

Advent I: Death

The first of The Four Last Things is death. Death has a curious history in western civilisation: the Jews of the Second Temple period and the Early and Medieval Christians feared death only because they believed it to be the prelude to God's judgement and possible damnation. Modernity does not believe in either judgement or punishment on the other side of the grave – or even on this side of the grave. Generations of educational theorists have encouraged us to use only the concept of reward but not punishment – so revealing a fatal illogicality: for where there is no attachment of blame for wrongdoing, then the concept of praise for doing well is worthless. And nowadays the intelligent art of making judgements is outlawed as *judgemental*.

Something odd happened to death in the 16th century. And it happened as a direct consequence of the modern view of reality. Jews and Christians – Muslims too, for that matter – had always believed that reality is to be found in God, and that human beings partake of reality only insofar as they belong to God. In the 16th century all this changed profoundly. The greatest play of our age, the play which set the intellectual and spiritual tone of modernity, is *Hamlet*. And particularly the lines *To be or not to be, that is the question*. But when Hamlet is agonising about being, it is not the being of God he is thinking about, but his own being: Hamlet's being. And, exactly contemporary with Shakespeare, we have the Frenchman Rene Descartes who is very like Hamlet. Descartes makes human consciousness the centre of reality: *Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am*.

It is no wonder that both Hamlet and Descartes feel queasy, indecisive and worried to death. For the centrality of human consciousness – which they invented – includes consciousness of death. And we have gone on feeling queasy ever since. Kierkegaard even defined the essence of human consciousness as *anxiety*. *Angst* is a word so familiar that it's all over the Sunday colour supplements and the health and well-being pages. Freud declared that we are in thrall to *thanatos* – the death instinct. Samuel Beckett couldn't have a shave without seeing the grinning skull in his mirror. Martin Heidegger said our whole existence is *being towards death*. We can joke about it with Tom Stoppard who wrote in *Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead* that you wouldn't like to wake up and find yourself alive in a box – and added, *Mind you, it's better than being dead in a box*. But this is black humour, as when Woody Allen says twitchily, *I don't mind dying: I just don't want to be there when it happens*.

All this modern neurosis is entirely understandable. Because, if you make human consciousness the centre of everything, then what is left when this consciousness is extinguished? The humanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment puts too much of a psychological burden on us, and so we become queasy and scared. But the Christian faith says something more revealing. Death, says St Paul, *is the wages of sin*. Now don't start thinking that sin is just particular acts of naughtiness. Sin is the primary – let us say *original* – form of false orientation. It is rebellion against God. And the modern form of this ancient rebellion is precisely that intellectual act by which we centre reality in ourselves rather than in where it truly is – in God. This is our original false consciousness.

In *Choruses from the Rock* T.S. Eliot describes some of the ways in which our false consciousness tries to avoid anxiety and he ends with a fearful warning:

We are:

*Engaged in working out a rational morality
Engaged in printing as many books as possible.
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles
Turning away from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity.
Though you forget the way to the temple
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not:
You shall not deny this Stranger*

Sin is seeking your reality in anything except God. Sin is me making myself the centre of meaning and significance. But this is poor, mortal me. No wonder I feel anxious. Hamlet knew it. Oh Boy, did Hamlet know it: *the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to... What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! ... In action how like an angel! ... The paragon of animals...* But the anxiety of Hamlet's self-consciousness makes him see the whole world as *A foul and pestilential congregation of vapours...* And he himself, poor lad, *This quintessence of dust*. Just like us. We had been warned already by the Bible: *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*.

Hamlet not only fears death, but he is suffering already a death-in-life. The anxious, queasy, indecisive life which comes through centering reality in his own being instead of in God. This is what St Paul means by *sin*. Sin involves another mistaken perception: the mistaken perception that we move from life towards death. Our Christian faith teaches us the opposite. Through our sin – through this intellectual, spiritual and moral misperception of reality – we are in death already. Jesus Christ is our exemplar. Christianity actually begins with Christ's body in the tomb. Karl Barth, preaching in a Swiss jail, said:

The great NO; the great shadow that hangs over our lives – the wages of our sin – that is our death – was paid by Christ lying dead in the tomb. This he willed and this he did. Our death occurred on his Cross. The great NO which was meant to strike us, struck the One who was without sin and who, therefore, did not deserve death. Death was executed in Christ's flesh to the bitter end.

We must become aware that there is something worse than natural death. We can even perhaps stoically contemplate our natural death with equanimity, as did David Hume who said:
I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire.

But the living death which is sinful is the attempt to be independent of God and to root reality in oneself. This is the queasiness and emptiness which is the source of all our unease and dread. As Kierkegaard said, it is *The sickness unto death*. This is the result of sin and rebellion against God. It is simply living on false pretences.

St Paul, who diagnosed the sickness, also produces the cure. And the cure is faith. And faith is reorientation, to turn to Christ and have your being rooted in him. Then you will have eternal life with him. That means a life outside time and in Christ. It is a life which death cannot touch. And it is not pie in the sky. It starts now – as soon as you decide to find your reality in Christ. Then the first thing that you are freed from is that self-centred, neurotic fear of death.

Can you bring yourself to give up false consciousness and have faith? There are things that help us do this. One great help is the service for *The Burial of the Dead* in *The Book of Common Prayer*. This book is a treasure because throughout its pages it offers penetrating psychological and spiritual descriptions of what it is to be human. The Prayer Book has us bang to rights. Are we to suppose that this great and inspired book which understands our lives so perfectly will suddenly lose its mind when it speaks to us about death? Of course not. So listen and be comforted by Christ's words from the Collect from *The Burial of the Dead*:

Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the Kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world: grant this we beseech thee O Merciful father through Jesus Christ our Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.

Advent II: Judgement

After Death comes the second of the Four Last Things: Judgement. As soon as children learn to speak they cry out those words all parents hear a thousand times: *It's not fair!* The desire for justice, for fairness and right dealing goes deep and it is the basis of the faith of the Old Testament and of Islam. For the Jews after Moses, what guarantees justice and right judgment is the Law, based on the Ten Commandments. This Law is not at all like modern ethics which are merely utilitarian; in which moral decisions are infinitely various and all that matters is that the ends justify the means.

This is applied to license all manner of atrocities. So embryos may be created in the sure and certain knowledge that some of them will be killed in the process of scientific research. The former Bishop of Oxford, Lord Harris, justified this on Thought for the Day by arguing that many embryos die naturally anyhow. Which is a bit like saying that accidentally falling under a bus is the same thing as being pushed. Or twelve year old girls are given the morning after pill. Or we murder 200,000 unborn children every year, because pregnancy would interfere with a woman's lifestyle. *The Times* ran a piece this week celebrating the fact that Britain leads the world in the amount and variations of casual sex. Or it is thought right, because it looks convenient, to build the economy on debt – that is on fictitious money – without reckoning the long-term consequences: because, *in the long term we'll all be dead*. What John Maynard Keynes did not add, of course, is that after death there will be judgement. Nietzsche was right to deplore this hedonistic creed as *pig philosophy*

Contrasted with modern ethics stands the Law of God. The moral rules are not infinitely variable: some things are right in themselves. The Commandments are binding. God did not give us the Ten Suggestions. He said *Thou shalt not*. And the Law of God is timeless and universal. As Eliot put it: *There is no life not lived in community; and no community not lived in praise of God*. There was a terrific philosophical howler perpetrated by John Humphrys on this theme in

his book last year when he said that of course it's possible to have true morality without believing in God: lots of civilised societies have disbelieved in God. It was left to Mary Wakefield to point out that it's not a question of *believing in God* but of *the existence of God*. This is to say that ethics is deontological. Ethics derives from being. And the being ethics derives from is God. Without God there is no possibility of goodness

The modern interpretation of Law not as obedience but only as a means to hedonistic ends results in the depraved notion of universal human rights: depraved because illogical and incoherent. For, if I have a right to behave in such and such a way, then it automatically implies that someone else has the responsibility to guarantee me that right. Contradictions are bound to arise. I claim a right to peace and quiet but my neighbour Mr Cacophonous infests the atmosphere with nauseating rock music – on the grounds that to forbid him would deny him the right of freedom of expression. So the doctrine of universal human rights can never be an ethical principle but only a wish list – an impossible cloud cuckoo land.

The ideas of justice and judgement meant that everyone shall get what he deserves. This produced an intellectual and moral crisis which only the coming of Christianity could resolve. For the question arises: *Do you really want to get what you deserve?* I certainly hope I don't get what I deserve. For I am only too conscious of the fact that I so regularly – and, most annoyingly, repetitively, leave undone the things I ought to have done and do the things I ought not to have done. I fall short – just like you. In biblical language, I am a sinner. And, if I am to be saved from myself, I need more than the Law – which I cannot always keep. I require mercy.

But mercy is bought at a price. Not even God can say, *OK I'll simply let you off*. For that would abrogate his eternal Law. So how can we uphold the integrity of the Law and at the same time guarantee the salvation of sinners like you and me: sinners in fact like all humankind? The first person to address this problem was St Paul, some twenty years after the Crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He wrote:

The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ. St Paul says also: God commendeth his love toward us that that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

St Paul worked out in detail the means whereby we are redeemed. He based his reasoning of course on the words of Our Lord himself who promised: *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish but have everlasting life.* What I find so moving and so telling, so completely convincing, is that this truth was prophesied by Isaiah five hundred years before either Jesus or St Paul. For Isaiah knew too that we fall short, we cannot save ourselves. And the amazing thing is that all those centuries before the events he saw in precise detail what God would do to save us:

He is led as a lamb to the slaughter. Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

These words are no coincidence. We are not being merely fanciful here. Isaiah foresees the death of Christ in exact detail – even to predicting the emergence of the thieves on the crosses and Joseph of Arimathea.

Consider the story of Abraham and Isaac, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and then at the last minute provides a ram for the sacrifice instead. The overwhelming purpose of this story – from more than fifteen hundred years before the birth of Christ – is to prefigure the fact that God would sacrifice his own Son.

But one enormous problem remains. If God punishes the sinless Christ in order to save sinful men and women, surely he abrogates his own immutable Law of justice? For it cannot be right to punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty. The fact is that there is no fracture of the Law of justice. Because Christ is not other than God. Again as St Paul puts it:

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

When you contemplate the mystery of our redemption, deep matters give way to even greater depths. For consider this: when God made all things, he also made time. God himself is outside and beyond time. This means that, before the heavens and the earth were brought forth, God knew from everlasting that his act of creation would involve his own ultimate sacrifice. There was the knowledge of Calvary in the mind of God “before” the foundation of the universe.

The miracle of the Divine compassion, of God’s extreme tenderness and love towards us, is that he went ahead anyway. He thought we were worth it.

Advent III: Hell

After *Death* and *Judgement* we arrive at *Hell*. Of course, these days hardly anyone believes there is such a place as hell: it’s just one of those throwbacks to medieval superstition – along with sin and judgement. The trouble is that these notions of Divine judgement and hell belong to the world of spiritual philosophy and moral seriousness. And our world doesn’t *do* philosophy or moral seriousness. It *does* propaganda and the utilitarian calculus: life is about maximizing pleasure and avoiding pain.

That despised medieval Christianity taught that the highest compliment paid to humankind is that we are made in the image of God. And God commands of us moral seriousness. But what commandments are left today? Only *Don’t get found out* and *Wear a condom*. But when we reject spiritual philosophy and moral seriousness we are simply telling God that we don’t want to be formed in his image. We prefer the image of the consumer. Or the precious personal self with its human rights. But to reject the image of God is to will oneself to be less than human – and therefore to forfeit all rights. Because the whole idea of rights – as the word makes plain – belongs to that rejected world of moral seriousness.

There is a typical childishness and peevishness about our refusal to accept that we really are going to be held responsible. Modern theologians deny the existence of hell. In one particularly choice example of intellectual vacuity and self-importance – a book, by theologians, for God’s sake! called *Objections to Christian Belief* - it is claimed that hell is *morally repellent symbolism*. In other words, a God made in the image of modern theologians would not be so ill-mannered as to send us to hell.

Besides there is something wildly silly about protesting that it’s not nice of God to send us to hell if we’ve spent all our lives rejecting God. For hell is simply being without God. If we don’t want to be with God down here on earth, why should we want to be with him up there in heaven? The choice is all ours. There is terrible truth in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We are all creating our picture in the attic, forming by our each and every action our character that will appear at the last.

St Thomas Aquinas told us that evil and hell are merely banal. Precisely. And we certainly have a taste of this already. So much of the world of mass culture that surrounds us is banal. It is shoddy, shallow and trivial. It rejects attention, effort and application. It is a refusal to concentrate, to stretch oneself, to put oneself under some pressure. We get a foretaste of hell in the mass culture of popular entertainment and the obsession with shopping and celebs. The play-station. The obsessive texting. Facebook. In fact some people are not content to be only one precious little self. More and more are going on line and inventing another self for themselves – an avatar, rich and beautiful as a rule, who has all sorts of exciting adventures in cyberspace.

This new game has already resulted in divorce proceedings being brought back down here in what used to be called *real life*. So much for the forbidding of graven images.

Tumid apathy with no concentration...distracted from distraction by distraction. God offers us eternal life with him. People prefer *lifestyle* instead. I imagine my own private hell as an everlasting series of *Midweek* with Libby Purves – that icon of inconsequentiality - getting excited about nothing in particular with her vacuous *studio guests*; telling us in thrilling tones that, whereas somebody so famous you’ve never heard of her used to wash her hair on a Wednesday, now she does it on Thursday instead.

When you want a working definition of hell, think of its opposite. Its opposite is wholehearted commitment, the life of the alert mind and the quickened soul. The mystical theologians knew that the secret of blessedness is to attend to something; in a word to concentrate. And it is the avoidance at all costs of this attentiveness which is the hell of the modern age. A bit of escapism is fine now and again; but when everything is a form of escapism you have lost your soul – and that’s the traditional definition of hell, isn’t it?

God wants us to escape hell and enjoy something more wholesome. Jesus said, *I am come that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly.*

Advent IV: Heaven

And after death, Judgment and Hell, at last we come to heaven. Well, I hope so. I wonder what it will be like? Human beings have an acutely ambiguous attitude towards life after death. There is

the story of the famous Spiritualist F.W.H. Myers talking with a woman whose daughter had only recently died. Myers asked, *What do you suppose has become of her?* The woman replied, *Oh I'm sure she's enjoying everlasting bliss – but I wish you wouldn't talk about such unpleasant things!*

Heaven won't be like going to church all the time. Remember the lovely hymn we often sing where it says: *So, Lord, at length when Sacraments shall cease.* Yes, even the Sacraments will come to an end. As you know from your Catechism, *A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.* So when we are in that eternal state of spiritual grace, we shall not require the outward and visible sign.

When we speak of heaven, we are trying to speak about a spiritual state of being beyond time and space, and so all our language will have to be metaphorical. We cannot express supernatural realities directly in natural language. The Bible itself is limited to extravagant metaphors. We get fantastic – even lurid – pictures of beasts with hundreds of eyes, angels and archangels, the Tree of Life and a stream flowing from the throne of God. The Bible is written in natural language, so not even the Bible can tell us directly what heaven is like.

I think we have another way of knowing. Think of this: if heaven is beyond time and space, if it is infinite, then there is a sense – though our language here is close to breaking down – in which we are there already. Or, if I may so put it, a sense in which *we have been there.* For if heaven is an eternal state, then to be there is to be there eternally.

We have intuitions of this truth. What Wordsworth called *intimations of immortality*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing clouds of glory do we come From God, who is our home

Trailing clouds of glory. Because God made this material world and because he was incarnate in it in his Son, we must expect the material world to contain reminiscences of the eternal world, heaven, God's everlasting abode. This universe of ours is material, but it is not merely material. As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.... Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Remember Our Lord promised that the Holy Ghost would *bring all things to your remembrance.*

But this experience is not just for poets. I ask you to reflect on the fact that you and I, each one of us, knows it in ourselves. Imagine you are on a weekend in the country. You awake in the milky dawn light in a silent room. It is a high room with oak beams. You go downstairs and open the door. You feel the rush of the fragrant air and from as far as you can see into the mist and the dampness, there comes the calling of birdsong. The watery colours of the landscape can hardly be made out. The pale disc of the sun behind the racing clouds. This produces in you an exquisite

sensation, which is something like joy, something like peace: but you can't put it into words *exactly*. For coming at you out of the beauty of the scene, there is something like recollection, that reminiscence I mentioned earlier. Like a haunting. I believe such experiences are sent for our encouragement. Intimations of immortality. Natural presences which both hide and reveal the eternal presence of God.

Or remember the first time you stood on the shore as a child and watched the tide roll in.

When I was a boy I spent quite a lot of time in hospital. I remember once – I was about seven – I'd been in for several weeks, cooped up, as they say, on the ward. One day it was brilliantly sunny and warm and my favourite nurse – actually, Staff Nurse Parker – got permission to take me out for a walk. Round the back of the great Victorian buildings of St James' Hospital there was a large garden. I remember the warm sunlight. I remember the deep red roses. I remember the crackle of our feet on the gravel path. I remember that neither of us said a word.

A couple of years before that, just after my Auntie Doris had gone off to New Zealand to marry her soldier boy, I went one afternoon, just after lunch, upstairs into the front bedroom. It was very quiet. Doris had left her dressing gown behind the door. But what I noticed was the sunlight on the dark brown dressing table. I had a warm, reassuring sense of presence again. And I didn't want to leave the bedroom. As Hopkins said, it was the sense of *deep down things*. A reality beyond appearances.

God leaves his footprints and fingerprints all over the place. Why do we *know* that music is not just melody, rhythm and harmony – but there's something hanging around in there that excites us, that thrills us or even makes us cry? The Bach *Double Violin Concerto*. The slow movement of Schubert's *String Quintet in C* – where Schubert almost stops the music altogether. The utterly sublime music Purcell produced for the funeral of Queen Mary. And the words from the Prayer Book that go with it: *Thou knowest Lord, the secrets of our hearts: shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer.*

We find these intimations of the eternal world everywhere. In just a line of sublime poetry such as: *sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. Or: The voice of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple tree.*

Or think of that feeling when you love someone. The nicest thing I ever heard my dad say to my mother: *If I loved you any more, I'd burst.*

The presence of God is subtle. The reality of eternity. It is forever half hidden and half revealed. Memorably to the married couple on their way to Emmaus on the first Easter Day: *But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.* Until later: *He took bread and blessed it and brake and gave to them...and he was known of them in breaking of bread.*

In all these ways, God seeks to comfort us with the reality of heaven, half hidden, half revealed in the things of this earth. As usual, St Augustine puts it better than anyone:

But, what do I love, when I love Thee? Not the prettiness of a body, not the graceful rhythm, not

the brightness of light (that friend of these eyes), not the sweet melodies of songs in every style, not the fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs which can be grasped in fleshly embraces - these I do not love, when I love my God. Yet I do love something like a light, a voice, a fragrance, food, embrace of my inner man, wherein for my soul a light shines, and place does not encompass it, where there is a sound which time does not sweep away, where there is a fragrance which the breeze does not disperse, where there is a flavour which eating does not diminish, and where there is a clinging which satiety does not disentwine. This is what I love, when I love my God.

Christmas Day

And is it true? And is it true? says John Betjeman. He says it twice just so you know he's a poet. How I miss the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who could be counted on to pop up every Christmas and Easter to say there were no wise men, no shepherds, no angels, no oxen and asses, no star, no Virgin Birth and no Resurrection. Remember his phrase *conjuring trick with bones*? David Jenkins had a knack of coining the vivid phrase, but the vivid phrase was soon drowned in the swamp of his gabbling loquaciousness: a morbid, even tragic, combination of effects – like a sublime sprinter who was damned forever to have both legs down one knicker.

Actually, Bishop Jenkins was only proclaiming all over the mass media what the theological colleges have been teaching for the last forty years. Having been through that theologically licentious sausage machine, I can tell you the church doesn't need Richard Dawkins to pull it to pieces. It has its own unbelieving theology professors. Their main article of faith is that you can't believe much that's in the Gospel.

In my day the buzzword was *demythologising* and its leading exponent was Professor Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg. His famous phrase was *You can't believe the miracle stories of the New Testament in the age of electric light and the wireless*. And everyone was so captivated by the vivacious novelty of this saying, that no one thought to ask, *Why not?*

Actually G.K Chesterton had already ridiculed this notion before Bultmann came on the scene. Chesterton said, *The idea that a doctrine may be believed in one age but not in another is like saying that a doctrine may be believed on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, but not on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday*. Well, I did write a little satirical musical about demythologising at college and on the last night of term a gang of us got up in the common room and sang demythologised carols:

Hark the herald angels sing; Bultmann is the latest thing.

Now why, if it was not true, did the first disciples of Jesus preach that he was the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary his Mother? Well, the unbelieving professors taught us that the disciples did so in order to stress what an important person Jesus was. Let me examine the logic of this for a minute. Suppose I told you that our Parish Clerk, John Gaze, is very good in the Sanctuary and that he is generous with people in need. This is true. But would I really enhance John's

reputation if I were to add, *Oh and by the way, he arrived here fifteen million years ago from the planet Zog on a motorised cucumber...*

What the unbelieving professors were saying is that the disciples didn't believe the Virgin Birth and the other miracle stories. They just made them up. In other words, they were lying. But let's do a bit of literary study for a minute: is the wonderful teaching about love, compassion and sacrifice – the saying above all by Jesus, *I am the Truth* – all the manufacture of a bunch of liars?

Are we really supposed to believe that the disciples endured ridicule, hardship, persecution, torture and death for something they knew all the time was a pack of lies? Can you hear Simon Peter saying to St John, *I know a good way to get us crucified mate – let's go round spreading old wives' tales and theological balderdash!*

Besides, when it comes to scepticism, there is nothing unique about our modern age of *electric light and the wireless*. Why does the modern age persist in regarding all its forefathers as blithering idiots? The people of New Testament times were just as sceptical as the people of today: the disciples were ridiculed for preaching the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Only a handful of people at first believed the Christian story. Remember the walk to Emmaus all in the April evening when those two disciples were walking along the road with Jesus, not knowing it was he, and they told him that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified; and they added shamefacedly, *Certain women came saying that they had seen a vision of angels which said that he was alive*. In other words, even some of the first disciples thought the Christian story was old wives' tales.

The unbelieving professors say the gospel stories are legends or romances. On this, C.S. Lewis who was a professor of romance literature commented:

Whatever these men may be as biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading...If he tells me that something in a gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read....

I know what legends are like. I know that not one of them is like the Gospels. The Gospel is reportage – though it may no doubt contain errors – pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell's Life of Johnson. The reader who does not see this has simply not learned to read...

This is good stuff from C.S. Lewis, but we can go further. The earliest tradition of the church says that the story of Jesus' birth is recollections by the Virgin Mary who told them to St Luke, and St Luke wrote them down. After your Christmas dinner, or first thing tomorrow morning, just read the first two chapters of St Luke's Gospel and you will hear the unmistakable tone of a personal reminiscence. Read the Gospel aloud. We don't do enough reading aloud. The Christmas Story is an eyewitness account. We can believe it because the first eyewitness, and Mary herself, knew it was true.

This is marvellous indeed, but it does not end there. The truth is not something that belongs only to the past. The truth lives in the lives of those who believe it. And the bare, bold truth gains

shape and substance as it grows in the hearts of those who do believe it. So the truth shines out to us in the icons of Madonna and Child, in the early Italian paintings which give us old midwinter Bethlehem in full colour. As Christ was made flesh in the Incarnation, so the Christmas truth is given flesh and lineaments in the great cathedrals, in the Christmas arias and choruses in *Messiah: Unto us a child is born.... And the glory, the glory of the Lord*. It is bursting with life, light and joy in *The Christmas Oratorio*.

Christian history, civilisation and culture is the incarnation of Christian truth: the Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

The truth of Christmas is a contemporary truth. Not just truth in old Bethlehem, but truth now. And you have to help the truth become realised in your life today. You do this by reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting it. You must take it into yourself like your Christmas dinner. You must imbibe the truth with your Christmas drinks. Do this, and the truth shall make you free.

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