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Sermons for the Christian Year

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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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3rd April: Easter 2

LIES, LIES, LIES

By the Revd Allan McCafferty
Kirkwall, Orkney

John 20:19–31 (Revised English Bible)

In the House of Commons there are certain procedures that are rigidly followed, and one such procedure is that members do not call each other liars; they have to find other euphemisms and ways of expressing the same thought if they must, but to use the word ‘liar’ of a fellow MP is not allowed. It is one of those words, that if uttered, would almost certainly make the Speaker of the House have the offending MP immediately withdraw such an accusation or face expulsion from the chamber and being barred from entering again for a period of time. It is a serious matter.

Lies come in degrees starting with ‘little white ones’ and progressing up the scale of seriousness. The difficulty of course is that what is to one person a ‘little white one’, is to another person, quite simply, a basic stand alone lie.

When it comes to matters that affect the very fabric of people’s ordinary ongoing lives, if a lie is told it can be like a weather forecast and act as an indicator of stormy times ahead.

Have you ever been called a liar? If you have the chances are you remember being called it. It’s not a word that’s normally used lightly or an accusation that rolls off the tongue unless there is good evidence to substantiate the claim.

Maybe you have called someone a liar. Maybe even someone close to you.

If one half of a couple has been significantly overspending and running up a large debt without the other knowing – maybe shopping or drinking or gambling or some other thing that is out of control – that’s not good. If one partner has been having an affair with someone else, then most certainly that’s serious.

Such things can cause dismay and hurt, but if the relationship between the couple is deep and strong, then with a smattering of things like some forgiveness and contrition and hard work and communication the difficulty can be worked through. But if the partner is directly asked whether they have been overspending and have run up a large credit card bill, or if they have been seeing someone else, and the person in question flatly denies it and says ‘NO’, but are subsequently found to have been lying, then the issue can move into a different level of magnitude. It can be like a stab to the heart of the other, because the relationship of acceptance, trust and honesty that was built up is knocked. It certainly doesn’t mean to say that the difficulty can’t be forgiven or worked through, but the chances are it would have been much easier if when directly asked, ‘Did you do such and such?’, the honest, truthful answer had been given.

Often people can excuse a whole myriad of faults and failings, but lying is always looked upon gravely. Think historically of government ministers. If they are honest with the House of Commons and say ‘I did this, but I was wrong and I am sorry’, they can generously be excused a not insignificant error, but a small error compounded by a lie can swiftly bring an end to a ministerial career.

Think of the famous quote, ‘I can’t tell a lie pa; you know I can’t tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.’ The life of the cherry tree may have suffered but the reputation of George Washington, the first President of the USA, was bolstered.

Lying is serious.

But what has that to do with the readings for today?

Just as lies can range on a spectrum from ‘little white lies’ at one end to the other end which more and more clearly is a downright lie, then so too can the way we respond to situations in terms of doubting other people’s words.

The stark statement ‘You are lying’ at one end of a spectrum moving to ‘Are you being economical

with the truth?', down to 'I'm not sure about that'. The context and the way each phrase is expressed, as much as the words themselves, carrying with them their true meaning in any given situation.

The reading from John's gospel finds Thomas missing when Jesus Christ appears to the other disciples on that very evening after having spoken to Mary by the tomb. The Revised English Bible says the disciples 'kept telling him, "We have seen the Lord."'

We can imagine Thomas thinking to himself – 'what a peculiar statement.' Jesus is only a couple of days dead, his body is missing, and Mary has announced she has seen the risen Lord. And now all the other disciples are saying that they too have seen the Lord. How must Thomas have felt? The tomb is empty, the body is gone, but by the evening of the discovery all his friends are saying 'We have seen the Lord.'

The disciples had left their old lives behind to follow Jesus, he had been arrested, tried, crucified, the body was now gone and now all the other disciples around Thomas were saying 'We have seen the Lord'. Does Thomas wonder if they are ganging up against him and treating him in a cruel and heartless way? Or does he think everyone is going insane around him?

Does he feel marginalized and on the edge of a group that not long ago he was clearly a central member of?

But leave behind Thomas for a minute. Think about how the other disciples are feeling, 'They have seen the Lord', they must be excited and enlivened, it has been a rollercoaster ride of emotions. Yesterday, the feelings surrounding the death of the man whom they had left their old lives behind to follow, were sinking in. Since then an empty tomb, and then Mary saying she had seen the Lord. But now they too were able to say the same. From death to life, from sadness to joy, they must have been bursting with excitement.

And through that excitement, how many times did it make them say to Thomas 'We have seen the Lord'? As the Revised English Bible says, 'They kept telling him'.

Maybe they were oblivious to his thoughts and feelings, totally wrapped up in their own excitement.

How many times did he hear them say it before he says, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails on his

hands, unless I put my fingers into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it'?

The context and how Thomas expressed these sentiments probably carried some of the meaning, but certainly you can imagine his words land somewhere along the spectrum which has the statement, 'You are lying' at one end of it. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my fingers into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it.' He does not simply doubt that Christ is Risen, he is doubting their word.

Of course Thomas himself sees Jesus the next Sunday evening, but what must that intervening week have been like? If Thomas does not believe, yet all the other disciples do, does he feel excluded? Does each day become ever more unbearable as they again and again tell him what they saw? Or do they get to the stage of hushing up and saying little about it when Thomas comes into their presence? Or are they annoyed with him because he will not believe them, do they feel he is almost accusing them of talking nonsense?

Often when we think about this story we concentrate on Jesus' words, 'Peace be with you'. Or the fact that Thomas doubts. But today we have considered the relationship between Thomas and the other disciples. And that adds something to the story.

In other words rather than simply being about the faith of Thomas, this story is about a threat to the harmony and the relationship between the other disciples and Thomas. It is not only that he is missing at the time of the appearance, but by being missing that he may well have found himself marginalized or at least feeling so.

The re-appearance of Jesus, then, a week later does not simply allow the missing disciple to believe, it makes sure that harmony between the disciples at a significant time of change, when they were feeling that they had been on a rollercoaster ride of emotions over the past week can be restored. This story not only shows us Jesus talking about peace, but by his appearance he institutes the setting and the circumstances to allow peace to flourish and harmony to reign. If Thomas was feeling sidelined, it is as though Jesus is saying, 'Thomas, you are not excluded. You too must be part of this group which will go out into the world and spread the good news.'

The second Sunday evening appearance is not simply about the faith of a man, of Thomas. It is about the harmony and togetherness of a community.

Any hints of lying or doubting melt away and Thomas is able to say, 'My Lord and my God'. Together, this fledgling community are empowered, and able, with the strength of the Holy Spirit, to forgive, share their personal story, and spread the gospel.

10th April: Easter 3

THE PRESENCE OF THE RISEN CHRIST

*By the Revd Dr Chris Knights
Scotswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

Luke 24:13–35

In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18 (v. 20), Jesus is recorded as telling his followers that 'wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them', and I've often thought that today's Gospel reading, the justly famous story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and two disciples on the road to Emmaus from Luke 24, is almost a sort of enacted parable of or commentary on that saying, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

The story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus is all about how disciples can discover the presence of the risen Christ in their lives, where and how they can both meet and recognize their risen Lord.

First of all, the disciples meet with the risen Christ while they are gathered together. Jesus joins not just one of his followers, but two, and two ordinary followers at that, not leaders of the disciples. All we know for certain is that one of the two was a man called Cleopas. I like to think that the other disciple was his wife. A wife of Cleopas (which is tantalizingly close to Cleopas) is named as Mary in John 19:25. In that verse, Mary the wife of Cleopas is depicted at the foot of the Cross of Jesus on Good Friday, in the company of Mary Magdalene and of the mother of Jesus, and Mary the wife of Cleopas seems to be also described as the sister of the mother of Jesus.

If all these connections hold out (and that's not certain), then one of the two disciples joined by the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter Day was both a witness of Jesus' death and a close

relative of his – which would make their failure to recognize him all the more remarkable!

The crucial thing, however, is that Cleopas and the other disciple met Jesus as they journeyed along *together*, not individually. And the same goes for us. We meet with the risen Christ, we discover his presence, as we gather together. The Church is always corporate. It's not a matter of 'Me and my God' but always a matter of 'Our God and us'. Christ makes himself known in the gathering of the people.

Then Cleopas and the other disciple discovered the presence of the risen Christ in Jesus' patient explaining to them of the scriptures. On reflection, they realized that their hearts had burnt within them as the stranger had drawn them to the sacred words on the road, and that burning of their hearts was, for them, a sign that it had been Christ who had been present with them.

And the same goes for us. We too meet with the risen Christ, we too discover his presence, in the scriptures, as we read them and as we hear them read, proclaimed and expounded. It's worth recalling that most of the books now contained in the Bible were not written to be read individually and privately, but to be read out loud and heard and listened to, corporately, just as Cleopas and the other disciple *heard* the scriptures and Jesus' exposition of those scriptures. It is the same today. Christ makes himself known in the proclaiming of the Word.

And then Cleopas and the other disciple discovered the presence of the risen Christ when, at the house in the evening, Jesus broke the bread before them. It was at that moment that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And the action of Jesus was clearly a re-enactment of the Last Supper, and was so the second ever celebration of the Eucharist.

And the same, once again, goes for us. We too meet with the risen Christ, we discover his presence with us, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, in the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing of the bread and of the cup. Christ makes himself known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Cleopas and his wife or companion met with the risen Christ in each other, in the scriptures and in the Eucharist. And so do we. And we need all three – others, the Bible and the Holy Communion – for that meeting to take place most truly, for they are what make the Church and make her worship.

For if we look at the communion service as a whole, we find that those three things are indeed

reflected in it. The service begins with what is now called 'The Gathering', where the focus is on seeking Christ in each other, an emphasis repeated later, at the Peace. The next section is, 'The Liturgy of the Word', where the focus is on seeking Christ in the reading and expounding of the scriptures. The final section is 'The Liturgy of the Sacrament', where the focus is on seeking Christ in the bread and the wine.

There's quite a famous prayer, intended to be prayed on a Saturday night before coming to worship on a Sunday. Its original form goes:

More than watchmen long for the morning,
more I say than watchmen for the morning,
so longs my soul for you, O God.
Come with the dawn and make yourself known in
the breaking of the bread,
for you are our God for ever and ever. Amen.

It's a prayer which I like and use a lot, except that I expand its second sentence to reflect what I've been trying to say today. Rather than just, *make yourself known in the breaking of the bread*, I pray *make yourself known in the gathering of the people, in the proclaiming of the word and in the breaking of the bread*, thus preserving that triple focus so clearly shown in the story of the Emmaus road. Perhaps you'd like to start praying it too, in that expanded form?

While we gather for worship for God's sake, to give glory and 'worth-ship' to him, and not to make ourselves 'feel better', it is nevertheless true that it's right for us to expect our hearts to burn within us as we gather together to hear the scriptures and to share in Holy Communion, for that is, it seems to me, one of the signs that we have indeed discovered the presence of the risen Christ with us and within us.

May God grant that it may indeed be so, that our hearts may indeed burn within us as we worship together, not just today, but always.

17th April: Easter 4

LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

*By the Revd Peter Chave
Plymouth*

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Lectionary readings are like Christmas presents: some are easier to be grateful for than others. Three

of today's have sheep and shepherd imagery, making them traditional and beautiful – like the cardigans Granny knits us – but 'so last-millennium!'

The reading from 1 Peter 2 is more like Uncle sending us a subscription to a reactionary newspaper. Starting at verse 19 is clever, but cannot really evade the previous verse: 'Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but even those who are harsh'. 'Politically incorrect' is not the half of it!

How can we counsel such passivity to evil? Especially when slavery persists in many forms in our own day.

Am I going to be critical now of Acts 2:42-47 – the idyll of the Early Church? Only to say that it is like those Christmas letters we get from 'the ideal family': everything is going absolutely brilliantly for each happy, high-achieving member. It doesn't make us envious exactly; just gives us a pang about our own very human, less than perfect family – or church.

Having grumbled about my lectionary presents, I now zone in on a precious treasure one of them contains. John 10:10b has always been my favourite scripture text. It was read at my ordination, at my wedding and at my son's baptism. I think about it often. Texts can truly be used as mottoes for our living. They can also be 'mantras', repeated over and over to lead us deep into prayer and meditation. You will not find a better one than this: (Jesus said) 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. Or, following the New English Bible, which translates the key word with an actual English idiom: 'I have come that they may have life – and may have it in all its fullness'. This is Jesus' intention for his 'sheep' – and for the others from different folds he also cares about, and will in due course gather in (John 10:16). This text makes the vital point that Christianity is life affirming. It does not counsel playing safe – doing as little as possible, lest we fall into sin. It is not negative or miserable but richly hopeful. The passage includes Jesus' self-sacrifice – 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). But our response should not be to spatter our lives with self-inflicted petty 'sacrifices' he does not ask for. Rather, we should enjoy, and make the most of, the life he has won for us. The text is often read as if it referred to Heaven. Life, it is claimed, can only reach its destined 'fullness' there, and Jesus has come to

lead us there. Fair enough – but before we reach that destination, life is here: perhaps a good many years of it. There is too much life here and now for us to manage it without Jesus; or for Jesus to have intended to exclude it from his remarks.

If ‘Life in all its fullness’ (as abundant as is possible short of heaven) is Jesus’ plan and gift for us now, it must be our serious project too. Like the servants with the talents, we must receive the blessings tendered and do the best we can with them.

What then *is* ‘Life in all its fullness’? It is hard to define – but it is recognizable. It is not jam-packed busyness: more like a balanced portfolio of enjoyable, improving, worthwhile and helpful activities – plus appreciating and relating-with the world and people round us.

Let Rudyard Kipling give us the taste as he describes the boy Kim setting out to adventure on India’s Grand Trunk Road: ‘The diamond-bright dawn woke men and crows and bullocks together. Kim sat up and yawned, shook himself, and thrilled with delight. This was seeing the world in real truth; this was life as he would have it be – bustling and shouting, the buckling of belts, the creaking of wheels, lighting of fires and cooking of food, and new sights at every turn of the approving eye ... India was awake, and Kim was in the middle of it, more awake and more excited than anyone’.

Now, substitute yourself for Kim – and think what would make up ‘life as you would have it be’ – abundant life, for you. We are so different that each of us must think for ourselves what would thrill us with delight and make us awake and excited. [We could adjourn the sermon for five minutes to let you do it]. We are sufficiently similar, however, that we probably all settle too often for much less. So, I suggest it is a universal religious duty (for example) not to watch too much second-rate TV – but it is your own choice whether you go to the Opera, the Rock Concert or the Football match instead. ‘Self-fulfilment’ is a fashionable aim – and many Christians are wary of it as a ‘New Age’ aberration. But our text surely implies a duty to fulfil our potential, to flourish and to grow, to pass our precious time in quality living, not merely existing. It seems to me that, in the terminology of John 10, Christ the good shepherd has won us some safe space – seen off the wolves and thieves who threaten to destroy – and the least we can do is make the most of our living. Clearly Christians will not pursue ‘self’

-fulfilment in isolated selfishness. They know they are children of God. Life will never be truly full unless it is shared with God. The natural setting for this is the Christian community and ‘fullness of life’ becomes a common goal, a co-operative venture. Returning to Acts 2:42–47 in a less jaundiced mood, we can rejoice that church life can sometimes be awesome and wonderful, people’s needs do get looked after, Christians keep company with God and with each other. When we do eat together ‘with glad and generous hearts, praising God’ (2:47), people take notice and are touched. ‘Life in all its fullness’ is never achieved by trampling over other people. It comes as we try to help them to have it too. The Church enjoys the taste of ‘abundance’ whenever it strives to make quality living possible for all. What a sobering thought that while we (for fullness’ sake) are deciding to take more exercise, read more serious books, or learn a foreign language – many a Third World community is simply hoping for a good supply of clean water or regular food to transform its life. The fullness of our living must include giving some practical help for theirs.

Now let us face the starkest problem with all this merry talk about ‘life in all its fullness’. Surely, for some people it is a cruel impossibility. They have been stricken by some disastrous circumstance that prevents them simply resolving to live richer lives – and doing it. Illness, misfortune or oppression, accident or imprisonment, have closed down their options drastically.

Could this be where we are driven back on 1 Peter chapter 2? Up to this point I have been talking as to free persons with some mastery over their lives; urging you to fill those lives with quality activity.

But many people are more like the slaves to whom Peter speaks, whose situation was wretched and (at that time) beyond transformation. We must move very carefully here. I do *not* want to say (as 2:18 might suggest) that the unfortunate should accord their misfortune any rights, or defer to it in any way.

I do want to suggest as Peter does (2:20), that in an appalling situation it is still better to do right than do wrong. In very narrowed circumstances this could bring out an unexpected ‘abundance’ that may be hidden there. Jesus’ own story is cited as an example (2:21–22). Other such ‘hard cases’ might be Bonhoeffer in jail or St Therese of Lisieux in her mortal illness.

What could be more full of life than the theologian's deep and novel thoughts from prison or the nun's offering up of her suffering (a sacrifice not self-inflicted and not petty) to do good to others? You will know other people who have impressively achieved 'life in all its fullness' in straitened circumstances.

'Achieved' may be the wrong word. Bonhoeffer and Therese would surely say so. 'Life in all its fullness' is not something we go out and achieve. The achiever was Jesus. He is our example. He set us within a loving network with God and our fellow beings. He fought off the evil threatening us and made us space – to live. 'Life in all its fullness' is not just our activity – primarily it is receiving as a gift his activity for us: accepting and enjoying Jesus' love.

I still have difficulties with sheep and shepherd imagery – but since I have not found a better, twenty-first century, idiom, I turn back (sheepishly) to it in closing.

The danger is missing out on life in all its fullness, either by failing to 'go for it' or by seeking it in the wrong place. 'You were going astray like sheep' (says 1 Pet 2:25). Jesus is the right place: 'but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls'. Life in a sheepfold still sounds unappealing to me, but life with Jesus as guard and guide and friend is abundantly attractive. Let us 'go for it' indeed. AMEN

24th April: Easter 5

A WASTED LIFE?

*By the Revd Colin Sedgwick
Kenton, Middlesex*

Acts 7:55–60

When a person dies young we sometimes shake our heads and wonder what they might have been. A concert pianist? a great goal-scorer? a leading brain surgeon? a prime minister? We speculate; but, of course, we can never know.

I feel a little like this when I think of Stephen. No, we don't know that he was young when he was stoned to death, the first Christian martyr. But we do know that no sooner was the church *born* – than he *died*. What might he have accomplished given another twenty years! Perhaps he would have turned out a great companion of Paul, a missionary

preacher, a teacher of the church. But he is allowed to die at the very dawn of the church's life. How prodigal God sometimes seems with human gifts and talents, indeed, with human life itself

Luke surrounds his death with a number of details which can only challenge and inspire the Christian.

First, Stephen was a Spirit-filled man (v. 55). Luke has a particular interest – in both his gospel and in Acts – in the Holy Spirit, so this detail shouldn't surprise us.

The condition of being 'filled with the Spirit' can be described in more than one way. On the one hand, it can apply to an instantaneous, one-off event: this is what happened to Peter when threatened by the religious authorities (4:8) – the Spirit came on him in an instant to equip him for the demands of the moment. On the other hand, a person may be filled with the Spirit in the sense of this being a settled characteristic – 'Spirit-filled' is the kind of person this person habitually *is*. And it is this second expression that Luke uses of Stephen, both here and when we first meet him in 6:5.

Luke, then, is not speaking here of some kind of mystical experience that Stephen had at this crisis moment (that comes later). No, he is telling us about his character and personality. When you met Stephen, it would seem, you were aware of being in the presence of someone who was ablaze with the life and energy of God, someone who had something other-worldly, something heavenly, about them.

It is this kind of 'Spirit-filledness' that the New Testament urges on every Christian believer (e.g., Eph 5:19). It is a condition which comes from a deep and intimate relationship with God. We should aim for nothing less.

Second, Stephen had a vision of glory (vv. 55–56). This is the 'mystical' part. He 'saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God'. The new-born Christian here stands in choice company – Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, to name three.

Such experiences are not common. It is natural for us to envy them – oh for a touch of the mystical in my drab little existence! But we need to be careful. Moses and the others suffered much in the aftermath of their visions. And Stephen was to pay a heavy price for his – a few minutes later the stones would be thudding into his body and cracking his skull. Why God chose to give him this vision I don't know. But I suspect that when we hanker after an experience such as this, it is for our own spiritual comfort and

security, not because we want the glory of God. The Bible warns us to be careful of visions, signs and wonders: 'This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign . . .', says Jesus in Luke 11:29. If God chooses to *give* them, fine, that's his prerogative; but we are not to *seek* them.

Third, Stephen betrayed a truly Christ-like spirit. As he sinks towards death he says two things, both of them thoroughly reminiscent of Jesus.

First he prays, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (v. 59). We can't help but think of Jesus on the cross crying out 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). The difference is that Stephen directs his words to Jesus, not to God the Father: an interesting insight into the understanding of Jesus of Nazareth that the early church had already reached – to address *Jesus* in the very way Jesus had addressed *God*!

We probably don't dwell too much on the prospect of our own death. But I imagine all of us would like to feel we will be able to pray such trusting words when that time comes for us. Are you confident in the face of death?

Second, and even more wonderfully, Stephen prays, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (v. 60). Again, we instinctively recall the words of Jesus, 'Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing' (Luke (again!) 23:34). To pray for your tormentors, indeed, for your killers . . . yes, Stephen was truly a 'Spirit-filled' man! When we think of the petty

grievances we nurse, how can we not feel ashamed? Am I harbouring some stupid little grudge today? Are you? Even if it is something big – a deep and long-lasting wound, perhaps – should we not at least pray for grace to show this same Christ-like spirit?

Luke rounds off the story of Stephen's death with beautiful simplicity: 'When he had said this, he fell asleep' (v. 60). He doesn't tell us Stephen died; no, he fell asleep. This has at least a double significance. First, it suggests innocence and ease; what could be more peaceful than the act of falling asleep? And second, it suggests things to come, for sleep is not final; it is something from which we wake. And so even in the moment of Stephen's death Luke manages to hint for us at his forthcoming resurrection. This is not the end of Stephen's story!

Luke adds another little detail in 8:1: 'And Saul was there, giving approval to his death'. Saul's conversion to Christ is not to happen for some little time yet. But who can say what impact that experience of seeing the martyrdom and hearing the words of Stephen had upon him? This, very likely, was the moment when Saul's anti-Christ spirit began to melt, his bigotry to splinter.

Yes, Stephen could well have lived another twenty years; but perhaps he achieved more in those few minutes by the manner of his dying than he could have achieved in all that time. A sad, indeed tragic, event, no doubt. But God really does know best. Believe it!

George Herbert

GEORGE HERBERT, *A Priest in the Temple or The Country Parson with selected Poems* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003. £9.99. pp. 122. ISBN 1-85311-532-0). George Herbert was born into a noble family and educated amongst the elite. He set out on a career that pointed towards the Court and then veered towards a life of ecclesiastical advancement. But when he arrived at Bemerton in Wiltshire in 1630 he was still a deacon. There, he was on the edge of the estate of the Earls of Pembroke (to whom he was related) and he was newly married to the daughter of one of the great county gentry. And he was presented to the living by the Crown. This was to be his first (and only) cure of souls and it was close enough to Salisbury for him to walk there once a week to sing the evening office in the Cathedral – at least until the consumption that was to carry him off within three years debilitated him too much. His idyll of country life, *A priest in the temple* (published in 1653, twenty years after his death, as a document intended to remind those suffering from puritan zeal of the benefits of a gentler time) is a prose eclogue, an attempt to justify an opting out of worldly ambition. This edition, with a elegantly bland introduction by Ronald Blythe, but to which a delicious sampling of Herbert's poetry is appended, is not to be preferred to the several scholarly editions currently available. But it can be recommended to all those who like good writing and whose enjoyment requires nothing in the way of context or explication. It is nicely produced and is a reminder of how beautiful the English language can be. It is a book of quiet yearning for life as it might be, not how it was (or is). But it is none the worse for that.

JOHN MORRILL, Selwyn College Cambridge