

Tractarians of the Twentieth Century: The Tradition Continued

Eric Abbott

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By

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ERIC Abbott had a remarkable and prestigious career; more so than many who ended up on the Episcopal bench. Indeed, he turned down the bishopric of Lincoln. He was successively Chaplain of King's College, London, Warden of Lincoln Theological College (which he always insisted on calling, quite correctly, *Scholae Cancellarii*), Dean of King's College, London, Warden of Keble College, in this University, and Dean of Westminster, an office rather more resplendent than a primatial see. He exerted a powerful influence over the institutions he served and, more particularly, over the people whom he encountered. His memorial tablet in the Abbey captures this precisely calling him the "friend and counsellor of many ... pastor pastorum."

Yet, unlike Michael Ramsey last week, he left little published work. None of his half-dozen books is in print, some are available second-hand. There was until last week only one of his books in Dr Pusey's Library; there are now two with two more on the way. He destroyed all his sermons and other writings before his death, dismissing them as "ephemera." There is a short entry for him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, an excellent, but short, pamphlet, only thirty-two pages, produced by the Abbey after his death, a couple of memorial addresses and obituaries written in 1983 when the art of the revelatory or candid obituary had not taken hold. Yet he undoubtedly deserves his place in this series' pantheon.

Where both Father Jonathan and Father Barry could point to the genesis of Michael Ramsey's and Eric Milner-White's Catholicism, or Tractarianism, I am unable to do that. Nowhere in the biographical record have I been able to find any specific reference. However, everything he wrote was obviously Catholic in content and context. In one address he counts himself among "Catholic Christians, liberated from self into the Church." And elsewhere referring to the Blessed Sacrament he speaks of "that real Presence in which we believe and rejoice: for here in the breaking of the bread He is still known, by His will He is made wholly available ... Here is a Presence which does not negative the general, besetting Presence elsewhere, but focuses it: for as God acted at a point in time, in a certain place, and Jesus was born, worked, preached, healed, died ... so in our sacramental ways we are not ashamed to say here, now, in this broken bread, is the gift, the real gift, of Presence."

Lincoln, King's College, Keble were all Tractarian or Anglo-Catholic foundation which had not yet lost their way and betrayed their heritage. He played a major part, under Michael Ramsey's chairmanship, and with the participation of Gregory Dix among several others, in preparing and writing a Report for the Archbishop of Canterbury on Catholicity, which is perhaps the nearest the Church of England has come to a definitive articulation of its Catholic nature. From our present perspective, look on that mighty work and despair. He avoided commitment to any particular expression of Catholicism in the Church of England but he was

Catholic in his fibre. A friend of mine heard him preach on Corpus Christi at S. Mary's, Bourne Street and still remembers it as uncompromisingly Catholic in its doctrine and devotion.

Of course, Abbott was a Cambridge man and went to Westcott House, so his Catholicism may not have had the more exotic flourishes found elsewhere, not least here in Oxford. He did, however, have elegance, certainly sartorial elegance. He was a handsome figure, always immaculate in dress and appearance. Well-cut suits and cassocks, perfect cinctures, spotless bands: dapper rather than a dandy: were characteristics throughout his life. He was not without a touch of vanity. The Bidding Prayer at his Memorial Service, which attracted a vast congregation, spoke of his "graces of personality, subtle humour and unfailing sense of style." Eric Abbott had style. This can be seen in his portraits and photographs. He was sufficiently aware of his presence to want one of his photographs to be taken by Karsh of Ottawa, one of the finest society photographers of the day.

These photographs and portraits all reveal the well-dressed cleric, but they also reveal much more of the man, especially seen in a painting by Norman Hepple. Handsome, certainly, elegant, obviously, spruce, undoubtedly, but the eyes have a haunting sadness, almost a melancholy. Another image, this time a photograph as Dean of Westminster, has him sitting at a table, hands clasped, looking across the camera rather than directly into it: the dark eyes are sympathetic, the pose is attentive and serene, composed and calm, the look is thoughtful and concentrated but with a slight relaxation in a half-smile, it is almost a wistful, far-seeing look with just a hint of pain and stoic suffering from the ill-health which dogged him. The images are somehow consoling, of someone you felt you could instinctively trust and like. And it is true that his accessibility was legendary, his willingness to listen and to respond faultless, and it was allied to a swift intelligence, a subtle wit, a perceptible charm (that elusive and sometimes dangerous virtue) and acute perception. These attributes were to underpin a remarkable ministry and influence.

He was born in Nottingham in 1906 to two school teachers. He went to Jesus College, Cambridge to read Classics. He took a First in Part I of the Tripos, but coxing the college eight resulted in a Second Class degree in Part II of the Tripos. At Westcott House he took a Third in Theology. But, even then, he was marked out.

He served his title at the fashionable church of S. John, Smith Square for two years before he was invited to be Chaplain to King's College, London, and so to begin twenty-five years of involvement in training men for the priesthood. (It was all men in those days, as it is now.) Aged only thirty in 1936, he became the Warden of Lincoln Theological College. On the staff, but about to leave, was Michael Ramsey, and about to replace him was Eric Mascall. Here Abbott instilled in his ordinands the indispensable need for interior faith, a ministry rooted in prayer and self-discipline. In 1945 he was invited to return to King's College, London to be Dean. The Dean worked with a lay Principal, and was also the Head of the Theology Faculty. To this he also added the task of Warden of the hostel in Vincent Square, primarily for students of the college pursuing a priestly vocation.

If this his public work was demanding enough in itself, it was but the tip of an iceberg. He was unstinting in giving time to countless individuals, in the confessional, in spiritual direction and guidance, in pastoral conversation and consultation, or through an apostolate of correspondence. He had a daunting ministry of the letter and the postcard. In his counselling he was "shrewd and unshockable ... recreating hope and generating expectancy." These are rare gifts. When Dean of Westminster he returned from a two week holiday at 3 o'clock in the

morning following a delayed flight, had three hours sleep and awoke to deal with over a thousand letters. Later that morning he suffered a heart attack.

He had been diagnosed with angina some years earlier and those who know something of angina will understand its sometimes crippling pain. Abbott fulfilled his public duties and his private, hidden ministry against that constant background. It is, perhaps, what most marked out his ministry and his sympathetic engagement with friends, with strangers seeking advice, and his correspondents.

In 1956 he became the sixth Warden of Keble College but the first to be elected by the Fellows under new self-governing statutes. He rather regretted spending only a short time there but his impact far outweighed his brief tenure of three years. Those who witnessed it testified to the way in his manner and approach, his presence, his pastoral concern and easy friendship, his empathy with undergraduates, and although not an academic, his ability to understand and encourage academic excellence, he gave the College, still a relative fledgling in the University, a self-confidence and self-belief.

In 1959 he was appointed Dean of Westminster, his most public and prestigious office. Here his influence was not confined to academic institutions and to the sphere of private encounter, but was played out on the national scene. He set out his manifesto (that is too mundane a word for it) of the Abbey as a great church in which all men and women of any faith and none would see Jesus and behold the glory of God. He forged a transformation in the Abbey. He knew the Abbey staff individually, not as a collective work-force. He seemed one of those beings who possessed an inexhaustible power of knowing personally an endless number of individuals and knowing them beneath the surface. He knew the meaning of friendship and he knew the meaning of community rather than the meaning of institutions. His feeling for aesthetics, for art, music, literature was all deployed to enhance the worship of the Abbey but it was not outward show. His ministry was almost sacramental in character: the outward and visible signs of his ministry were rooted in an inner reality and hidden power of, what one admirer identified as "prayer, preaching and presence." Perhaps above all, presence: his physical presence and the presence of his personality and character in correspondence.

His successor as Dean, Edward Carpenter, who had served as a Canon of Westminster before succeeding him, wrote about his "compulsive but restrained personality," the expression of "an indissolubly incarnational faith." He was someone who seldom challenged but often comforted, seldom condemned but always supported. As Dean his ill-health began to grip but he "never flinched nor complained about his illness" even though it brought frustrations with his lameness and his anxiety on public occasions, especially royal occasions. (He was much valued as a counsellor and advisor within the Royal Family, with a particular friendship with Princess Margaret.) He feared most processing with Michael Ramsey who, Abbott said, was incapable of steering a straight course up the nave. Dean Carpenter summed up Abbott's character in a way that seems to me to encapsulate the best kind of Anglo-Catholic. He said, *inter alia*, that Abbott was unpredictable, imaginative and expansive. He understood the nature of humanity, the virtues and vices of human beings. He was neither abrasive nor oppressive, he sought not to condemn but to sustain. Carpenter's description of his being "morally ... non-propositional ... willing to live and let live," may be going a tad too far. He was highly intelligent without being an intellectual. He saw religion as encapsulating a feeling of mystery to be adored rather than a set of propositions to be rationally apprehended. He was not, in that

sense, a conceptual thinker. He was also an “incurable gossip,” yet, when it mattered, confidentiality was absolute.

Given that Eric Abbott left so few published works and burned copies of his sermons and other writings, and that there has been no edition of his extensive correspondence and no full biography, it may be wondered why he is brought to mind in this series. And it may seem that a capacity for friendship and a genius for advice are an inadequate basis for that remembrance in that those virtues rarely transcend the particular friends and the specific circumstance which gave rise to the advice. Yet they lie at the core of a catholic priesthood. Much of the priestly life is hidden from the world: it is individual and personal, its effects often incalculable and private, so here in Eric Abbott we can at least glimpse some of those effects and engagements and the living out of a dedicated priestly ministry. For example, I was told only last week that Garry Bennett relied hugely on Abbott’s advice and support and felt adrift after his death. Had Abbott lived might Bennett have written the *Crockford* preface as he did? Abbott was assiduous and would think nothing of travelling hundreds of miles to marry a student and to preach an “unforgettable and unforgotten” sermon. He would give hours of his life to see people, to listen to them, to talk to them: hours of patient self-giving in counsel, advice and absolution. It was a costly ministry of reconciliation.

This is exhausting and draining work. If you think it difficult to make your confession, remember that it is not any easier to hear a confession with the attention and discernment that the sacrament demands. But in giving so much of himself, Abbott drew strength from and was sustained by his friendships, not least that of John Robson, sometime Chaplain of Wellington College, the one among many. Friends drew sustenance from him and they returned a deep and abiding affection. Abbott exercised a vivid living ministry of a living person to the living.

And it was all conducted against a background of ill-health. There is evidence of an emotional breakdown while he was at Westcott House and there is the well-documented and public ill-health throughout his life. Even though there was some attempt at covering his disability at Westminster, a discreet hand on the verger’s shoulder as he walked up the steps into the sanctuary, his illness was such a part of his personality and informed so much of his sympathies and pastoral work that it could not be obscured. But that cover-up on public occasions was necessary both for him and for others which signalled a profoundly natural instinct and response to his vocation and the needs of others: it was a mutual recognition, an example of the reciprocity of love that lies at the heart of the Trinity. His physical vulnerability and his breakdown became his best gift to the Church which he served with such distinction. It moulded his personality and his response. It gave him that sympathy and sensitivity to the vulnerability and the wounds of others. His ill-health became an important and significant part of his life and ministry not least because of the way he bore it and was able to transcend it and transform it into a blessing and an asset. It was the key that made him so pastorally accessible and able to show empathy to the emotional damage and anxiety of others. John Robson recalled him “sitting for hours on end with his head in his hands, bearing the pain and enduring the fearful grimness of the depression that descended like a terrible, almost satanic vengeance.” He often defied the crippling power of depression and physical incapacity to turn it to good, a well from which others might draw sustenance.

His illness effectively forced his retirement from Westminster, something he did with some reluctance. As Robert Runcie said in his Memorial Address retirement saw his “precarious health [give] way to a great deal of physical suffering and mental anguish ... He knew well that

suffering is the strange glass through which we all in this world at some time or other behold the glory of the Lord and are either changed from glory to glory or from glory to bitter and anxious self-concern ... [but those] black patches ... did not stop [him] growing, discovering more of himself, confronting the world as it is, in spite of the fact that it was not what he might have preferred it to be."

One of Abbott's themes was glory. We heard last week how that was also true of Michael Ramsey. At the heart of Abbott's catholic, incarnational faith was the Transfiguration, the change from glory to glory. For him it spoke primarily of heaven, of the transcendent power of Christ, of the glory of the Lord. It was a transfiguration that happens to us through the minute particularities of life, those "little things" in S. David's words that Harri Williams reminded us a week or so ago. It was not and is not a magical transformation, some spectacular stage effect, nor an annihilation or overthrow of the natural man, the human person, but rather, it was and is a transformation or transfiguration by raising the natural man beyond himself to a higher power: a more mysterious process than mere rationality. As Robert Runcie said, "few men ... can have lifted, and sought to lift, more hearts and minds to God than him, in private and in public." He was a rare person who in his joys and in his sorrows mediated the love of Jesus Christ.

BOOKS:

Escape or Freedom (1939)

Foothold of Faith (1943)

Catholicity (1947)

Education in the Spiritual Life (1961)

The Compassion of God and the Passion of Christ (1963)

EXTRACTS FROM ERIC ABBOTT'S WRITINGS:

(A)

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 cannot 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.

(B)

BE ye imitators of me, as I am also of Christ" – a bold use of words – but right. When we look at this saying of S. Paul on its human side in the experience of the Church, we surely find that if a man is a great man, he will have disciples, and if his greatness is that of faith working by love, he will have the devotion of those disciples, and in that devotion they will imitate the master, sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously: they will catch his accent, they will reproduce that way in which their master has expressed the truth, the words and

phrases which were “moving and ravishing” to them: moreover, having seen the master at work, and especially among people, in the peculiar form of work which we call pastoral, they will imitate him again, asking themselves instinctively when doubts arise concerning the right action or the right attitude to a problem – what would he do?

(C)

NO one can be either active or passive all the time. Over our activity, as over our passivity, broods the activity, ceaseless and creative of God himself. Judging our activity and passivity, and redeeming it, is the Passion of Christ, His greatest action. All our activity is rendered temporal only, that is, it is robbed of its eternity, unless it is offered to God in love and by His love is given an eternal quality. Whether to be active now, or passive now, whether to be silent now or to speak, is a matter of choice, a matter of faith, and therefore a matter of risk. Even the reformer is not reforming all the time. He brings the old out of his treasure as well as the new. The thing is to be supple in our Lord’s hand, to ask to be used, to be watchful and then ... behold you are active or passive as the case may be, and as faith requires, and then, whatever the visible outcome you thank God for using you.

(D)

TO God be the glory for ever and ever: Amen.” Let us then live, speak, work, and pray, “to the greater glory of God”, “ad majorem Dei gloriam”. This will afford us the same motive as Christ our Lord had. This will direct all our work to an end beyond ourselves. This will afford us a worthy ambition – the glory of God and the Kingdom of God. It will also strengthen us when life seems to lack purpose, to lose its cogency. “Ad majorem Dei gloriam” will also lift us out of our self-centredness, to look beyond our own glory to God’s. It will give us a simple and salutary form of self-examination – “where is the glory I am seeking, in the things I do and say?” It will help us to see that we are instruments only in the hand of our Lord; to realise that we enjoy being used; but “not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name give the praise.”

Then let us add to the glory that we seek to give to God, the very important word “Amen”. “To him be the glory: Amen”. “Amen” is our saying Yes to God’s will. “This,” says God, “is what must be”; and we say “Amen”. “Amen” is what Christ’s Mother said at the Annunciation. “Amen” is what all the saints have said to the demands our Lord has made upon them. “Amen” is what every Christian man and woman must say in accepting their particular vocation. “Amen” is what we say when things are hard but inevitable. It is not false passivity; it is active acceptance of God’s will. Try to say “Amen” to those things in your life which are clearly the will of God. Try not to say “Amen” to things which should not be accepted.

“Amen” is the last word to be spoken. Therefore in speaking it, we shall try to finish our work, finish the tasks that God has given us to do, believing that he will not summon us away from this world until we have had our chance to show him at least a token of what we would do for him perfectly, if only we could.

Then we realise that our life and our work can never be quite tidily finished. But this is only to say that the final "Amen" to our lives which alone can make them good, can only be spoken by God; by God who spoke the "Amen" to his beloved Son's life on earth, raised him from the dead, and then by the Holy Spirit's power made his life and his death endlessly fruitful for good, until the end of time.

When we come to the end, therefore, let us commend our spirits to God our Creator and Redeemer in faith, believing that he who raised Jesus from the dead will be able to take what we have done for him, whether explicitly or implicitly, and will gather it into his Kingdom, to be in that Kingdom that particular enrichment of the Kingdom's glory which our particular life had to contribute.

For there is something which only you can bring into the Kingdom of God. Therefore let us live this life to the greater glory of God, say our "Amen" when the end comes, and trust that Almighty God from his side will forgive us, will accept us in his beloved Son, and will himself pronounce upon our little life his own "Amen"

The Compassion of God and the Passion of Christ