

The Twelfth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

The Rt Rev. and Rt Hon. Lord Habgood

at Westminster Abbey

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and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

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WAITING FOR GOD

I am grateful for this opportunity to remember Eric Abbott, and to celebrate his remarkable ministry. I came to know him quite by chance, when I was a curate in Kensington in the early 1950s. Curates in those days were expected to find their own lodgings – and to pay for them. After an unsatisfactory week or two, I wanted to be nearer the parish church, so answered an advertisement from a widow living in a block of flats a few hundred yards from St Mary Abbots. Thus I found myself lodging with a certain Mrs Owen whose husband, I soon discovered, had become Bishop of Lincoln in 1946. He had died shortly after being appointed, almost certainly as the delayed result of the bomb which hit the Guards Chapel, while he was preaching there in his capacity as Bishop of the Forces.

In the 1930s Leslie Owen had been Eric Abbott's predecessor as Warden of Lincoln Theological College. His Sub-Warden had been a bright but somewhat eccentric young theologian called Michael Ramsey. Some years later when Leslie Owen was Bishop of Jarrow, he had a secretary cum chauffeur called Joan Hamilton. Michael Ramsey had by then also moved to Durham, as Canon Professor, and promptly married her. Michael and Joan Ramsey were occasional visitors at Mrs Owen's flat. And so were many others.

Leslie Owen had been the key figure in a remarkable group of clergy, who used to meet together as a cell for prayer, friendship and spiritual guidance. Reginald Somerset Ward, perhaps the best known spiritual director in the Church of England, was a member, as was Eric Abbott. Much of the inspiration for the group came from the writings of Baron von Hugel, a Roman Catholic lay philosopher and theologian, who had also been spiritual director to Evelyn Underhill. She carried on the von Hugel tradition after his death in 1925, was well known to Leslie Owen's group, was largely responsible for a revival of contemplative prayer in the Church of England, and had a highly influential ministry as a spiritual writer and retreat conductor. Curiously enough, both she and the Baron had lived in Kensington – von Hugel in a house almost next door to the vicarage.

All this constituted a somewhat heady atmosphere for a junior curate. But, before I explain why I am telling you about it, let me say a word or two more about the two principal characters, who, alas, are not today as well remembered as they deserve to be. Baron von Hugel and Evelyn Underhill were together prime movers in the modern philosophical and historical study of mysticism. The Baron was a close friend of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Modernist movement, and was in consequence more popular among Anglicans than in his own church. Like Rudolf Otto, who wrote *The Idea of the Holy*, and who was his contemporary, he placed tremendous emphasis on religious experience; in fact theologically the inter-war period was marked by a strong belief that religious experience held the key to Christian apologetics. However the Baron was also touchingly realistic about it, especially when writing to friends. Here is an example:

“Religion is dim – in the religious temper there should be a great simplicity, and a certain contentment in dimness. It is a great gift of God to have this temper. God does not make our lives all shipshape, clear and comfortable. Never try to get things too clear. In this mixed-up life there is always an element of unclearness. I believe God wills it so.”

Here he is on the philosopher, David Hume:

“Hume is blasé. He is the sort of person young people are taken in by; they take him for something else. He knows everything. He got to the bottom of everything by the time he was sixteen; he sees everything through clear glass windows. If I

were to die tonight, he would know all about me by tomorrow. These old bones would all be arranged, sorted out, explained and in his coat-pocket; but somehow he would not have got me all the same.”

And a final entirely characteristic quotation, which just about sums him up:

“To sanctify is the biggest thing out.”

Evelyn Underhill was deeply indebted to von Hugel. Like him, she wrote a famous book in mysticism and another on worship, and she published many smaller books of retreat addresses. One of the earliest of these had the title *Concerning the Inner Life*, and I possess Leslie Owen’s marked copy. Typical of the marked passages are a quotation from the mystic, Walter Hilton:

“the city of the love of God was built ‘by the perfection of a man’s work and a little touch of contemplation’.”

and another from Mother Janet Stuart:

“Think glorious thoughts of God – and serve him with a quiet mind.”

And this is Evelyn Underhill’s assessment of the current state of religion in 1926:

“A shallow righteousness, the tendency to be content with a bright ethical piety wrongly called practical Christianity, a nice, brightly-varnished this-world faith, seems to me to be one of the ruling defects of institutional religion at the present time. We are drifting towards a religion which consciously or unconsciously keeps its eye on humanity rather than on deity – which lays all the stress on service, and hardly any of the stress on awe; and that is a type of religion, which in practice does not wear well.”

I have quoted at some length and traced some connections between the people concerned, to give you a flavour of the group which moved in and out of Mrs Owen’s flat, a group in which Eric Abbott himself was partly formed. They shared a deep commitment to prayer, a broad, unfussy catholic understanding of the church, and a concern for the inner life as the primary locus of spirituality. This concern for inwardness ran all the way through Leslie Owen’s own life and teaching. He described the purpose of a theological college as being “to teach men to pray theologically”. Eric Abbott in writing about him after his death said that when he succeeded Leslie Owen as Warden, his college was outstanding in its theology, devotion and discipline. It is not a tradition which shaped many theologians or church leaders, but it produced first class parish priests. Leslie Owen, it was said, “met students at the heart of their vocation, the revealer ... of the hard simplicity, the single mindedness, of discipleship”.

That is the tradition I was privileged to glimpse at a formative stage in my own ministry, and which Eric Abbott himself had inherited. It has now become deeply unfashionable, and has been the subject of some quite sharp criticism in previous lectures in this series.

Here is a modern Anglican theologian commenting on what he sees as a disastrous concentration on the idea of the self as some kind of inner private reality:

“This view of the self has had particularly destructive consequences for the way in which our Christian thinking and practice have developed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described what had happened to the Protestant Christianity which he saw as

concerned with a particular kind of ‘inwardness’. Once you have decided that our real self lies hidden within, it is not far to the conclusion that the stature we seek is an ‘inward’ stature. Real holiness then becomes whatever it is that we seek for that inward part of ourselves. Much traditional Christianity, with its talk of the soul, can lead us, quite wrongly, to imagine that Christianity has the development of that inward bit of ourselves as its principal goal. We contrast ‘genuine’ worship with ‘merely external’ worship as being of the kind that really comes from, and ministers to, the soul. Spirituality becomes, on that view, a way of giving whatever is the equivalent of massage to that part of ourselves which is not our body ...”

This was an off-the-cuff statement, which is why I quote it as a typical example of the present-day instinctive reaction in some circles against a spirituality centred on inwardness. It makes a valid point. Spirituality is, indeed, a wider concept than can be embraced by the inner life of prayer. Human beings have bodies as well as souls and it is a mistake to separate them. Furthermore the embodied self is not isolated, but is constituted by its relationships with other people, by its place in the world of nature, as well as by its relationship with God. The tradition I have been describing knew this too. Here is Evelyn Underhill again:

“The spiritual life does not begin in an arrogant attempt at some peculiar kind of other-worldliness, a rejection of ordinary experience. It begins in the humble recognition that human things can be very holy, full of God ... since all life is engulfed in him, he can reach out to us anywhere and at any level.”

We are not, in fact, dealing with two totally different concepts of spirituality – the inner life, and life firmly rooted in this world. It is more a question of emphasis. But it is true that much of the emphasis has moved outward, towards what Evelyn Underhill called “practical Christianity”. And where it has moved inward, it frequently takes on a character very different from anything she would have approved. In popular mythology nowadays, Christians are thought of as divided between those who are too engaged in social and political activities to retain their hold on traditional faith, and those in the charismatic movement who, in turning inwards, have focused more on religious emotion than on self-emptying contemplation. The broad catholic contemplative tradition tends to be dismissed as too locked up within its own pieties.

There is a more hard-headed account of the shift of emphasis in an essay called *From inwardness to social action* by Charles Davis, the former Roman Catholic theologian, now turned free-wheeling Christian academic. He goes so far as to claim that social and political action is now the sole valid means of expressing the Christian Gospel. He distinguishes between what he calls the three worlds of modern culture: the objective world of human knowledge, the social world of practice with its ethical norms, and the subjective world of self-awareness with its stress on the inner life. Our apprehensions of transcendence relate to all three in terms of cosmic religion, political religion and contemplative religion. Nowadays, he says, knowledge is too fragmented to provide any standing-ground for the kind of cosmic synthesis which sustained mediaeval faith. By the same token, we now have other ways of exploring the depths of human consciousness, and there is not necessarily anything peculiarly religious about inwardness, important though it can be as a vehicle for religious experience. In contrast to these false avenues, he concludes, the Christian religion has always been concerned with action, and it is much more characteristic of Christianity to find God in our neighbour than to find him in our inner consciousness, or in the cosmos. Hence the priority of social activism. And hence the rage of many politicians – or should I say not ex-politicians – who would much rather clergy stuck to what they saw as the less politically contentious business of saving souls.

I have compressed what is already a compressed argument, and Davis would be the first to admit that he overstates his case. But it is a case which has an obvious appeal to those Christians who are confused and worried about the contents of faith, but who know that they want to do good, and who want to demonstrate self-sacrificial love in action. Doing menial tasks among the poor may appear to them as their only means of conveying anything about a God for whom there seems to be no adequate language, and whose ways so often seem incomprehensible.

Last year's lecturer, David Hare, described how, while doing research for his play *Racing Demon*, he met many clergy whose faith, or lack of it, might be described in these terms. He depicts some of them sympathetically and movingly in the play, and in his lecture he confessed to a sneaking admiration for their dedication. He also expressed astonishment at their unwillingness to talk to their people about the actual contents of faith, their rejection of what they called "stuffing Christ down peoples' throats". But when they did talk about their faith, and when they seemed somehow in the name of God to be explaining the painful realities of their world, or even justifying them, his admiration turned to hostility. As those of you who heard him last year will recall his lecture was full of bitter comment of the way churches have actually behaved, and there was some telling knockabout criticism of the unfairness and arbitrariness of God in the role of lead player in the Old Testament. But the heart of his complaint, if I understand him rightly, was what he called the fatal tendency for Christians "to have one eye on this life and one eye on a second". I quote:

"The best Christians are the ones who work as if there is no tomorrow. But I still could not help observing in the months spent with my vicars that there is a subtle loss of urgency, a certain psychological softness in the way you approach life if you subscribe to a religion which teaches you that there is something else beside life itself. There is a moment at which your mind drifts upwards. Justice on this earth seems to matter less to you if justice will one day be delivered in another."

The lecture ended with a quotation from Seneca:

"When shall we live, if not now?"

This is the classic humanist complaint against otherworldly religion – and it is a powerful one. My aim in this lecture is to see if it can be answered from within the spiritual tradition I have been describing, and which Eric Abbott shared.

Evelyn Underhill had already anticipated it in her first major work on mysticism which examined the lives and experiences of the great Christian mystics. What was novel about the book was her demonstration that a degree of absorption in God, which might seem to be totally out of this world, could, and usually did, go hand in hand with an intense practicality and social activism. Indeed for her the great test of genuine mysticism was whether it found practical expression in charity. Again and again she demonstrated how otherworldly exploration can lead to a truer understanding of this world than is to be found in those who pride themselves on being worldly-wise. For those of us who are not mystics there is a simple analogy. Travellers from abroad tend to look at their own country with new eyes, at least in the after-glow of their return home; and this fresh vision from a distant place can often be a greater spur to try to put things right than staying at home.

Thoughts of this kind may help to clear up a common confusion about what is actually meant by Christian otherworldliness. With all due respect to David Hare, it need not, and in most cases does not, entail preoccupation with what happens after death. The exploration of the other world happens now. It is relevant to what happens after death, or at the last judgment, or whenever, but it is not relevant primarily because of them. Traditional Christian faith asserts the intrinsic importance of the contemplative life now, because it represents a unique way of being in touch with

God in his transcendent reality, being shaped by him, and giving ourselves wholly to him. Inwardness can be thought of as the mirror-image of transcendence; there are heights and depths in both directions. Those who have a jaundiced view of God as some kind of tyrant, constantly fussing about petty faults and remaining silent in the face of the world's disasters, may not find the idea of being in touch with such a God in the least attractive. This is one of the sub-texts in David Hare's lecture. But if God is the goal of all longing, the source and ground of all goodness, and the perfection of all beauty, then the exploration of this ultimate vision can become the basis of all worthwhile endeavour. By God's grace it may find its fulfilment beyond this life, but the motivation lies in the experience and worship of God as a present reality.

"You are going too fast", you may say. Indeed I am. And I have not forgotten Charles Davis's categorization of such talk as belonging within the realm of psychology. My aim at this stage is simply to shift the description of what is at stake. I want to reject the crude idea that Christians are less keen to do things in this world because there is always the next one in which to sort them out. I want to affirm the contrary, namely that what one believes and does about living this life here and now, depends on what one believes about God. And I also want to assert against Charles Davis, that one cannot in the end separate the intellectual and psychological and social worlds while believing in God, because God is precisely the one who holds all reality together – and that includes the inner reality of the self as being inseparable from the way we both think and act. The great mystics were no doubt in some sense acting as psychological pioneers; but what they claimed to know is not wholly expressible in objective psychological categories, any more than our direct experience of being ourselves can be objectified or described exhaustively in psychological categories. There is something irreducible here. As Baron von Hugel might have remarked, David Hume could easily have explained it away – without actually explaining it.

Let me turn to an actual mystic, a modern one, the French philosopher Simone Weil, a fascinatingly ambivalent and hesitant Christian who always stood on the edge of the church, and was never actually baptized. She feared the narrowing effects of commitment. But she certainly did not lack commitment to social action; in fact she was more than willing to take seriously the sufferings of her fellow human beings. Her identification during the War with the poorest of the French workers, and her insistence on limiting her food to the wartime rations of her compatriots in the French occupied zone, may in one sense have been ridiculously otherworldly, especially since she was then living in England. Indeed it was a policy which eventually led to her death. But it also had everything to do with this world, and the evils she perceived within it. And it was driven by her passion for God, and her desire to know him with all the intellectual integrity of which her formidable mind was capable.

A key element in her spirituality was what she called "attention". So central was it, that in her capacity as a former teacher she saw "the development of the faculty of attention" as "the real object and almost the sole interest of studies". It did not matter to her whether or not a school subject was intrinsically interesting or valuable or whether students were successful in solving problems, provided they learnt how to attend. And this attention was not a strenuous kind of muscular effort, as when people furrow their brows in order to concentrate. Rather it was a suspension of thought, a detachment, an openness to the object, a readiness for truth. She saw that there is an essential passivity required if we are to allow reality to impinge on us.

This may seem an odd way to teach, but then I suspect Simone Weil was a very odd teacher. What she is describing, though, is a form of contemplation, an inwardness which enabled her to be receptive to the whole of her experience. It involved complete concentration on what was actually there. Such openness to all experience might seem to lead to a syncretistic hotch-potch. But she was well aware of differences. On different religions, for example, she wrote:

“Each religion is alone true, that is to say, that at the moment we are thinking of it we must bring as much attention to bear on it as if there were nothing else; in the same way, each landscape, each picture, each poem, etc is alone beautiful. A ‘synthesis’ of religions implies a lower quality of attention.”

It is the same with religious dogma. That it requires is not intellectual adherence, but respectful attention. I quote:

“Intellectual adherence is never owed to anything whatsoever. For it is never in any degree a voluntary thing. Attention *alone* is voluntary. And it alone forms the subject of an obligation.”

I shall return later to this point about attention alone being voluntary. For the moment I have simply wanted to illustrate the relationship between a high degree of inwardness, an enormously broad receptivity, and a very acute political and philosophical consciousness. Simone Weil was the author of a devastatingly accurate critique of the failures of European, and particularly French, culture in the inter-war years; she anticipated Michel Foucault in her exposure of the psychological and material bases of power; Pope John XXIII counted her as one of the three most important intellectual influences on his thinking. She was a powerful lady. But what underlay all this was her ability to attend. Attention is not itself prayer, though she saw its relationship to prayer. Towards the end of her life she came to realise that the most demanding form of attention is attention to God.

So what had she to say about God? Here is a typical quotation:

“I am absolutely certain that there is a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that my love is not illusory. I am absolutely certain that there is not a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that there is nothing real which bears a resemblance to what I am unable to conceive when I pronounce that name, since I am unable to conceive God. But that thing which I am unable to conceive, is not an illusion.”

It is a quotation which reminds me strongly of the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, describing the process of scientific discovery. He tells how the mind which has been attending to reality in terms of a particular theoretical framework, has to let go the framework and face a kind, naked exposure to that reality, before it can again be clothed with coherent concepts. He explicitly compares this with religious contemplation.

“Contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them.”

He then goes on to describe Christian worship as sustaining “an eternal, never to be consummated hunch ... an obsession with a problem known to be insoluble”. And he follows this with a sentence which thirty years ago I used as the foundation text for a course of lectures on prayer for ordinands:

“Christianity sedulously fosters, and in a sense permanently satisfies, man’s craving for mental dissatisfaction by offering him the comfort of a crucified God.”

We pray, in other words, in broken images. Every affirmation about God also has to contain a denial because it is inadequate to the reality it is affirming. But, and this is the glorious paradox of Christianity, the brokenness is also itself the image. We worship the crucified.

If we want a more contemporary example of this kind of spirituality we can find it at its most uncompromising in the poetry of R.S. Thomas. Thomas's God is hidden, appearing only to disappear, away ahead of us, yet glimpsed in the contemplation of life itself when honestly attended to. Here is a typical example in his poem *Emerging*:

Well, I said, better to wait
for him on some peninsula
of the Spirit. Surely for one
with patience he will happen by
once in a while. It was the heart
spoke. The mind, sceptical as always
of the anthropomorphisms
of the fancy, knew he must be put together
like a poem or a composition
in music, that what he conforms to
is art. A promontory is a bare
place; no God leans down
out of the air to take the hand
extended to him. The generations have
watched there
in vain. We are beginning to see
now it is matter is the scaffolding
of spirit; that the poem emerges
from morphemes and phonemes; that
as form in sculpture is the prisoner
of the hard rock, so in everyday life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal him to us
little by little under the mind's tooling.

Attention to "plain facts and natural happenings" is not all that different from Evelyn Underhill's "humble recognition that human things can be very holy, full of God ...". Thomas is clear that attention is not quite the passive process Simone Weil's use of the word seems to imply, though actually, for her, I think there was a strong sense of being actively grasped by what one was attending to, and passivity is the last word one would use of her life in general. For Evelyn Underhill attention had a more sacramental flavour; ordinary life is holy, capable of revealing God, because it has been consecrated, or to use von Hugel's word – "sanctified". Thomas, like a sculptor, has to fashion an image of God out of "the hard rock", yet as sculptors frequently tell us, this is only possible because in some sense the image was there already. All three engage in an intense kind of inwardness, through a process of waiting, attending, listening, and shaping reality in the mind.

I believe this quality of attention represents the essence of human freedom and spirituality. We have learnt a lot about ourselves as human beings in recent decades. We have daily reminders of the significance of our genetic inheritance. We are conscious that many of our fundamental human characteristics have been shaped by evolution, not always helpfully in view of the circumstances in which we now have to live. We know ourselves to be a mass of contradictions and competing desires. Much else of what we are and what we feel about ourselves, is ascribed to social conditioning. Some scientists and philosophers have been trying to persuade us for a long time that freedom is an illusion.

Compare Simone Weil – “attention *alone* is voluntary”. As Iris Murdoch has observed, for the most part we can choose where to direct our attention, what features of a story to concentrate on, how to interpret what we are experiencing, what ideas we will entertain and what we will reject. There is no absolute freedom here, but little by little we shape ourselves by the way we habitually think, “under the mind’s tooling”, and it is in this area that such inner freedom as we possess is either squandered or enlarged.

I feel sure that nobody in this audience ever watches *Blind Date*. But if by chance any of you have watched it, inadvertently of course, you will have noticed a revealing turn of phrase constantly used by participants. Though the programme is ostensibly about choice, almost nobody uses the words ‘I choose’. Almost invariably the phrase is “It will have to be ...”. They are speaking out of a culture in which belief in the kind of freedom I am talking about has been so subtly eroded, that the act of choosing comes across as a form of necessity.

Compare that with what the explorers of the inner life are telling us about how to cope with the responsibility for directing our attention. In directing it towards God we face a realm of infinite possibility, infinite openness, infinite love. Prayer is an exploration of freedom, the freedom to be ourselves before the one who knows us better than we know ourselves; the freedom to transcend ourselves, to discover more possibilities in ourselves, before the one who utterly transcends us. Contemplation of God, the prayer of adoration, is an enlargement of our humanity. This is why it is so utterly wrong to denigrate the concentration on what lies beyond life, as if it were somehow a diminishment of life itself.

But one has to admit that in the end there is no nice, neat answer to the question whether the contemplation of God enables us to respond more honestly and openly to the needs of the world. I know what David Hare was talking about when he described the dangers of a certain withdrawal from life, a debilitating spin-off from the belief that this life is not all there is. Religion is always double-edged. The sense of touching an unfathomable reality can enlarge consciousness, undergird freedom, heighten sensitivity, and inspire heroism. But it can also generate fear, possessiveness, intolerance, smugness, and all those other narrowing traits which make some believers so singularly unattractive. Religious people, in fact, often depend on their critics to rescue them from themselves. But this does not mean accepting the critics’ views of what faith is actually all about.

On the mantelpiece in her bedroom my landlady, Mrs Own, had a framed picture which simply contained the word ETERNITY. It sustained the character of her life. She thought much about her dead husband, but more in celebration and anticipation than in sorrow. She certainly believed in the life to come, and used to say that nobody could celebrate All Saints Day properly unless they had lost someone close to them. But the eternity of which she was conscious was eternity here and now, the practice of the presence of God, which enhanced every aspect of life, and touched it with glory. It is a tradition of spirituality for which I am profoundly, perhaps I might say eternally, grateful.