FAIRACRES

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Cover photo: The Nativity, detail from illumination of the opening of Prime in the Hours of the Virgin, from a Book of Hours, Delft *c*. 1470.

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COMMUNITY NOTES

SISTER CLARE LOUISE

Dear Friends,

I am writing a little earlier than normal, at the beginning of November, at the beginning of a new session of country-wide COVID lockdown, and as the people of the United States wait for the announcement of who has won the presidential election. By the time you read these Notes the results of that event will be old news, as will the news of the lockdown. But it is the background to the thoughts and concerns of many of us as I write.

November is the season of saints and souls, beginning with the celebration of All Saints and All Souls at the beginning of the month. Among the names of those mentioned at All Souls was that of Sr Elizabeth of the Word of God Incarnate who died at the beginning of this year, and of our recently departed Sister Alison of Christ the King who died on 15 September in the John Radcliffe Hospital.

Sr Alison (Alison Kathleen White) entered the Community in 1979 following a career in teaching, and she made her Profession in 1983. Her funeral was held at St Andrew's Church, Headington on Thursday, 15 October. Sadly, Coronavirus regulations meant that not many of her friends and family were able to attend the ceremony. Sr Rosemary's moving homily is printed in this *Chronicle*. Sister Alison for many years cared for the members of the Fellowship of the Love of God and will have been known to may of you for her regular letters. I am glad to say that Sister Christine has taken over the care of FLG.

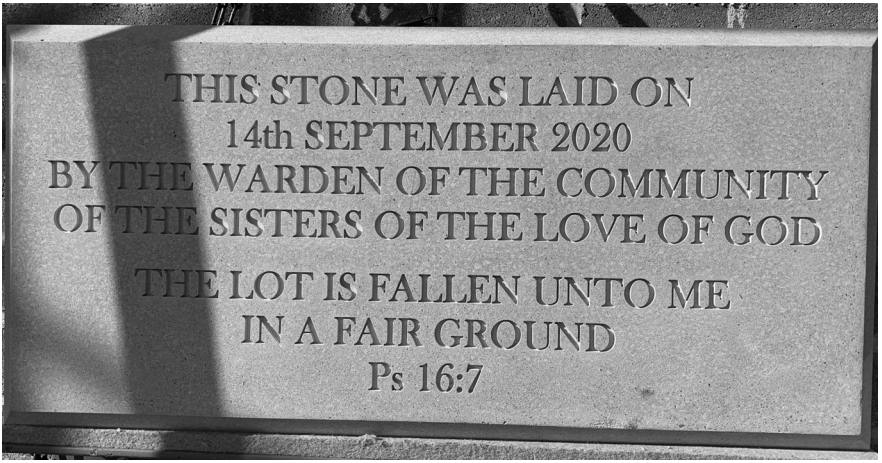
The summer months have also seen the deaths of two of our Oblate Sisters, Aileen Margaret of Jesus and Mary Hannah of the Holy Trinity. Aileen Margaret (Aileen Eyers) was born on 9 December 1923 and made her Life Promises on the Feast of St Bartholomew in 1989. Mary Hannah (Mary Wheatley) was born on 4 August 1938 and made her Life Promises on 25 September 2016. Both were widows and both died in care homes. Both were devoted churchwomen: Aileen Margaret had been an RE teacher in Bath and

had a large family of foster children, as well as her own daughter, Jane. Mary Hannah had a legal background and was very active on committees at diocesan as well as parish level in Sheffield.

The day before Sr Alison died, we held a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of the new wing of the Convent, conducted by Fr Andrew Teal, Warden SLG. Although the stone is placed on the wall of the new wing it commemorates more than just that new section of the Convent. The current work on the building marks a milestone and a new stage in the life of the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God as we look forward to returning to the buildings next year. The date of the ceremony and the wording on the Stone help celebrate our hopes for the future as well as referring back to the past history of the Community.

The first sisters gathered to found the Community on Holy Cross Day, 14 September 1906, 114 years before the laying of the stone. Engraved on it are words taken from the inscription above the Visitors Chapel door, where Psalm 16 is quoted:

The lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground.



The foundation stone ready to be seated in its place.

The pun is of course on *fair ground* and *Fairacres*; the 'lot is fallen' for the Sisters of the Love of God in these Fairacres, and the work on the Con-

vent is an act of faith in our future. When the Sisters moved to Fairacres in 1911 it was also an act of faith. The early years of the Community were hard for the Sisters involved as they sought to discern the way of life and prayer that they were called to. As numbers began to increase the move was made to a bigger property in the hopes of continuing growth.

Now, of course, the Community is much smaller and we have not had women coming to join the Community for many years. However, the vocation to prayer continues, especially in the light of the world situation (political, social, economic and environmental) at this time. The discernment now is how we remain faithful to that vocation in our own particular times.

The Community in its first fifty years of life lived through two World Wars and profound changes in society and the church. In our second half-century we have experienced continuing war, political instability and a new and horrific recognition of the damage humanity has done to our planet. Now we are in the midst of a global pandemic that reminds us that there are things over which none of us, however powerful, influential or wealthy, have control.

All this is a cause for great concern, but is it a cause for despair? We certainly need a corporate sense of sorrow and accountability, but at the same time faith assures us that what is required is not despair but hope—and hope not in ourselves, but in God.

We know that God is not in the habit of waving a magic wand and making all well! His response to our need for salvation was the sending of his Son as a fragile child in a poor family, eventually to die a horrific death on the Cross. His chosen disciples were as fallible as we are ourselves, and they went out into a world as troubled and violent as our world today. Yet through all that God worked out salvation for the whole world. As St Paul reminds us:

> *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* (1 Cor. 1:18)

A reading of 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 verses 18–31 serves as a clear reminder that our future hope lies in God and not in ourselves.

This is definitely not a call to passivity! When we take our eyes off our own fears and instead set them on the Love of God, we are set free to respond

The Warden, Fr Andrew Teal, in his finery and complete with hard hat, blessing the Foundation Stone and taking in the ambience of the new main entrance foyer.

Above, community and staff during the Foundation Stone ceremony, standing in households and carefully observing social distancing.

Right, interiors taking shape.

to the call of God in loving service in our particular sphere of activity, and in deep and committed prayer and intercession.

Prayer is the particular work of our Community and I encourage all the readers of the Chronicle to join us in that work. As always, you are in the prayers of the Sisters as we hope we are in yours.

One final note will be of interest to all Chronicle readers and customers of SLG Press. Over the past fifty-plus years of its history the editor of SLG Press has been a Sister, but over the past year we have been glad to welcome our first lay editor Julia Craig-McFeely. You have already seen examples of her work, and I would encourage you to visit the website of SLG Press to see details of recent publications. We give great thanks for the Sister Editors over the past years, especially Sr Christine, the most recent one, who continues to act in an advisory and editorial capacity.

With prayers from all of us here at Fairacres,

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG
Reverend Mother

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Perspectives

Foundations of the new guest houses

The new range viewed towards the old convent building, chapel on the right.

From foundations to
roof timbers.

Photo credits: Maggie Forrester

ADDRESS FOR THE FUNERAL OF SISTER ALISON OF CHRIST THE KING SLG (ALISON KATHLEEN WHITE)

(15 October 1933–15 September 2020)

SISTER ROSEMARY SLG

Ezek. 34:11–16, 20–24, Eph. 1:15–23, Matt. 25:31–46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

THE day of her funeral was Sr Alison's eighty-seventh birthday, and I think her tidy mind would relish that coincidence. Physical problems had loomed large in her life for so long that now it is wonderful to think of her as free of all that. With her youth 'renewed like the eagles' she is now, most likely, playing hockey with the angels! She worked so hard to keep going as best she could, she endured some challenging surgery and a good deal of pain. She valiantly rose to the challenge of decamping from the Convent last year and, once settled in 38 Fairacres Road appreciated the companionship of living in a smaller group and joining in the Office with her Sisters. That has been a real joy for her. Now she has completed the last lap, and could say, as her friend St Paul said: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' We give thanks for her faithfulness and we entrust her to God, praying that as she has so 'longed for his appearing' (2 Tim. 4:7–8) so she may receive what is promised in the book of the prophet Isaiah: 'Your eyes shall behold the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.' (Is. 33:17).

In a sense, Alison has waited a long time to behold him. When she was still teaching she suffered a serious car crash and in the moment before impact she heard the words, 'Behold thy King cometh unto thee' (Zech. 9:9) and she responded in worship and surrender, 'My Lord and my God' (Jn 20:28). But the time was not yet, she did not die. She felt, though, that this was the decisive moment which illumined and determined her vocation and her life from that point on. What followed immediately was the discovery, while she was

in hospital, that she had cancer, which required surgery and radiotherapy. There were unintended consequences of the treatment she received, and fear of cancer cast its shadow over the rest of her life.

Alison was living in Guildford at the time, sharing a house with her friend Jeannette, who was also a teacher. They had started attending Guildford Cathedral, drawn by the beauty of the worship and, thanks to Canon Telfer who knew Mother Mary Clare, were put in touch with SLG and visited Bede House. It was Jeannette who was considering a religious vocation, but eventually it was Alison who entered as a Postulant on Holy Cross Day in 1979. In November she would have heard the readings we have heard today (they are those appointed for the Feast of Christ the King, year C) and the gospel especially spoke to her. She was probably struck by the dedication, or title, of Sr Marjorie of Christ the King, whose death occurred when Alison was staying at Fairacres as a visitor. That would have been her first experience of the death of a nun in SLG and that is always moving. When she was clothed as a Novice, Alison took 'Christ the King' as her own dedication.

Sr Alison entered the Community in her mid-forties and she and I often spoke of the difference between that and entering in your early 20s as I did. She had left behind her own house and a successful career, and it was not easy for her to do that; or to leave her family and friends, or to move into a more catholic expression of Christian faith. The references she brought with her to Fairacres show how much she was appreciated as a PE teacher in Portsmouth Northern Grammar school (1958–1962) and at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow (1965–1967) and from 1967 until 1972 at Guildford County School for Girls where was she head of the Religious Education Department and did much else besides. She is described as 'a very sound and sincere teacher' and 'a delightful colleague'.

Alison loved teaching, and Guiding and camping, and 'the youngsters'; her sterling qualities in those contexts were put to good use in the Community too. Her sociable and hospitable nature came to the fore when, at different times, she had a share in the welcome and care of Oblate Sisters, and then the Companions; and she was zealous in keeping the records of membership of the Fellowship up to date. She had a very good memory. For many years

she worked meticulously in the bursary and sat on the Board of Management. She served on the Economical Commission for contemplative nuns that gave her some ecumenical friendships which she prized. She was a faithful friend and prayed faithfully for the many people she knew and remembered. She loved to spend holidays with the Augustinian Sisters at Sayers Common, and later, when they moved, to stay with them in Dove Cottage near Lewes. But I think she would say that the crowning point of her Community life was when she and Sr Sarah were sent to pioneer SLG life in New Zealand.

Sr Susan and Sr Sarah had made a preliminary visit to the Hokianga to 'spy out the land' and the report that they brought back gave the Chapter the reassurances we needed to say 'Yes' to Sisters going out more permanently. This time it was Sr Alison and Sr Sarah who set out for Auckland and, on 19 December 1995, were jointly commissioned and blessed as the Warden of St Isaac's, with a final Maori blessing from the Bishop of Taitokerau, that was sung at the funeral and is printed below. It was quite an adventure: life in the Hokianga was different, it was not like Oxford! Alison loved it: she felt at home, especially as she got to know the local people. There were plenty of stories to tell, especially about the redoubtable Clementina Gordon, the founder of St Isaac's, who shot possums ('… but surely, Sisters, you know how to shoot?'). Sr Alison became very interested in Maori culture and started to learn the language and read the Bible in Maori. Her cell looked out to the bush and the mountain, a holy place, which shelters the bones of Maori ancestors. Sometimes it was partly covered in mist, sometimes there were rainbows. The presence of the mountain through the coming and going of the weather and the seasons spoke to her of the mystery and faithfulness of God. 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help.' (Ps. 121) 'Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee.'[1]

There were of course challenges too. Here is a glimpse of SLG life, Northland style:

> In the evening we suddenly found we had no water, so had to don gumboots and macs to track down the problem. In the dark that was impossible, but we narrowed down the possibilities and James came through to

[1] Thomas O. Chisholm, set to music by William Runyan.

> repair it on Friday morning. A heifer had trodden on the pipe and the soft ground had bent it and broken a fitting. We now know how to repair it and, after the event, how to stop the huge tank emptying overnight into the garden … Certainly we will be pleased to be in the Warden's House and not to have to squelch our way to chapel, or through the garden to reach the wood pile. (28 July 1996)

Above all Alison had a life-long love of Scripture, so she would want us to turn our attention to the Gospel and the story in Matthew 25:31–46: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory …' And he will reveal a state of affairs which surprises everyone, whether sheep or goats. Those who visited and cared for people in need did not realise that they were ministering to Jesus; neither did those who ignored him realize who it was they were ignoring. So this is an eye-opening moment which shows how different things look in God's eyes. The whole picture is revealed. No one knows the day or the time of this revelation, so can it perhaps be interpreted as applying to the moment of death? Ladislaus Boros in *The Moment of Truth: Mysterium Mortis* maintains that the moment of death is when we will encounter God and see the truth.[2] Read in this way, the good news in the story is that in that moment we will see how Jesus has been present in our lives even—and especially—when we were unaware of him. Taking it a bit further, we could even say that when God looks at us, in whatever needy state we are, and however we think of ourselves, he sees Jesus in us.

We have briefly looked back over Sr Alison's long life, setting aside for a moment our most recent memories of her so as to lift to God her whole life, which God, of course, knows in all its fullness, detail and uniqueness. In death he has drawn her closer to himself, to his love. He looks at her and sees her whole life, her whole person. And St John of the Cross tells us that 'for God, to look is to love' (*Spiritual Canticle* 32, 3).

If that is true, if in the end we will be met by a look that is both knowing and loving, then it can only be natural and joyful for us, for Alison, to return that glance, to look up and 'see the King in his beauty.'

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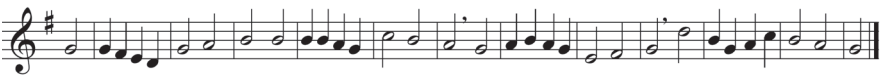
[2] (London: Burns & Oates, 1965).



Ma te marie a te Atua	*The peace of God*
Tatou katoa e tiaki;	*keep us all;*
Mana ano e whakau	*He will confirm our*
O tatou ngakau ki te pai.	*Hearts in goodness.*
Ma te Atua Tamaiti ra	*May the Son of God*
Ma te Wairua Tapu hoki,	*and the Holy Spirit,*
Ratou, Atua Kotahi nei.	*they, one God,*
Tatou katoa e whakapai.	*bless us all.*
Amine.	*Amen.*

GOD WITH US

Matthew 1:18-25

BONNIE THURSTON

ONE of the most remarkable claims made by any of the world's religious traditions is 'God with us'. God—the Creator, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, the Judge and ultimate Ruler of the Universe—comes to be *with* human beings; comes, not like one from the Greek pantheon, to stir up trouble and retreat, but *as one of us*. God takes on human limitation and dwells among us. The Transcendent One becomes imminent and omnipresent.

God's 'with-ness' is the great theme of St. Matthew's gospel. From the beginning of Jesus' life, there is no question but that he is the 'Christ' (Matt. 1:18). In St. Luke, the angel tells Mary to name her child 'Jesus'. (Matt. 1:31–2) Her betrothed, Joseph, who had rather a lot to take on board in a short time, gets the same message from an angel and, like Mary, is obedient to it. When Joseph names the child 'Jesus' (the Greek form of Joshua, 'God is salvation'), he legally claims the child as his own. Joseph legitimises both Jesus and his mother, and from the beginning of Matthew's gospel we know both who Jesus is and what Jesus will do. Matthew believes the birth of Jesus fulfills Israel's hopes, so adds an interpretative verse from Isaiah 7:14: 'they shall call him Emmanuel, which means "God with us".'

To call Jesus 'Emmanuel' personifies the concept subsequent Christian theology calls 'Incarnation'. The perfect revelation of God is enfleshed in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Astonishingly, God has been made personal, present, and real before us. We Christians are rather prone to throwing around the fancy theological word 'incarnation', as if it were simple and manifestly evident. But it is the most glorious mystery of human history. We enter into mystery in silence. And yet 'God with us' has very practical consequences for our lives.

First, it underscores the value of human life: if God became human, then it follows that all the functions of human life are sanctified. Human life is sacred, and human beings are important because God not only made, but took on human flesh, thus understands its nature, its joys and sorrows, its problems and triumphs, from the inside. When we speak to God about our lives, God understands it because God has *been* it.

Second, if God took on human flesh, it suggests that the material world is more than the material world. In her book *The Spiritual Life,* Evelyn Underhill asserted that human beings are amphibious.[3] She didn't, thank goodness, mean we were frogs, but that we live our lives in two realms: as flesh and as spirit, as matter and as something quite other. The visible, measurable, universe, our modern model of reality, is inadequate for a world in which God became incarnate. God and the unseen, spiritual realm are intrinsically part of *this* existence, our lives.

Third, 'God with us' means, quite literally, that God is on our side. When the teams were being chosen, God chose to play on ours. When the trials and conflicts come, and they do and will, God stands with us. To call Jesus 'Emmanuel' is to affirm that the universe is not ultimately hostile or even neutral, but, if not apparently always friendly, at least in the final analysis *for us*. The ultimate power of the universe is not our adversary but our ally.

Finally, 'God with us' means we are never completely alone. This may be of particular comfort at this moment in human history, and at this season of the year, and especially to those who are single or widowed or estranged

[3] Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Great Spiritual Truths for Everyday Life* Mystical Classics of the World Series (London: OneWorld Publications, 1999).

from loved ones. 'Emmanuel' affirms what Moses told the Israelites in the desert: 'The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.' (Deut. 33:27). Incarnation is a fancy way to describe the existential reality of the support, the enfolding of those everlasting arms in whatever human trial we experience. Whatever the physical, psychological, or spiritual challenges or torments we may face, even in the face of death itself, God is with us.

Elie Wiesel records this experience in a Nazi death camp: the prisoners are lined up to watch as their captors torment some of them. One of those watching whispers, 'where is God?' Someone else responds, 'with the suffering ones'.[4] God is not, as sentimental greeting cards declare, 'nearer to us in a garden than anywhere else on earth'. God is nearest to those who suffer, however, wherever and whoever they are. The greater the locus of suffering, the more likely God is, and will be, found there.

Christmas, feast of the Incarnation, is cosmically important not because of the decorations, the gifts, the food, the gathering of family and friends, though all those things are wonderful (and let's be honest, also stressful). The birth of Jesus is vital not because of the joyous carols (which people who *never* sing hymns any other time of year lustily belt out), not because of Bible stories acted so charmingly by the children. Important as they are, Christmas is not only about two laudatory, obedient people, a virgin mother and her righteous, kind husband. Christmas is vital because of the ultimate goal of human life: being known by and knowing God.

To paraphrase St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, knowing God fully as we are already fully known by God is brought within reach by Jesus, 'Emmanuel'. Jesus, Paul records in the Colossian hymn,' is the image of the invisible God …'. God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him 'to reconcile to himself all things …'. (Col. 1:15, 20)

What was made known by an angel to wildly trusting Mary and brave, obedient Joseph has, through them, been made known to us by their child. One day it will be made known to all the nations, to the ends of the earth,

[4] Elie Wiesel, *Night,* Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2012), 20.

and perhaps even beyond it. Astronomy and theoretical physics reveal that God made a very big universe. I think God loves all of it.

The remarkable Welsh priest-poet R. S. Thomas' poem on Incarnation, 'The Coming', begins as God holds a small globe and closes with Jesus saying 'Let me go there'. The overture to Matthew's gospel introduces the theme of Emmanuel, God with us, a melody we hear again and again in his gospel. And, in its final aria, words spoken by Jesus, the great promise of the ages is delivered: 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' (Matt. 28:20). And *that* promise is what Christmas is about.

The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

R. S. Thomas[5]

Bonnie Thurston is the author of twenty-three theological books, two collections of verse and many articles, and taught at university level for thrity years. Ordained in 1984, she has served in a pastoral capacity both in the USA and abroad and is known as a leader of retreats.

[5] © Elodie Thomas, reproduced with permission.

ABIDE IN MY LOVE

Entering into the Life of an American Carmel

SR ROSEMARY SLG

THE idea was that I would keep Lent and celebrate Easter with the nuns in Baltimore Carmel in Maryland in the USA. This was a prospect that I looked forward to with great eagerness and I had no doubt that whatever happened it would be full of blessings; what I had not bargained for was the pandemic and the consequent restrictions on travel and daily life. As it turned out, the generous hospitality of the Carmelites enabled me to stay with them for more than six months. That was a wonderful bonus for me, enabling me to get to know the Sisters better and to feel thoroughly part of the community for all the time that I was there.

On 25 February two smiling Carmelites met me at the airport and we drove to the Monastery. It was dark when we arrived, I was disorientated and jet-lagged after the flight, so I had very little sense of where the highway we sped along was taking us. We turned off down a tree-lined road, and before long an automatic gate swung open to let us in to the Monastery grounds. As an avid reader of Carmelite literature, the phrase 'entry into Carmel' has a thrilling ring for me, as well as conjuring up less than helpful images of grilles, locks, and veiled nuns. St Thérèse had longed and fought to be allowed to enter as a postulant, St Elizabeth of the Trinity had waited for years until her mother eventually gave her permission to do so; for both their entry into Carmel was loaded with a mixture of powerful emotions. My quiet entry as a guest that evening was, in its own way, moving too. As it was long past bedtime we crept in softly, and I found myself in an elegant and spacious entrance hall dominated by a series of large portraits, 'the Ancestors Hall'. The portraits of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila announced at once that this is a Teresian Carmel, but who were the others and why such grand portraits? In the course of my stay I learned the story of this particular Carmel and came to understand how significant these ancestors are for the nuns today. For now, however, I was ushered along a modern walkway and up to the dormitory floor and the cell that was to be mine for the duration. It fulfilled all

my hopes: on the door, the text 'Abide in my love', inside, a window with shutters and a wide wooden sill, the bed covered with a colourful quilt, and on the wall beside the window, the bare Carmelite cross—alleluia!

The Baltimore Carmel (Monastery of the Sacred Heart) was founded in 1790; it was the first community of women religious in the original thirteen states of North America. How that came to pass is important and, given the historical circumstances, somewhat complex. In England since the Reformation the Catholic Church had been outlawed by a series of statutes under Queen Elizabeth I, and on until the reign of George III. These Penal Laws forbade the Mass and the practice of the catholic faith and drove those who remained loyal to the Pope to flee abroad. Very many Catholics took refuge in the Low Countries, the area that is now Belgium and Luxembourg, and was at that time under Spanish rule. Women who wished to follow a vocation to Carmel were obliged to leave their native England and live in exile, but in the early years of the seventeenth century they could find a home in the 'English Carmel' in Antwerp. This Carmel, and others founded with the encouragement of the Spanish authorities, were directly descended from St Teresa and her reform. In 1604 Anne of Jesus and Anne of St Bartholomew, along with four other 'Spanish Mothers', arrived to found a Carmel in Paris. Three years later Anne of Jesus proceeded to the Low Countries to found Carmels in quick succession in Brussels, Mons, Spanish Antwerp and Mechelen. In 1619 Anne of Jesus chose five Carmelites from these Teresian houses to establish an English-speaking Carmel in Antwerp. Such is the family tree of the Baltimore Carmel.

The women who joined these communities were from families which had faced persecution in England, some were relatives of those remembered as the English Catholic Martyrs; they had personal experience of the needs and perils of those times, theirs was a faith 'tried in the fire'. John Fisher's grandniece was professed in Antwerp in 1636; Teresa Ward from the Mons Carmel had dressed as a man to leave England. Among the foundations of that time Hoogstraet, on the Dutch/Flemish border, is vital to the pre-history of Baltimore Carmel. This is how the nuns tell their story on their website:

> British colonials from Maryland began crossing the ocean to become Carmelites in 1742. Among them were Mary Brent (1731–1784) who joined

the Antwerp community in 1751; and Anne Matthews (1732–1800) who three years later together with Ann Hill (1734–1813), the cousin of John Carroll, entered the community in Hoogstraet. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, therefore, the seed for Carmel in America had taken root and produced strong American leadership for the "English Teresians" in both Hoogstraet and Antwerp. This leadership proved to be a strong base from which to plan for the founding of a new monastery in Maryland. Mother Margaret Mary Brent had the primary role in preparing for this foundation. When she died in 1784 at age fifty-three just after completing six years as prioress of the Antwerp community, it fell to her close collaborator, Mother Bernardina Matthews, a neighbour from Charles County who was prioress at Hoogstraet Carmel from 1771 to 1790, to take on the task of leading the first Carmelite foundation to their native Maryland. Through Mother Bernardina the tradition of both colonial Maryland Catholicism and Carmelite life and spirituality would be passed to a new generation.

The most intriguing of the portraits displayed in the Ancestors Hall is this one of Mother Clare Joseph Dickenson, one of the four who made the voyage to America in 1790. She kept a diary, now in the Carmelites' archives, including an account of the voyage: 'the 22nd [May] Saturday Contrary wind tossing and rowling about from one place to another. All very sick … only made about 12 mile in 2 days.' '30th Trinity Sunday. We rose at 5 dressed up a little alter, & for the 1st time used our pretty candlesticks. We had not the Benefit of Mass but Mr N [Charles Neale SJ] consecrated a sufficiency of hosts to serve us for the rest of the voyage. as he saw no probability of being able to celebrate any more on board. … as Everything of this nature is a profound secret on board …'.

All that history was present when we celebrated Foundation Day at Baltimore on 21 July: a precious altar-stone, entrusted to the English-speaking Carmels, was resting on the altar. It had been used by Jesuits celebrating Mass in the Tower of London as they awaited their martyrdom. A silver ciborium sparkled

beside it, the very one used on board the ship taking the nuns to America. The names of all 137 Sisters in the Profession book were read out, and, mysteriously, I too felt embraced by a living tradition. Later with Sr Celia and Sr Connie I paid a 'virtual' visit to the places in south Maryland where the nuns had landed, and where they had a farm for forty years, living off its produce. When the farm did not prosper they moved to downtown Baltimore where, surprisingly for a contemplative community, again to make a living, they opened, and taught in, an academy for young women. Had they not been so enterprising, and endowed with such Teresian 'determined determination', the foundation would not have survived. As Sr Connie has commented, 'I believe there is something in us that would do *anything* to survive'. The Ancestors' Hall and the collection of valuable archives at Baltimore are of great historical interest, but not only that. They bear witness to the spirit and character of the Sisters, to the roots of the community, and the experiences which have shaped its identity and character. The Sisters are proud of being Carmelites and refer familiarly to 'our Holy Mother'; they are proud of being American, while gladly including Sisters originally from Spain, Mexico and Germany, as well as Maryland, Utah, Brooklyn and all over the States. And they are also proud of being twenty-first-century women.

The nineteenth-century Baltimore Carmel in Biddle Street was demolished in 1961 and the 17 nuns looked for a new home away from the restriction and busyness of the city. At the same time the Roman Catholic Church under Pope John XXIII was preparing for the Second Vatican Council. The coincidence of these two events has decisively shaped the thinking, the prayer, the daily life and the spirit of the community from that time up to the present day. When I woke up and looked through my cell window on the morning after my arrival it was a grey February day, but the view more than made up for that: I was looking out over a gently undulating meadow with a fringe of tall and slender trees. There was a sense of space and light, seclusion but no crampedness, containment and openness. It must have been like that, and a huge change and relief, for the nuns who moved here from Biddle Street. As spring and summer unfolded the view got better and better, cardinals and humming birds arrived and in Holy Week flowering cherries came into

bloom. The best time to be in the meadow soon became early prayer time, before the sun and the cicadas were up.

Besides the beauty of the place (I am reminded of St Anthony who 'loved the place') there are other features of the Baltimore Carmel which immediately strike the newcomer: the modern chapel is built in the round with ample room for quite a large congregation to worship around the altar with the Sisters. For Mass and Office the nuns wear white choir robes over their ordinary clothes; apart from that they dress like everyone else. These outward things say much about concerns in the heart of the community now and as they look to the future: they are not separate from the people of God, from the Church—the whole body of Christ—and from the world as it is. Far from indicating a shallow desire to be seen to be modern, let alone any disrespect for their tradition and traditions, these externals arise out of love for the God who made and loves the world, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and whose love extends to transformative union with each human heart. And who, as we become aligned with that love, engages us in his loving transformation of the cosmos.

When I arrived in February the coronavirus had not yet become public knowledge and there was no lockdown, so on Sunday there was a good congregation for Mass. The service was introduced by a Sister who struck the large glass singing bowl at her side, awakening waves of sound which throbbed and resonated in ever widening circles. It was an invitation to centre down, and at the same time to gather and send peace out into the mysterious energies moving along the highways of the world. To quote again from Baltimore Carmel website:

> Seized by the unconditional love of Jesus, the Christ, and allured to the mountaintop, we embrace the mystical flame of contemplation as our life's grounding. The silence and solitude of our life of prayer immerse us in a deep communion with God that draws us into a full and willing participation in the unfolding of a new and transformed consciousness. Such radical openness to the power and meaning of this union of love calls from us nothing less than everything and propels us toward total communion with one another, with all people and species, and with the entire creation. This is the vision that we desire to live for the life of the Church and on-going emergence of humanity and our planet earth.

Informally, mostly during conversation at mealtimes, I learned more about how the process of renewal has been for the community, how it has been by turns exciting and frustrating over many years and decades. Change was often incremental, sometimes hard to see at the time but, encouragingly, it did not matter whether a bold experiment 'took' or not. However long it lasted, or did not last, the attempt would contribute something to the long-term outcome. Most important has been the commitment of all the Sisters to move forward together in mutual trust and love. I listened intently because many of their challenges face us too; and although in Oxford and the Church of England the immediate context and history is different, the larger context and intention is the same. And the questions are familiar: how can we be faithful and, in faith, step out into the unknown? What does it mean, in the midst of change in the Church and the world, to align ourselves with God and to abide in God's love?

POET OF THE WORD

The Biblical Hermeneutics of Saint Ephraem the Syrian

ÆLRED PARTRIDGE OC

IN 1920 Pope Benedict XV declared the last theologian of the East to be honoured with the title 'Doctor of the Church'.[6] The theologian so honoured was St Ephraem the Syrian, who has been described as 'the most important representative of Syriac Christianity in its most semitic form' at a time when Greek philosophy and language were shaping Christian doctrine in other parts of the Church.[7] Yet, despite the differences of language and culture, Ephraem's thought is not so very far removed from his Cappadocian

[6] Pope Benedict XV proclaimed St Ephraem a Doctor of the Universal Church in an encyclical letter issued on 5 October 1920 ('Principi apostolorum Petro').

[7] 'Ephrem Syrus', in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality,* ed. by G. Wakefield (Norwich: SCM Press, 1983).

contemporaries, Basil the Great (*c.* 330–79), bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia and organiser of monastic life in the East; his brother Gregory (*c*. 335–395), bishop of Nyssa and a theologian of great mystical depth; and Gregory of Nazianus (*c*. 329–390), bishop of Constantinople.[8]

Ephraem was born, as far as we can tell, in AD 306 in the Syrian city of Nisibis on the easternmost edge of the Roman Empire. Evidence suggests that Ephraem was only introduced to Christianity as a youth, and that he received his Christian education as one of the Catechumens under the care of James (or Jacob) the saintly Bishop of Nisibis, and was baptised at the age of eighteen (or twenty-eight, depending on his date of birth). At some point in his adult life Ephraem was ordained as a deacon and served as a catechetical teacher for a series of notable Syrian bishops until the last decade of his life.[9]

He seems to have been given responsibility for the music and liturgy of the local Christian community, in which he was intensely active until AD 363 when Nisibis was annexed by the Persians. Ephraem emigrated to Edessa (Turkey), where he continued his ministry as liturgist and preacher until his death in AD 373**,** a victim of the disease he contracted while caring for those infected with the plague. Clearly, Ephraem embraced and took seriously the pastoral challenges of his ministry as a fundamental aspect of his Christian identity. What he has left us, however, as his abiding heritage, are his incomparable biblical commentaries written both in poetry and prose, and his poetic homilies and hymns.

These poetic works, especially the hymns, echo the characteristically Semitic love of antithesis and parallelism so often found in the Psalms, and which in Ephraem's hands 'proves a tool admirably suited to the expression of the various paradoxes of the Christian mystery'.[10]

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[8] See 'Gregory of Nazianzus' in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*.

[9] Sebastian Brock, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, Popular Patristics, 10 (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997) lists these as: Jacob (Hames) *d*. 338; Babu *c*. 338–350; Vologeses *c*. 350–361; Abraham born *c.* 361.

[10] Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Poems of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Cambridge: Aquila, 3rd edn. 2013), 7.

Sebastian Brock, a Syriac scholar and translator of Ephraem's writings, speaks of Ephraem as a theologian-poet who combined a 'technical artistry with a richness of imagery that is at times breath-taking'.[11] Not all commentators have been as enthusiastic as Brock, however. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says rather disparagingly of Ephraem's hymns and sermons: 'Their inspiration is scriptural throughout, but their style, characterised by repetition and the accumulation of metaphors, is alien to most modern tastes'.[12] By contrast, Murray describes him as 'perhaps the greatest poet of the Patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante'.[13]

It appears that Ephraem's hymns and homilies had a liturgical setting; a good proportion of them being produced as choral responses to the scripture lessons read in worship. Griffith states: 'The fact that so much of Ephraem's writing had a pastoral setting, a good portion of it even being produced as choral response to the scripture lessons in the liturgy, reminds one of the centrality of the Bible in all of his work.'[14] In these hymns and homilies he was no less an exegete than in the more traditional biblical commentaries associated with his name. Indeed, Jacob of Sarug, a fifth-century Syriac writer, bears witness to Ephraem's reputation in his own verse-homily dedicated to him, in which he describes Ephraem as a skilled composer of doctrinal hymns carefully crafted to commend right teaching and refute error.[15] Ephraem's own theology was firmly grounded in Nicaean orthodoxy and he wrote in particular with the Arian heresy in mind.

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[11] Ibid.

[12] 'Ephraem Syrus' in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* ed. by F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: OUP, 2nd edn. repr. 1983).

[13] Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 31. Murray's book is a detailed study in some themes of early Syriac biblical exegesis.

[14] Sidney H. Griffith, *'Faith Adoring the Mystery': Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian,* Père Marquette Lectures, 28 (Ann Arbor MI: Marquette University Press, 1997)*,* 13.

[15] *Idem*, 6.

There are scholarly debates surrounding the authenticity of a number of biblical commentaries that have been traditionally ascribed to Ephraem, most modern scholars accept as genuine his commentaries on Genesis and Exodus and a number of New Testament books which survive only in Armenian translations. His oft-quoted commentary on Tatian's *Diatessaron*[16] is, however, no longer regarded as directly from Ephraem's pen, but thought to have originated from within the catechetical school in Nisibis of which he was probably a choirmaster.

Nonetheless, there is a passage in the commentary on the *Diatessaron* which aptly sums up Ephraem's own approach to the scriptures and their interpretation. It reads:

> Many are the perspectives of his word, just as many are the perspectives of those who study it. [God] has fashioned his world with many beautiful forms, so that each one who studies it may consider what he likes. He has hidden in his word all kinds of treasures so that each one of us, wherever we meditate, may be enriched by it. His utterance is a tree of life, which offers you blessed fruit from every side. It is like that rock which burst forth in the desert, becoming spiritual drink to everyone from all places. 'They ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink'. (1 Cor. 10:3–4)
>
> Therefore, whoever encounters one of its riches must not think that that alone which he has found is all that is in it, but rather that it is this alone that he is capable of finding from the many things in it. Enriched, by it, let him not think that he has impoverished it. but rather let him give thanks for its greatness, he that is unequal to it. Rejoice that you have been satiated, and do not be upset that it is richer than you… Give thanks for what you have taken away, and do not murmur over what remains and is in excess. That which you have taken and gone away with is your portion and that which is left over is also your heritage.[17]

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[16] The *Diatessaron* was a collated version of the four Gospels to create a continuous narrative, compiled by Tatian *c*. 150–160. It circulated widely in Syriac-speaking countries, where it became the standard text until it gave way to the four separate Gospels in the fifth century. Its original language was probably Syriac or Greek. Tatian himself was a native of Syria who became a Christian in Rome in the mid-second century.

[17] Carmel McCarthy, 'Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's *Diatessaron*: An

In common with early Greek Fathers like Origen (and Gregory of Nyssa),[18] Ephraem's biblical exegesis is essentially creative. For Ephraem, inspiration was not a presence of the Spirit that enlightened only the original authors of the sacred texts, but is, rather, a continuing process, and one that affects every reader who is attentive to the hidden presence behind the words as he reads them. Ephraem also warned against a purely literal interpretation of biblical texts, which he sees as spiritually deadening.

As a poet, Ephraem is keenly aware of the limitations of our human language when speaking of divine mysteries. If we are to speak of God at all, we have, as it were, to empty our familiar language of its limited human content and associations and allow it to take on a new and unfamiliar role in referring to the unfathomable mystery of God. Ephraem sees in our human language, and especially in the language of Scripture, a kind of *kenosis*, a self-emptying by which God allows himself to be described in the limits of human language and rhetoric.

If we are to read the Scriptures with understanding, we must recognize that they are a wholly inadequate vehicle to express the depths of the divine mystery in their literal form, and the reader who would understand their spiritual treasures must learn how to dig beneath the surface:

> If someone concentrates his attention solely
> on the metaphors used of God's majesty,
> he abuses and misrepresents that majesty
> by means of those metaphors with which God has clothed
> himself for man's own benefit,
> and he is ungrateful to that Grace
> which bent down its stature to the level of man's childishness:
> although God had nothing in common with it

English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709', *Journal of Semitic Studies* Supplement 2 (1993), 49–50.

[18] Gregory of Nyssa (*c*. 330–95), one of the Cappadocian Fathers, and influenced by Origen's approach to the task of biblical exegesis, is remembered especially for his *Life of Moses*, through which he presents a vision of the Christian's spiritual journey in the imagery of the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings and final inheritance of the Promised Land. It is a wonderfully nuanced and profound 'spiritual' reading of an Old Testament narrative.

He clothed himself in the likeness of man
in order to bring man to the likeness of himself.
Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names,
for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are familiar
to you:
it is not because it is poor that it has put on your imagery,
rather, your nature is far too weak to be able
to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished
by being depicted in the pale colours that you are familiar with.[19]

Ephraem guards against a literal interpretation of the sacred texts: they are clothed in metaphors and 'pale colours'. They are constrained by the limitations of human language and rhetoric, and only reveal their riches as we recognise and respond to a more imagistic and poetic reading of them. In particular, Ephraem relies on a typological reading of the Bible. The terms 'symbol' (the Syriac word he uses literally means 'mystery') and 'type' recur throughout his exegetical poetry. Sebastian Brock goes as far as to state:

> Perhaps no other writer has ever put typological exegesis to such creative use, employing it to provide an intricate network of links between the two Testaments, between this world and the heavenly world.[20]

Ephraem's reading of Scripture creates a rich tapestry of interrelated themes and symbolic associations that work on two separate planes: horizontally between the Old Testament and the New; and vertically between this world and heaven. In both cases, they serve to 'uncover' something of the 'hiddenness' of a mystery not yet fully revealed;[21] as St Paul termed it, 'seeing through a glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12).

Echoing the exegetical tradition of the early Fathers, Ephraem locates the key to uncovering the hidden meanings in a Christological reading of the Old Testament embedded in its figurative language: especially in the names and titles ascribed to God, through which he makes himself known.

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[19] *Hymns on Paradise II* 6–7, trans. Brock, *Harp of the Spirit*, 13.

[20] Brock, *idem*, 13.

[21] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 23–9.

Ephraem cautions his readers to be particularly alert to their associations and resonances in what he calls 'the crucible' of the scriptures:

> Contemplate in his crucibles,
> his names and his distinctions.
> For he has names,
> perfect and exact;
> he also has names
> metaphorical and transient …
> Have a care for his names,
> perfect and holy,
> for if you deny one
> they will all fly away.
> They are tied to one-another
> and they carry all,
> like the pillars
> of the world.[22]

These symbols, types, names and titles are the alchemical elements in the crucible of the text that enables spiritual gold to come into being. Or, to use Ephraem's metaphor, they are 'a bridge and a gate' that lead us into the 'luminous heights' of Paradise.[23] For Ephraem the figurative language of the Old Testament (in its broadest sense) is to be read, as are the narratives of the patriarchs and prophets, through the lens of the incarnate Word, and thus it comes to shape the Christian experience.

Ephraem's approach has therefore sometimes been referred to as 'symbolic theology' and contrasted with more discursive and philosophical modes of reflection. It is, therefore, important to have a clear idea of Ephraem's understanding of typological exegesis if we are to be able fully to appreciate his reading of the Bible and its poetic expression. Although 'typological' readings of the scriptures were familiar to the Antiochene school of biblical interpretation, as a contemplative exercise the role of symbols, types names and titles had a far greater significance and application

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[22] *Hymns on Faith* 44:1–3, Jeffrey T. Wickes, trans., *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith*, Fathers of the Church, 130 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 240.

[23] *Hymns on Paradise* 9:20, trans. Brock, *Ephrem the Syrian; Hymns on Paradise*, 104.

for Ephraem. For him they provide the very idiom of our theological grammar. The figurative language of the scriptures is the way in which God manifests his hidden reality in a manner that can be grasped by the human intellect. Theology consists in the contemplation of these mystic symbols through which God allows himself to be known. As Ephraem frequently wrote, God's revelation of himself is through a rhetoric of *kenosis*, foreshadowed in the Old Testament but embodied in Christ, who is God's rhetoric made flesh.

Ephraem's typological exegesis is richly-textured and imaginative and admits of multiple readings of every scriptural passage:

> If there were [only] one meaning for the words [of Scripture] the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding. But every word of our Lord has its own image, and each image has many members, and each member possesses its own species and form. Each person hears in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him.[24]

Although Ephraem nowhere discusses the principles of his hermeneutics, his approach is everywhere evident: he begins with the literal meaning of the text and then searches for the spiritual sense encoded in the symbols, types, names and figurative language which have Christ as their point of reference.

This does not, however, lead to exegetical anarchy or flights of allegorical fantasy, since Ephraem's thought is firmly grounded in Nicaean orthodoxy and his biblical exegesis is heir to the Patristic principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. His is a hermeneutics of intertextuality, and anything he asserts as a spiritual reading must be clearly evident elsewhere in Scripture at a literal level.

Ephraem's genius is not so much his approach to biblical exegesis as his expression of the fruits of his insights and contemplation of the texts of Scripture in the language of poetry, with its paradoxes, nuances and allusiveness. Sebastian Brock has written:

> Ephraem's radically different approach is by way of paradox and symbolism, and for this purpose poetry provides a far more suitable vehicle than prose,

[24] McCarthy, 'Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's *Diatessaron*', 139.

seeing that poetry is much better capable of sustaining the essential dynamism and fluidity that is characteristic of this sort of approach to theology.[25]

Ephraem's poetic theology cuts its way through the academic approach to Scripture that sees it either as a source of historical information or dogmatic confirmation. The Bible for Ephraem is a treasure-house of spiritual riches, a fount of life for the soul, a banquet of images and figurative language to be teased out and to become nourishment.

For our journey of faith, Ephraem the Syrian is a master of the spiritual life, whose contemplation of the scriptures was a model of *lectio divina*, and who teaches us that faith is not always *fides quarens intellectum*, but also *fides adorans mysterium*.[26]

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THE DESERT: ADVENT II

Mark 1:1–8

AIDAN NICHOLS OP

WHEN does the Christian story, the story of Christ begin? What is the moment when our faith, our religion, first came into being? Most of us, especially as Christmas approaches, would think automatically of Bethlehem and the nativity; the crib, the tableau of Mary, Joseph and the Christ-child lying in a manger. And obviously there is a sense in which this

[25] Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 24.

[26] Griffith, *'Faith Adoring the Mystery'*, 37. Griffith contrasts Augustine of Hippo's search for an intellectual understanding of faith (*fides quarens intellectum*; 'faith seeking understanding'), with Ephraem's approach, which he characterises as *fides adorans mysterium*; 'faith adoring the mystery'.

has to be correct: the life of Christ begins with the birth of Christ. But in saying this we would only get two of the gospel-writers, Luke and Matthew, on our side. Our traditional picture of how our religion started is really a synthesis of their accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus. John and Mark, present us with, a very different view of how it all got going. In the very opening of Mark's gospel he plunges us straight away not into the life of the Holy Family, not into the perhaps rather cosy domestic life of the child Jesus, but into, of all unlikely places, the desert.

> The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ,
> the Son of God … A voice cries in the wilderness …
> and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the
> wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance
> for the forgiveness of sins.

Not the manger with the warm straw, the proximity of human bodies, the respect and concern of wise men and local country people but the *desert*, in particular the Judaean desert, hostile, forbidding terrain beyond the cities of Judah, no man's land, an area alternately swept by bitter cold and by torrid heat. It was there in that arid, lifeless, sub-human world that the gospel began. 'The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God … 'A voice cries in the wilderness.'

Why was it, then? Why did the revelation of God to man, at least for two of the evangelists, begin precisely there, in the wilderness, in the desert? We know the answer to this question. We know it from the spiritual experience of the Church. We know it from the way that men and women have struggled with themselves, and with the living God, and with Jesus Christ his son, down the centuries. The answer is that the desert corresponds to an area not on any map, namely the human heart. There is a region of the heart which is as dry, as waterless, as parched as any desert on the face of the earth. There is a side to the human heart where at is not a jolly, cheery, thing, not the seat of our everyday human sentiments, the little positive feelings that make the average day go well. There is a side to the heart where the heart of man is longing and aching for a fulfilment which it fears it will never find; where it is conscious of its own basic isolation and loneliness; where despair is

round the corner; where the chips are down, where we are alone, where nothing and no-one can be guaranteed to reassure us and satisfy us, and where we know, in our heart of hearts, that all total trust in any other human being is misplaced. 'Put not your trust in man', says the Old Testament, 'in whom there is no salvation'. The desert experience is when we come to see this for ourselves, when we realise that we are by ourselves in a waterless land. This region is too remote to expect a rescue party, too inaccessible for anyone else to dig for water on our behalf. This is the wilderness; this is where we know ourselves most realistically for what we are; this is where the Christian story begins.

'A voice cries in the wilderness: "Prepare a way for the Lord: make his paths straight"'. John the Baptist realises this prophecy by speaking of Jesus: 'Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am …' Why is Jesus more powerful than John? Because he can do more miracles? Because he can attract more disciples? Or is it because while John can identify the desert of the human condition, can put his finger on the spot where it really hurts, Jesus and Jesus alone can do anything about it. John knows what we are like: he knows the heart of man; Jesus does too, he had his own wilderness experience; but Jesus is also the heart of God translated into human flesh. He is not just a human heart, he is the Sacred Heart. And if he is God made man, then he is someone who can reach our interior desert; by his influence, by his grace, he can reach me in this most cut off of all lands, more cut off than any pole or any jungle.

Because I am one finite spirit and you are another, I cannot touch you, in the sense required, except by the sheerest temporary luck; but God is the sum of all spirits, he is closer to us, even in our desert, than we are to ourselves and, to change the metaphor, he is the life-giving water that springs up for eternal life.

Love, the poet said, is where two solitudes meet and touch each other.[27] This is a chaste, a disciplined, a realistic definition. It is only inadequate when we come to describe the love which exists between God in Christ

[27] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a young poet*, 7 (14 May 1904).

and ourselves. The life of God is not a solitude, it is a creative outgoing communion, the eternal dynamic interrelationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and when God touches our solitude he does not leave it a solitude, he does not leave it a wilderness, and go away again, although sometimes that is how we experience it for a while. When God meets our solitude he opens it out from within, he transforms it so that it becomes the inner depth of our own capacity for relationship; he makes us respond to his own beauty and goodness and he secures us with the knowledge that we are loved infinitely and eternally: 'I have called you by your name; you are mine'. It is about this that the prophecies and the gospels are talking:

> The poor and needy ask for water, and there is none,
> their tongue is parched with thirst.
> I, Yahweh, will answer them,
> I, the God of Israel, will not abandon them.
>
> I will make rivers well up on barren heights,
> And fountains in the midst of valleys;
> Turn the wilderness into a lake,
> And dry ground into waterspring.
>
> In the wilderness I will put cedar tress,
> Acacias, myrtles, olives.
> In the desert I will plant juniper,
> Plane-tree and cypress side by side.
>
> So that men may see and know
> May all observe and understand
> That the hand of Yahweh has done this,
> That the Holy One of Israel has created it.
>
> (Isaiah 41:17–20)

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‘GREAT IS YOUR FAITH!’

Mark 7:24–30 & Matthew 15:21–28

DOUGLAS DALES

IN Mark’s gospel, the encounter between Jesus and a distraught mother is placed immediately after the important teaching of Jesus that exploded the whole idea of ritual cleanliness, to which so many gave such strict attention at that time. It is hard for us to realise what a potent revolution occurred in the celebration of the Eucharist in the earliest church, when ‘Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free,’ sat together around a common meal table, ‘all one in Christ’ (Gal. 3:23). Little wonder that Jesus had to take refuge for a while in the relative safety of a Gentile area, in the neighbourhood of Tyre and Sidon just to the north of Galilee.

In Mark’s gospel, this encounter is followed by another one in which Jesus healed a Gentile person who was deaf and dumb, in an area of mixed settlement opposite Galilee called the Decapolis. The distinctive story in this gospel of the second feeding miracle of four thousand probably also has associations with the mission to the Gentiles. As God’s Messiah, Jesus ‘could not be hidden’; and his miracles among Gentiles demonstrated the universal significance of his mission and his message. His actions among Gentiles also laid the basis for the subsequent mission of the Church, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Matthew’s version takes up the theme of mission to the Gentiles and elaborates it.

In the sharpness of the exchange between Jesus and the distraught Gentile mother a vivid mirror is held up for all to see. The embarrassment and heartlessness of some of his disciples is exposed ruthlessly: ‘Send her away!’ The implication is that she simply does not matter. The words of Jesus that seem so harsh and racially conditioned in fact expose the hidden assumptions and attitudes of so many of his compatriots, including some of his own disciples, who regarded themselves as God’s chosen people. ‘Am I sent as Messiah only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Is this what you really think and expect? Should I now take the bread of life given for God’s chosen people and give it to foreigners that you regard as unclean and little better than dogs?’

Put this way, the response of Jesus was a word of judgement before it became a word of compassion. It was clearly a turning point in the thinking and attitudes of his disciples that they never forgot, as he demonstrated directly the social and ethical implications of his teaching about unclean food that he had just given in such an unequivocal manner. Jesus not only declared all food to be clean, but potentially all people clean as well.

This story is about a courageous and persistent mother, desperate for help for her possessed daughter, whom she has left at home. Why did Jesus play her along in the way that he did? Was it kind to her? Augustine says this: 'She was initially ignored by Jesus, not that mercy might be denied her but that her desire might be enkindled; and not only that her desire might be enkindled, but also that her humility might be praised.'[28] Ardent desire and genuine humility constitute true faith: they open the heart of Jesus because they open the human heart to him. She could see in Jesus what others could not see. She would not be shaken off or ignored, because she too was a child of God, and so was her sick daughter. 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table!' What a reply. And what a condemnation of the racial and religious prejudice of the male disciples standing around her.

In Matthew's version, the story has assumed something of a conversion narrative. The woman acclaims Jesus as the Son of David, recognising him as the Messiah sent from God about whom she has clearly heard already. Falling on her knees, she worships him as Lord with the words, 'Lord, help me!' She hears in turn wonderful words that echo those to others in the gospels: 'O woman, great is your faith! May it be done to you even as you desire.' She returns home to find her daughter fit and well, liberated from whatever it was that was destroying her humanity. For Jesus is able to save to the uttermost all who turn to him – there is no limit to his compassion or to his healing power.

Bede regarded this story as a great example of the importance of prayer for others:

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[28] *Sermon* 77.1.

> ‘The Church as a caring mother must intercede for the soul of another in need so that Christ may convert her by inspiring her interiorly, drawing her from the darkness of error, and arousing her to acknowledge the true light. But if the Lord keeps the Church waiting for an answer as she asks in tears, it is not that she should desist from asking, seeking, knocking, nor that there should ever come to her despair of having her request granted. Instead she should persevere with great earnestness; she should resort to the Saviour crying out obstinately; and among her petitions should seek to obtain the support of His saints, until they too offer supplications to the Lord from heaven that the prayers of His Church might be heard. Then it will happen that, if she does not turn aside her mind from its proposed intention, she will by no means be deprived of the fruit of her request. A person who intervenes, either for the sake of his own weakness, or for the sake of others, will obtain in the end the desired result. … But we must note that this tenacity in praying can only deserve to bear fruit, if what we ask for with our mouth we also meditate on in our mind; and if the crying of our lips is not torn apart in another direction by the focus of our thoughts and attitudes.’[29]

Bede puts his finger on the crucial point about this story: the challenge of Jesus to hidden attitudes of racial and religious prejudice, to harsh judgements about others on grounds of gender or class. As Jesus said just before this dramatic encounter: ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles’ (Mark 7:20); and it can certainly also destroy other people by blind or deliberate inhumanity. This is therefore a story about how the eyes of the disciples were opened to see this foreign woman and her child as persons loved by God; and this is the sure and only foundation for any effective Christian mission which is truly pastoral and evangelistic.

So we must always pray in the words of Alcuin:

> Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name.

This unknown woman is set before us in the gospels as an example of that prayer in action.

The Revd Douglas Dales is an Anglican parish priest in the Oxford diocese and was formerly Chaplain of Marlborough College where he taught Theology, History and Latin.

[29] *Homily* 1.22.

HEALING AND 'NORMALITY'

JAMES RAMSAY

WAITING in out-patients for a clinic appointment, one with a crowd of others yet isolated in our different complaints, we had no choice but to 'possess our souls in patience'[30] as names were called, people came and went. Doctors are only human, we remind ourselves. Yet in our anxiety about the news we await we recall that we have heard anecdotes. Miracles do happen. Should I have faith or be a 'realist'? Looking around I felt, by a strange dislocation of time, a sense of identification with those throngs of anonymous sufferers gathered around Jesus whom we read about in the Gospels.

A modern hospital waiting room is a far cry from a dusty roadside in first-century Palestine. The technology of healing in present-day Britain does not bear comparison with the medical options and spiritual world of demon possession and exorcism of Jesus's time. However, experiencing for myself the dependency that poor health brings, having previously enjoyed (and taken for granted) sixty years of good health, I was discovering a new perspective on the Gospel healing narratives: not so much the stories of particular individuals, but the generic sick about whom we know only that the closeness, words, gaze, or touch of 'the resurrection and the life' brought salvific wellbeing.

Who were these people? We know neither their names nor the details of their ailments, and to them we would probably seem like aliens. Yet they knew wonder, pain, fear, and joy as we do. Their grief at the death of a loved one is no stranger to us. They are people of their time, as we are of ours. Those around me in the hospital waiting room were no less alien and anonymous, and no less my brothers and sisters.

In that recognition of shared humanity, beyond yet also precisely within the accidents or *maya* (illusion) of time,[31] I felt Christ among us. One with us. Naturally I prayed for a beneficial outcome to my physical problems, but

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[30] Cf. Luke 21:19.

[31] *Maya* (Sanskrit: 'magic' or 'illusion') a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy, notably in the Advaita (Nondualist) school of Vedanta. *Maya* originally denoted the magic power with which a god can make human beings believe in what turns out to be an illusion.

in sensing commonality with those living in such different circumstances so long ago, and those of diverse backgrounds and ages in my own time, I experienced a different dimension of healing. Something out of the normal.

An adage exhorts, 'Be kind. Remember, everyone carries a heavy burden.'[32] The person sitting across from us in the waiting room, or failing to socially-distance in the supermarket, or annoying us over the phone from a call-centre in Mumbai … remember, we do not know what burden they carry. Yet in the holy spirit of God-with-us, in the midst of our own worries and pains and priorities, we can pray God's blessing upon them and be blessed in turn with a relaxing of the grip of self that, unnoticed because so normal, racks us with tension and cripples us spiritually.

Warding against COVID-19 we are aware that we are all in the same storm but not all in the same boat. We are all affected differently. Holding this prayerfully in mind perhaps opens a window for collective healing. Medical research suggests that the higher our stress levels, the weaker our resistance to viruses. Mindfulness of loving interdependence in the body of Christ, our ultimate vocation to wholeness, has therapeutic power beyond our individual person. Our individual prayers contribute, however intangibly, to reduction of collective stress. Healing in the normal sense can be merely a return to a state of being, of physical or mental habits and routinised relationships, that are fundamentally unhealthy. By contrast, recognising Christ with us in whatever 'waiting room' life might send us into, offering in prayer not only our own pain, anxieties, unacknowledged anger, disappointments, and sorrows, but also the plight of the vulnerable and the frustrations (and for many at the present time, the intense financial worry) of those we imagine to be strong or not vulnerable, the eyes of our heart are opened to our neighbour, our ears to the Word of life.

Our NHS has rightly been described as not so much a health service as an illness service: it addresses symptoms of unwellness rather than deeper

[32] Rev. Dr John Watson DD (1850–1907), but widely misattributed to Plato or Philo of Alexandria.

issues of being well. Whole-person and societal aspects of healing are undervalued. With the loss of support structures within local communities, as church congregations have dwindled, as communities become more culturally diverse and geographically scattered … long-term care provision is desperately stretched. In a liberal, democratic society, healing has thus an unavoidable political dimension. If we are not prepared, through our democratic voice, to support policies that will fund a genuinely working health and care system (and as a priest, albeit retired from parish ministry, I have seen too much distressing evidence of a broken system), we are not a whole society. We are in an unholy state. We must do all we can to affirm the compassion of Christ, his care for the poor, the weak, the marginalised, and his challenge to the complacent and hypocritical by the way we ourselves live and relate with our neighbours across the whole of society.

That is not to say we must be preachy or always explicit about our faith. The hospice movement, inspired by and built on Christian principles, has had an influence far broader than its initial aim in terms of affirming the dignity of human life and human death. It presents a moral and spiritual challenge to a culture in which drugs and medical care are seen as business opportunities rather than a public good. The Trussell Trust, again founded on Christian values and serving all unconditionally, not only helps people at the primary health level of nutrition through its food banks, it also addresses publicly the scandal of hunger in one of the world's richest nations. In an era of huge social inequality, of insecure and inadequately paid work, and a health service and welfare system run down by decades of underfunding, there is a crying need for healing of the body politic.

Jesus had no political programme, yet he spoke of a kingdom of righteousness, peace, and celebratory communality. Rooted in the eschatological vision of the Old Testament prophets, his language was offensive to the authorities of his day, to the 'hireling shepherds' more concerned for their own status and comfort than the wellbeing of the people. When he teaches his disciples to pray 'Thy kingdom come', prayer is at once an interior activity and an outward truth-doing: 'But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in

God' (John 3:21). That cannot fail to be political as well as personally beneficial. Prayers for healing and wellness are in a continuum with actions that testify to God's will done 'as in heaven so on earth': whether through a hospice or foodbank or (recalling Jesus's provocative purging of the temple), in disruptive gestures alerting society to an ill we have failed to notice or with which we have come to an unhealthy accommodation.

Spiritual healing may be uncomfortable. A disconcerting aspect of Jesus's healing ministry is the way it often draws attention to an individual who would perhaps have preferred to remain one of those anonymous recipients of grace about whom we were thinking at the start of this article. The woman in the crowd who reached out to touch the hem of Jesus's garment was suddenly exposed to the glare of public attention in all her ritual uncleanliness. Zacchaeus, compromised yet aware life could be different, despised no doubt for his short stature as much as for his collaboration with the Gentile occupier, peeps from his sycamore tree and finds himself in the spotlight of 'the light of the world'.

Many of us feel embarrassment, if not shame, at being unwell. Accepting help, or the need for a stick or wheelchair, can be difficult. Normality is not very tolerant of weakness. The stigma around mental problems in particular signals a collective mental malady in 'normal' society. Divine love hauls us out of the cabined space of retreat and self-apology into which so many are reduced by sickness. Just as those who desire the limelight and automatically seat themselves at the top table are publicly shamed in the heavenly banquet by being asked to make way for a nobody—in the new norm of Christ, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit … the meek … those who are persecuted' (Matt. 5:3–12)—the nobody must accept the dignity of being somebody.

Healing in 'the way, the truth, and the life' brings responsibilities. One can no longer be merely the victim of bad luck or one's own charming recklessness. Nine lepers (Luke 17:11–19) have faith sufficient to be cured; but the Samaritan, an outcast in the world of 'normality', understands the limitedness of that world. He returns to give thanks and is 'made well', not simply physically, but in his heart and soul.

In the story of the paralysed man lowered through the roof (Mark 2, Luke 5) true healing is expressly identified as spiritual; bodily cure merely signifying the power of grace. Like all of us in fact, in different ways, the paralysed man is wholly dependent on others. Was he happy with their wheeze? Who would pay for the roof repairs? How did he feel as he was lowered, swaying, at risk of being dropped, into a room where there was space for no more people? Entering further into this miracle, let us by way of conclusion return to the anonymity of the waiting room, and imagine the event from the viewpoint of one of the crowd inside the house. Determined to see the famous Rabbi, we have elbowed our way in. The atmosphere is hot and sweaty. We note the scribes and pharisees (even, it is rumoured, some from Jerusalem) clustered close to the Nazarene. The debate, refreshingly understandable, makes us feel somewhat disturbingly that we understand nothing.

A scraping sound is heard overhead. Rats? Pigeons? Debris showers down and sky appears as roof tiles are removed. There follows a confusion of voices and faces. Those in the centre of the room press back self-protectively, expostulating and shouting upward as a pallet is lowered into the room (the Rabbi quizzical? amused? already knowing?), like a coffin into a grave. On the pallet is ... that egregious sinner, well known to all, for whom we have even on occasion been moved to feel pity!

We are mortified at how our community is being shown up in front of VIPs. A disgrace, a theological scandal! We hear the Rabbi's potentially blasphemous arrogance: 'your sins are forgiven'. But then ... what's this? We cannot believe ... Miracles do not happen here! The sinner is on his feet, rolling up his mat and making for the door, looking back at the Rabbi, exclaiming, 'My God! My God!' And we too are exclaiming, 'My God!' And we are afraid.

For we do not understand what has happened, or what it betokens. The VIPs look shaken and dubious. With our own eyes we have seen the reality of incomprehensible freedom. And we and our village, our little polity, shall never be 'normal' again.

ASSOCIATES

✠ **RIP** ✠

Priest Associate

The Revd Stuart Aitken 15 May 2020

FLG

The Revd Margaret Raven 22 February 2020

IN MEMORIAM

William Stuart Aitken
(1935–2020)

During the early 1990s the SLG Chapter agreed to experiment with altering the design of our habits and headwear. After several radical attempts by Sisters to design something suitable (none of which adequately reflected the monastic expression of our vocation), by the late 90s the matter was in abeyance. Then Sr Isabel, in charge of Bede House, wondered whether one of the priests who came for retreat from time to time might be able to help us. This was indeed a nudge from the Holy Spirit as Sr Isabel was known to be very much against the whole project, so we asked her to pursue the idea. Thus Stuart Aitken came into our lives for several years.

At that time he was Rector of Burham and Wouldham in the diocese of Rochester, as well as being Diocesan Communications Officer. He was ordained in 1983 after training for the priesthood at the Canterbury School of Ministry. Before this he had qualified as a dress designer and teacher, which were his particular gifts to us. He had worked for Marks & Spencer and another firm which designed uniforms for air hostesses, so was well-versed in designing garments that could be adapted to all shapes and sizes. A tailor's dummy appeared in the Workroom and in due course, a milliner's dummy to enable the redesigning of our headwear (old: coif/wimple, bandeau and veil;

new: collar, cap and veil). His work for us was painstaking, and he took time to hear what design would suit us best. Our habits now might look as if they had not changed since our foundation; but they do reflect the consensus of the Sisters at that time, and have a less bulky cut which is easier to wear. He was clear that the headwear would be the last part of the habit to be redesigned, as it would be the most difficult task to suit all head shapes, opinions and desires. In the end we came to a consensus about this as well, though not without many trial models and compromises on both sides.

Sisters Edwina, Tessa and Edmée, modelling headwear old and new, from a picture taken in 1997.

I think it is fair to say that Stuart enjoyed this task, an activity where he could call on his original training and integrate it into his ministry. He was a good teacher and taught the Sister in charge of the Workroom how to make and alter the patterns he drew up. We have been constantly grateful for his work and for his sensitivity in dealing with a group of strong-minded women. We, and he, valued the further link with us as a Priest Associate and remember him with thanksgiving and affection.

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2021

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

21st–25th July 2021

Led by:

Canon Andrew Teal

Sister Clare-Louise SLG

Llangasty Retreat House is open for business and taking bookings in line with Welsh Government and Church in Wales guidelines, which may change at any time. Llangasty Retreat House confirm they are able to follow government safety guidelines to provide a COVID-secure environment and will continue to review their procedures and practices for the safety of retreatants, but as a result can only currently welcome groups of up to seven (this number may be increased in the case of family or carer 'bubbles'). That number may be revised depending on the availability of vaccines and other tests.

Cost: £330.00 each Deposit: £33.00

Early bookings are recommended as only seven delegates can be accommodated on this retreat. Bookings will be accepted on a 'first come, first served' basis.

Deposits and further information:

Carol Richards, SLG Charitable Trust Ltd,
Convent of the Incarnation, Parker Street, Oxford, OX4 1TB
carol.richards@slg.org.uk

BOOKS RECEIVED

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

Rowan Williams, ***The Way of St Benedict*** (Bloomsbury, 2019) £12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-7307-8

John-Francis Friendship, ***Enfolded in Christ: The inner life of a priest*** (Canterbury Press, 2018) £12.99, Kindle £7.12. ISBN: 978-1-78622-046-2

Bruce Carlin, ed., ***In Concert Sing: A Mirfield Bedside Book*** (Mirfield Publications, 2020) £8.50. ISBN: 978-0-90283-451-4

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Sister Gemma Simmonds CJ, *The Way of Ignatius: A Prayer Journey through Lent* (London: SPCK, 2018), Paperback £8.99, ISBN 978-0-28107-531-7.

> This is emphatically not a book for experts or, indeed, a book by an expert on prayer or the spiritual life. I'm not sure what such experts would look like, since I have never met any.

So Sr Gemma starts her book. In writing this review I very much hope to encourage, or even persuade, readers to buy Sr Gemma's book and read it. It is not long (only eighty-eight pages), but every word counts. It is presented as a Lent book and would fit into that time frame well, but my experience is that coming to the end I simply wanted to read it again, and that the season does not matter. Its subtitle is 'A Prayer Journey through Lent', but will, I think, speak to anyone, even those who have thought that Ignatian spirituality is not for them. It is perhaps not a book for absolute beginners as she makes some assumptions, but more for people who try to pray but feel that they are getting nowhere, or who want to go in deeper.

There are nine chapters, each one divided into sections, so it is ideal for slow reflective reading. Within this structure she leads us into a very wide understanding of prayer, and it is a breadth that we sense is matched by the possibility of increasing depth. She uses the experiences of Ignatius and of

Mary Ward, the founder of her own order, to make her points, and in Chapter six explains simply the purpose and method of the Spiritual Exercises, the work which Ignatius wrote to help his brethren, and which has spoken to many people today

I found that there were two threads running through the book: Sr Gemma's belief in the merciful love of God for each one of us; and trust: trust in God and trust that we all know inside ourselves how to pray if we can learn to believe in that instinct. We do not, however, necessarily find our way to trusting this mercy and so to prayer in one moment of conversion; for most of us there are stages.

These stages are outlined in the nine chapters, but this is not a tidy progression, one can at any point double back on oneself to go deeper into an earlier suggestion. She begins with our own poverty, not of money or possessions but of our inner resources, 'Blessed are those who know their need of God' (Matt. 5:3), in fact. When we realize that in this sense we really are poor and accept that it can be the gift that God is seeking from us, then it can be the beginning of a powerful life of faith and relationship with God. She moves from there to friendship with Jesus, suggesting that we may become his intimate companions, able to find God in all things. And she ends chapter two by introducing the Ignatian Examen for the first time. It is a tool by which we can end the day by seeing our day with God's merciful eyes.

Chapter three opens with a short apologia for the Exercises. She writes: 'They are not magic and they can be hard work, but they do offer anyone who engages with their process freely and sincerely an opportunity to open ourselves up to God who is willing to meet us where we are. The rest is up to God'. But how do we know whether what we experience comes from God or our own ego? To answer that question Ignatius gradually evolved what he called 'discernment of spirits', the need to notice the effect of our thoughts: do they leave us inspired and happy or dispirited and sad; feelings are not to be squashed or ignored. She stresses that both Ignatius and Mary Ward were people of strong feelings. In fact in the following chapter she describes Ignatius as a person with a challenging temperament, something which might make many of us warm to him!

The themes of self-acceptance and discernment are basic and recur: 'we face the task of discerning where our greatest good truly lies'. She tells the story of Julian Bream, the world famous guitar and lute player. He was largely self-taught, and at thirty-nine he found himself with muscular pain and paralysis which he was told would be permanent unless he re-learned the techniques properly. So he set himself the hugely difficult task of learning to do the same things differently. It is a parable and we are left to ask ourselves if or how it applies to us.

In Chapter five she shows how both Ignatius and Mary Ward moved from wanting to do spectacular things for God to a 'greater respect for the "everyday God", the God of little things and the ordinary aspects of our human living'. It requires a deepening of self-acceptance, but it doesn't exclude passion; our passions are part of us. She reminds us that Lent is indeed a time for looking at ourselves honestly, and she quotes the *Cloud of Unknowing*, 'It is not what you are nor what you have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be',[33] and she concludes with a very beautiful poem by Symeon the New Theologian connecting our self-acceptance to the astounding fact that we are the body of Christ.

Thoughts about self-acceptance continue into the following chapter. It is basic to our life with Jesus. When we can trust that we are loved we can face sin, both our personal sins and the systemic sin which is so much part of our world today. Instead of feeling crushed we can feel forgiven. She uses the apostle Peter as an illustration. He was an impulsive man, full of self-sufficiency and weakness, and yet he was accepted. We see this so clearly at the end of Jesus' life. At the time of his trial he denied Jesus, but realizing what he had done he went away and wept, and then came back again to carry out his vocation, knowing his weaknesses and that he was forgiven.

Chapter seven opens with three strong pages about systemic sin, and she strongly denies that we, as fragile and isolated individuals, can do nothing about it. We have to answer the question 'how are we going to follow Jesus?' Our desires are the crucial element in our choices so we need to become

[33] James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), ch. 75.

accustomed to exploring our deepest longings. In this way we shall open ourselves to the work of God.

She moves on to suffering and humiliation, both that of Jesus and our own. The connection is systemic sin. She gives the chapter the title 'Surveying the Wondrous Cross', from the well known and loved Passion hymn. She enables us to picture Jesus looking down from the cross; he will have seen his mother and the other women doing nothing but stand silently around him. This standing and being there is prayer. If, she says, we come close to Jesus in his humiliation and suffering in this way we will also come close to the least of his brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40). It means, 'that we will never again be able to look on personal or systemic injustice and remain unresponsive'. She then moves to four concepts which will be familiar to people who already read books on prayer, that of fasting, self-denial, mortification and humility. They are given a new lease of life: we can, for instance, fast from power, money, status, image, success, addictive work patterns, or fun.

In the final, full chapter she returns to Peter.

> His weaknesses are all too obvious, but so is his willingness to keep trying to follow his beloved Master faithfully. It is when he comes at last to know the extent of his own fragility and stops trying to keep hold of control that he learns what true discipleship means. It is not a performance-related activity but an openness to learning how to love beyond or despite our limitations.

She notes that we live in a world that cannot wait, and yet what she is writing about takes time and so requires an inner shift in ourselves. Ignatius writes about being contemplative in action, but the way we make our action contemplative is to be in the present moment. We have to allow ourselves to wait; to have, in fact, a Holy Saturday experience of going down into the tomb; it requires trust, trust in the 'one who tramples on all locks and chains that bind us, pulling us out of the dark places where we are unable to see clearly the healing and liberating work as it unfolds. God's goodness is sometimes unseen, but no less good for that'.

It is a wise and compassionate book.

SISTER SUSAN SLG

Bonnie B. Thurston, *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), Paperback £15.99; Kindle £9.78, ISBN 978-0-81468-807-6.

Downsizing on my retirement a few years ago, I got rid of the only two books by Thomas Merton which I possessed: *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Contemplation in a World of Action*. They turn out to be among the titles most frequently referred to in this excellent little book about Thomas Merton's spirituality. In the matter of books, of course, it was ever thus. Indeed, with this level of ignorance and this act of vandalism in my background, I would never have agreed to review this book, but for one thing. Before the 'lockdown' in March a friend had warmly recommended a small book by Merton recently published. This was *Where Prayer Flourishes*, a re-issue of the book originally published in 1969 (the year following his accidental death in Bangkok), under the title *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. This was my companion through the initial months dominated by the pandemic, and it continued to nourish me as I read and re-read it. In the light of that, I was keen to extend my knowledge and discover more of the background. The present work by Dr Bonnie Thurston, a book on the same small scale, turned out to be the perfect companion volume.

As is clear from the title, Dr Thurston seeks to examine the specifically monastic character of Thomas Merton's spirituality. However, as Merton does himself, she is at pains to stress that monastic spirituality is not something completely remote from the spirituality of Christians living 'in the world'. She is clear that Merton's vocation as a monk is central, and yet begins with a quotation in which Merton affirms that at the very centre of the monastic vocation is the person of Jesus Christ. It is a life devoted to the mystery of Christ. While she explores this under categories which are naturally associated with monastic life, Obedience, Silence and Solitude, she does so as Merton, at least in his more mature writing, also seeks to do, in a way which points to their relevance to all Christian disciples.

Within a small compass the book provides just enough biographical material to give a picture of Merton's conversion and monastic call, and the

process by which what began as a 'flight from the world' came to be experienced as a vocation to embrace the world 'in Christ'. The chapters on prayer echo much that I found in the republished earlier work. There is much emphasis on flexibility and a certain disparaging of 'method', which is perhaps the fruit of maturity and also speaks to those who are relatively mature; there is very little about the way in which the prayer disciplines of monastic life, and particularly the Liturgy of the Hours, are actually the foundation on which such flexibility can be built. But the underlying vision of the call to every Christian to discover their true self in Christ, and in so doing to join in Christ's compassionate embrace of the whole of humanity, and indeed of creation, is both profoundly challenging and deeply inspiring.

Dr Thurston's style is pleasantly informal (she refers to Merton at one point as 'history's talkiest Trappist'), but behind the book are forty years of study of his huge output of writings: novels, poems, autobiography, theology, history, talks and letters; she provides in footnotes and a bibliography many valuable pointers to further study for those who wish.

Revd Paul King

Liz Hoare, *Twelve Great Spiritual Writers* (London: SPCK, 2020) paperback, £9.99; Kindle £6.99, ISBN 978-0-28107-936-0.

Those who are familiar with the Office of Readings in the three-volume *Divine Office* (or the four-volume *Liturgy of the Hours* in the USA and Canada) come to know the cycle of scriptural texts and post-biblical readings well enough after sustained engagement. What some may not know is that what is published in print is in fact only half of what was originally proposed by the Congregation for Divine Worship. The selections of readings were to run over two years, instead of one, but (so one version of the story goes) the price quoted by the original printers for producing such a set of books was so eyebrow-raisingly expensive that a one-year cycle was rather hastily adopted instead. There exist various drafts and versions of the 'missing half', of which the list of biblical texts is fairly straightforward. What remains tantalisingly out of reach, however, is the definitive selection of patristic and

other readings intended to complement them, though various versions have been advanced.

Liz Hoare's *Twelve Great Spiritual Writers* sets out to offer 'inspiration and nourishment' by introducing the reader to people with whom, through reading their works and, in several cases, personal encounter, she has become friends. Before going further, I must admit that her treatment of the writers whom she has selected for inclusion in this book seemed, at times, to place them—like the Office of Reading's missing Second Year—somewhat out of reach. She surveys twelve contemporary writers, allotting on average a dozen pages to each. What we have in this volume of their own words is necessarily restricted, but I confess that I would have liked rather more than what we get, and indeed would have preferred to begin each chapter by hearing their voices. Where this book really excels is in the 'questions and action points' which close each chapter, and in the accompanying bibliographies. They offer an invigorating opportunity to go more deeply into the works and the approach of each of the writers, with a knowledgeable and engaging guide. I hope this book is used in study groups and the like, but it also repays individual reading and reflection.

I knew of just two of them in any depth before reading: Sister Benedicta Ward, with whom I took medieval Church History once upon a time, and Marilynne Robinson, perhaps most famous for her novel *Gilead*. Robinson's fiction is discussed in some depth, and I would have been interested to read, under the heading 'Faith, values and culture', what Hoare makes of Robinson's extraordinary 1989 work *Mother Country*, about the Sellafield nuclear site, described by a reviewer at the time as 'formidable', 'incendiary', and 'gravely unsettling'. I was glad to meet the others: Kathleen Norris, Alison Morgan, Ann Lewin, Sarah Clarkson. Annie Dillard, Margaret Guenther, Sister Margaret Magdalen, Barbara Brown Taylor, Anne Lamott, and Mary Oliver. There is a strong Anglo-American slant here, and there seems no reason that a future collection of this kind, which would be welcome, could not, as this one has done, consciously determine criteria for inclusion aimed at further enriching readers' awareness and experience of spiritual writing.

Hoare warns against a 'subjective spirituality lacking in content and direction': 'there is no place in Christian spirituality', she writes, 'for an individualistic and privatised approach' (pp 3–4). In her outline of what we ought to understand by 'spirituality' and 'spiritual writing', and in the ways in which she presents the authors discussed here, I was reminded of another work from which I have derived a great deal, the Dominican Michael Demkovich's *A Soul-Centred Life*: *Exploring an Animated Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), in which he explains:

> … the great traditions of spiritual writers are not about individual quirkiness. In fact, it is about community—a community that is gathered around the religious tradition, made alive in very real people called disciples. If spirituality is reduced to merely reading texts of a historical person, a very vital dimension is left out. That dimension is spirituality's ability to constitute a community that shares this spiritual vision, a vision that touches the very souls of women and men who believe.

The twelve writers whom Hoare has chosen are all women, and she asks whether women write differently from men, and whether there is 'such a thing as "women's spirituality"'. The Austrian-American scholar and critic Ruth Klüger (1931–2020) proposed that 'women read differently', in her 1994 essay of the same title. 'Books have a different effect on women than they do on men', she argued, in part because literary canons tend to present men as subjects, and women as objects, before concluding that 'perhaps the title of my essay is not quite right, because it insinuates masculine normalisation. […] "Men read differently" would be a better title. The same thesis dressed up in the antithesis. This synthesis will have to suffice for now.' Hoare invites her readers to 'listen to your response as you read' (p. 8), which is sound advice in an all-too noisy world. That said, current circumstances for some of us tend to the quiet, even the isolated: to be enclosed entirely inside oneself is the opposite of spirituality, and this book ultimately offers the reader the wonderful possibilities of dialogue.

Fr Daniel Lloyd

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