Sermons for the Christian Year

SAGE Publications

The Expository Times 2005 116: 162

DOI: 10.1177/0014524605051867

DOI: 10.1177/0014524605051867

SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

THE TEXTS ARE TAKEN FROM THE *REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY*
(THE CANTERBURY PRESS, NORWICH, 1992. ISBN 1–85311–063–9)

6th March 2005: Lent 4

LIGHT THROUGH THE VALLEY

By Dr Patricia Batstone
Honiton, Devon

1 Samuel 16:1–13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:1–41

Introduction

The old, old man lay in a hospital ward, visibly distressed. A constant stream of white- and blue-coated figures were plying questions – 'Where's the pain?' 'Where are your pills?' 'Have you unpacked?' 'Would you like tea or coffee?' 'Haven't you filled in your supper menu? … signed your forms?'

Surely it must be somewhere on those records they keep that he *couldn't* sign forms because he couldn't *see* them? And no one ever told him who or what they were so he thought the orderly was the doctor and the doctor was bringing his tea, and he could have died of embarrassment.

When it was asked why they could not write 'blind' under his name on the communication board the answer came that it was not 'politically correct' because it was divulging personal information! The fact that it was vital information was of no consequence. It was not acceptable to refer to a person's blindness – but they didn't even accept him as 'visually impaired'.

The question may very well be posed: *who* was blind? The old man or the politically correct hospital sister? Jesus wouldn't have hesitated to declare yet again, 'If you *were* blind you would not be guilty …'

In the lengthy readings in today's Lection we can see 'visual impairment' or whatever we prefer to call it demonstrated in several ways – obvious and not so obvious – and we also see how God Himself deals with the questions it raises. Let us consider firstly:

1. Samuel's Eyes

He was sent to Bethlehem to find a replacement as king for the disaffected Saul, and he went to Bethlehem with little faith and much fear – so much so that God suggested he went, ostensibly, to offer a sacrifice; dishonest, perhaps, but a gesture not difficult to regularize, which also put Jesse and his family at ease. The feast was prepared, the family consecrated.

One might reasonably ask whether they realized that Samuel had an ulterior motive, even when he was working his way through the line of Jesse's sons and apparently rejecting them.

Or was Samuel as confused as everyone else when he reached number seven and there'd been no divine assurance? Samuel was learning to see, properly, spiritually.

Here was a handsome young man, strong, tall, well-turned out, with a kingly presence – surely he'd make a brilliant leader?

'Oh no,' says God. 'You haven't read the inside of this book. It's not a bit like the cover. I can see into the story and know what the ending would be. He's not all I need him to be. Actually, at heart he's a big coward.'

Samuel is astonished, and even more so as he is led down the line of seven – seven, the perfect number. It couldn't be possible that the ideal family couldn't produce God's chosen one – but no.

Then the revelation: there was more – one more – this red-faced slip of a lad who lived for his sheep, had no pretensions or ambition – but had the courage of a Trojan when his flocks were in danger. Samuel's spiritual eyes were opened wide.

2. The Blind Beggar's Eyes

Here is a man who has been an object of pity throughout his life. Any child born blind, however perfect in other ways, was an instant reject. This one seems to have been more fortunate than some for his parents had not altogether thrown him out, but brought him up till he was old enough to be put out on the street each day to beg for his living – and possibly theirs.

Right up to the twentieth century blind girls fared little better, considered worthless because no man would give anything for a blind wife. It was Bible Lands Society pioneers who found these girls, huddled in corners, out of sight of the world's eyes, and they founded schools and educated them – the nearest they could get to giving them sight.

But this blind beggar was given something of far greater value even than education – sight. Not restoration, not healing, but the gift of sight that he'd never known before.

Imagine it! There he sits by the roadside, oblivious of the passers-by, conscious only of the occasional clinks as a coin dropped into his lap. Technically, he is begging on the Sabbath, even though he is saying nothing.

Suddenly he becomes aware of voices – voices talking about *him* – and talking *to* one addressed as 'Rabbi' – 'Why was he born blind?' What a question! His parents were sure it was something they'd done, the only reason they'd kept him at home was guilt. To have turned him out altogether would have added to that guilt.

The Rabbi starts talking about *work* – on the Sabbath – work and daylight. The man only knows the time by the actions of his parents who send someone to lead him home when it begins to get dark. He doesn't understand the bit about someone being 'light of the world'.

Then he *feels* something wet on his eyes; only the watchers know exactly what and they feel revulsed. Now a voice speaks to him, 'Go and wash in Siloam' – not in a water bowl or at a well, but at Siloam. He can just about gauge the way there on his own. He doesn't know why he's being obedient but he is. Like a robot he's programmed to obey any command – 'Sit down … get up … move on … to Siloam'. How thankful he is, though, that once he has made the initial move, unknown strong arms link into his and guide him to the pool.

Whatever the voice has put on his eyes hurts and is hard, and he has great difficulty in getting every last speck out and it's as he's trying hard to release a particle of mud that he realizes he can see his own hand in front of him. It has to be a hand because it's rubbing his eye. A veil seems to have dropped and darkness has become light. He turns and surveys a foreign territory and realizes that now he has no idea of the way back to the market-place. But he doesn't have to ask what sight and light are – he *knows*.

C. S. Lewis wrote a horrific story of a man born blind who couldn't get anyone to describe light because they had no words for it and couldn't see that he couldn't see for himself what they took for granted. This beggar has no such doubts. How pleased his parents, his friends, his neighbours will be for him! Or will they?

3. *The Eyes Of The Pharisees*

It doesn't at first occur to him that what has been done to him constitutes work, even though that's what the Voice had said. Worse still, when he returns to the spot where he'd been sitting, the stranger and his friends have gone – he can't even thank them.

Now he is faced with hosts of people who know him but are having trouble believing him. They've been no more than voices before.

Then the religious leaders appear. Some instinct tells him what they are and he feels uncomfortably intimidated, but defiant.

'Who healed you?'

'The Prophet!' (Why has he suddenly called the Rabbi 'The prophet'?)

'What sort of prophet heals on the Sabbath?'

'What sort of sinner has power to restore sight?'

His parents are sent for, and arrive, astonished, wanting to be glad since they feel a burden being lifted too, yet hardly daring to own their son because of the influence of the priests.

Again he is interrogated. Again he tells the truth: he has become witness to the power of God in human life. Now he becomes frustrated. Something good has been done to him. God doesn't work like this through a bad person – and no one but God could open a blind man's eyes.

Whoops! They are angry. Who does he think he is? 'Get out of our town! We don't want you here.' They can't see for looking and they don't like what they do see.

By now he's almost tempted to fling the gift back – if he could. At that moment Jesus comes looking for him, but the beggar doesn't know who this man is, though the voice seems a little familiar.

'Have you faith in the Son of Man?'

A strange question, but a Messianic question and the man realizes a connection – 'Who is he? Tell me and I will believe.' And when all is revealed the man falls to his knees in gratitude and faith and nothing else matters.

That's when Jesus turns on the Pharisees and condemns their lack of sight – or rather, insight. They say they can see – yet spiritually they are totally blind.

4. The Eyes Of The Sheep

We heard about David being filled with the Spirit of God, and that infilling gave him spiritual eyes – eyes that could distinguish light from darkness and declare that God could lead him even out of the darkest valley, when there seemed no hope.

He saw God as his Shepherd, and he is our Shepherd too.

The writer to the Ephesians recognized this as he equated the new Christians as those having come out of darkness and now living in light – and in turn lighting the way for others, for that is what living in the Light of Christ is all about – telling, sharing with others.

The beggar's first instinct was to declare what had happened. He knew the danger signs, the risks, but this was too big to be ignored.

Even King David, who experienced many dark times in his life, was positive about sharing the experience of God bringing him out into the light.

This is what the Christians of Ephesus were being urged to do. This is what *we* are being urged to do.

A member of the Methodist Conference declared that *she* was impaired – but it was her wheelchair that was disabled. She could see – but like the old man in hospital, those he needed and relied on were blind – in this case socially blind. Just as the Pharisees were blinded by their laws – and judged for it – so those hospital staff were blinded by their political correctness into withholding the very support that was really needed. And they, too, may find themselves judged.

13th March: Lent 5

LAZARUS, HIS FRIEND

By the Very Revd John McIndoe, DD
Glasgow

John 11:1–45

We are not told how Lazarus felt about being brought back from the dead. Some people who have had near-death experiences have reported feelings of reluctance at being returned to the conditions of bodily life. It may be that such people have not actually died. Lazarus, on the other hand, had been dead four days.

But, we protest, dead men do not rise, or at least not as Lazarus rose. No wonder people hearing the story of Lazarus find it bewildering. Of course that might be the point of it. It is outrageous in the same way that the gospel is outrageous, cutting deep across the grain of common-sense calculation and startling us in the way that Ezekiel startled the dry bones into standing upon their feet in response to the word of the Lord.

But, in any case, how are we to understand the Raising of Lazarus? Is it a miracle or a parable? Is it a drama on the theme of resurrection? And what about such puzzles as the two-day delay before Jesus set out for Bethany or his uncharacteristically public mode of prayer in face of the by-standers? On the other hand, who would want to surrender the most poignant verse in the whole Bible: *Jesus wept*, or to sacrifice that final masterful summons: *Lazarus, come forth*?

Faced with enigmas like these we are tempted to pick and choose, but there is one weighty consideration that requires us to treat the story as an undivided whole, namely, that the writer wrote it that way and who are we to say that he was wrong? We may willingly concede that the event itself is inaccessible to us, though clearly something extraordinary happened, but the general theme is clear enough. Beyond that we must place ourselves at the service of the story itself.

There is no escaping the emotion in the story. Anger simmers just beneath the surface, as it is always liable to do when bereavement is in the air. The frank reproachfulness of the two sisters: '*Lord, if you had been here in time our brother would not have died*' is matched by the muttered indignation of the by-standers: '*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying*'?

But who, in all this, is Lazarus? Central figure he may be but by any standards he is an unremarkable person, except in one particular: he is the friend of Jesus. That is his repeated and unvarying designation whether it be his sisters or the mourners or the Lord himself who so describe him. It was at the tomb of this undistinguished man that Jesus stood and wept. *See how he loved him*, the people said.

How strong and durable is the bond we call 'friendship'? Our present-day culture gives a prominent profile to 'friends' but has devalued friendship to the point that it has become an easily disposable relationship, in which 'friends' are those with whom one shares a communal life-style for as long or as short a time as may be convenient. This is not to say that there may not be many sincere friendships today which defy the cultural stereotype but in that case they are likely to include the key quality of loyalty. The wisdom of the Bible put it well: *Not all friendships last but some friends are more loyal than brothers* (Prov 18:24). In the case of Jesus' friendship we may recognize the quality of loyal love, strong as death, reaching up to and well beyond the grave. If the story of the Raising of Lazarus is meant to present Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, as it surely is, then we may take the Lazarus event as a foreshadowing of the final consummation that awaits all God's people when Jesus will change our lowly bodies to be like his own glorious body by the power which enables him to subject all things to himself (Phil 3:21).

That lies in the future but we are not required to wait until the End before benefiting from the redemptive and resurrecting power of Jesus Christ our Lord. The teaching of St John's gospel is that the cross-over from death to life can take place for all of us in the here-and-now, even if the final fulfilment lies beyond. In the words of Jesus: *All who hear my words and believe in him that sent me have eternal life; they do not come into judgment but have passed from death to life* (John 5:24).

In Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* we encounter a character in need of redemption. He has committed a murder but can protect himself from guilt by his own clever reasoning. Beneath the surface, however, he is troubled. He becomes acquainted with Sonia, a girl of the town, no match for him in learning or argument but of a sincerely good and Christian spirit, who stands by him in his turmoil. Visiting her house one day he notices a New Testament lying and, to her surprise, asks her to read a particular passage which he remembers from school days: the Raising of Lazarus. This she does, but he appears quite unmoved. In due course he confesses to the murder and is sent to a prison in Siberia. Sonia continues to stand by him, despite his blank unresponsiveness. But one day, almost in spite of himself, he finds himself missing her. His frozen spirit has begun to thaw, and he remembers again the story of Lazarus. The story ends with these words: 'It was the beginning of his gradual rebirth, his gradual regeneration, his gradual passing from one world to another, of his acquaintance with a new and hitherto unknown reality.'

Perhaps at the end of it all the story of Lazarus grips us because we have all experienced our own little deaths and resurrections. Our credo may be nothing more than 'I was brought low and the Lord helped me' (Psalm 116:6) but we will recognize that when we needed it most aid has come and often in strange and unlooked-for ways. Behind that, if we have the gift of faith, we may recognize the generous provision of Love. *For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

20th March: Lent 6

PASSION SUNDAY

By the Revd Ron Dale
Harrogate

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

There are certain Sundays in the Christian calendar that make me smile, one of them being Passion Sunday. In my imagination that title conjures up a picture of two young lovers enjoying themselves on the back row seats of their local multi-screen cinema!

What the Church means is of course very different, being a title that heralds the 'passion', the suffering and death of Jesus.

Now the word 'passion' is only used once in the Bible, in Acts 1:3: 'To whom he also showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.' A word used therefore of the suffering of Jesus, but as the writer of Hebrews puts it: 'Crowned with glory and honour, that he, by the grace of God should taste death for everyone.' This is the backcloth then of Palm Sunday – a link between death and resurrection.

So let's take a closer look at the last spoken words of Jesus as he dies on the cross, illustrating them from some modern films.

In John's Gospel, the last spoken words of Jesus are: 'It is finished,' and I want to illustrate those words from the film 'Driving Miss Daisy' which starred Jessica Tandy who, in her eightieth year, won an Oscar for her performance.

The opening sequence of the film shows a car emerging from a garage then crashing. Miss Daisy is the driver and her son determines that from now on his mother shall have a chauffeur. But Miss Daisy is a stubborn old woman of the deep south and it's quite comical to see her new black chauffeur driving slowly along the road whilst trying at the same time to persuade Miss Daisy to get in the car. However, Miss Daisy has other ideas and slowly walks to the shopping mall, arguing with her driver all the way and refusing a lift.

Slowly but surely however, as time passes these two very different people get to know and, after a fashion, love one another. The straight-laced, stubborn, set in her ways Miss Daisy from the upper crust of wealthy society in Atlanta, Georgia, and the lowly, but wise and cheerful black chauffeur become almost as mother and son. In fact, later on in the film the wealthy only son visits his mother in a retirement home and finds that his mother is far more interested in her chauffeur. Indeed, Miss Daisy sends her son away, sitting happily at a table with her old chauffeur friend. By this time Miss Daisy can't do much for herself, not even raise a spoon to eat her food. The closing scene shows her being gently fed by her old ex-chauffeur. So in a way Miss Daisy could say, 'It is finished', the old life-style, the old get-togethers with friends to play cards and chat, the driving of the car, the old family home: finished.

But the chauffeur could also say, 'It is finished' in a very different way. He was retired, with his own home and the old family car he had bought from Miss Daisy. So his job had finished, his old life-style had finished, but the most important thing of all that HE had finished due to his grace and practical care, was that he worked hard in offering friendship, grace, practical care to Miss Daisy who in the end accepts him, is reconciled to him and totally at ease with him.

Now if a gracious and caring black chauffeur could achieve such a miracle in the deep south of America, think what Jesus accomplished by his death on the cross. As he said during his life, 'As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.'

Now let's move on to the last spoken words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?' Words that express the loneliness of Jesus in his agony, abandoned by mankind and seemingly forsaken by God; but words that also express a total devotion to God that endures every agony and bad experience. A devotion that continues to claim God as 'My God' and will not let Him go.

Now let's take a look at those words in the light of another film, 'Steel Magnolias', starring Dolly Parton and Shirley McClaine among others.

This also is a film from the deep south of America, full of marvellous wit and pathos. I suppose the film is a kind of picture diary concerning the lives of five women and the ordinary events of their daily lives, with marriage, divorce, Christmas and death being the main ingredients. Shirley McClaine is wickedly funny and very temperamental. One of her friends has a daughter Shelly who is preparing for her wedding. All the friends gather in Dolly Parton's hairdressing salon as the bride to be has her hair 'fixed' with the film slowly taking us into Shelly's home and all the pandemonium of preparation; also into the church so beautifully decorated for the wedding; later, after the wedding, into Shelly's new home with her new baby, born against all medical advice. Tragedy soon strikes as Shelly is taken seriously ill and put on a life-support machine. But it soon becomes obvious that there is no hope, so the machine is turned off and Shelly dies. After the funeral service, by the graveside, Shelly's mother begins to scream her rage at such a terrible thing as the death of her daughter. It is one of the most moving illustrations I've ever seen of those words of Jesus, 'My God, my God, why did you abandon me?' And just as in the Gospel, after the resurrection of Jesus, it becomes plain that God was sharing the pain, had not in fact abandoned a grieving mother.

But in the sad and dark moments in hospital and by the graveside, it was not at all obvious that God was indeed there, save maybe in the film, of some halting and pious words of a family friend and in the gospel story in the words of other women who bore their witness to the risen Christ.

Last of all, let's take a look at the last words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel: 'Father, I commend my spirit into your hands', words that express trustful commitment and a voluntary acceptance of suffering and death. However it's the title of 'Father' that I

want to concentrate on because that's the powerful theme of another film called 'Dead Poets' Society' with Robin Williams playing an English master in a kind of 'Ivy League' American school. If Jesus turned the world upside down, Robin Williams turns the teaching of English upside down, with all traditional methods torn up and thrown out of the window and with the pupils in the all-boys school coming to love every minute. One of the things Robin Williams' character tries to do is to encourage the boys to be themselves, to seize the day of opportunity when it comes, to adventure forth into life with colours flying. Slowly you begin to see changes in behaviour: the hesitant, doubtful lover becomes a bold one; the young aspiring actor flies in the face of his father's wishes and goes on stage. But for him, therein lays the tragedy, because his father, a very strict disciplinarian, a real martinet, brooks no disobedience from his only son. He had his own plans for his son's life and, in order to make them come true, he removes the lad from his school and the influence of the teacher, in order to enter the family business. Tragedy strikes as the son shoots himself with his father's gun rather than be obedient to his father's wishes and plans.

That particular father was portrayed as being wealthy, ambitious, ruthless and determined to plan his son's career and lifestyle, but only tragedy and death resulted. In other words, a very bad father figure is portrayed. Seeing this made me ask questions about the kind of father figure that Jesus pictures in the Gospels.

If you read Matthew's Gospel, here is the kind of picture that emerges: God is a Father who loves all his children impartially, making His sun to shine on the good and bad; He expects a high standard of behaviour. He desires the Ten commandments to be lived out in gratitude, He commands that His people shall not murder. But according to Jesus anyone who is angry with his brother must stand trial and anyone who calls his brother a fool must face the supreme court. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' He says and Jesus adds that 'Everyone that looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart'. Love your neighbour, yes, but also love your enemy. God is our Father who gives us our daily bread, forgives our trespasses and delivers us from evil. He is the Father who knows all our needs even before we ask and, according to Jesus He is completely dependable, therefore, we are not to worry about anything, or at least, to take all worry to Him. He is a Father who bountifully cares for all His children and whose good pleasure it is to give them His Kingdom.

For us then, it's not only at the hour of our death that we commend ourselves to our Heavenly Father, it is surely every day. The life and Passion, the crucifixion and death of Jesus in all his agony, reveals a Father who cares for you beyond your wildest dreams and hopes. And Jesus lays down, if you like, a pattern for us all. That in this life, even in the darkest of moments, and particularly when we also feel that He has deserted us, we are to go on trusting Him, go on loving Him, go on desiring Him, to the very end. And that end will mean a glorious new beginning for us all.

27th March: Easter Sunday

WHAT GARDEN IS IT?

By the Very Revd Andrew McLellan, DD
Dunfermline

John 19:41 – 20:18

It is a real garden; the garden of Joseph of Arimathaea. They put that in for a reason – it is mentioned in all four gospels. They underlined that it was a proper garden owned by a real person: a person who could be identified and a garden which could be identified. So it could not be said that they had made a mistake, that Mary and Peter had gone to the wrong place, for it was some other garden that they should have gone to. It was the garden of Joseph of Arimathaea. There was no mistake. Think what you will about Easter: you won't get away with saying they went to the wrong place. The Easter garden is a garden of confidence.

The garden is in the gospels to help the earliest believers be confident that there was no mistake in the Easter story. But what garden was it? General Gordon thought he knew. Visitors to Jerusalem today are taken to a place called 'The Garden Tomb'. General Gordon was travelling through Jerusalem in 1883 and was very much moved by visiting a garden with an empty tomb in it near the Damascus gate. Convinced that this was the very garden of Joseph and the very tomb of Jesus he gave money for its care and upkeep. The arguments about its authenticity

have been most persuasive to evangelical Protestants like Gordon. But even those who are confident that Gordon's tomb does not represent the historical site of Joseph's garden find it a charming, inspiring and memorable place.

It is disappointing that fewer and fewer Christians are expressing their solidarity with Christians in Jerusalem by visiting Israel and Palestine in these times of their greatest need; but it is interesting to see that the number of visitors to the Garden Tomb is actually increasing. It is a place of peace in a city of war: which would be a good thing to say about an Easter garden. The Easter garden is a garden of peace.

For most people, at least in the northern hemisphere, the Easter garden is a spring garden. Easter eggs and butterflies and bunnies and daffodils: all the signs of new life. The butterfly is an old Resurrection symbol: its beauty emerges from the apparent death of the chrysalis. Daffodils bursting into yellow glory from the withered skin of the bulb planted in the cold ground are just as early a Christian symbol and a sign of resurrection.

> In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
> In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
> In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
> Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.
> In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
> Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.
>
> (*Hymn of Promise*,
> © 1986 Hope Publishing Company)

Plenty of Christian hymns, like that one, have made good use of the coming of spring at Easter-time. God brings life out of death at Easter, the very time when nature's garden shows the sings of new life. The American writer E. B. White watched his wife as she came near to the end of her life. She had always loved to garden; every year planning the planting from the bulb catalogues was a joy. When she became very ill, she still struggled out when it was time to plant.

> Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Catherine would get into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little round wool hat and proceed to the director's chair placed at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones, ready for the intricate interment. There was something comical, yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. The small, hunched-over-figure: her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be another spring: oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand; sitting there with her chart under those dark skies in the dying October calmly plotting the resurrection.
>
> (E. B. White, *A Biography*, 1984)

The Easter garden is a garden of hope.

It is a Biblical garden. Only one other garden is mentioned in the New Testament. It is a story about Jesus and it is a story about Easter. It says that he went across the Kidron valley to a garden; and there he was betrayed. The writer of the Fourth Gospel is always making links: it is not simply guesswork, therefore, to put together the only two stories in the gospel narrative set in a garden. Put the Garden of Gethsemane beside the Easter garden and Easter is no longer merely the fresh face of spring. For in the Easter garden the suffering of Jesus is healed, the prayers of Jesus are somehow answered, and the betrayal of Jesus is forgiven and overcome.

There is another Biblical garden every bit as significant for the Easter garden. It is in a garden that the Bible sets its terrible story of man and woman and the world's pain. That Garden of Eden story is a story of human disobedience, of human sin; and it is a story of human suffering and the suffering of the whole creation. That is the background for the Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus. In a garden the world was lost; and in a garden the world was made new.

When Mary meets Jesus dead no more on Easter morning it is not really her discovery that he is dead no more that matters. It is not really her realization that death is not as strong as the power of God which matters. What matters is that all that is wrong is now being put right, that the worst that can be done is not all that can be done, that behind and beyond the darkness there is the light of God. There was the Garden of Eden with its message of despair; and now there is the Easter garden with its message of life and hope. They used to say that when they were driving the cross into the ground for the execution of Jesus they struck a skull: and it was the skull of Adam. The Easter garden is a garden of healing.

What garden is it? It is a real garden, it is a spring garden, it is a Biblical garden. A garden of peace, a garden of hope, a garden of healing. And it is the garden in which we all live. Before Eden was the place of pain it was the place of God's creation, the work of God's hands in which the people of God were placed in love. Living in the garden of God's creating is what the people of the Bible do long after Eden, although it is now the garden of the Bible's poetry: *The Lord shall guide you continually, and you shall be like a watered garden* are the words of Isaiah. So is the image of the vineyard as the beloved people of God. It is in the garden of the world that God's people live; and it is in that garden of the world that Mary finds Jesus is risen.

All the other gardens are a distraction if they prevent us from seeing this garden. What matters about the Easter garden is its ordinariness. It is the garden in which we all live. Not just religious people, not just good people. The garden of the world in which ordinary people have to do their best and where they worry and hope and fear and somehow muddle along. When Mary came running into the garden from all the tears of her life and all the tears of the last three days she was not entering a new world. She was coming home. She was in the world in which she had always lived. And Jesus came to her. He was dead no more.

The Easter garden, where the resurrection happens, is the most ordinary of gardens, the world in which we all live. It is the place of God's creating, and the place of human struggling. It is where love takes shape. It is in the real world in which we are all placed that God begins new life.

A chapter or two earlier in John's account Jesus says *I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener* (NIV). In the Easter garden of the ordinary world, the place of God's creating, Mary believes the risen Jesus to be the gardener. She was more wise than she knew.

MINISTRY AND VOCATION

Charles Richardson, *This is Our Calling* (London: SPCK, 2004. £11.99. pp. 142. ISBN 0–281–05600–5).

THIS is a collection of eleven concerted essays by various hands around the theme of vocation. Vocation is treated in a general and open way as the call to the complete people of God to discern their vocation and exercise their ministry and only in the penultimate chapter 'The Call to Ministry', by Peter Edwards, is a detailed presentation of the vocation to ordained ministry set out. The collection is clearly related, often in practical details, to vocation in the Church of England although much of the material will be of use to those discerning their call in the context of other churches and denominations. The reason for this is the helpful structuring of the chapters around biblical passages and biographical examples printed in distinctive and obvious paragraphs throughout the book.

The discussion of scripture is one of the strengths of a book which issues from the Catholic tradition and Anglicanism, specifically reflecting the concerns of the 'Society of Catholic Priests' and 'Affirming Catholicism' as Charles Richardson notes in his introduction. There are therefore helpful chapters on creation by Charles Richardson, with an emphasis on living the way God intended humanity to be; and on incarnation, 'The Call of Jesus' by Kevin Scully, which is a forthright challenge to understand vocation in the light of Jesus' own calling and commitment to the will of God. A central chapter on Baptism, by Sheila Nunn, is a timely discussion of the vocation of all the baptized, seeing baptism as a form of 'ordination' to ministry which all the baptized are called to discern and live. This is one of the most important chapters linking with the fresh emphasis in the Roman Catholic Church on the ministry of the baptized and with the well-known emphasis on every member ministry within evangelicalism.

Although it is touched on, the call to self-denial is not discussed as fully as this theme deserves and although the helpful emphasis on the variety of vocations and ministries is maintained, some fuller discussion of the meaning of the diaconate and priesthood would have been welcome. Nevertheless, the book is full of helpful insights, useful information and it is a pleasure to welcome a co-ordinated treatment of such a vital theme.

GERALD HEGARTY, SAOMC, Oxfordshire