

The Seventeenth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

The Revd Mark Oakley

St Paul's Covent Garden

at Westminster Abbey

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and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality. The venue for the lecture will vary between London, Oxford and Lincoln.

The members of the Committee are: The Dean of King's College, London (Chairman); The Dean of Westminster; The Warden of Keble College, Oxford; The Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute, University of Sheffield; The Reverend John Robson and The Reverend Canon Eric James.

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SPIRITUAL SOCIETY, SECULAR CHURCH? **Private Prayer and Public Religion**

I am very grateful for the invitation to give the 17th Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture, although having seen who gave the other sixteen I have to admit to you that, coming from the Actors' Church, I feel I must be the warm up man, which usually means of course some sort of comic who hasn't quite made it but who comes on and tries very hard to get an audience nicely ready for the real act.

Well, ladies and gentlemen this evening there is no such act. I am no academic, nor world-renowned authority on anything, and I do not give lectures in Westminster Abbey very often. This evening then I have to hold very tightly to one thing, that is, apart from this lectern. On Eric Abbott's memorial here in this Abbey it tells us that "he loved the Church of England" and that he strived to make this building "a place of pilgrimage and prayer for all peoples". I never met Eric Abbott, although I have been nurtured through the years by some special people who were looked after by him and feel that I am consequently one of his many hundred spiritual grandchildren, but although I never met him, as a fellow priest I can say almost 20 years after his death that I too love the Church of England, what Evelyn Underhill called "that respectable suburb of the City of God", and that I hope very deeply that our churches will be "places of pilgrimage and prayer for all peoples". This lecture can only be offered by me, as a parish priest, as a modest part of that long conversation, a conversation which Eric Abbott I know felt to be so important, as to what these things might mean in our own day, to love the Church, to be a place for pilgrims. Yes, as regards my suitability as lecturer this evening, I am having to find reassurance in the words of the late Quentin Crisp: "if at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style".

So first, let me explain my title.

Gerald Priestland once commented that "as a naturally laid-back denomination the Church of England has always sought its thrills by frightening itself to death". Put another way: "An issue! An issue! We all fall down". Whether this is true or not, we have to admit that some of the research, statistics and consequent commentary regarding the vitality and attendance of the Church of England are uncomfortable, even alarming, although as Grace Davie has recently shown the Church of England broadly reflects the trends of other churches in Western Europe¹. Using data from sources such as the European Values Study, some secularisation theorists have argued for some time now that there is a necessary connection between economic and social modernisation and the decline of religion as a significant feature in public life, as Steve Bruce has put it in his *From Cathedrals to Cults: Religion in the Modern World*: "Individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible."²

If this is so, of course, there is the fact that in America, and other places indeed, modernization and religious activity co-habit rather nicely, 40 per cent of Americans going to church weekly and 90 per cent saying they believe in God. Why this is so is endlessly debated and answers please on a postcard because such secularization theorists go on to argue that in Western Europe, at least, things do look pretty grim for organizational Christianity. Add to this, they continue, the fact that present religious pluralism in the West tends to make religion a matter of options, preferences and lifestyles rather than of truth. You will find church services advertised in the Saturday papers somewhere between gardening and fashion. If religion becomes a hobby, commitment thins, conviction dies, the duvet is pulled up closer on a Sunday morning.

¹ Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, DLT, 2002

² Steve Bruce, *From Cathedrals to Cults: Religion in the Modern World*, OUP, 1996, p.230

Callum Brown in his very recent *The Death of Christian Britain*³ argues that what he sees as the demise of Christianity in Britain must be explained in terms of the collapse of a shared discourse. Interestingly he says that through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was women who disproportionately carried this discourse but since the revolution of the 1960s women are no longer willing to be the carriers of piety on behalf of the nation as a whole - this latter argument a slightly overcooked thesis, perhaps, more interesting than digestible.

So enter Grace Davie again, a sociologist whose book on *Religion in Britain since 1945* attracted much attention, largely due to her theory nicely summarized in the book's subtitle: *Believing without Belonging*⁴. She wants to redefine what we mean by this word "secularisation" because it seems to her that the statistics show that there is not at the moment a wholesale shift to a secular society where religious faith is no more; that whereas people have stopped attending worship in large numbers there is a persistence of interest in spiritual and moral matters. There is a general disillusionment in institutions and of what we might call "institutional truth", compromised, cautious, having the logic of expediency, moulded as it were on Caiaphas. But there is also a renewed, even growing, interest in the inner life or life of the spirit. She writes: "What emerges in practice...is the situation that I have described...as "believing without belonging"...which undoubtedly captures the clustering of two types of variable: on the one hand, those concerned with feelings, experience and the more numinous religious beliefs; on the other, those which measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment."⁵

Davie then makes a second observation: "It is only the latter (i.e. the more orthodox indicators of religious attachment) which displays an undeniable degree of secularisation throughout Western Europe. In contrast, the former (the less institutional indicators) demonstrate considerable persistence."⁶

In other words, churchy people may be on the wane but those who want to talk about faith, about the possibility of reality being trustworthy, about ethics, the possibility of God and life given as a gift, about life after death, a divine spark within and so forth, these people are not on the wane at all, in fact, says Davie in some more recent work, there is evidence that they are growing, especially amongst the younger generation. Belief persists but becomes more personal, detached and heterogeneous.

This rings true for me as a parish priest in the West End of London. First, I see, and find myself talking to, an increasing amount of young people who come into the church I serve for rest and quiet, but also for prayer and broadly spiritual reading - the intercession book open for additions is a remarkable collection of letters to God. Secondly, I do not blush in quite the same way as I did just eight or nine years ago when I am asked by my contemporaries, say at a party, what I do for a living. There is interest in the inner landscape and a desire to talk about it. The problem is, of course, that because so many people have no spiritual tradition they have few resources to draw on for their expression and development, they lack a vocabulary for the soul. Callum Brown is right. The shared discourse has gone. I usually try and begin with the arts, with film, novels, even TV in order to use a shared experience and language to enable a discussion of the things that matter, to begin to show how these things relate to the Christian tradition and our interpretations. In St Paul's, Covent Garden this Lent we invited preachers to use a film currently showing as the basis of their sermon and then to explore how its artistic messages related to our Christian tradition and understanding. It was interesting to see how the series attracted many who would not usually go

³ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, Routledge, 2001

⁴ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford, 1994

⁵ Grace Davie, *Europe*, p5

⁶ Grace Davie, *Europe*, p5

into a church and how a similar exercise in King's College Chaplaincy is also opening up similar exploration.

These conversations with those of my own generation, and those younger, reveal much of what you will already know about their present reflections but I outline a few themes: 1) that many have lots to live with today but little sense of what to live for; that we feel trapped in that circle of spending money we don't have on things we don't want to impress people we don't like; 2) we want a lot today but we expect little; our culture has two addictions - to being inoffensive, and to being offended; and our instruments of escape have become our places of imprisonment; 3) we have been told that life is survival of the fittest, but fit for what? We are lonely, atomised, bombarded with information but in search of wisdom, we have never had so many words thrown at us every which way, and never have we so distrusted them all either; 4) we find ourselves in search for that which will raise our low expectations, challenge our lack of trust, defeat the paralysis of cynicism. Some of you may know Douglas Coupland's novel *Life After God* in which he comments: "though we took a billion different paths to get where we went, our lives oddly ended up in the same sort of non-place." Or as the narrator of Michael Frayn's latest novel, *Spies*, puts it: "I have a kind of homesickness for where I am...I have a feeling that some secret thing in the air around me is still waiting to be discovered".

Now all this, from a priest's point of view, sounds like an opportunity, an opportunity for a fresh hearing of the Christian faith. But let us not fool ourselves.

The many conversations I have with the spiritually intrigued today, whilst they are open to discovery in many ways, so often do not place the Church on the map of their exploration. It seems that a good deal of contemporary people are looking for meaning, a truth to pattern their behaviour, even a community from which to find an identity, but as they set off on the journey to find these things they consciously skirt around the Church. It is as if they feel they know all about Christianity and that it is partly from the things they know that they wish to escape. "At the altar rail" writes Seamus Heaney, "I knelt and learnt almost/ Not to admit the let down to myself". What is it that appears to make the Christian Church spiritually inauthentic to these honest searchers? Bonhoeffer was keen on what he called "stocktaking Christianity" and, although the objections to the Church are far too many to examine in a talk such as this, we do need to face some basic criticisms, realising at the same time that simply to name them does not mean we have somehow overcome them.

Like many, I was moved by the opening words of Rowan Williams' small book *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and its Aftermath*,⁷ almost a notebook of his thoughts on having been in New York on that day. I now quote:

"Last words. We have had the chance to read the messages sent by passengers on the planes to their spouses and families in the desperate last minutes; and we have seen the spiritual advice apparently given to the terrorists by one of their number, the thoughts that should have been in their minds as they approached their death they had chosen (for themselves and for others). Something of the chill of 11 September lies in the contrast. The religious words are, in the cold light of day, the words that murderers are saying to themselves to make a martyr's drama out of a crime. The non-religious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about - the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged."⁸

He goes on: "We'd better acknowledge the sheer danger of religiousness. Yes, it can be a tool to reinforce diseased perceptions of reality...our religious talking, seeing, knowing, needs a kind of

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11 September and its Aftermath*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002

⁸ *Ibid* pp1-2

cleansing. . . God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words for him".⁹

This reflection haunts me. The religious and their words are violent yet pious. The natural language of love, thrown desperately across the sky, seems, on the other hand, God-like. If a man learns theology before he learns how to be a human being, warned Ludwig Holberg, he will never learn how to be a human being. And it is a truth that many pastors and friends will recognise, that sometimes a person's religion imprisons rather than enlarges. Instead of teaching souls to fly, it grounds them. So much of a pastor's counselling is trying to enable a person to believe and hold on to God beyond the prison gates of ritualistic, doctrinal or ethical precision.

My own book was an attempt to explore this possibility that God is shored on our fragments, that we have a flickering communion with him.¹⁰ It is true that religion can poison, restrict or disable humanity, reducing it from being the true glory of God and "fully alive". If you have ever visited Visby cathedral on the island of Gotland you will know that whatever time of the year you go, when you stand outside the front door there is always a fierce cold wind blowing, almost knocking you off your feet. Locals have their own story as to why this is. Apparently, the devil and the wind were out walking one day when all of a sudden the devil stopped outside the cathedral door. He told the wind to wait there for him as he was going to pop over the road into the Chapter House. And of course the moral is that he is still there. It seems that wherever there is religion in congress there will also be a struggle for fresh air. It follows that a younger generation whilst willing to call themselves "spiritual" would not want to be thought of as "religious".

Now this is a very general criticism of institutional religion and is not specifically aimed at the Christian Church and to read the history books and to watch the news today will throw up many questions about the spiritual authenticity of many Christian denominations and world faiths. However, in this country the Church is the mainstream religion, we are the one with the biggest buildings, the most clergy, seen as the one with access to royalty, parliament, institutions. We are the most visible, the one whose history has most shaped the nation for good or ill and institutional Christianity has, in many imaginations today, the image of stale air rather than fresh. Yes, we might reply to the sceptic in the gospels, something good might come from Nazareth. It is less likely, however, to come from the General Synod.

If we are viewed as stale, just where is the bad smell coming from? What are the impressions people have of us from outside the Church of England? Is it that we can appear managerial, money-obsessed, yet comfortable and somewhat self-satisfied? Is it that we reflect the Western business society in which we find ourselves, hyperventilating, concerning ourselves with the turnover, predictability and control of a centralized system? If we advertise ourselves like a hamburger, and manage ourselves like a hamburger multinational, perhaps people are now treating us like a hamburger?

We certainly know that the Church can appear wet, limp, a Dick Emery character with no cutting edge. We all know, for instance, of the churchwarden who asked the plumber to come and look at the annoying drip in the vestry and the plumber thought he meant the vicar. However, our worship is often appreciated as being beautiful, especially in our cathedrals and abbeys, but it can also give the impression that we are the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Sealed Knot who meet for a Sunday morning's immersion into the thought-forms, costume and language of another historical period and then get in the car to go home and watch a video. Or, on the other hand, our worship can seem bland, unimaginative, trite, similar to what Peter Brook called "deadly theatre", where all the lines

⁹ *Ibid* pp4-5

¹⁰ Mark Oakley, *The Collage of God*, DLT, 2001

are delivered and the directions meticulously followed but the life, the flame, is not there. When it comes to liturgy, perhaps we can not win?

Then there is the issue of the Church's leadership and public face. Too many of our leaders, I'm afraid, come over as personality-less. Confusing unity for uniformity they all tend to say the same, too often, bloodless things. Such consensus management rarely attracts or leads. There is, both in and outside the Church community, a longing for a revisitation of life, passion, breadth of experience, humour, intelligence, what we might call a Tutu-fication of the Church. People may not expect to agree with our leaders but they long to know with whom they are disagreeing and debating. Nice is not good enough. It never was. I think all this is seen in the present debate about the next Archbishop of Canterbury. I sense there is an urgency amongst Anglican Christians about this appointment, that it almost feels as if we have one last chance to be taken seriously and we had better get it right. I must say, my limited experience of bishops has taught me that many of them have all the good qualities we know leadership needs, - and bishop baiting is a cheap and selfish sport - but there is something about those mitres that acts like candle snuffs, so much is put out that, with just a little daring, could enliven and enrich the whole body. *Parrhesia*, frankness, freedom of speech, is cited as a spiritual gift after all. But those of us in the vicarages and pews will have to be big enough to allow some pluriformity, some disagreement with our leaders, without threatening to storm off or write off.

There is also the image the Church has of being out of touch and a conviction that the Church is just plain wrong about certain things, about the place of women, gay partnerships, cohabitation, re-marriage of divorcees and so on. Like Belloc in his *Cautionary Tales for Children*, some voice the complaint about some Church teachings: "And is it true? It is not true. And if it were it wouldn't do." Some work has been published looking at how some have left the church in order to maintain their faith or to deal in what they feel to be more healthy ways with issues of personal maturity and growth. A recent book specifically examines this phenomenon of the, as it were, butterfly Christian faith that leaves behind the Church chrysalis. Some have intellectual objections to the Church's doctrine, of course, or what they perceive to be that doctrine, and some have left wounded because of intemperate behaviour, oppressive attitudes, abuse or just plain boredom - the Church answering the questions that no one is asking.

You will most probably be able to add to this necessarily brief list of impressions. It seems to me, however, that in all the conversations I have had over the last few years a strange irony emerges. We find a society more spiritually conscious than for some time, especially the younger generations, a spiritually hungry and yearning society clearly able in many sections to see trivia and emptiness, aware that we can't live on bread alone, but perceiving the Church as secular, as pre-packaged, as unattractive as party politics. And so a people willing to engage in private prayer avoids public worship. It is no wonder that those such as John Drane in his book *The MacDonaldization of the Church* have begun to reflect:

"I wonder if our ways of being church have not become too much like the kind of rationalised systems that we are all struggling with in other areas of our lives. Or, putting it another way, is church as we know it just too bland, dull and safely predictable for people who crave an experience of radical challenge? And if that is the case, we need to ask ourselves how this might be impacting both our witness to those who as yet are not Christian, and our ability to empower those who are already following Christ. At a time when our culture is so clearly crying out for what in biblical terms could be described as social metanoia, or change of heart, what can the church - which has long been familiar with such terminology - hope to contribute?"¹¹

¹¹ John Drane, *The MacDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church*, DLT, 2000, p.28

I would like to spend the last minutes of this lecture exploring how the Church might begin to look again at this question. The backdrop, all the time, to my questioning is those words from Eric Abbott's memorial: "Love of the Church of England . . . a place of pilgrimage for all peoples".

First of all, we in the Church need to work out whether we should be at all interested in how others see us. Whereas I would argue that we are not just to go native, as it were, and live as those without hope, a tradition, sacraments and rooted faith, I do lament the fact that so many in the Church sign up to the Wendy House doctrine of the Church, making the Church a place in which to act out your own controlling tendencies and fantasies without anyone outside allowed to ask what you are doing and whether you may have got some things a little bit wrong. Of course, in a cold climate we huddle together, but I'm asking whether the climate is as cold as we think, whether we might have friends we didn't realise we had.

There are intellectual trends in the theological world that I also find frustratingly self-contained, not least the so-called Radical Orthodox, who always sound more orthodox than radical to me, but who at best can encourage us to draw on our own wells and revitalise ourselves from our ancient sources, but can at worst push us towards theological necrophilia, giving no one but ourselves the right to criticize us.

The World Council of Churches document of 1982, *Mission and Evangelism - an Ecumenical Affirmation* reminded us that "the call to conversion should begin with the repentance of those who do the calling, who issue the invitation". And I have no doubt that the Church, if it has made the gospel message unappealing, if it has created too many frosty fellowships rather than communities of lively faith, if it has bored people, if it has become Puddings for Christ, overcast, fearful, dull, then we need to hear it and acknowledge our sin. "If I seek the Church's enemies", wrote St Augustine, "I do not look without but within". The preacher must preach until the preacher is converted. And as any priest knows deep within his or her heart, our calling is to help others have that relationship with God which you only wish you had yourself. There is a danger that we model the Church on the brother who, in the parable of the Prodigal son, stayed at home. But as Simone Weil reflected: "It is to the prodigals . . . that the memory of their Father's house comes back. If the son had lived economically he would never have thought of returning."

As well as acknowledging some failure we also, primarily, need to acknowledge what it is we love and are drawn to as Church, namely the reality and freshness of God as Mystery. To my mind, to reclaim the truth of God's hidden and transcendent Mystery will be absolutely vital over the next few years and it will be a truth that will need careful interpretation at a time when the word more usually translates as "problem" or "uncertainty". And here lies the problem. Where there is a quiet sense of regret that the Church just doesn't work for us anymore it is by and large, because the language being used lets us down. This has been noticed well before now, of course, but so often the remedy has been sought by trying to make religious language and the words of worship *relevant*. Instead, I want to argue that the languages of faith should not so much be relevant as *resonant* - if you can, I hope, like me, see a distinction. Resonance touches us at a deeper level of understanding, it does not so much answer a need, impose closure, tie things cosily together, as recognise the need and push us, sometimes with discomfort, further into the exploration. A columnist seeks relevance in what she writes. A poet seeks resonance. Resonance is constantly engaged in, what Martin Amis has called, "the war against cliché"¹². Our society at the moment has a suspicion of authoritative languages but, in its desire for relief from its addiction to novelty, is searching for those words that we might just be prepared to die for. In his cell Bonhoeffer thought our most important prayer was that for a language that could reverberate and sound fresh, one layered with comfort and challenge, enabling recognitions only as the words are spoken. We are still praying.

¹² Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000*, Vintage, 2002

In 63BC the Romans stormed the Jerusalem Temple and were, we are told, astonished to find the Holy of Holies empty, with no statues and no object of worship. This shock of absence, I believe, must lie forever at the heart of faith in God. "The sensation of silence", wrote John Updike, "cannot be helped: a loud and evident God would be a bully, an insecure tyrant, an all-crushing datum instead of, as he is, a bottomless encouragement to our faltering and frightened being".¹³ It is true that as we try to articulate God we discover his elusiveness, his receding before us. God gives us just enough to seek him, and never enough to fully find him. To do more would inhibit our freedom that is so dear to him. "Such a fast God", says RS Thomas, "always before us and leaving as we arrive".¹⁴ We relate to God only in the context of nearness and distance for if we ever think we possess him we will stop desiring him. It is as if we know there is a God because he keeps disappearing. "We want God's voice to be clear but it is not. It is as deep as night, with a dark clarity, like an x-ray. It reaches our bones".¹⁵

Our concern to *resolve* the Mystery of God is corrected into a desire to deepen it. For this reason I believe people of faith should be unapologetically poetic, poetic in the will to capture truth but to resist closure. Theology, like a poem, is never finished, it can only be abandoned. Poetry is "memory become image and image become voice" (Octavio Paz). Those of us in the churches need to cultivate the poetry, the metaphor, symbol and myth of our tradition, and be unashamed in disappointing those who want our religion to be a *source of facts* about God, the universe and everything. Such "easy religion" will always let you down in the end. "Our religion has materialised itself in the fact", wrote Matthew Arnold, "in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it...the strongest part of religion today is its unconscious poetry".¹⁶ I would suggest that we need intimation as well as specification, a language of possibility, a vocabulary for those who don't quite believe their disbelief. If, in the postmodern, knowledge exists no longer in narrative form but in the form of information, bringing a loss of meaning, we need to reveal that God, at least, will never be revealed propositionally. Can you imagine a theological document written by our Primates, for instance, that instead of beginning a recent dreary document with "We believe that God is real and active, creating and sustaining", took Meister Eckhart's lead and began: "God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away."¹⁷

There will be those who find this frustratingly nebulous. They are in a good tradition for those early disciples of Jesus, it seems, were equally rattled by what the sacred parables and all the secrecy meant. As the work of Sallie McFague has reminded us, "a theology that is informed by parables is necessarily a risky and open-ended kind of reflection. It recognises not only the inconclusiveness of all conceptualization when dealing with matters between God and human beings...but also the pain and scepticism - the dis-ease - of such reflection. Theology of this sort is not neat and comfortable; but neither is the life with and under God of which it attempts to speak. The parables accept the complexity and ambiguity of life as lived in the world and insist that it is in this world that God makes his gracious presence known. A theology informed by the parables can do no less - and no more."¹⁸

All this has implications for every level and activity of Christian discipleship, not least in the way we worship, interpret scripture, preach, speak of our faith to one another, and treat one another as sacraments of the divine mystery. We only love God as much as the person we love least. Part of the worry in the present climate is surely that it is not so much that people will believe nothing as

¹³ John Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, Knopf, 1989, p.229

¹⁴ RS Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990*, Dent, 1993, p.364, "Pilgrimages"

¹⁵ Ernesto Cardenal quoted in Michael Paul Gallagher, *Dive Deeper: The Human Poetry of Faith*, DLT, 2001, p.77

¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry", in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, Macmillan, 1888, p.663

¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, quoted in Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Harper Collins, 2000, p.116

¹⁸ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, SCM, 1975, p.7

that they will believe anything, and many so called spiritualities on offer are so self-centred. Christian people have a concept of the self that is, rather, selfless. We in the Church should not be reflecting back to the surface of society a way of being and communicating that is simply factual, informative, or deadened with opinions and rhetorical relevance. If God is in this world as poetry is in the poem, then we need poetic assurance, diverse ways of communicating in unified purpose, for truth is not the elimination of ambiguity. Theology is poetic gardening. In her poem *Minister*, Anne Stevenson asks why we need the minister today at a funeral - to dig the hole, to drive the hearse, to bake the cakes? No. "We have to have the minister", she says, "so the words will know where to go. Imagine them circling and circling the confusing cemetery. Imagine them roving the earth without anywhere to rest."¹⁹ If this is so, if a priest is a sort of "poet-in-residence" then we need to be clear as to our task and our tools. As that larger than life Australian poet, Les Murray, prays: "God, at the end of prose, somehow be our poem."²⁰

If my analysis has any truth in it tonight, that regardless of religious orthodoxies it appears that people can not brush aside the sense that there are things that matter and that this mattering is not a mere question of knowledge and social convention; and that this implies an orientation of one's life towards what lies outside it, a recognition of values which transcend the individual and the culture, that it is as one was being invited to respond and to receive, then it will not be good enough just to hope in a Church that imitates and sounds like much of the mundane disenchanting day to dayness of current life. And whilst it is always good to be a little improbable, it is not good to simply rely on our past and live life like the character in the *Goon Show* who always knew what time it was because someone had once written it down for him on a piece of paper.

A Church of the transcendent God of Mystery, a Church who dares to believe that this God has been glimpsed in a body-language we know as Christ, who builds his kingdom in our empty spaces and entrusts his future in the earth to his friends, this Church will need to be more modest, honest, imaginative and keen to relate to God rather than package or control him. It is when you dislocate deadly conventions, of thinking, speaking or behaving, that epiphany is granted - and I do believe that God unveils himself as well as tucks himself out of sight.

In this Golden Jubilee year I would like to add a short postscript about Establishment. In a recent lecture in which he recognised that "the current assault on . . . establishment seems not to know where it is going but in the name of openness and accountability . . . reckons that it is going somewhere",²¹ the Dean of Westminster, Dr Wesley Carr, argued of the Church of England that "more than most it does not control its destiny: it can only exist as the Church of England through people looking to it for something and through those who make up the Church responding with sensitivity....The Church of England lives the vulnerability of the incarnation in its willingness to respond to people first rather than to seek to direct them. Such a stance may sometimes be seen as complacent, that is a risk but not necessarily the outcome."

I agree wholeheartedly with Carr for the conclusion is clear. The ministry of the church of England has always properly located itself at the edge or boundaries of the church, a two-way channel for life and truth. It has traditionally been a pastoral and learned ministry, stopping it from being just another "not very good therapy", and such a pastoral ministry is missionary. This proper interpretation of establishment at the ground level, rather than at the coronation level, reminds us that unless we finance, staff and support the work of our parish priests and chaplains properly, all the agonizing talk about the higher level establishment will naturally disappear.

¹⁹ Anne Stevenson, *The Collected Poems 1955-1995*, OUP, 1996, p.62, "The Minister"

²⁰ see also Les Murray, "Poetry and Religion", in *Collected Poems*, Carcanet, 1998, p.267

²¹ Wesley Carr, "The Roots of Established English Anglicanism in the 21st Century, given at St Giles-in-the-Fields, 18 March 2002

Having said this, I would then want to make comment on how a State relates to such a Church. If a State does not wish to remain completely secular, and I have argued that ours appears not to, it will wish to acknowledge spiritual values somehow. But how? You probably know that when the three vicars went into the New York deli and asked for soup the waiter asked them - mushroom, chicken or minestrone? No, we just want soup, they said. "You can't have just soup. There's mushroom, chicken or minestrone" says the waiter. To be soup it has to have a flavour. As in soup, so in faith. Spiritual values can only ultimately be affirmed concretely, specifically. It may be that in Europe we need a constitutional defence against the secularization of the State, shaped by one tradition, at national and local levels - a secularization which I argue is the real desire of relatively few people. It is for this reason that those of other faiths are often so supportive of an Established Church. For me, the Church of England has the potential to continue being a candidate for the role - as long as it remains tolerant, hospitable, and unapologetic for its own convictions, ministry and theological method. Professor Keith Ward's argument rings true to me in the present climate, but there is undoubtedly some working out to do in order to get ourselves fitter for the job:

"It is a good thing to have a religion established by law as long as most members of a state take religious questions seriously, as long as dissent is permitted, as long as the established religion is concerned to encourage constructive conversations with other religious communities, to permit diversity of interpretation within itself and to show a concern to formulate a broad value base for the state as a whole".²²

The Church of England should be unworried about its role as a vicarious Church, a Church where significant numbers "are content to let churches enact a memory on their behalf, more than half aware that they may need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or collective lives" (Grace Davie). Indeed, the fact that they still do may be something we can be very pleased about. St Augustine reminds us: "Make humanity your way and you shall arrive at God. It is better to limp along that way than to stride along some other route."

When Eric Abbott was Warden of the Bishop's Hostel in Lincoln he published his six addresses on prayer given to the triennial mission in Cambridge University as "Escape or Freedom". He argued that the obligation to make the Church visible as a *worshipping* society is as urgent as ever. In the middle of the book Abbott quotes a German pastor who was writing in Germany in the 1930s. Abbott describes this quotation as "an absolute tonic". I end with it this evening. It is a recognition of the times and, at the same time, a realization that the Church can have a future. It is also poetic.

"I thank you" writes the Pastor, "for reminding me of the text "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles". In their nests eagles are the most clumsy of creatures: in the storms, however, and above the abysses, they are the free-est and proudest of creatures. When the wings of a young eagle have grown in his nest on the crags, and he has learned how to fly, the old eagle casts him out of the nest. It may well seem as though he were falling into the abyss. But lo! He feels how this invisible sea of air into which he has fallen, bears him up. He spreads his wings and trusts himself to them. Nowadays God has cast us Christians out from our sheltered nests, out from all nests of earthly security and human scheming. But, "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles."

²² Keith Ward, "Is a Christian State a Contradiction?" in D. Sherbok and D. McLellan (eds), *Religion in Public Life, Basingstoke and New York*, St Martin's Press, 1992, p.16