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ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

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Deconstructing the Church's Ministry

It is a great honour to be invited to deliver the Eric Abbott Memorial Lecture. I never met Eric Abbott but he has been a name in my consciousness for a long time. He belonged to that small group of influential figures, all intensely Anglican, who have made their impact on history and ideas mainly through the ministry of friendship and love. When Leslie Houlden invited me to deliver the lecture he suggested something about the crisis in ministry in our time. I have called the lecture *Deconstructing the Church's Ministry* and I shall be diagnostic rather than prescriptive, though I do have a few ideas about that as well, none of them original.

Before I begin this presentation, however, let me enter a disclaimer. Those of you who know the novels of David Lodge, a former English professor at the University of Birmingham, will remember the two university novels he wrote: *Small World* and *Changing Places*. In these novels he describes the international jet setting of the English literature professional who goes from conference to conference reading the same papers on structuralism and post-modern literary criticism. The lecturers in the novels swop universities, countries and spouses along the way. One of the most endearing characters in the novels is an energetic North American from the University of Euphoria called Professor Zapp. One of Professor Zapp's epigrams is that 'every decoding is an encoding'. I take that to mean that there is no escape from subjectivism in human affairs and the attempt to achieve complete clinical objectivity on any topic is delusionary. Nevertheless, we have to attempt analysis and diagnosis of the various contexts in which we find ourselves, human, institutional and ecclesiastical; and, while it may be wrong to claim complete objectivity for our attempts, there is no escape from the task of interpretation, from what theologians call the hermeneutical task. In what follows in this presentation, therefore, I am not claiming complete objectivity in interpreting our current predicament. Rather, I shall attempt to describe how I see and experience the situation we are in. If we all do this we may be able to move forward, as long as we remember that 'every decoding is an encoding'. The question I want to answer is this: 'In organising the Church's ministry we know we are not where we want to be, but how did we get to where we are?'.

Before attempting to answer that question directly, I wish to posit three operating theological principles that I shall assume in the discourse that follows. The first theological principle is this: what we call original sin unbalances and distorts every human endeavour. Original sin is shorthand for that intrinsic bias in human nature that disfigures all human systems and relations. Kant probably described it with the greatest elegance when he wrote that, 'From the crooked timbers of humanity nothing straight can ever be built'. This is a way of acknowledging the intractability of human history, sometimes described as Murphy's Law, that if a thing can go wrong it will. I'm not positing any theory of origins for this human tendency. I'm simply acknowledging that there is an intrinsic or systemic fault in us, a bug in the human system that modifies all our institutions. Having said all that, to be appropriately paradoxical, we have to enter the opposite truth, sometimes called the doctrine of original blessing, which recognises the human aspiration towards righteousness, justice and unity.

For the purpose of this lecture, however, I think it is more important to focus on the impact of original sin, rather than original blessing, on our structures. This means that all our instrumentalities are vitiated by our own nature. This is not a pessimistic but a liberating doctrine. It frees us from the compulsion to make unsustainable claims about ourselves, our relationships or the institutions we have developed. I am fond of the long poem by the American poet, Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body*. These are some words from that epic poem:

So, when the crowd gives tongue

And prophets, old or young,
Bawl out their strange despair
Or fall and worship there,
Let them applaud the image or condemn
But keep your distance and your soul from them.

If you at last must have a word to say,
Say neither, in their way
'It is a deadly magic and accursed',
Nor 'It is blessed', but only 'It is here'.

A radical view of human nature, what is sometimes described as Christian Realism, should lead us to the understanding that there are no perfect structures, no absolutes in the relational sphere. This means, if we are wise, that we won't invest ourselves neurotically in the defence of structures that no longer serve us well. That defensiveness is difficult to avoid, of course, because we are insecure creatures, but we should try to catch ourselves at it. The point I am making here is that systems failures, like personal failures, should not surprise or depress us, nor should we allow them to paralyse us. They will paralyse us only if we make too many unsustainable claims on behalf of our structures. I suspect that the Christian tendency to theologise everything, including the way we organise ourselves, is one of our biggest dangers, seen most convincingly during the debate over women's ordination.

The second theological principle I wish to enter is the forgiveness of sins, a doctrine that has to be understood radically and universally. The experience of the forgiveness of sins leads us to a radical understanding of the doctrine of grace. We are saved, not by getting it right, but by the love that redeems us while we are getting it wrong. This experience of grace applies to much more than our private failings, though that's the area in which we tend to confine our experience of forgiveness. Grace and the prevenient mercy of God apply everywhere. The doctrine of Grace applies to ideas, to structures, to relations, to organisations. These all need constant forgiveness. Our efforts are constantly met by the grace of God filling what we lack, forgiving what we have badly done or left undone. Forgiveness of sins is also a liberating doctrine. We no longer have to make false claims, to live defensively, only honestly. It is all right not to have got it right: indeed, it is expected, it is understood. I came across a poem recently that began, 'You don't have to be good'. The point of the poem was liberating; its thesis was simple. We can't start out good at tennis, although we might get to be good by practice. The same is true in the Christian life. We can't start out good. We don't have to be good. We cannot be good at something we're just starting out on, and most of us are just starting out on our humanity. There is an unavoidable, developmental integrity in life. The whole point of it is our growth, the possibility of getting better at things, largely through trial and error. But if we think we have to be good, have it right from the start, be all right, then we trap ourselves in false claims, pretend to a perfection we cannot possess. Life, especially Christian life, is an experiment in human maturing, leading us from defensiveness to mature freedom. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is immensely liberating. Our God expects us to be trying things out, getting things wrong, finding out who we are; and it is all taken care of, it is all part of the deal, part of the covenant between us and the God made known in Christ.

The third theological principle may be slightly less expected. This is it: all our systems, moral theological, ecclesiastical, political, are created for *our* sake not God's. We need them because of original sin, because we have to learn to co-operate, because we are social creatures who need structures and some order in our lives. But it is a dangerous step to claim divine warrant, in any but the most general sense, for any of our systems. The text here is our Lord's word on the Sabbath, when he told us that it was made for us and not us for it. The test is always pragmatic. Do

our institutions, our moral systems, our ecclesiastical structures make our lives more abundant; do they increase our maturity, our joy; do they enhance or diminish human flourishing?

I think it is important to acknowledge the relativity of all human systems because there is an opposite tendency in our nature that prompts us to sacralise them, to absolutise provisional systems and associate them exclusively with God. Since this is more easily seen in retrospect than in our own situation, an illustration might help to establish the point. History is littered with discarded human systems for which human beings once claimed unwavering divine approval. The Victorian class system, for example, captured in a now abandoned verse from Mrs Alexander's famous hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, makes the point precisely:

> The rich man in his castle
> The poor man at his gate
> God made them high or lowly
> And ordered their estate.

God didn't; we did. We organise society in a particular way, usually imperfectly, and claim that it was actually God who fixed it that way. They did it in South Africa for years and called it apartheid, claiming that it was sanctioned by God. The system known as Patriarchy is one that some theologians say reflects, not human development and its systemic imperfectability, but the unchanging will of God. A recognition that all human systems are provisional, are made by us and can therefore be unmade by us, is another liberating insight; it gives us permission to search for systems that are more appropriate to our day. This means that we will not invest too heavily, either theologically or morally, in our systems. We are redeemed not by them, but by the God who is already on our side. The question Christians should ask themselves every day is 'Given that we are already redeemed and forgiven, how should we live responsibly and joyously? How should we express that saving reality in our systems and relations?'

Before moving on, let me add another proviso or operating axiom. The wisest changes in human systems come through evolutionary adaptation, rather than through revolutionary violence. We could spend a lot of time debating an unargued proposition. I'm stating it as an observed phenomenon rather than as a value in itself. Our own emergence as a species probably had its leaps, but it seems to have been the result of a long process of adaptation and incremental change. The evolutionary paradigm seems to have constant validity in human history.

If we accept that the fact of original sin vitiates and distorts all human relations; if we accept that God's response to that systemic flaw in our nature and its institutions is forgiveness; and if we acknowledge that all our systems are provisional, created for our sake and not for God's sake, how can we answer the question, 'How did we get to where we are in the practice of Christian ministry?'? Let me begin to answer that question by stating a thesis which I shall spend most of the lecture trying to substantiate. Here, then, is my thesis: 'Most of our systems are the expression, usually unadmitted, of a structuralist metaphysic'.

Let me start to explain the meaning of that statement. By a metaphysic, I mean the underlying way we explain, account for, or express our understanding of reality. The current buzz word *paradigm* captures something of this meaning. A paradigm is a pattern or model of reality, often unexpounded. And the word *structure*, which suggests a building, something fixed and static, something solid, something *there*, defines the nature of the metaphysic, the paradigm, the symbol through which we understand reality. Let me offer you an example of a particular structuralist metaphysic that used to inform much theology and Church practice, and still does to a very great extent. According to this pattern, God is conceived as the originating fixed cause that got everything else going; and this great engine of divine energy built a universe that is a kind of

machine, a mechanism. It is solid, structured, articulated and ordered. In particular, it is ordered into laws and systems of precedence with humanity just below God, over the created order. But something went wrong in the running of the system, in the management of the factory over which we were set. So God took emergency action to reclaim the territory, the ruined factory, the despoiled country. God lands secretly, like an exiled ruler, paddling ashore on a remote Scottish coast, and gathers together a loyal guerrilla group who are trained to win back and reclaim the lost estate. This is the Church's task. It is the Commando of God, sent to overthrow the usurpers and re-establish God's order.

The life of heaven itself exemplifies this same structuralist metaphysic. This, for example, is the meaning of the angelic orders. Angels are to be understood as bodiless intelligences in a hierarchical order between humanity and God, the creator of both. Tradition holds that the order of precedence is: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, angels. Angels guard us, archangels instruct us, virtues look after our spiritual welfare, powers drive away Satan, principalities direct our lives aright, dominations strengthen us against temptation, thrones help us to persevere, cherubim give us wisdom, seraphim fill us with heavenly love. The human order reflects this angelic hierarchy, descending from the monarch at the apex, through layer after layer, down to the peasant who has only his dog to kick. However implausible this great paradigm of order and gradation may seem to us today, it governed the Church and society's understanding of themselves until very recently. It is still there in the background, sitting in the attic like a dominating grandparent whose anger and confusion play havoc with our attempt to live our own lives. For most of the Christian era this structuralist metaphysic was interiorised by Christians. Like the best plausibility structures, it was treated as a given, as part of the fixed order of things, the very nature of reality, and not as something we had ourselves created. Rebelling against it was thought to be not only vain but unnatural, like complaining about the need to breathe. This prevailing metaphysic had certain dominating characteristics, through which it was expressed and incarnated. It was a system of order and authority, privilege and obedience; it was, above all, a minutely detailed system of inequality. Every institution reflected these characteristics. The State did; the Church did, schools, factories and families did. This was the way things were. This system was as timeless as the mountains, as unalterable as the tides and the rhythms of the seasons. Though it has lost its plausibility today, it still hangs over us like a slowly receding mist, and its influence is powerful; it affects our self-understanding and modifies our attempt to create new and more appropriate patterns that will help us in both Church and State.

In order to disenthrall ourselves from the dominance of this metaphysic we must listen to the great critique that has been levelled against it, particularly in our own time. That critique comes from four different angles. The first is the Marxist insight that power always seeks to legitimise itself with a metaphysic. This is a simple but revolutionary insight. It takes only one small boy to point out that the emperor has no clothes on to bring the process tumbling down. Once we interrogate the pretensions and assumptions of power, and challenge its place in the nature of things, our consciousness begins to change. Amazement begins to grow until we reach the moment when we recognise that for centuries we colluded with a system that enslaved us. This should not surprise or even embitter us. We have seen too often how we get in our own way, collude with our own misery, say Amen to the doctrine of our own inferiority. But it's all an illusion, an intricate management exercise, whereby power sustains its place on the pinnacle of the temple.

The second angle of criticism comes from Jesus, when we hear him freshly and radically. Incidentally, it's worth nothing that Jesus has always been co-opted by people in power to sanctify and anoint their own privileges. This should not surprise us. Alasdair Macintyre has coined a new epigram to express this melancholy reality: 'All power co-opts and absolute power co-opts absolutely'. It is amazing, however, that we have allowed Jesus to be co-opted by the powerful, especially when we confront the reality of his own testimony in the New Testament. The main

force of his witness was against exclusionary divinity and exclusionary humanity. The way that Marcus Borg puts this is to describe the opposition between what he calls the politics of purity, a religion system based on excluding people from God, either ritualistically or morally; and the politics of compassion, an approach based on an understanding of God as longing to draw humanity into the divine life in love and in mercy and intent on breaking down every wall of separation. But so dominant is the hierarchical metaphysic, this paradigm of exclusion and infinite gradation, that it has even modified the way we read the flaming words of the New Testament.

But there the words still sit, primed to blow up all exclusionary metaphysics and every hierarchy of power. Perhaps the two greatest texts that do this are Mark 10:35 ff, where we hear the sons of Zebedee seeking a place in the new exclusionary kingdom to be set up by Christ, so that they may rule over others. The other apostles are furious, not because the Zebedee brothers have misunderstood Jesus, but because they got their bids in first. The encounter provides Jesus with the occasion for the great saying, 'You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'.

An even more revolutionary passage is found in chapter 2 of the Letter to the Philippians, where we read that Christ Jesus, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men'. This is the great Kenotic text: *Kenosis*, meaning the self-emptying of God. We imagine that it refers to a single event in salvation history, the Incarnation, when God the almighty, the unapproachable, the king of kings and lord of lords, the power behind all power, the cause behind all causes, comes among us for a season, parachutes into our midst in disguise to organise a resistance movement that will reclaim the lost kingdom. But what if the doctrine is infinitely more radical than that? What if it expresses the eternal nature of God? What if it tells us that it is God's nature to go forth eternally from God's self; not to hoard the divine life or enjoy it for its own sake, but to express it in creation as well as in the eternal mutuality of the divine Trinity. What if Kenosis, divine self-emptying, is not a diversionary tactic, a ruse, but expresses the very nature of God? Were this to be true, as I profoundly believe to be the case, then we are left with the extraordinary paradox of a God of *un*power, of *un*might, who is yet the source and origin of all power and might. However we deal with these paradoxes, they do demonstrate that Jesus, the man from God, the man who for Christians discloses the nature of God, so that, in John Taylor's language, we talk of the Christlike God, this man sets himself against the paradigm of power as dominance and gradation and becomes its victim.

The third angle from which we can begin to offer a critique of this paradigm of power is, in many ways, the most surprising and intriguing, because it comes from the new cosmology. According to the new physics the universe has three characteristics. The first is that it is dynamic, not static; expanding, not limited; evolutionary, not hierarchical. It is a vast experimental process and modern cosmology is able to take us back to the microsecond just after the birth of creation fifteen billion years and ten seconds ago – and the first ten seconds are unimaginably important. Everything in the universe, all the matter than now composes billions of stars and billions of galaxies, was an incredibly dense mass, so small it could pass through the eye of a needle. From that point it expanded very rapidly and at only three minutes from zero most of the main elements of the universe were formed. The expansion in the first ten seconds was so rapid and so violent that astronomers coined the phrase 'the Big Bang' to help us think about it. Fifteen billion years later the universe, which is still expanding, achieved consciousness in us and started asking questions about itself. Before the discoveries of the new science we had a picture of the universe as a great machine, solid, material, predictable, without beginning and without end. So staggering and

transforming are these new insights, that some scientists liken God to a jazz musician improvising brilliantly, or to the inspired experiments of J.S. Bach. Whatever analogies we choose, we have to acknowledge that we live in a universe that is still being created and in which things are being tested and discarded, tried and adapted.

The second characteristic of the new cosmology modifies the traditional picture of God as the being who pressed the button on the universe-making-machine and set the whole thing going. The new cosmology suggests a god of continuous creativity, constantly at work in the process, engaging with us, partner in our joys and tragedies.

The third element is one that has both biblical and cosmological resonances, the principle of sacrifice, the idea that we are all part of one another and that dying we live. The modern science of ecology tells us of the extraordinary balances of nature, of the way animals prey on one another and by so doing maintain the balance of their own existence, the continuation of their own species. John Stewart Collis wrote a book called *The Worm Forgives the Plough*, which makes the same point. We are part of one another; we live off and from one another, we have a symbiotic relationship with nature and with our own kind. We ourselves are the product of the death of stars. I find the claim that we are result of burnt out stars deeply moving as well as provoking. Angela Tilby, a previous Abbott lecturer, in her book *Soul*, points out:

> 'The very elements of which our bodies are made were not present in the universe at the beginning. They could not have been created until the universe had reached a particular point in its expansion at which the clouds of hydrogen and helium were cool enough to condense into the galaxies which formed the first stars. Stars are the great nuclear furnaces in which all the complex elements are made. Their metals and minerals and gasses are released into space in giant supernovae explosions. These can only happen when the balance between the internal pressure of a star and its own force of gravity breaks down and the star explodes.'

These burnt out stars are whence we came. We are stardust. The whole process is vast, prodigal and costly, but sacrifice seems to be one of its governing principles, and improvisation seems to be the method. God the great improviser is continuously engaged in the creative process.

Another fact that modifies human and theological understanding today is surely the new understanding of the Trinity as a community of eternal mutuality and self-giving. We are beginning to appreciate again the radical and revolutionary implications of the doctrine of God as Trinity, put with particular eloquence by Elizabeth Templeton in her book, *The Strangeness of God*:

> 'The strangeness of God, if the Trinitarian character of that reality is taken seriously, is that the last thing God can be is an individual. Far from being the cosmic projection of our microscopic existence as individuals, God is the one for whom atomic self-sufficiency is an impossibility, since what identifies him is the uncoerced communion of being in which father, son and spirit are only in the mutual giving and receiving which sustains each. It is no option for God to be father without son and spirit.'

This means that god's nature is intrinsically collaborative and expresses an eternal mutuality of self-giving, and from that communion of eternal self-offering comes forth the universe and the Church, which are themselves expressions of that mutuality and sacrificial love. What I am trying to grope towards here is an understanding of the universe, and the Church within the universe, as expressing the nature of God as sacrificial mutuality and self-offering. This is the very opposite, the profoundest contradiction of the prevailing structuralist metaphysic with which we started. This, it seems to me, is where we must take our stand today. Increasingly, this dynamic,

Trinitarian, experimental paradigm informs our understanding of Christ, of morality, of the nature of theology and the being of the Church. However, our structures are more than remnants of this power metaphysic reflected in the life of the Church and the ordering of its ministry. Ministry as an icon, as a public expression of an undisclosed metaphysic, still reflects too many elements of the hierarchical governance model.

Actual ministry today, of course, is increasingly modified by collegial models of episcopacy, by mutuality in ministry at the parish level and by the emergence of synodical structures. But there is a strong sense that we are not yet where we ought to be, not yet separated from where we have been. What we might describe as the public theatre of ministry, our mitres and power dressing, our discourse of obedience and canon law, and the whole paraphernalia of legality that is still a conspicuous element in our ministerial arrangements, all express, however confusedly, the discarded paradigm.

So where are we today? Obviously we are in a state of transition. A good analogy is provided by the British monarch and class system. These still exercise enormous nostalgic power over us in Britain today. The monarchy, as presently expressed, and its attendant class system, is a powerful anachronism that hinders us from discovering more appropriate models for our day. I don't think I'm too wide of the mark when I see the traditional understanding of ministry and its public expression as analogous to the troubled role of the Royal Family in Britain and the Commonwealth. We retain a lot of the theatre of monarchy and ministry, partly because we enjoy it and partly because we are not sure what to replace it with, or whether substitutes would be any better. But the underlying metaphysic on which it once sat solidly has been eroded. It is crumbling before our eyes. If we argue to retain anything of the traditional system today, our arguments are all pragmatic; we no longer offer a theological defence. As with monarch, we may have a taste for the theatre of authority, but we want it to be answerable to the common good and reflective of current human development. These transitions are inevitable and, while people of a conservative, not to say nostalgic temperament, may regret the fact, *fact* it remains that institutions like species must adapt if they would endure. Our dilemma today is that we have retained too many of the mechanisms that were designed to protect the mystique of monarch and ministry long after the mystery has departed from them. It has become a bit of a game, an act, a kid on. It would be more honest to work out what purpose a demystified monarchy and a demythologized ministry might usefully serve than put our energy into trying to remystify or remythologize them.

As far as the ordained ministry is concerned, some things ought to be acknowledged immediately. The first thing is that the ministry does not create the Church, it was created by the Church. Bernard Shaw said that all professions were a conspiracy against the laity. Inevitable, the ministry has usurped much that does not belong to it. I am not here talking about ordination as such, though I believe the theatre of ordination has long since eclipsed the theatre of baptism and sent it packing from the West End. Baptism plays in back streets in the provinces; ordination gets the big notices in the big places; it is serious theatre, professional, whereas baptism is amateur stuff that doesn't capture the imagination. It used to be the other way round. Baptism was the big one, the main show. Maybe the theatre of the respective sacraments wouldn't matter if it did not also reflect the realities of structural power. Presumably, organised ministry evolved to help the Church be the Church, now it prevents as much as it enables. We have communities of the baptised, churches in New Testament terms, that are deprived of full sacramental life; in Roman Catholicism because its clinging to a discarded paradigm has led to a shortage of priests, in Anglicanism because of a shortage of money that has led to a shortage of priests. So the professionalising of the Anglican priesthood, making it a financial burden, or the transformation of ministry into a special caste, as in Roman Catholicism, end by depriving the Church, the baptised, of the rights they received at their baptism. This is an ecclesiastical version of the kind of usurpation of function we see throughout human history. 'But it shall not be so among you.'

Obviously, if the historic model of ministry is not delivering the bread then we must find one that will. Increasingly, that is happening along the lines of the vision of Roland Allan who believed that each community of Christians should generate its own appropriate ministerial arrangements, and the last criterion that should be considered is the financial one. It is beginning to happen, of course. NSMs, locally ordained ministers, the apostolate of the laity. These developments should be welcomed by the professional clergy and should not be seen as inferior mechanisms, substitutes for the real thing. There is no permanent real thing except the ongoing life of the Church itself and, like any intelligent organism, it will adapt to changing circumstances because it knows that it bears a reality through time that is expressed historically but must never be limited by any particular phase of history. If I could make one change that would alter the whole culture of ordination in our Church it would be to reverse the whole dynamic of vocation. At the moment, we premise our selection processes on a mystical experience in individuals which we then proceed to validate or negate, with traumatic effects on those who are rejected. If, as I suspect, we are moving into a radically different ecclesiastical culture, we will have to develop an understanding of vocation that starts from the community and moves to the individual, so that people won't offer themselves, they'll be chosen. Maybe, too, we can evolve methods of training that will come to them rather than the other way round.

Let me, in conclusion, touch on another controversial topic, lay celebration. The motive behind this proposal is part exasperation and part mischief. Where it is a response to conditions of eucharistic famine it is understandable enough. But it seems to me to miss the point of ordination. All celebration is lay celebration, ordination is the way the bishop organises the rota. We can always re-invent the wheel, of course, but research would probably show that presidency at the Eucharist was something the Church learned to organise carefully and prepare for wisely and license to sparingly. I have no doubt that the ordained function has usurped many other functions in the Church and I am sure that Evangelicals are right to protest against corruptions in ministry. But they also reveal, by their frustrations, a sectarian rather than a catholic spirituality. Their unit of grace is the congregation, the local connection, usually of the like-minded. Their tendency is centrifugal, like all perfectionist groups, and they tend to break into smaller and purer splinters. The catholic tendency is centripetal, on the other hand; it can lead to over-centralising, but it can work to hold all the dispersing elements together by a sort of gravitational force focused in the office of bishop. Of course, if the episcopal cosmos, the diocese, is too large the forces of disintegration will be strengthened. I suspect that the Church needs to look closely at the way it uses bishops, but that is getting close to my own Trades Union so I'll call a halt there with a final reminder: morphological fundamentalism is every bit as bad as scriptural fundamentalism and liberal Anglicans, who are often heavily into structures, ought to remind themselves occasionally of the parable of the mote and the beam. And that's probably enough offence for one night.