

The First

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

His Eminence Cardinal Basil Hume OSB
Archbishop of Westminster

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The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture Trust 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.

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I did not know Eric Abbott well. He had retired as Dean of Westminster two years before I came to live in London, but I have vivid memories of a special occasion in the course of the celebrations of the 900th anniversary of the Abbey. The Dean presided with grace and dignity over us his visitors, the monks. On that day he was our abbot. It was as if we had stepped back into an earlier age, not just to recall the past but rather to point to the future, that is, to a Church reunited once more. It is not too fanciful to compare Eric to a Benedictine abbot. The office of Dean of this ancient abbey suggests the comparison in any case, but there is more to it than that. At Lincoln, in London and Oxford, before he came to Westminster Eric held positions of responsibility. It fell to him to introduce many to the spiritual life, a task demanded of those called to leadership in ecclesiastical institutions. No doubt he would have discovered through his experience what St Benedict had learned from his, namely “how difficult and arduous a task he had undertaken, of ruling souls and adapting himself to many dispositions” (Rule, Chapter 2). How far Eric succeeded, only those who learned from his example and teaching are able to say, but “this friend and counsellor of many” has in this congregation tonight a great number of those who regarded Eric as their master and guide in the spiritual life.

I am very touched to have been invited to give this talk although I confess to being a little overawed by the subject which has been assigned to me. No one speaks or writes with any degree of confidence on the spiritual life. And that is an understatement. I shall do my best, of course, and in so doing hope to be able to speak of things that were important to the man whom we are remembering and honouring this evening. This is not a treatise on the spiritual life, only a few random thoughts.

It may seem that I am in these thoughts largely ignoring that aspect of my title which refers to the contribution of the religious community. It should be said in explanation – and self defence – that all I have learned about the spiritual life has been learned in my monastic community. Nothing I say can be divorced from that context and experience.

I shall commence by looking at life in our society today. Even in this very secular and Godless age, there are echoes of God in unusual places. The search for God, the incessant yet often unrecognised desire for him, leads many along strange paths, but even waywardness in the life of the spirit can point to profound truths. Whether we realise it or not, we all yearn for a lost Eden; we long for that familiar converse with God and that personal experience of Him so vividly described in the first pages of the Book of Genesis. We are, all of us, restless for the infinite.

We fulfil our innate need for God in many ways. Today, deprived so often of a formal religious upbringing, people sometimes respond to their need for meaning and fulfilment by pursuing what quickly proves to be a delusion. It is arguable that we can find evidence of humanity’s quest for God even in our modern preoccupation with sects, the occult and drugs. I single these out because they seem to me to illustrate how our deepest needs for the things of the

spirit lead us into frustration. They also suggest how we, the adult world, have failed to communicate to the young, in particular, a knowledge and interest in God. We have failed to show the attractiveness of God. We have not taught the absolute claim which he has on our obedience. We have also been too easily led astray by false philosophies and unreal promises of a paradise in this world.

The sects make much headway among the young and the vulnerable in society today. It is a phenomenon causing widespread concern. The sects are successful because they supply a need we all have for recognition, belonging and a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. The phenomenon should lead us to recognise the importance of fostering and developing among the members of our Church, personal conviction, living faith and religious experience. Yet we recognise sadly that all too often this does not happen. Congregations are sometimes inward-looking, uninspiring; they can seem unwelcoming to the stranger and the seeker; public prayer is sometimes lifeless and perfunctory; there is little or no sense of belonging. Little wonder, then, that some find more attractive the warm embrace and the simple solutions offered by the sects. In the long term the community experience often proves to be stifling not inspiring, inhibiting and not liberating. The success of the sects however should cause us to examine ourselves about how we can provide more effectively for the genuine spiritual needs of believers today.

There is also at this time a growing obsession with the occult. It is a grave danger to many who are young and inexperienced. Many films and television programmes present dramatically the horror and the fascination of the powers of darkness. They portray possession and exorcism. With the decline in formal religious faith more people turn for guidance and significance in a relatively harmless interest in astrology and fortune telling, or in the much more serious and dangerous meddling in magic, witchcraft and Satanism. While the sects provide a parallel religious experience the occult offers a contradictory one, sometimes expressly hostile and alien to God.

Like sects and the occult, drugs hold out to people today a false picture of how the life of the spirit can be nurtured and developed. People sometimes rely on drugs to cope with stress and meaninglessness and to wide their sensory experience. It is an attempt to force an entry into the world of the spirit which is doomed to frustration because it does physical and psychological violence to the personality and leads ultimately to frustration. God's grace always builds upon nature, it never violates it.

The fundamental objection to be made against all three is that they constitute in the last analysis a flight from reality, a rejection of the world as it is and ultimately of God. Any authentic spirituality has to be a deeper exploration of reality, a consistent and developing process of exploring and understanding God and his creation. The spiritual life is not an escape from reality but a journey into it. Our century, so deeply scarred by war, violence, deprivation and suffering, has been a time when many false gods have been toppled, and many misleading ideologies exposed.

As we near the end of the second millennium people in Western Europe tend to be exhausted and confused but there are, I believe, undoubted signs that in and through pain and death we are discovering the beginnings of new life. The innate restlessness of the human spirit, the unexpected ways in which God manifests himself to us, all these could, and indeed should, lead us into a rediscovery of genuine spirituality. It is a task of much urgency.

We need to spend a little time examining more clearly what is involved in developing a spiritual life in the midst of our daily duties. Behind what I say lies centuries of experience by those who have given themselves to life in religious communities, as I have already indicated. We are the heirs of a collective wisdom from the great teachers of the past.

I shall start by quoting two texts: one from Paul VI, the other from the present Pope, John Paul II; both are of our day and are relevant to our situation. The first comes from Paul VI who wrote in 1973 (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* N.76):

The world which, paradoxically, despite innumerable signs of the denial of God, is nevertheless searching for him in unexpected ways – and painfully experiencing the need of him – the world is calling for evangelisers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible. (N.76)

There are, of course, “innumerable signs of the denial of God”. We do not need to look far for them. Nonetheless that same world according to Paul VI, does in fact search for him “in unexpected ways”. I have already considered some of these. There are, doubtless, others, and among them we may count the pursuit of power, of riches, of uncontrolled pleasure – each of these can so dominate our minds and hearts, that we turn them, unthinkingly and uncritically, into false gods. We make them ends to be pursued for their own sakes, not means to achieve other and better goods. And they can so easily destroy those who have dedicated their lives to them. But the instinct to pursue that which we see to be best for ourselves is deep and strong. It is an instinct that may move us, when we heed its nobler prompting, to look for a treasure which is proof against corruption. That instinct is the effect of the need for something which is greater and nobler than ourselves; the treasure is God himself.

That need for God is often not recognised, frequently not acknowledged, sometimes deliberately denied. We may ignore the need, suppress it, fight against it, argue ourselves out of it ... but it remains, a deep need waiting to be satisfied. If we do not attend to it, true happiness will elude us. There will be within us a deep unease, a sense of discontent. Restlessness will hold sway.

There is, however, a paradox here, for “restlessness”, a growing dissatisfaction with the way our lives are going, turns out often to be a friend after all. This is especially so when, weary from the pursuit of lesser goods, we are compelled at last to pine for Him who is goodness in its most

absolute form.

George Herbert, like St Augustine, understood well the part which restlessness can play in leading a person to God, or rather how it can cause our opening up to a Lord who has been knocking incessantly to gain entry into our minds and hearts:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
'Let us,' he said 'pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.'

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure;
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

'For if I should', said he,
'Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast'.

(George Herbert, 1593-1633)

There is a further paradox here: "repining restlessness" and "weariness" may lead us to God but we do not find him within the restlessness or the weariness. To discover and explore the mystery we need something else. Paul VI appealed for evangelisers to speak to the world of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could "see the invisible". That requires stillness, attention, openness, love and communion. I am sure these were in the mind of the present Pope when in October 1985 he addressed a symposium of European Bishops, and spoke of the qualities required of a herald of the Gospel. He said:

We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys and hopes, the agonies and distress of people today but who are at the same time contemplatives who have fallen in love

with God.

Evangelisers or heralds of the Gospel, then, are to speak as if they could “see the invisible” and to be “contemplatives who have fallen in love with God”. They must know, too, the depths of the human heart – that heart when it rejoices, admires or loves; that heart in its agonies, when it experiences suffering, failure or emptiness. An ancient message can still speak to a modern mind and warm today’s hearts. The Gospel is relevant, and is so in every age.

The attempt to “see the invisible” and to “fall in love with God” is no bad way of explaining the meaning of the term “the spiritual life”. We may speak of it, too, as the search for that which will give meaning and purpose to our lives at the deepest level of our beings; it is the quest for inner peace and freedom which implies a certain detachment from worldly preoccupations and goods. It is a desire for that which will fill a space within us, itself God-made, and only to be filled by Him. It is a relationship with God, as he will increasingly occupy our thoughts and engage our desires. It is a life within, hidden, often, from the gaze of others, private and secret – “a life hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3).

St John has told us that “eternal life is knowing Thee who art the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (John 17.3). The life of the soul, both now and hereafter, is one of knowing and loving. In this it reflects the very nature of God Himself. Now one day we shall see God as he is, face to face, know Him immediately and without any intermediary. Beatitude, that is perfect happiness, will follow from that vision and we shall be in that endless now of ecstatic love as we are united to Him, who is absolute truth and goodness, and as such infinitely lovable. For us it is not so yet. At the present our knowledge of Him is imperfect, and it must needs be mediated through finite things and persons, that is either through his creation or through the sacred words which convey to us his divine message. We enjoy reflections of his glory, glimpses only, not the reality as it is in itself. Glimpses of him can be seen in the things of our experience, and that is what St Paul told the Romans in a passage of great importance:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. (Romans 1.19-21)

Are we, too, like the Romans, in our day, “without excuse”? Have we not become “futile in our thinking” and have not our “senseless minds” become “darkened”? Maybe.

Clearly there is no question of our having a direct vision of Him as we are in our present state, but we should, from what we can experience with our senses, be able to conclude that he

exists, and to get, at least, a glimpse of his Truth, Goodness and Beauty as these are mirrored in his creation. Happily we have been given more than his creation to contemplate and in which to detect his hidden presence. He has spoken to us more directly, and notably with a Son who is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1.15). The Lord told Philip that to see him was to see the Father. There is no other way of coming to know God as we would a friend except through the person of Jesus Christ. He, both God and man, is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14) and the Holy Spirit promised and sent by Him and the Father will guide us to explore the mystery which God is and to respond to a love which has first been given by Him. We need, always, to return to the Bible and there, in a prayerful manner, engage in that special study which is called meditation. That exercise requires careful planning and the will to engage in it regularly, even if only briefly on each occasion.

I have said, and I believe it to be so, that every person is in search of God, and does so in so far as that person is seeking beatitude, and a meaning and purpose in life. There is, however, another important paradox to be considered and understood. It has been well expressed by TS Eliot, who wrote:

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not.

(“East Coker” III)

The spiritual life does not consist in seeking satisfaction for ourselves. Those who wish to find their lives must in fact lose them. There is evidence in the Scriptures to support that assertion. A life given solely to the pursuit of peace and happiness for their own sakes would be a refined form of self-seeking. Seeking our own spiritual well-being is nonetheless a starting-point, and even if only a modest one, is nevertheless important. But we have to go further. There is a cross to be carried; the condition of discipleship is to be prepared to do so.

It is this failure to understand, or in some cases to refuse, the role of suffering as essential to growth in the things of God which deters so many from following Christ all the way.

Let me give one very relevant example. Growing in the knowledge and love of God demands consistency and tenacity. In our growing relationship with God there will, however,

always be dark periods. We shall experience doubts and frustrations, disappointments and aridity. It has to be so, for we have to change from seeking the consolations of God to searching for Him alone, and this without reward or joy if that be his Will. If our love for God is to become authentic, then faith must be purified and that will involve a decreasing dependence on things human and a more deliberate leaning on God alone. Faith is purified when it is tried. It triumphs when we pray, and very humbly do so, “Lord, I do believe, help thou my unbelief” (Mark 9.23).

The achieving of the spiritual ideal is rare; we approximate to it to varying degrees. A truly spiritual person is someone whose orientation is now firmly towards the other, and that because he allows the love of God within him increasingly free rein in his relationship with others. The selfless service of those with whom we must deal each day, and our generosity to the most needy in our society, these are the signs that all is well in our relationship with God. Indeed the very touchstone of an authentic spiritual life is always charity. The saints are the evidence for this assertion, but, of course, we are not all saints.

Most people are only too aware that they have failed to achieve the ideal. Failure, like restlessness, can also be a friend, for its role is to introduce us to humility. Humility is facing up to reality, that is to the truth about ourselves, our sinfulness and our limitations. Humility is a lovely virtue, edifying to behold, essential to the spiritual life, uncommonly difficult to acquire. It forces us to cast ourselves on the mercy of God. We look now to him to find us rather than seeing it the other way round. It has dawned on us that our search for Him was but our reacting to his for us. We speak often of development in the spiritual life as if it were a matter of our initiative. There may even be a suggestion that it is a personal accomplishment. It is not so. Ours is but a response to an initiative which is taken by God, and followed up by Him. Ours is to say “yes”, that is to cooperate with Him. Each person is led differently. No two people pray in the same way, for instance, and what God reveals of Himself to any individual is known to that person alone. That is one reason why we should listen to each other’s experiences, for every person who takes his or her Christian life seriously has something important to say. Reference to St Matthew is vital in this connection. You will recall how Our Lord said: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will” (Matthew 11.25-26). It is often the unlearned and the deprived, as the world would judge, who have the clearest and deepest understanding of the things of God. It will, in fact, be so for those who are truly humble, whether learned or not.

It is made quite clear in the passage of St Matthew that our knowledge and understanding of God is a gift. It is also clear that there is a way of knowing and loving which is directly given, a special light in the mind, a significant warming of the heart. That is the presence of the Holy Spirit. His gifts are diverse, and variously experienced and differently expressed. His action within us both uses the natural powers that have been given to us, and transcends them when He sees fit to do so. Without his guiding and prompting however there can be no advance in our knowledge and

love of God.

It is vital that everyone should have the opportunity to be helped as far as possible to progress in that knowledge and love. There can be little doubt that most people experience difficulty in finding experienced and sensitive guides to the spiritual life. So urgent is the need for spiritual directors, and so pressing the priority that I believe the Christian Churches should be taking more steps to provide adequately prepared people for this task. In my own Church we have devoted much time and energy in recent years to the training of catechists in our parishes. To a lesser extent we have provided people to raise the level of understanding and intelligent participation in parish liturgy. Now I believe we must add a specifically spiritual dimension to this far-reaching work of Christian education and formation. The spiritual life is the very soul and inspiration of liturgy and catechesis. We have to develop this on two levels. Those who are being trained as catechists and liturgists ought to become aware of the principles and the importance of the spiritual life and be prepared to impart these to the people they teach. But at the same time our clergy should be encouraged to act much more as guides to the life of prayer and the spirit and to make their own experience available to the people.

What is also needed is the provision and the endowment of centres of spirituality. I am well aware of the tremendous service already offered by retreat houses, monasteries and convents. I would like to see much more thought-out and effective use made of resources already available. I do not think, for example, that we make enough use of our parish churches and our cathedrals as centres for the development of prayer and spirituality. Nor must we overlook the enormous potential of religious shrines and centres of pilgrimage. They can do much to inspire and give expression to the spiritual life in the most unlikely people. They also have the advantage of popular appeal. We cannot ignore the real miracle of Lourdes which consists not in the very rare miraculous healings but in the invariable stimulus given to faith and the growth of life in the spirit. People go back again and again to celebrate and deepen their faith and return refreshed. Look no further than Taizé and what has happened there especially in appealing to the young of every nation and many religious traditions. Last year in Europe alone some 25 million people went on pilgrimage to holy places. Here indeed is evidence of the enduring religious devotion of ordinary people and suggests ways of developing their spiritual lives.

This leads me to the final point I wish to make. The spiritual life should be accessible to all and should be developed from where people are instead of being an artificial form imposed on them, doing violence to their real selves. I recall the maxim: "You can't take people from where they are not to where they don't want to go, but you can take people from where they are to where they never dreamed they could reach".

I recall this not only to emphasise the value of pilgrimages but even more the importance of the family. It is sometimes called 'the domestic church' – the natural unit of the family transformed

by faith to become a lived experience of Christian faith, hope and charity. How badly we have neglected family prayer or any shared religious experience in the family. We first learn of God, Christ and the things of the spirit in the familiar surroundings of our homes and families. Deprived of that, faith fails to take root. Furthermore it is important to have understood that there can never be any real divorce between Sunday worship in Church or Chapel and weekday activities. All we do at work or at home is part of God's work of redemption, his healing and his plan for us. This is the secret of Nazareth, this explains and justifies the 30 years spent by Our Lord in the sweat and labour of his carpenter's craft and at home in this mountain village. The fact that God who became man lived and worked as an ordinary person in the Nazareth of his day means that all that is human is of particular value in the sight of God. Only sin, the misuse of good things against the law of God, is the exception. Everything else can become an act of love. The spiritual life is rooted in daily life, finds true expression there, helps to give point and purpose to the pain and the activity of each day. We must be careful lest we make the life of the spirit something exotic and remote. It can and must be lived here and now in the circumstances of everyday life and give ultimate significance and value to the most humdrum of existences. It is that – and only that – which makes life worth living and death a consummation.

Death is fulfilment. The man whom we are honouring tonight understood that. In 1950 he wrote, and his own words sum up much of what I have been trying to say:

There is too much love within us, and no expression of it is fully satisfying. The longing for heaven is the longing for the perfection of Love given and received, and the longing for Love is the longing for death. Yet we can't have that death for the wrong reason. We easily confuse the longing for Love and the longing to escape and Lethe, and so God makes some at any rate of the great lovers go on living.

Eric lived on until God chose the moment when his longing for the perfection of love would at last be fulfilled. It has been and we rejoice.
