saturday is a place of expectant waiting. It is not a passive waiting where time merely passes; that is the danger of drifting in the darkness. One must be active and vigilant. ‘Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to Him at once when He comes and knocks’ (Luke 12:35, 36). When it feels as if God is hiding, ‘we look for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom’ (Is. 59:9b). How do we remain expectant waiting in the gloom? There are three things we can do to seek God who is momentarily hidden from us. It is sometimes salutary to remember that it is not God who is absent but often we absent ourselves from God by our passive waiting and gloomy dispositions. So we must actively seek God.

First, we can seek Him in the Scriptures. To stay ‘in touch’, to stay close to God there are few ways better than the Scriptures, especially the Gospels. It is the place where God reveals Himself through the life and teaching of His Son Jesus, and where the apostles share their insight into the living of the Good News. ‘For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope’ (Rom. 15:4).

Second, there is the Holy Eucharist which is usually a very tangible Sacrament: touching, tasting, sometimes smelling, that can ground us in the Presence even if we are numb. The story of our salvation is revealed in the Mass, the passion and death of Jesus and His Resurrection. The ritual and familiarity of the Mass allows us to transcend the place where we are to a newer closeness to God. Today our tactile and olfactory senses are set aside as we only engage with the Mass through live streaming on our computers or phones, but it remains a corporate offering.

This brings us to the third point, which is community. Do not shun community when you are in a dark and lonely place. Thomas fled the company of the disciples on Holy Saturday and missed the first resurrection appearance to the group. Darkness, fear, unknowing and confusion can be alleviated and tempered by the presence of others. We are the Body of Christ, not individuals going it alone. Despite the isolation of today's lockdown we must nevertheless still reach out to others, shopping, phoning or chatting at a safe distance.

Christ's repose in the tomb is an active repose, for He descends into hell to set the captives free and unloose the bonds of death. Our waiting, too, must be active. We must continue to seek God. We must pray through the emptiness that is Holy Saturday. We must pray into the great silence of Christ asleep in the tomb. Let not the silence and the absence lull you to sleep. 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead.' Your waiting has an end and Christ is risen.

It is good that we should wait quietly for the Lord as it says in Lamentations (3:25–6). And the Psalms bid us to wait in silence, 'For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in Him' (Ps. 62:6). Do not let the time of spiritual desolation be a barrier to God; rather in the active waiting through it, make it a means of closer union with God.

A Place of Hope

We know the end of the story, what follows Holy Saturday. We know that Christ has been harrowing hell, releasing the dead from death, and then rising on Easter morning, death vanquished. This knowledge brings us to a place

of hope. So we live Holy Saturday amid its confusion and fear, its absence and waiting, we live it in hope. When grounded in God and believing His promises, we have a hope which provides the incentive to live out our faith even in the face of trouble. This requires a total fixing of one's confidence on God's goodness. Through our faith comes a hope which brings a confident expectation for our future.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Rom. 5:1–5)

Even though we often feel nothing when we are in a 'Holy Saturday' place, our hope, girded up by faith, will give us a certain assurance in God's faithfulness and in His presence. Therefore our waiting should be shot through with hope. Setting God before our eyes, and hoping in the promise of His Resurrection, we will find 'pleasures for evermore.'

I have set the Lord always before me;
because He is at my right hand I shall not fall.
My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices,
my body also shall rest in hope.
For you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor let your holy one see the Pit.
You will show me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy,
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

(Ps. 16:8–11)

Hope is a spring welling up inside to counter the gloom of God's hiddenness. The powerful combination of faith and hope lightens our spirit and brings us joy because we know and trust the truth of His Resurrection and the new life this brings to the believer. 'For in this hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if

we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience' (Rom. 8:24–5). And it is in the patient waiting in the darkness that hope can come fully alive and flood our souls with confidence and trust in God's goodness. Hope is essential. The absence of hope leads to a sense of despondency and ultimately to despair, which is counter to the Resurrection life in Christ Jesus. 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope' (Rom. 15:13).

The End of the Story

The disciples did not know how that first Holy Saturday would end, but we do. And it is in this knowledge of Christ's Resurrection from the dead that we are enabled to live through our 'Holy Saturdays' with patience and hope. The coronavirus has provided us with a real Holy Saturday experience and, like the Apostles on that first Holy Saturday, we do not know the outcome or implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are enabled to live through this 'Holy Saturday' through the power of the Holy Spirit. We seek and claim this power through a constant vigil of self while directing our attention and energies ever towards God. We wait patiently in the darkness and confusion, the fear and unknowing that can engulf us at times. We nurture hope in this place while seeking the presence of God in the Scriptures, in the Mass, and in our neighbour.

In Holy Saturday we encounter Christ's hiddenness in our lives. Holy Saturday can help us understand that God works out of sight, in the depths of our life and in the world as well. The sense may be one of absence or void, but in truth Christ is very near to us, longing to do what He did on that first Holy Saturday: harrow our hell and raise us to new life. So we must yield through prayer and discipline the dead wood of our lives to Him to be transformed in the new flames of the Paschal fire. Holy Saturday speaks of the completed sacrifice but, paradoxically, it is a place where we can come to know the incomplete nature of God's loving. The Love that does not stop; there is always more.

Because we know the end of the story, the waiting becomes a place of hope and anticipation of God's action in our lives. He can break through the

barriers of our feelings and blankness, bringing the Easter fire's Light into our lives. We may feel dead, but we wait in the knowledge that on Holy Saturday Christ was in hell raising the dead to new life. Holy Saturday is a place of waiting in anticipation of God's action in our lives.

Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
(Rom. 12:12)



FAITH, FAMILY & FRIENDS

Mothering Sunday, 22 March 2020

Colossians 3. 12–17

DOUGLAS DALES

Mothering Sunday comes at a poignant moment in the life of the Church and society, in the UK and across Europe and much of the world. It is a special moment when we affirm what we all value most—our faith, our families and especially our mothers; and also our friends. It is hard to recall a time when the celebration of Mothering Sunday, Holy Week and Easter had to be suspended in the way it was this year. But the worship of God and life in accordance with the Gospel is not suspended, and it cannot be. This is because each person, made in the image and likeness of God, is called to become a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit,’ someone whose heart beats with the worship of God ‘in spirit and in truth.’ So perhaps the first challenge of this enforced and unending Lent is to cultivate and deepen our faith in Jesus Christ. St Bernard once said that ‘life is given to us that we may learn how to love, and time is given to us that we may find God’. Well now we certainly have the time!

We have lived in a society increasingly preoccupied with material possessions and too often distracted by over-busyness. Now we have been stopped in our tracks and confronted with a dire crisis of life and values. We

have time on our hands and real limitations placed on our lifestyle. So we will have time to pray more sincerely and deeply: for our families and friends, for our neighbours, and for so many whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by this crisis. Pray too for the governments and all who work in the health sector, in social care and those unseen or unconsidered carers including undertakers, here and in other countries. Enclosed with this issue of the Chronicle I offer a short ‘Rule of Prayer for use during the Pandemic’. It is the duty of all Christians to pray regularly each day and with disciplined determination for every aspect of this current crisis, now and in the many months ahead. In our communities, our kindness can be manifest in many practical ways, but our prayers can also reach where we cannot be, as we seek in both ways as St John of the Cross told us, ‘to put love in where love is not’ and to banish fear in the name of Jesus Christ our Risen Lord.

The human and pastoral impact of the current pandemic is profound and wide-ranging. It is a unique and unfolding situation with unknown consequences for so many people, posing the most serious crisis for us since the Second World War. We are witnessing a great tragedy, and our hearts go out to all whose lives have been turned upside down by events beyond their control. Our faith must be the foundation for all our action, and it must also be the anchor that gives hope to others in a quiet but determined manner. The very fact that we, and others, can no longer worship in church should prompt us to value more deeply the worship that we can give day by day at home.

Mothering Sunday is a festival of family life, as indeed is Easter. Yet this year we were not free to forgather in the usual way; it is very hard to be cut off from our children, and grandchildren in particular. As Christians, how we feel for our families is a guide to how we should feel about God as our heavenly Father, and also how we are to feel towards our neighbours as His children as well. One of the advantages of living in a village, as I do, is that small can be strong, as we reach out in practical care and immediate comfort to those around us, whether they come to Church or not. A strong, charitable impulse is a defining characteristic of our country and also of our own neighbourhood; it is to be cherished and strengthened in the demands of the

coming days. As our Lord said, ‘insofar as you care for others you are caring for me’ (cf. Matt. 25:40).

It will be hard not to be able to receive Holy Communion for some time, and the lack of this for the sick and dying is a serious concern yet to be addressed. However, we can take comfort from our Lord’s promise that ‘where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there I am in the midst’ (Matt. 18:20). He remains the Bread of Life, giving Himself to us, and also through us, in His great love. Let the friendship of Christ be the secret strength of our lives, and let us be sensitive to His presence among us as well as in the needs of others. Friendship is indeed the bond of love that unites the Church. As St Gregory the Great once said: ‘let your good deeds be evident where you are, and let your prayers reach where you cannot be.’ Prayer as an expression of love underpins Christian friendship. With telephones we have a wonderful instrument for cultivating friendships, and we now have more than enough time to do so. So cherish your friends, near and far, and give them time. Include within your circle of friendship anyone who may be isolated or lonely. This is a most vital duty as the impact of the current measures on mental health is a serious concern. Conversation and sincere listening are vital for well-being; taking an encouraging interest and calling up regularly is so important.

Finally, take to heart the wisdom contained in the epistle for Mothering Sunday this year from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. It makes a perfect agenda for us to follow; and it is also an inspiring mirror of the values that already sustain the life of the Church at the heart of our communities here. May God bless you all and your families and friends during these demanding times.

Douglas Dales is an Anglican parish priest in the diocese of Oxford.

REMINDER

Chronicle subscription rates were increased for 2020. If you pay by Direct Debit then your instruction to your bank may need to be updated.

NATURAL EPIPHANIES

JAMES F. WELLINGTON

One of the positive features of the present lockdown brought about by the coronavirus is the number of people who are saying that they have started to have a far greater awareness of the natural world than previously. Those drawn to contemplative prayer will no doubt be cheering them on and encouraging them to greater things. The contemplative's vocation to see God in all things and to see all things in God has traditionally led to a keen attentiveness to natural epiphanies.

The fourth-century poet-theologian and mystic, St Ephrem the Syrian, wrote over four hundred hymns, many of which are full of theological reflections on the created order. In *Scripture and Nature*, St Ephrem insists, God has two witnesses, each one testifying at some length and depth to His beauty, His goodness and His love. In one of his *Hymns on Faith*,¹ for example, he offers these thoughts on birds:

A baby bird, when it is not yet mature,
cannot crack its shell because of its weakness.
Faith under silence,
is also lacking. Perfect it, Perfecter-of-all!

Refrain: *Make me worthy to glorify your birth with silence!*

The genus of bird is passed on in three stages:
from the womb to the egg, and from it, to the nest where it chirps.
And when it has matured and has flown in the air,
it stretches out its wings in the symbol of a cross.

So too faith is disseminated in a threefold manner:
since the Apostles believed in the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit,
the proclamation has flown to the four corners
through the power of the cross.

¹ Hymn 18, available in Saint Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, trans. Jeffrey Wickes, *Fathers of the Church*, 130 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 148–9.

The three names are disseminated threefold,
in the spirit, and the soul, and the body, symbolically.
Our trinity, perfected by the Three,
has ruled over the borders.

When the spirit suffers, it is entirely inscribed by the Father.
When the soul suffers it is entirely mingled with the Son.
When the body suffers and is then burned,
it shares entirely in the Holy Spirit.

If a bird withdraws its wings and refuses
the simple shape of the cross, the air too
refuses her, and will not bear her,
unless her wings have confessed the cross.

St Ephrem watches a bird spreading its wings in order to fly, and looks beyond the natural beauty of the spectacle to the vision of Christ on the cross. And, even looking beyond the awesome beauty of this spectacle, he sees the imperative of the teaching which invites us to take up our cross daily and follow Him. It is only by such action that we can connect with His Spirit and be borne heavenward like a bird in flight. For the joy of Easter, the exaltation of Ascensiontide and the empowerment of Pentecost are only possible once we have imitated Christ, and like the bird have spread our wings, to deny ourselves, to be reborn and revived, and to be carried ever upward into the limitless realms of divine glory.

Grant, we pray, Almighty God,
that as we believe your only-begotten Son
our Lord Jesus Christ
to have ascended into the heavens,
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
and with Him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

IN MEMORIAM

Since the Winter issue of the Fairacres Chronicle three Priest Associates have died, all of whom had been linked with us for many years. A short biography does not do justice to them, but each had such interesting ministries that it seems appropriate to give some account of their association with us. We have been blessed and enriched by knowing these priests and privileged to support them in their ministries. We ask our Priest Associates to make a commitment to live by the Community's vocation to a life of prayer and reconciliation in the circumstances in which they are called to minister. Reflecting on the lives of these three, it is heartening to know how faithfully they lived out this promise, and how fruitful their lives have been for the whole Church.



TONY KIDD 1938–2020

Tony practiced as a solicitor in the East End of 1950s London. In the 70s he and the family moved to Guiseley where they were all active in their parish church. He trained as a Reader, but a call to priesthood began to sing its siren song and in due course he was accepted by ACCM for training. In 1989 he was ordained as a Non-Stipendiary Minister. He knew that though he was called to serve as a priest he needed to minister without being tied to a parish full-time. This allowed him to give time to retreat work and writing. For several years he wrote a series of Bible study courses for the Scripture Union and after his retirement developed a blog offering online study.

We got to know him best through his visits to the convent at Boxmoor. Last November he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and died on 25 January. Whenever he wrote to us in the few months remaining to him, it was evident that he was preparing himself in a deeply reflective and faith-filled way for seeing his Saviour face to face.



PHILIP ALLIN (1943–2020)

We first got to know Philip when he was Team Vicar of Hermitage in Oxford Diocese. Hitherto he had been in parishes in the dioceses of Nottingham and Southwell. A trained marriage guidance counsellor, in 2001 he was one of the founders of the Institute of Pastoral Counselling and Supervision designed to provide high quality professional counselling training which included Christian theology and spirituality. Prior to this, as the Bishop's Advisor on Pastoral Care in the diocese of Sheffield he was appointed chaplain to the core congregation that remained after the demise of the infamous Nine O'Clock Service which shook the Anglican Church. Until he moved to Durham diocese in 2008, he continued to be the Bishop's Advisor, and then was Warden of Spiritual Direction in that diocese. He died on 13 February.



JOHN ARMSON (1939–2020)

During the 1970s and 80s John regularly brought groups of ordinands from Westcott House to live alongside us during Holy Week. Each week was as memorable for us as it was for the students. Sisters still talk about the year the whole chapel was lit only by dozens of candles for the whole of the Easter Vigil.

When we first knew him, John was Vice-Principal of Westcott House; in subsequent years we prayed for him as Principal of Edinburgh Theological College and a Canon Residentiary of Rochester Cathedral.

His great love of and support for community life remained constant. Indeed, for a couple of years he joined the ecumenical community founded by the Sisters of the Assumption at Hengrave Hall in Suffolk. In the last few years, even though it was no longer possible for him to visit us, he would be making plans to come and stay at Fairacres, a place he found a spiritual home. Fittingly for one for whom the Holy Week liturgies were so important, he died on Easter Day, 12 April.



RECENT & NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM SLG PRESS

Christopher Scott, *Unknowing and Astonishment: Meditations on Faith for the Long Haul*, Fairacres Publications, 182 (2018), 70 pages, £12.99.

Canon Christopher Scott was ordained in 1968 and has served in parishes in Canterbury, London, Guildford and Truro dioceses. He is an Honorary Canon of Truro Cathedral and an Associate of the Community of the Servants of the Will of God at Crawley Down, Sussex. In a series of reflective essays he puts before us an understanding of the Church which goes beyond a managerial model. He urges us to consider again the place of prayer in our lives and to recognise how it changes and develops over time. Drawing on the traditional theology of the Eastern Churches, and linking this teaching closely with the liturgy, he shows how the *cataphatic* tradition of affirmation is held in tension with the *apophatic* tradition of negation, the way of unknowing. Within this tension, ‘faith then holds before us the possibility of being drawn to the unapproachable light in sheer astonishment’. This is theology of the highest quality, presented with clarity, elegance and accessibility.

Bonnie Thurston, *‘Lazarus, Come out!’ Meditations on John 11*, Fairacres Publications 181 (2017), 66 pages, £7.50. *Pondering, Praying, Preaching: Romans 8*, Fairacres Publications, 183 (2019), 69 pages, £12.99.

Bonnie Thurston is a New Testament scholar and poet, well known to readers of SLG publications and to those for whom she has led retreats. She is a founding member and past president of the International Thomas Merton Society and the author or editor of twenty theological books, including commentaries on Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians, and six collections of poetry. Her extensive experience and theological scholarship has provided the press with two volumes of scriptural reflections.

Chapter 11 of John’s Gospel, the Raising of Lazarus, is the longest continuous narrative in his writings, other than the account of the Passion. This study regards the text from the perspective of a play in three acts with seven scenes,

each focusing on one of the *dramatis personae*. In addition to historical-critical and literary commentary, it introduces the traditional Orthodox theology of the icon of the raising of Lazarus to illuminate the text. Each Act closes with questions for prayer and pondering, making the monograph ideal for a self-directed retreat. Of special liturgical interest in the Church's preparation for Holy Week, this passage of Scripture is a timeless challenge to awaken us to awareness and aliveness. We are encouraged to leave behind what is dead and to respond to Christ's call to liberation.

Her book on Romans 8, a pivotal chapter of the Letter to the Romans, is presented in a form to appeal to anyone who reads and ponders on scripture. Each reflection includes useful suggestions for further reading and for using the text in study groups or for preaching. In the words of Esther de Waal, 'Here is serious academic scholarship presented in an accessible form. Read and stay with this material until it enters your heart and becomes prayer.'

Mary Hansbury, *Shem`on the Graceful: Discourse on the Solitary Life* Fairacres Publications, 184 (2020), 60 pages, £5.00.

Mary Hansbury is a student and translator of early Syriac literature and a trained iconographer. Her publications include translations of the writings of St Isaac of Nineveh, of John the Solitary and of the Letters of John of Dalyatha. Her translations of the Table Prayers of St Ephrem, *Hymns of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (SLG Press 2006) and *The Prayers of Jacob of Serug* (SLG Press 2015) complement her extensive publications in the field of Syriac studies.

The late seventh century in the Syrian Church saw the flourishing of several noted monastic writers, among them Shem`on, a monk of an abbey in south-west Iran. Few of his writings remain, but this homily has been preserved as a model of instruction on the solitary life. Preached at the consecration of the cell of a monk embarking on the hermit life, it clearly states the disciplines required to live this form of asceticism, as well as the difficulties and dangers that will be encountered. Through this life of stillness (*hesychia*), the whole person lives centred on life in the resurrected Christ

and in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world. His admonishments are remarkably apposite today, surrounded as we are by temptations of all sorts, and particularly relevant this year as we all come to grips with the imposition of isolation that forces us to look for inner strength. Shem`on has much to say on the subject.

This volume joins a number of publications by SLG Press introducing the texts of the early Fathers of the Christian Church.

Esther de Waal, *God Under my Roof: Celtic Songs and Blessings (revised and enlarged)*, Fairacres Publications, 185 (2020), 48 pages, £4.50.

Esther de Waal has written widely on the Celtic tradition, on Benedictine and Cistercian spirituality and on Thomas Merton. Her most recent book, on borders and thresholds, was inspired by her long association with the Welsh Marches. She now lives in Oxford.

This book started as a simple reprint of her beautiful collection of Celtic poetry published by SLG Press in 1986, which presented a selection of poems and blessings from the monumental multi-volume 19th-century collection of vernacular Hebridean poetry known as the *Carmina Gadelica*.¹ However, the opportunity to include a number of new selections was not to be missed, so this is an expanded and revised edition, containing twelve new prayers and blessings.

Esther de Waal uses the poems to evoke a vision of the wholeness of life: we are seen to belong to a common creation, responsible for the natural world but essentially at peace with it, secure in the knowledge that wherever we go we are under God's heaven, and that God can be found close at hand, under our very roofs. The poetry evinces a life lived with God very close by, a companion in every aspect of life and living.

¹ *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations, with Illustrative Notes of Words, Rites and Customs Dying and Obsolete: Orally Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* by Alexander Carmichael, vols I and II ed. Mrs E. C. C. Watson, vols III and IV ed. Professor James Carmichael Watson, vols V and VI ed. Professor Angus Matheson, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1928–1976)

We are encouraged to make some of the prayers included here our own; to find ourselves befriended by God and the saints as we talk to them with unforced simplicity and candour. So we discover that it is through the rites of ordinariness that the rhythm of eternity penetrates our days and nights.

James F. Wellington, *Journeying with The Jesus Prayer*, Fairacres Publications, 186 (2020), 36 pages, £4.50.

James F. Wellington is a retired Church of England priest, with a Permission to Officiate in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. He holds a doctorate from the Archbishop's Examination in Theology for a thesis relating to the origins of Jesus Prayer. He is a conductor of retreats and quiet days on the Jesus Prayer and other aspects of spirituality, and has had several academic papers published in *Studia Patristica*. He is also the author of *Christe Eleison! The Invocation of Christ in Eastern Monastic Psalmody c.350–450* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2015), *Praying the Psalms with Jesus: A Journey of Discovery and Recognition* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2015) and *Beguiled by Jesus: Faith and the Language of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2017).

In recent years more and more Christians in the West have been discovering the many blessings of the Jesus Prayer, which originated among the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Eastern Mediterranean around fifteen hundred years ago and for centuries has inspired and enabled Christians of the Orthodox Church to find a deeper relationship with God through the continual rhythmic repetition of the short prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'.

In this book, James Wellington beautifully narrates the story of his own journey with the prayer, highlighting the graces which he has received on his travels. These include unceasing prayer, inner watchfulness, stillness of heart, and perfect longing. He concludes with a celebration of what the Jesus Prayer has taught him, and is still teaching him, about the inner geography of the human heart.

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available worldwide from the online retailer, Amazon.**

During the current working restrictions SLG Press is unable to send out new book orders. However any change to this situation will be advertised on the Press website. We hope to be able to resume normal working soon.



REVIEWS

Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict* (London & Oxford: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020). 147 pages, £9.99–14.56. ISBN: TPB 978-1-4729-7307; eBook 978-1-4729-7308-5.

In 2005, the then bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, spoke at Pembroke College Evensong and referred in passing to the ‘new’ Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who had started in that office just a year before. With great confidence, Lord Harries referred to him as the most intellectual Archbishop since Saint Anselm (who seemed to smile down upon the bishop from the stained-glass window in Chapel). It was undoubtedly intended as a compliment; we tend to use the categories and values which we hold most dear in our praise of another. Rowan is ubiquitously referred to as clever, or erudite; the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, expresses what many of us feel at Rowan’s fluent erudition and beautifully clear writing: ‘Rowan Williams is a quite exceptional thinker and man of God’.

But some people have backed away from Williams’s writings for fear of his sophistication. In fact, *Resurrection* (1982) was a book I encountered as an undergraduate, and it was clear that the writer *listened* and sought to understand different perspectives without fear: difference was not something to be backed-away from, but encountered and enthusiastically explored with a resilient hope that this would add to the texture and nuance of the truth, rather than expose it as error. This approach is seen to be too

liberal and inclusive for some who want a binary answer to a brittle question. On the issue of the Resurrection, for example, the American Bishop John Spong believed Rowan to be a ‘neo-medievalist’, preaching orthodoxy to the people in the pew, but knowing in private that it was not true. Rowan wistfully admits to his bewilderment:

I am genuinely a lot more conservative than... [Spong] would like me to be. Take the Resurrection. I think he has said that of course I know what all the reputable scholars think on the subject and therefore when I talk about the risen body I must mean something other than the empty tomb. But I don't. I don't know how to persuade him, but I really don't.¹

Rowan seems always to have longed and waited for the truth to emerge. Richard Harries may have used the term intellectual, but patient, prayerful, wise and, indeed, holy also seem enduring hallmarks.

That is why I think that Rowan's recent book, *The Way of St Benedict*, is more than a careful historical analysis or contextual description of Benedict's thought and work. It is a profound self-disclosure, too. If you really want to get a truthful insight into the former Archbishop, read this book. In it we can see the skill of someone steeped in Benedictine prayer and practice, who held together an Anglican Communion that many thought must splinter and collapse, not only in the world-wide sense, but even in the Church of England. It did not, because Rowan is the opposite of a populist: he eschews inflammatory rhetoric and faction-building because it is not worthy of humanity and is a denial of Christ, who is the only cohering centre of creation. Williams is not afraid of any questions in the quest for a language of the greatest scope and truthfulness, because Christ is the stable foundation who always invites us to begin again every day with simplicity and solitude, renouncing duplicity and factionalism. Each day is a challenging adventure for Rowan to ‘hold together the *community life* and the vocation to solitude’.² In other words, the well-known foundation of stability is, Rowan shows, most present in openness to the possibility of God amid disruption:

¹ In Douglas Holt, ‘Grace under Pressure?’ *Third Way* 23/1, 18–19.

² Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*, 55.

[Stability is] not a static and frozen style of life, but a solid commitment to accompany one another in the search for a way to live honestly and constructively together in the presence of God.³

This is the clear theme that emerges on every page, whether Rowan is considering the literary or historical context of the Rule, or manifestations and reformations of Benedictine life through history. Rowan seems constitutionally incapable of what many of us know so well, of entertaining ‘deceit in the heart’ (*Rule*, 22), and this integrity means living ‘accountably alongside others ... learning how to pay attention to others, ... identifying and rectifying your own unthinking self-centredness’.⁴ It is what he did as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Without redemption from the abyss of self, there would appear to be little hope. If all were just cause and effect, with every lie we tell, our true selves would get buried a little bit deeper, and we might rightly worry that one day we would wake up and look for ourselves, and we would not be there any more. But the infinite atonement is Christ Himself, and His Resurrection unearths the dead and buried. This embracing holy wisdom penetrates our sealed tombs, as warmly and emotionally as a hug to end our social isolation and self-alienation in the coronavirus lockdown.

Williams presents us with an image of Benedict who is a truthful, rigorous leader holding compassion and integrity together in a way that is attractive. He is a careful and committed organizer: the *Rule* might seem prosaic in its attention and detail, but each page of the *Rule* is really about helping us to ‘see ourselves under Christ’s judgement and see others under Christ’s mercy; and we are urged not to despair of that mercy even for ourselves.’⁵ However, ‘people fall in love with God, not because they are told that it is part of the strategy for evangelization... [but] the plain sense of a calling into intimacy with God through life lived with brothers and sisters; nothing more, nothing less.’⁶

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Ibid., 52–3.

There are so many ‘purple passages’ in this clear and wise book that to illustrate them all would require a reprint of most of the pages. Please, read it prayerfully and with openness to its spiritual wisdom that can reach into us and tenderly set us right.

I felt a real sense of exaltation reading this book, a profound hope and a deep joy. To give you an idea of the contents—rather than just my response—let me briefly outline the structure of the work. Williams writes on Benedict’s *Rule* as a ‘toolbox’ to shape lives of holiness (pp. 11–26); he evaluates Benedict’s communities through historical change (pp. 27–42); looks at lives passionately committed to loving God and each other in the evangelization of England (pp. 43–53); the broader contribution of Benedictine monasticism ecumenically and ecologically (pp. 54–65); in the concluding chapter of Part One (pp. 66–83) Rowan thinks about Benedict as Patron Saint of Europe, and reflects on his capacity to retrain European thought in a ‘persuasive language for imagining shared goods and mutual dependence ... at a time when the challenges facing human society are so manifestly greater than any one nation or religious institution can handle in isolation’.⁷ Part Two contains two more detailed and nuanced historical evaluations: an essay on medieval monastic reform, and one on the mysticism of Abbot Cuthbert Butler (Abbot of Downside 1858–1934).

How and *what* has Williams done in this small volume? I think he has unostentatiously demonstrated that wisdom is the re-clothing of what seemed to be well-known and utterly familiar in new flesh, so Resurrection power unexpectedly springs forth: ‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’.⁸ I caught a television broadcast of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* during the lockdown, and wondered what Sr Edmée would have made of that interpretation! It unearthed several uncomfortable themes which confront the viewer. Rowan has, likewise, asked a startling question: where is *God* in Benedict’s invitation to community life? And where else would He be?

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’.

In that sense, this book made me appreciate what SLG and our life together is really about, and must always be really about: beginning again in the journey into truth, love, and community every day in the company of Christ. That is challenging, and prompts us to profound self-examination. But an unexamined life is not worth living.⁹

So let me leave with a hard challenge I want to turn over truthfully each day, grateful for Rowan's honest articulation of it, and of Benedict's path to resolving it:

The Church, which ought to embody not only covenant with God but also covenant with each other, does not always give the feeling of a community where people have unlimited time to grow with each other, nourishing and challenging. We have little incentive to be open with each other if we live in an ecclesiastical environment where political conflict and various kinds of grievance are the dominant currency... We are bad at finding that elusive balance between corrupt and collusive passivity that keeps oppression alive, and the litigious obsessiveness that continually asks whether I am being attended to as I deserve.¹⁰

ANDREW TEAL, WARDEN SLG.

Timothy Radcliffe OP, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). 432 pages, £10.65–12.99. ISBN 978-1-4729-7020-6

This is a book that contains all the wonder, beauty, mess and agony of being alive today. It is a book written with a mission in its sights. Timothy Radcliffe argues that what subverts religious imagination is not so much secularism as fundamentalism, Lynch's 'univocal mentality.' We are blinded to hints of the transcendent by small-minded reductionism which suppresses the impulse to worship the One who sets us free. 'The globalisation of superficiality' coined by Adolfo Nicolas SJ, is the most serious threat to faith in God today.

Radcliffe draws on the writers and artists who ask ultimate questions, who are faithful to the complexity of human experience. Why are we here?

⁹ Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, trans. and ed. D. F. Nevill (London: F. E. Robinson & Company, 1901), §38a, l. 5–6.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*, 25.

What does it mean to love? These can help Christians better understand what it means to choose life. Nothing human is alien to Christ and that, as far as Radcliffe is concerned, is what drives his rich journey through the culture of humanity in all its forms. He begins with Emma O'Donoghue's novel, *Room* (London: Picador, 2015) to introduce a key metaphor, that of escaping from confinement into the fresh air. *Room* is based on the true story of a young woman who was captured and held in a shed with her young son Jack who grows up thinking that the whole of reality is just that one room. Then he escapes and discovers the world outside. Imagine seeing the colours of nature for the first time, feeling the fresh breeze on your skin and seeing birds in flight for the very first time and you have an idea of what Radcliffe is calling us to do. Wake up and embrace reality that is brim-full of transcendence. He wants us to see that everything is an invitation to live lives that are full and open to God. 'Choose life.'

He writes with passion and enthusiasm for he has a mission: how to keep the imagination alive in the face of so much banality in the world. How may we wake up and be attuned to God's summons to share His life? One hour in church on a Sunday won't do it, that's for sure. Radcliffe commends liturgy, especially the Psalms, poetry and songs. He wonders if living close to the annual cycle of nature and in communities that value the arts and music also helps. There are some great quotable sentences such as: 'We are like people who know that the earth is a globe but live with people who assume that it is flat and that if you go too far you will fall off the edge.' *Alive in God* reminded me of another book but the style and pace is utterly different: Robin Daniels, *The Virgin Eye* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2016).¹

I confess that at first I was overwhelmed at the cascade of references to books and films. I began by enjoying the exercise of ticking off authors I had read, poems I knew, music I could recognise and so on. The book is stimulating in this sense from start to finish. Radcliffe claims no expertise in literature or the creative arts, but he has read widely and deeply, seen many more films than I have heard of and knows his art and music and he

¹ Reviewed in *Fairacres Chronicle* 52/2 Winter 2019.

uses it all to the full. The book is stimulating in other ways also, however, and it is the constant reference to the Scriptures that grounds this book firmly in the Christian Tradition at its best. Radcliffe's points are driven home in the teaching and actions of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, both Old and New Testament are liberally quarried and quoted. It took me a while to get into the sense of direction that the book was taking, but I soon found myself immersed in the journey through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

He tries to dispel some myths about Christianity, e.g. that it rejects the body or that its teachings constitute indoctrination. The problem here is that many Christians have swallowed these myths, so Radcliffe has to help Christians clear such false ideas away so that the Church may engage secular culture effectively. He himself has been deeply influenced by some of the best minds in Catholic teaching: Herbert McCabe, Cornelius Ernst and Fergus Kerr. He was a research assistant to Yves Congar for a while and has served as Master of the Dominican Order. He writes for believers and sceptics alike. Many of his citations come from the great writers and saints of the Christian faith: Augustine, Teresa of Avila, John Henry Newman. But he is not only writing for those familiar with Scripture and the Christian Tradition. In quoting his secular artists and writers, he points out that if we attend to what they are saying, they may attend to us.

The author capably addresses some of the more difficult issues of life today, not least suffering and evil. He writes about forgiveness, friendship and the failings of his own Church, and where the latter is concerned, he is adamant that we must not lose faith in it but recognise it is flawed.

As someone who was brought up to be suspicious of the imagination, I would have liked Radcliffe to challenge its suppression in parts of the Christian Tradition. He mentions fundamentalism as being inimical to the imagination but for many Christians today, there remains a need to justify as well as celebrate its necessity for fullness of life as described here. That said, Radcliffe explains at the beginning of the book that he will use 'imagination' in three senses. First as just the way that some people see the world. Today we seem to divide into those with a sacramental imagination and those who inhabit a technological one. Second, he uses it in the sense of having a vivid, exciting

vision of the world. Jesus had this kind of imagination and His parables are an example of how he makes ‘our hearts burn within us’. Third, it is sometimes used to describe how we imagine things that do not exist. Here Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are cited, the fruits of their imaginations embodying profound truths.

I asked my husband to whom he would give the book. As an artist himself, he would recommend it as stimulating him to think about his creativity in new ways. Anyone, believers and non-believers alike, who enjoy literature, film, poetry and all creative arts would be encouraged to make new connections between faith and life, but all who have ever wondered what life is really meant to be about, would be given a huge range of topics on which to hang glimpses of transcendence.

THE REVD DR LIZ HOARE

Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words, Believing in Poetry* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016), 215 pages, £9.68–12.99. ISBN 978-1-8482-5468-8

‘One of the most distinctive, intelligent and refreshing voices in the Church of England, always illuminating, never stale or secondhand.’ This is Rowan Williams, celebrating the appearance of Mark Oakley’s recent book on George Herbert. Both books are about poetry, the importance of poetry in our lives, the role of poetry in giving us language for God.

‘Give them poetry!’ This was the advice that Donald Allchin gave to David Scott, when he was at a loss for a theme for a retreat. And here it is, given to us: a comprehensive sweep, ranging from a fourteenth-century Sufi to the present Poet Laureate of the University of Oxford, each of the thirty poems accompanied by an illuminating commentary.

Mark Oakley writes vividly, impelled by his conviction that ‘good poetry makes the world a better place’. He is often very explicit about his own longings and questionings, not least the diminished way in which we try to speak of God. This is a book to cherish and to return to time and again. Expect to be stimulated, reassured, unsettled.

ESTHER DE WAAL

Stephen Platten, ed., *Oneness: The Dynamics of Monasticism* (London: SCM, 2017) 320 pages, £19.99. ISBN 978-0-3340-5532-7.

Sigebert Buckley is hardly a household name in 2020. His historical claim to fame is that he was the last living Benedictine monk of Westminster Abbey, refounded under Mary I under John Feckenham, who had begun his monastic life at Evesham before that abbey's dissolution in 1540. In late 1607, at about the age of ninety, Buckley took part in a ceremony intended to pass on to two priests the rights and privileges pertaining to the Benedictine abbey of Westminster. These priests were Englishmen, but members of the Cassinese congregation, and the purpose of the ceremony was to unite or 'aggregate' them to the English Benedictine body. In the 1930s, Dom Hugh Connolly of Downside described this act as 'instrumental in preserving monastic continuity in this country'. The history of monasticism, and in a particular way of monasticism in the British Isles, has a complex relationship with the notion of continuity. It is, if not in conflict with, then at least in dialogue with, ideas of fidelity to a founding charism, of a reading or interpretation of a Rule informed by, or reacting to, the signs of the times in which that Rule might be lived out. In the West, the Cluniac reforms, the discalced Carmelites, the Strict or Common Cistercians: all these and more bear witness to differences in discerning the will of God in relation to community and continuity. Modes of religious life may be particular and contextual, in teaching, caring for the sick, missionary work, and the like. Some rules seem to serve a definite purpose: should the response to change be to adapt anew, or to depart in peace? The Mercedarians were founded to ransom captive Christian slaves: today, their focus is on those held in what they call 'modern types of captivity, such as social, political, and psychological forms', working with prisoners, with those trapped by addiction, amongst the poorest and most marginalised. The emergence of a desire for the monastic life in the Anglican Communion in the nineteenth century, and the way in which that desire continues to be explored, add further challenges of continuity, heritage, reform and re-invention.

Such questions of continuity and (re-)discovery lie at the heart of this collection of essays, which takes as its inspiration the foundation at Shepherds

Law in Northumberland. This is the work of Brother Harold Palmer, whose engagement with the consecrated life began in the 1950s with the Anglican Society of St Francis and their novitiate at Glasshampton. A lengthy spiritual journey led, in the 1970s, to the beginnings of Shepherds Law as it is today: a little jewel of a chapel, small cells and ancillary structures, and the majestic landscape in which the whole is set. Today, Brother Harold is a consecrated hermit of the Roman Catholic diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, and the daily life and witness of Shepherds Law, as well as its extended community of friends and supporters, reflects his ecumenical pilgrimage.

What is this place, and where does it sit in the role of the monastic life in the contemporary Christian experience? The essays in this book are a gathered collection of pieces, many of which stand alone in their own right, but all of which relate to Shepherds Law. In this sense they are reflections of the model of life embodied by the foundation itself, as Andrew Louth's work on the *skete*, that form of religious life which marries solitary and communal living, shows. This piece, and Xavier Perrin's essay on Gregorian Chant and monastic life, are arguably the heart of the book. Sarah Foot, Nicholas Alan Worssam, and Petà Dunstan give accounts of the pursuit of holiness among those called to live that search in the life-long, day-round framework of prayer and meditation. George Guiver writes on aspects of contemporary monasticism, and Stephen Platten, Christopher Irvine and Ralph Pattison, tell the story of Harold Palmer and his vision of the life of prayer laid with gentleness and care in stone, brick, and tile on this rugged and remote spot. Quotations from Brother Harold are found throughout the book, and various interviews are available online. I could have wished for an extended piece from his own perspective, but to do so would, I think, have misunderstood his work.

FR DANIEL LLOYD



Sr Helen Julian CSF, *Franciscan Footprints: Following Christ in the ways of Francis and Clare* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2020) 144 pages, £6.54–8.99. ISBN 978-0-8574-6811-6.

This is a book about people whose lives were inspired by these two saints of Assisi. Through simple stories of martyrs and mystics, missionaries and thinkers, writers and others involved in pastoral care and social justice, Sr Helen Julian offers a series of compellingly-written and moving biographies. From thirteenth-century Italians to twentieth-century Congolese she weaves a rich and diverse tapestry of friars, sisters and Poor Clares, members of religious congregations, housewives and priests—mostly Roman Catholic but also Anglican—saints and ‘ordinary’ Christians. Some well-known, others less so; some have straddled the pages of history, others have remained hidden to all but a few. Christian heroes great and small whose lives will inspire you and leave you with the lingering taste of heaven.

In providing us with short accounts of lives inspired by Christ and the two saints of Assisi, Sr Helen Julian invites us to do what Clare advised her own sister, St Agnes: ‘Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.’

FR JOHN-FRANCIS FRIENDSHIP

Sisters of the Love of God



Visit our website at
www.slg.org.uk
to find out more about the Community
or
write to the Reverend Mother for information

ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2020

22nd–26th July 2020

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

Led by: Canon Andrew Teal &
Sister Clare-Louise SLG

*Llangasty Retreat House has issued the following statement:
“It is with great regret, but necessary for the protection of everyone’s
health in these uncharted times, that Llangasty Retreat House is cur-
rently closed for both day and residential retreats.*

*We are adhering to guidance issued by the Church in Wales and
regulations relating to the provision of accommodation made by the
Welsh Government. The changing guidance is being kept under review
as the situation unfolds and we are eager to re-open as soon as restric-
tions are removed and it is safe to do so.”*

*It is hoped therefore that the Retreat will go ahead if at all possible,
but a final decision will be made nearer the time, based on
current guidance in both England and Wales regarding the pandemic.
The retreat will not be held should there be any risk in doing so. If you
have already paid a deposit please contact Judith Lloyd Thomas
(below) for further information.*

If the retreat goes ahead booking information is as follows:

Cost: £322.00 Deposit: £35.00 (non-refundable)

Forms & Information: Judith Lloyd Thomas

32 Holcombe Drive. Llandrindod Wells. LD1 6DN

Tel: 01597 823020

An Oxford Retreat for Associates was not scheduled
for 2020 due to closure during building works.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Please contact the Editor (editor@slgpress.co.uk) if you would like to review any of these titles.

From Bloomsbury

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, *Faith Finding A Voice* (2018)

£12.99. ISBN: 978-1-472-950444

Joshua J. McElwee & Cindy Wooden, *Key Words of Pope Francis* (2018)

£10.99. ISBN: 978-1-472-95577-7

Bruno Cadore, *With Him* (2019)

£12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-7015-2

Mark Barrett, *The Wind, The Fountain and The Fire* (2019)

£9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-6837-1

From Canterbury Press

Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Mission* (2018)

£14.99. ISBN: 978-1-786-22036-3

Sarah Coakley, *Where Prayer Flourishes* (2018)

ISBN: 978-1-78622-061-5

From Dartman Longman & Todd

Vincent Strudwick with Jane Shaw, *The Naked God* (2017)

£12.99. ISBN: 978-0232-53256-2

From Franciscan Media

John Moses, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (2018)

£11.56. ISBN: 978-63253-184-1

From Hodder

Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (2019)

£10.99. ISBN: 978-1-47366-212-4

From:Oxford University Press

Paula Pyrcce, *The Monk's Cell* (2018)

£47.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-068058-9

From:Paraclete Press

Benedicta Ward SLG, *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom* (2018)

USD \$24.99. ISBN: 978-1-64060-097-3

From SCM Press

Craig Gardiner, *Melodies of a New Monasticism* (2018)

ISBN: 978-0-33405-720-8

From SCM St Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery Press

Father Euthymius, *St Anthony the Great* (2019)

USD \$16.00 ISBN: 978-1-945699-01-6

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FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

The Fairacres Chronicle is the journal of the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God and is published twice a year, summer and winter. The subscription runs from January until December. Customers who subscribe after the publication of the summer issue will receive the summer issue, plus the winter issue when published.

With rising postage and printing costs we have had to make a small increase to the subscription rate. This is the first increase for four years and we hope we will be able to hold this price for the next several years.



SUBSCRIPTION (*Summer and Winter editions*)

The subscription rates for 2020 (inclusive of shipping) are:

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EUROPE (Airmail)	£ 9.00	\$ 14.00	€ 10.50
OUTSIDE EUROPE (Airmail)	£ 11.00	\$ 17.50	

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We also accept orders online.

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Best times are 10:30–12:00 noon; 3:30–4:30 p.m.; 6:00–7:00 p.m.
Messages left on voicemail are picked up regularly.

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Please note that the staff will not usually be in during the lockdown

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