The Honourable Society of Lincon's Inn

The Spirit and the Glory: Humanity Transfigured

(*The Warburton Lecture, 23 June 2024*)

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Frederick Denison Maurice was the Warburton Lecturer in 1845. He is a theologian who is loudly praised but little read: ordained priest in 1835, he was appointed Chaplain to Guy's Hospital in 1836, a post he held for more than two decades, for some of the time in plurality with his Chaplaincy of this Honourable Society. A sermon he delivered in the hospital chapel in August 1838 has been preserved in one of the leather-bound and largely unread volumes that fill Cathedral libraries. Maurice's theme was St Paul's vision of the glory of God; his text was the twelfth chapter of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul's extraordinary account of a transcendent mystical experience which he describes as being caught up into Paradise.

In the opening lines of the sermon Maurice seems to be teasing his congregation. St Paul's miraculous experience might be theirs, he insists. '*We, even you and I at this moment, are surrounded by this glory*' he says, '*we are in the midst of the heavenly kingdom, we are in the presence of Jesus Christ, and of God, the judge of all. If it pleased God to take the veil from our hearts, we might any of us behold those wonders with our inward eyes as clearly as we behold the pillars and walls of this chapel with our outward eyes*'.

Sadly, volumes of nineteenth-century sermons do not record the impact that their contents had on their hearers when they were preached. We cannot know whether the congregation at Guy's looked afresh at the pillars and walls which surrounded them. But what their chaplain had told them is threefold: that Heaven is all around, that God chooses to reveal Heaven to certain of his servants in the here and now, and that those to whom it is revealed see it with their '*inward eye'* – the eye of the heart, the eye of interior conviction, the eye of faith.

For three months earlier this year I had the privilege of living and working in East Jerusalem. Twenty years ago the Heads of Churches in the Holy Land appealed to the worldwide Church for men and women to come and experience life in the occupied West Bank, and to bear witness to it on their return. I went as a member of the programme established in response, and served there as a human rights monitor through uniquely tense and complex weeks. Travelling on the day that the International Court of Justice made its Order on the genocide proceedings brought by South Africa, and returning home a few days after Iran's missile attack on Israel, the war in Gaza was the background and context to everything we did.

Early on, I went to the weekly Bible study run by Sabeel, the foundation for Palestinian Liberation Theology. I was the sole international attending, one among a group of Palestinian Christians. Together we looked at St Mark's account of Christ's exchange with the Temple authorities. Their question is: which commandments are first of all? His response is: love of God, and love of neighbour. What does it mean? asked the group's facilitator. What does it mean to love your neighbour as yourself, in Jerusalem, in 2024?

Sawsan, a Palestinian Christian in her late sixties, has lived in the Old City all her life. She described how the previous day a young armed officer had demanded to see her identity documents as she was on her way home. The officer took them from her, went off with them, and eventually returned, flinging them back at her. '*Am I supposed to love her?*' Sawsan asked. Also present was Sivan, an Armenian. He spoke of the settler organization who had taken over a house in the street where his brother lived. They had guns and dogs and were carrying out building work in an area where his brother had been refused permission to build. '*I don't love them'* he said. '*I don't love them'*.

The discussion continued, and the polished and well-tuned theological arguments that I might have deployed, born of a hundred sermons preached and heard on these same words, fell away in the face of my companions' lived experience. I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. The group were unanimous in declaring that Christ asks too much of us – an honest and bold statement of exhausted inadequacy that I'd be surprised to hear in an English parish. But there was a general consensus that at the very least what Christ demands of us is that we never lose sight of our neighbour's humanity, that we refuse to demonize them or 'other' them.

What such 'othering' might mean was brought home for me in a conversation with Khaled a fortnight later. Khaled was a Palestinian lawyer based in Ramallah. He had spent twenty years defending young men before the Israeli military courts that have jurisdiction in the majority of the West Bank (one of the four different jurisdictions operating in the territory of Israel and Palestine). Before the military courts the prosecutor is a military officer, the tribunal of law and fact is a military officer, and the witness to the offence – stone-throwing, for example (maximum sentence if thrown at a stationary target: ten years; if thrown at a moving target: twenty years) – the witness to the offence is probably a military officer, too. Khaled could remember a case (a case) in which the defendant whom he represented was acquitted. Stones had been thrown at a watchtower by a young man in a red T-shirt. Later in the day the officer from the watchtower had entered the local village and arrested the defendant, who was wearing a red T-shirt. Under cross-examination the officer had claimed that the defendant was the only owner of a red T-shirt in a village of 30,000 souls.

He was acquitted, surely a proper verdict, but he had been subjected to the ordeal of arrest, restraint, interrogation, and trial on the grounds of that one item of clothing. The appearance of his face and the style of his hair had not been noticed; his name and his family's reputation were not relevant; his people and their history did not feature. The inward eye was not engaged, while the outward eye saw a young man in a red T-shirt; the stone-thrower; the defendant. He had been stripped of his humanity.

'*…The Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again'* writes the author of the book Exodus, according to the New Revised Standard Version. '*If it pleased God to take the veil from our hearts, we might any of us behold those wonders with our inward eyes'* says FD Maurice. To remove the veil is to reveal the glory; when the veil is removed the glory may be perceived. But when Maurice teases his hearers that the wonders of God might be revealed he says they will see them as clearly as they see the walls and pillars; the angels will be evident amidst the architecture. And when Moses meets the Israelites, the glory that is revealed is the glory of Moses' face. Divine wonder and human work, divine light and human flesh – glory and humanity – are one. The profound wonder, hidden by a thousand veils of circumstance,

denied, resisted, and suppressed, is the humanity that binds us together: for that humanity is the dwelling-place of God's Spirit.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. He was born in France in 1915; his mother was from the United States, his father from New Zealand. Both died before Thomas turned eighteen. He joined the abbey in 1942, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, perhaps finding in its order and certainty a refuge from his nomadic and emotionally complex early life. Trappists pursue a vocation to silence, but Thomas Merton was possibly the noisiest Trappist who has ever lived. His autobiography became a New York Times bestseller, and a stream of books and articles poured out of him. Since his accidental death in 1968 his personal journals have been published. Here is his entry for 19 March 1958:

'In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness [...) This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud'.

The moment at the corner of Fourth and Walnut has is seen as having pivotal significance in Merton's transition from introspective and uptight young monk to world-facing social campaigner and spiritual guide. The veil is lifted; Merton's inner eye sees that he, a cloistered Trappist devoted to a life of prayer and study, is not fundamentally different to or set apart from the people his outer eye sees around him in the centre of the shopping district. He is one with them, united to them. And that he terms 'love'.

Client, colleague, clerk, counsel: when we encounter the most demanding of these or the most despicable of these then we stand on the threshold of glory. Our outer eye rests upon the veil of our difference, and the Spirit's work is to lift it and to usher us into the mystery of our profound oneness, where we, and they, await our transformation from one degree of glory to another. Amen.