

The Eleventh

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

David Hare

Playwright

at Westminster Abbey

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and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

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When shall we live?

Although, for me, it is plainly a great privilege to be asked to give this year's Eric Symes Abbott Memorial lecture, I can well understand if there are those among you who are contemplating the choice of the present speaker with a certain bewilderment. I must admit that as I prepared to speak, I have shared a good deal of that bewilderment myself. The Church of England is distinguished by its exceptionally non-doctrinaire and generous attitude to those who do not share its own most sacred beliefs. For better or worse, it is nothing if it is not a liberal church. But even so, I can see that it is quite striking that the Dean of Westminster should invite an obvious heathen to speak in memory of a man who, from what I have read of him, seems chiefly marked out from other men by the power of his Christian faith and example.

The oddness of the invitation does not stop there. Westminster Abbey is what is called a Royal Peculiar. That means that it is not under the jurisdiction of any Bishop. Least of all, I was told, in a tone which betrayed an almost Trollopian intensity of feeling, is it, God forbid, under the authority of the Bishop of London. The Queen herself is technically known as the Abbey's Visitor. But it is as a wholehearted, even slightly obsessive republican that I stand here, making my remarks in a church which, even for me, is most movingly full of the evidence of its own intimate connections with monarchs, living and dead.

Those of us who believe and have long argued that the hacking death-rattle of royalty is obscuring other, more positive noises in Great Britain are well used to the abuse we attract from our impassioned opponents. Yet even I was intrigued by the line of attack taken against us in a recent edition of the Guardian. The article had started with the routine attempts to type enemies of the Palace as embittered no-hopers, themselves intent on taking over the running of the country and crazed by the heady prospect of drinking their kir and eating their olives with their literary cronies on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. But as the journalist went on, he reported a rather more interesting argument and one which served to bring me up short. The entertaining royalist historian Andrew Roberts, whose book about the followers of Churchill I admired as much as anyone, was reported as saying that there was one crucial difference between monarchists and republicans, a difference which indicated to any honest observer which side must finally be in the right: that whereas monarchists were, as a group, willing to die for their beliefs, republicans plainly weren't.

In saying this, of course, Roberts was trying to establish that constitutional reform of any kind is a concern of what the press in its most self-hating and exhausted cliché likes to call "the chattering classes". Faith in the Queen, Roberts implied, was in some way a true emotion, whereas faith in democracy must, by contrast, be a phoney one. But it seemed to me an odd way for a historian to vindicate his own case, and indeed one which might unintentionally put him in some distinctly dubious company. Active service members of the IRA, wreaking their random bombings on the city streets, are, after all, willing to die for their beliefs. The lunatics of Hamas, who murder women and children in Jerusalem, are willing to die for their beliefs. Japanese kamikazes, firing killer-sprays on the Tokyo underground, are willing to die for their beliefs. I began at once to form the picture of a portly young historian with barrels of dynamite tied round his chest, going to blow himself up at a meeting of Charter 88, and all in the interests of defending the uneasy House of Windsor.

Beneath this happy image lies what I hope is an important idea, and one which I intend to provide the starting-point of this lecture: that most of us, indeed, do have little idea of what we believe, and are also extremely confused on the subject of whether we would be willing to die for it. Somewhere, in nearly every theological volume I have read, it is asserted that the most important decision any person has to make on earth is what form of supreme being he or she does or does not

believe in. Yet the mystery of this supposedly urgent subject is just how many days, weeks, or indeed years so many of us pass quite contentedly without once being troubled by it. Although you might feel the question of God's nature and existence *ought* to be obsessively important to each and every one of us, the simple fact of the modern world is that it is not felt to be. At least until the approach of death, the majority of Westerners are willing to tick the box in which they profess that they have some generalised religious belief by they are jiggered if they can actually say what it is.

This is, at first glance, a peculiar state of affairs. It is also one for which I do not think the conventional explanations quite hold water. The usual means of arguing away the modern indifference to conventional religion is to assert that because we in the West now live thirty years longer than we did even a hundred years ago, and because we endure less physical suffering, we have therefore lost some crucial sense of what life is actually about. In the Middle Ages, it is said, death was all around. People had an inborn sense of how transitory their existence was. They knew they were not here for long. For that reason their minds were wonderfully focused on the question of where they might be going next. They also knew the unspeakable horror of unrelieved pain and the sharp cruelty of sudden death. So they had no problem, it is said, in directing their minds towards a place where human loss might be explained and, hopefully, relieved. But now, it is argued, comfort and even luxury have inured us to considering the shortness and harshness of our span on earth. The soothing apparatus of our hospitals, the bright lights in our shopping malls, the constant chatter of our television sets and the general anaesthetic prosperity of our surroundings all combine to protect us from brute physical unpleasantness, which was once such a powerful spur to religious fear, if not to religious understanding.

I must say I have some difficulty with this argument. Like many people, I find it hard to admire a God who feels the need to make life short and brutal in order for his creation to appreciate him better. I have my doubts about a religious faith which depends on human deprivation and hardship for it to achieve a suitable intensity. If the only way we can be moved to believe in God is by experiencing the very worst aspects of the world he has created, then I have very grave difficulties with what kind of God he must therefore be. If human beings are, as Christianity claims, put on this earth to worship God and to do his will, it seems an extraordinary state of affairs that they should need to be reminded of that purpose only by the bitterness and brevity of their own lives.

The other way, of course, that the Church consoles itself for the apparent lack of interest in its own affairs is by asserting that there is an overall loss of belief in the idea of authority itself. While I was researching my play about the Church of England, *Racing Demon*, which started life at the national Theatre over six years ago, then I was told by a number of inner-city vicars that we lived in what they were happy to call a post-Christian era. The Church was a victim of the general scepticism which characterised the age. It was, you could say, just one more British institution which no longer commanded automatic respect. I was also constantly reassured by the vicars themselves that they were perfectly happy with this state of affairs. Indeed, some of them even welcomed it. Jesus, one South London rector told me, was a friend of the weak, so that if the Church of England itself was in a weakened condition, one might even say this was a good thing rather than a bad one. It helped the Church to a true Christian compassion. Nothing, he assured me, could be more dangerous than a Church triumphant, as in the Victorian age, for that way lay arrogance and complacency. Shuddering with horror when describing the excesses of the American churches of the South, he congratulated himself on the fact that the Church of England with its declining attendances, rotting buildings and half-hearted theology, was mercifully in no danger of being led astray by any vulgar or excessive popularity.

Besides, I was frequently told, even if people did not actually go to church, it was obvious however that they did have some residual spiritual sense. Even those in one parish who never attended the actual services had been distressed when they saw the old church pews out on the pavement waiting

to be replaced. They feared something was being lost, even if they themselves never actually went as far as using it. Why should a priest worry if spirituality expressed itself locally by less formal means than weekly attendance at the ever-changing, subtly depressing rituals of the Church of England? At times of disaster people gravitated gratefully towards religious buildings. They still felt instinctively that there was something numinous, something holy about a place where, even if you cannot believe yourself, many people have at least believed before you. Although individuals were no longer willing to subscribe to a code – because we lived in an era where codes were all so hopelessly discredited – they did however continue to wrestle with spiritual problems which brought them, most especially at times of birth, marriage and death, towards a house where they knew these crucial things would be honoured. People, in short, were still religious in spite of themselves.

Once again, I am not sure if I want to buy shares in this popular line of argument. Plainly, only an imbecile would deny that we in the West no longer invest much faith in authority. The reason is dazzlingly simple. In my lifetime, authority has not done much to deserve it. As the author of a matching play about the law, *Murmuring Judges*, I am hardly in a position to deny that a mixture of anger and cynicism now characterises people's attitude, for example, to the criminal justice system. The shocking travesties of justice – most of them racially motivated – which characterised the worst courtroom trials of the nineteen seventies and eighties have not led, in the nineties, to a fitting humility among politicians and the legal profession. Instead we have seen an ever-cruder vindictiveness at the Home Office. Under its current office-holder it has no aim to reform the criminal. It seeks only to slake the bloodlust of Daily Mail editorial-writers by doing nothing but punishing him.

As the author of a third play, this time about the Labour Party, *The Absence of War*, I also know that, at least since the election of the present leaderships, nobody has the slightest expectation that a genuine idealism will guide the programmes of the two political parties which have some chance of power. Even the ambition of inspiration is, quite simply, out of fashion. Churchill, significantly a leader at a time of war, was the last Prime Minister about whom the generality of the population entertained overwhelmingly positive feelings. Kennedy, for all his faults, remains the last President. I can also see that when leaders of whatever persuasion attempt to offer even the most hesitant guidelines to suggest a moral basis for citizens' behaviour they make themselves figures of open hilarity and contempt. At a time when you have been part of a Government which chose mendaciously to re-arm Saddam Hussein, when you have been encouraging the leaders of the privatised utilities to risk suffocation by permanent nasal immersion in the public trough, and you are constantly coming upon your own Cabinet Ministers with their trousers wrapped round their ankles, you may well be making a grave tactical error in suggesting that the time has come for the electorate to get Back to Basics.

Yet however dishonest and openly ludicrous the public climate of the time has become, and however deep peoples' disillusion with their leaders may be, I think this obvious ethos of distrust provides a singularly poor excuse for the frailty of the Church. Why should an institution whose concerns are mean, in part at least, to be not of this earth, feel itself so implicated in the failure of institutions which are? On the contrary, you might expect that at a time when powers temporal are so plainly failing to win the love of the populations of the West, people might very well instead have been drawn towards what was being offered by powers spiritual. If, as it seems, materialism has so sapped Western man that he has reached some sort of dispirited stage at which he no longer believes that the best of his dreams and wishes can be embodied in his social ideals, then why on earth is he not turning his attention to a religion, which, in theory at least, is supposed to offer some sort of alternative to a life lived purely for money and self-advancement?

But if I cannot accept the professionals' favourite arguments for the decay of organised religion, I am however persuaded by their final line of defence, by what we may call the Church of England's ultimate fall-back position: in other words, that however incoherent our religious beliefs and practices, we are all still aware of the spiritual side of our nature. Plainly, it is true. Asked recently, like the Princess Diana, though happily in less publicised circumstances, to attend some open heart operations, I looked into the deep crimson cavity of the chest, with the red pulsating football at its centre in a lake of blood. The colours were straight out of the apocalyptic paintings of Fuseli. As I wondered at how we carry around inside us an unseen landscape which so exactly parallels the external world, but daubed in the tones of our dreams, I experienced that familiar giddy sensation of absolute mystery. Who among us actually imagines that the human mind will ever be able to comprehend or 'explain' the universe? When scientists like Stephen Hawking confess such an ambition then clearly they make themselves absurd. The absence in us of any chance finally to comprehend our own existence makes us at every stage of our lives prey to intuitions which often appear to us more real than our ordered thoughts. Yet, like many people, I am not sure if the Church of England's present arrangements always play to that sense we all have of the transcendent.

Last year, answering just such an unexplained urge in myself, I ended up alone, driving a hundred miles on a beautiful spring afternoon to visit what is almost my favourite building in England. I do not know if it is true that Oliver Cromwell really did stable his horses in Ely Cathedral, but the idea of it has always summoned up for me an image of almost unbearable power – the rebel army of the republican movement lying down in straw on that massive stone floor, men and animals all night together, with the magnificent 12th century pillars soaring above them into the sinister, almost primitive darkness of the vaulted ceiling. As I sped across the pancake-flat fields, I could hardly wit for the sight of that extraordinary, cold, mystic façade. On arrival I cheerfully paid the rather surprising entrance fee, only to go in and find a lot of men in shorts wandering about with walkie-talkies in one hand and drills in the other. There was no chance of peace. Whatever humiliation Cromwell had deliberately inflicted on Ely, it was as nothing compared to the Cathedral's own bizarre decision to allow the *Antiques Road Show* to be filmed from there. What are the religious priorities at work when you charge visitors £2.50 to be admitted to one of the most suggestive and hallucinatory church buildings in Europe, only to have the spirit of the place destroyed by BBC carpenters banging away with hammers and by eager townsfolk queuing up to ask whether their granny's chamberpot will turn out to be Delft? It is beyond farce. Yes, the Church's area of expertise is said to be with the spiritual. But at such moments spirituality seems to be the last thing on anyone's mind.

The Christ who threw the moneylenders out of the temple would, I think, have been as bewildered as me by an established Church which has timidly allowed itself to be come so close to the secular institutions of its day – the army, the monarchy, the government. At first sight, it looks like an organisation which now lacks the missionary courage to set itself apart. It sounds too polite, too frightened to remind us that its determining values are in fact radically different from those of the rest of society. Yet, even as I say this, I am also aware that the very best work of what currently makes up the Church of England is conducted by men and women who barely make mention of those crucial values at all.

Having been brought up in an Anglo-Catholic school which laid great emphasis on daily, somewhat futile reminders to the boys of their own innate sinfulness, I was astonished when researching my play about inner London priesthood thirty years later to meet a supremely dedicated group of men who barely mentioned, let alone spread the gospel in the regular pursuit of their mission. To point out the most obvious development, they no longer saw conversion as part of their job. Hour after hour, day after day, there they were, out on the street, doing the most menial and demanding kind of work. As they helped young couples to fill in DSS forms, or advised young blacks in trouble with

the police, as they visited old peoples' homes or went to arbitrate in disputes on council estates, they served honourably as society's trouble-shooters, doing what was to all extents and purposes social work, and all on a half of even a social worker's pay. But at no time did it seem part of their agenda to mention to the people they were helping that every Sunday, in another costume perhaps, they conducted services which related, however loosely, to a much-discussed incident in the Middle East two thousand years ago.

Their principal fear, they said, was of what they, in an alarming phrase, called "stuffing Christ down peoples' throats". This, they say, was something which could only "put people off". As soon as ordinary people heard what the priests called "the language of Zion" – all that familiar talk about God and salvation – they were alienated. At bottom, the vicars said, that stuff was unhelpful. It was – another favourite phrase – "linguistic baggage". The essential message of Christianity was love. If the priests themselves could express God's love for the world through the work they undertook, it would be sheer arrogance meanwhile to dare to insist to what was now a multi-ethnic community that each member adhere to the priest's own private, culturally determined system of belief.

No-one was more typical of this – as one might say – defeatist tendency in the modern church than one compelling South London vicar whose faith was dryer than the driest Martini I have ever tasted. I would say it was ninety-nine parts good work diluted by just one quick twist of doctrine. I asked him for evidence of the power of prayer, in which he said he did unexpectedly believe. Thinking for a while, he cited the example of a very sick child in his parish for whom he had kept an overnight vigil. After twelve hours of sincere pleading with God, the child, whose life had previously been hanging by a thread, had indeed been saved. Impressed by this, I asked him what he would have felt had the child died. "Oh", he replied contentedly, "I'm so surprised when anything happens at all, I don't even notice the occasions when it doesn't."

Of course this low self-esteem in the modern Church militant made, from my point of view, for wonderful drama. To be frank, I had fun. The play was timely. At that moment the well of public values in Britain was being poisoned by an influential government, itself stacked with millionaires, and therefore self-righteously intent on preaching the virtues of acquisition to others. So it was touching to meet a distinctive body of clerics who were so plainly motivated by concerns other than career or money. But I must admit it was also delightful comedy to come upon a Christian institution which seemed terrified of mentioning its own founder's name. A Labour Party which does not dare use the word 'socialism' is one thing. But a church which does not dare say 'Christ' is quite another. As the century draws to a close in this country we somehow find ourselves lumbered with both, and in the play I satirised this tendency by making my leading character a vicar who said he always distrusted priests who approached their parishioners "usually with a lot of talk about Jesus – always a danger sign in my opinion".

The experience of meeting these good souls left me confused, because although I liked them so much personally – liked them, I suspect, far more than I would ever like their fundamentalist brethren – yet it did seem to me, as an outsider, that they were perhaps overlooking some essential point about the Christian religion. If Christ did rise from the dead, then call me a fanatic, but I think you probably do have to tell people about it. The inner city priest's conviction that the poor, for some reason, don't need to be brought up to speed on the news, does seem to be vaguely insulting. The Christian faith, after all, is based on the idea of intervention. Mankind is bowling along, following his own sinful ways, and then once and for all – for reasons which his Son then seeks to explain to us, but essentially because God has begun to despair of us – the physical rules of the universe are suspended and God intervenes. I cannot see how if the facts of Christ's life are true, they do not change everything.

It was here, with this most important point, that I began to confront the real implications of my presuming to write a play about the church. I had embarked on it somewhat blithely, assuming that I broadly liked and admired these essentially decent people. To a degree, I thought them ridiculous, but certainly no more so than playwrights, or judges, for that matter. And overall, I wanted to put them before the public as examples of people whose way of life was genuinely valuable. Anyone who comes at the modern world from a different angle has my vote. I also admired G.K. Chesterton's remark that the Bible story is so unlikely that it must be true. Indeed, I regard that as more or less the most convincing defence of Christianity that I have ever heard. But then I was disturbed to realise that I was coming to agreed with Kierkegaard that Christianity cannot be a 'to some extent' religion. Either it is true or it is not.

But what is it? The more I worked, the more I came to feel that although you may want to believe that Christianity's message may be boiled down to something – however vague – to do with love and its operations in the world, its authority does have to depend on two central claims, which no amount of modernist wriggling can quite dispose of. Christians are people who believe, first, that a man was born of a virgin. And if you ask for a doctor's chitty to excuse you believing even that one, nobody however is going to let you off what I think we may insist is the Christian dealbreaker: that a corpse did walk out of a tomb. These two claims seem to me historically to have exerted such a powerful hold over the human imagination that you cannot simply dump them for jetsam at the end of the twentieth century. It is not just that they are part of the ship. Without them, I'm not sure you have any ship at all. More than that, it is positively dishonest to pretend that if you believe them, then you will not be forced totally to re-construct the model of the universe which you carry in your head. Intervention is not just one idea like any other. It is a different order of idea.

I suppose what I am saying is that it took the writing of the play *Racing Demon* to make me realise just how profound my quarrel is with the defining myth of Christianity. There were times when I listened to the arguments then raging, for instance, over the question of the ordination of women, and I found that I was instinctively against the idea, not on the usual misogynist grounds that Jesus weirdly omitted to designate them for the job, but because I realised that women were in fact the only people likely to bring the unwelcome injection of vitality which would actually keep the whole charade of Christian belief going into the next century. But at other times I felt myself softening, quite simply moved by the palpable sense of goodness that radiates in some churches. If the test of an organisation is its ability to generate individual acts of kindness, then this was a fine organisation.

Those of you who have seen the play will know that I choose to start it with a prayer in which a vicar addresses God on the problematic question of his conspicuous absence from the world. Drawing God's attention to the desperate state of the inner city, the vicar remarks that, at one level, people are resigned to the fact of God's absence. They know that God is going to say nothing. They are used to it. However, after so many years of divine silence, the joke is beginning to wear thin. When God had said "nothing", they didn't realise he did genuinely mean nothing at all. It is, he remarks, with a mildness characteristic of the Church of England "just beginning to get some of us down".

The play kicked off in this manner because it has always astonished me that Christians so often overlook one of the central facts about their God – namely that, in this life, he is nowhere either to be seen or to be heard. What is also peculiar about God's silence – I would even call it eerie – is that biblically it is a fairly recent development. In his book *God: A Biography* the American academic Jack Miles points out that in the Old Testament God starts out as someone people can talk to. Or at least he is someone who talks to them. Throughout the early wanderings, the Jewish God is so often in conversation with individual humans that you could go as far as to call him positively communicative. True, most of what he says is critical. In a paradox which I admit I have never

wholly been able to grasp, God is forever communicating his displeasure with a creation which has failed to come up to his expectation. He becomes, famously, the master of the rebuke and the lamentation. Yet after the book of Job, he grows curiously more and more reticent. It is as if the sufferings of Job seem somehow to break his spirit and he speaks less and less. And in the whole of the New Testament, after sending his son, he only says one thing, although it is something which even a non-believer finds extraordinarily beautiful: “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased”. After this final statement, for the two thousand years which have followed, he is not on record as saying anything at all.

Given this defining feature of God’s existence – that he will not, in any terms which you will recognise as being of this world, help you until the day you die with the question of whether he exists or not – then the surprise of those religious surveys which I mentioned at the beginning is not that so few people can articulate their spiritual beliefs but that anyone call at all. As a child nothing put me off God more than my schoolteachers’ highly selective habit of claiming to see him in whatever suited them – be it in a daffodil or indeed in the abundance of nature. He was there, they said, in the stars. You could even tell he existed by watching the television programmes of David Attenborough. But the appropriation of everything which is good or beautiful or various as evidence of God always struck me even as a child as a particularly dishonest habit. “When I look out across the fields and see the sun rising, then I know that God exists” is a sentiment which has, throughout human history, engendered quite a terrifying quantity of poetry, both good and bad. Buckets of paint have been slapped onto canvas to make the same point. But when you think about it, it is an astonishingly feeble gambit. It can all too easily be countered by equally impressive arguments: “When I look at a small child, buried at three with cancer, or when I contemplate that famous first charge in the Battle of the Somme, then I know he doesn’t”.

For most of us, nothing is more off-putting in the Christian character than its faux-naïf habit of claiming everything which is conveniently positive and sliding over the things which are negative, or just consigning them to some marked-off philosophical dumping ground called “the problem of evil”. If everything which is good in the world is to be proffered and celebrated as evidence of God’s existence, then what are we to make of the bad? After the recent massacre at Dunblane you were grateful for the fact that no honest churchman even attempted to answer the difficult questions. An agonised Dean of the Cathedral on the television that night made a deeply sincere impression when he admitted that it was impossible to provide any immediate reasoning which could make sense of what had happened, or which could offer any proper consolation to the bereaved. But I am sure the Church equally did itself considerable damage the next morning when it allowed some cocksure vicar on the *Today* programme to go on and piously assert that “God has a special place for little children”. This kind of certainty – when we all know there is no certainty – is not just deeply offensive. It is perceived by the rest of us as being profoundly anti-humane. It remains for the parents of the murdered children, experiencing a torment which we cannot even begin to understand – and of which the radio vicar most certainly knows nothing – to decide where their children are now, if indeed they are anywhere. If we who do not believe take reasonable care not to trample on the religious feelings of those who profess them sincerely, then why can we honest doubters not ask an equal respect from churchpeople?

It is at moments like these when the Church does what one character in *Racing Demon* calls “all that awful claiming you do” that some of us become positively hostile to the strategies of religion. For as long as Christian practice is, effectively, social work, we are grateful for it. Our gratitude has more than a whiff of bad consciences. You are willing to do work which we are not. You will spend time with the sick and grieve with the dying. You will try to heal the wounds which a class of ideological politicians has created in society at large. But when Christianity then goes onto the offensive and starts telling us that the suffering we endure here in this world is somehow justified, that it even has meaning because it is part of an absent God’s larger plan and purpose, then we

become angry. We are angry because we sense a certain unwelcome opportunism in religion which seeks to follow its own agenda and capitalise on our grief. We do not accept your view of the world as some sort of divine laboratory in which we are effectively rats, reacting or failing to react to religious stimuli. We do not wish to be told in St Paul's most disgusting metaphor – a metaphor indeed which reduces human beings even further, to the mere status of things – that we have no more right to criticise God than “the clay has the right to criticise the potter”.

You will sense from what I am saying how hard I think it is to find any sense of proper proportion in a life dedicated to propagating the gospel of Christ. Go too far in one direction, as perhaps my likeable friends in the inner city have done, and your tone becomes laughably apologetic. What Anglicanism's admirers would call its open-mindedness comes across all too easily as lack of fundamental conviction. The doctrine of turning the other cheek seems not just quixotic but downright disingenuous in face of the modern world. But head off in the other direction and you pretty soon start to fall victim to practices which violate peoples' own sense of the privacy of their sufferings. Who, looking at the spectacle of millionaire preachers seeking out cancers among the elderly in Californian convention halls, or the equally grotesque money-driven antics at Lourdes, can doubt that Christianity is a religion whose power has traditionally depended in part on the almost unique ease with which it can be perverted?

After a while, I came to believe that this disturbing problem of tone, which hamstring the modern church and so easily sets one tendency against another, was not a coincidence, but instead actually told you something about Christianity itself. Like some other religions it has survived precisely because no-one can quite say what it is. It was that devout Christian Dorothy Sayers who remarked of the Athanasian creed that by the time it had informed you that God the Father was incomprehensible, Jesus Christ was incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit was incomprehensible, you were perfectly justified in concluding that the whole thing was incomprehensible. But who can deny she had a point? So many of Christ's actions and sayings seem to me so deeply ambiguous and so prone to so many different interpretations and conflicting meanings – who for instance can ever understand why on earth he casually blasted that fig tree? What on earth was that about? – that it is hard to resist the conclusion that the durability of the religion bearing his name is down to the fact that it can stretch and bend in almost any direction you choose. (The fig tree, let's remember, was just standing there when he blasted it, and what's more, in just the sort of display of vulgar magic which otherwise he tells us he deliberately disdained.)

Of course it is true that all prophets depend on a certain inscrutability in order to achieve a desirable longevity. As a director friend of mine who longed to be compared to Peter Brook once remarked: “I'd like to be a guru, but I can't do the silences”. Anyone like me who lived through the would-be student revolutions of the sixties is well used to the idea that the most influential prophets are always the ones whose precise meanings are hardest to discern. In those days, as soon as you said anything definite on the subject of, say, Karl Marx or indeed about Marxism itself, you would at once be told by some superior soul that you had insufficiently understood Marx. Or that your simplistic view of Marx did not take into account some factor or another. Or that if you could read him in the original German, you would know that of course he did not say what you thought he did. And of course there was always the most familiar excuse of all, and one which I think may even resonate on these sacred premises: that Marx was not a man whose ideas had been tried and found wanting, but – wait for it – a man whose ideas had never been tried.

However, even by the standards of other charismatic thinkers like Marx and Freud, Jesus Christ was prone to making comments which seem to support an almost infinite variety of exegesis. It was once said that by definition economists could not be expected to get anything right, because, of course, if they did, the world would only need one economist. In some sense, it is not up to a god to explain himself. That is left to the disciples. But a remark like “Render therefore unto Caesar the

things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" could almost have been produced by computer scientists working at the cutting edge of linguistic theory to formulate the single human sentence responsive to the greatest imaginable number of readings. No sooner does anyone tell you it is quite simple, and that they know exactly what it means than someone else pops up to tell you it means the precise opposite. Anyone who heard Margaret Thatcher claim that the Good Samaritan was only empowered to do good because he had first worked hard to amass a considerable private fortune – naturally enough, as anyone who has read the story recalls, by the sweat of his own brow and, specifically, as St Luke is at pains to point out, without any debilitating Palestinian state subsidy – will know that the Bible often seems like some massive, incoherent natural resource, a kind of philosophical building site full of old planks and plumbing, waiting to be looted for purely private purposes by any old mad woman with a handbag who happens to come along. No wonder it is the book which has traditionally provided so much inspiration to raving loonies in the street.

Is there anything firm, then, we may say about Christian teaching, which cannot be reasonably countered by someone anxious to swing the myth round to suit their own prejudices? Perhaps I am only confirming a few prejudices of my own, but I do not see how anyone claiming to look objectively at the bulk of the teachings can deny that this is an anti-materialistic religion. At every stage Christ seems quite clear that our values should not be determined by our physical needs. What's more, Christ was incontestably a man who preached the idea that one day everything will be reversed. Whatever else he was, he was a man who liked the idea of re-ordering. He draws me in, as he does many people, when he propounds the initially attractive idea that eventually – in whichever world, this or the next one – the first shall be last and the last shall be first. It is a peculiarly satisfying prospect. Like everyone else, I become excited at the thought of that wonderful moment when we're all going to sit watching those rich bastards bloodying the sides of their camels in a desperate attempt to force them through the eyes of needles. One of the funniest sights I have ever seen on television was the ineffable Lord Hailsham, after a lifetime of service to the interests of the rich, seeking to explain to us that Christ didn't really mean it when he said it would be hard for them to get into heaven. But oh yes he did. If Christ may be said to speak from anywhere at all, it is from a platform of redistributive justice. Here at least is one saying of Christ's which cannot be glossed out of existence. The meek, whoever they are, will one day inherit the earth.

But it is when we consider the possibility a little more closely that our doubts begin to creep in. It is those words 'one day' which stick in our throats. We are living after all in an age which has been uniquely disfigured by its appetite for violence. As Eric Hobsbaum points out in his history of this century, *The Age of Extremes*, it is sobering now to realise that the infamous pogroms which started the mass migration of Jews out of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century did not claim millions of victims. They did not claim thousands. They did not even claim hundreds. The entire Diaspora, which rightly so shocked the Western world at the time, was triggered by the loss of only dozens of lives. To us, today, sickened and bloodied by the overwhelming statistics of mass murder in our own time, the numbers seem almost trifling.

Since the defining moment of our century, that moment when it became acceptable, even expected, to extend warfare into the civilian populations at home, we have seen an exponential growth in the number of innocent people who have been caught up in wars for which they have not volunteered. If we add together the best estimates we have for those killed in major conflicts this century – the First World War – ten million; the Russian Civil War – ten million; the Russians, in the Second World War and after in Stalin's camps – twenty million; the Jews of Europe – six million; China in all wars – twenty million; the rest of us in the Second World War – fifteen million etcetera – then we arrive a community of the dead numbering one hundred and ten million. They have died by the

violence we inflict on each other. In the shadow of this numbing, overwhelming horror, what meaning does it have to sit and pretend that one day, oh *one day* everything will be set right?

My own view is that Christianity is declining in the West because, in our hearts, many of us can no longer make any honest sense of it. Its essential message – which is that of justice delayed – seems simply too far off for it to have much impact on us. We have always, perhaps, had trouble with a God who seems to have set life as some sort of insane examination paper which, he tells you, you will pass or fail according to whether you do or do not choose to believe in his existence. But in a century which has been marked out by mass brutality on an unprecedented scale, by the rise of random terrorism, and by the persecution of particular racial and political groups to a degree which almost defies the imagination, it simply seems silly to go on worshipping a God who is represented as telling you that you will finally be rewarded or punished, according to whether you are or are not willing to accept the terrifyingly intangible evidence of his existence. It offends many peoples' most profound sense of what they feel life to be. Frankly, in the charnel house of the twentieth century, it scarcely matters. What matters is when and how the killing will stop.

In saying this, I have to make clear that I am not sure in my own mind whether Christianity has recovered from the ethical disaster of the Second World War. If it were true that religion has been simply powerless to prevent any of this rise in global suffering, then at least one might regard it as well-meaning but irrelevant. But the evidence is all too plain that in some notorious cases, still unresolved, it has actively contributed to it. It is hard for us all once more to contemplate the behaviour of Pope Pius XII, but no-one who has ever faced the real facts of how God's representative behaved in relation to the genocide inflicted by Hitler on the Jews can escape the uneasy conclusion that it throw some small light on dangers within Christianity itself.

Even Pope Pius' most passionate defenders will admit that he knew full well what was going on in the death-camps of Poland and Germany. He was apprised by independent witnesses, some of whom are still alive today, and who have testified to telling him directly of the scale and horror of what was going on. The decision he then made not to speak out against the massacres, and to advise his Cardinals to maintain a similar silence, remains, by any standard, the greatest blemish on the Christian religion in this century. When he might have warned his flock not to take part in their hideous work, he did not. As one honest German Catholic remarked "Each of us has to grope our own way, abandoned and alone". Yet looking at what is plainly an act of moral madness, we can only understand it when we realise evil is always done by people who believe there is some cause more important than human decency. Here was a man whose actions can only make sense if we judge them by his own dismal criteria – did I save the Church? Did I preserve its power? – and who actually believed that these criteria should prevail over the ones which really mattered: did I sit in the Vatican and not lift a finger to prevent six million fellow-human beings be needlessly slaughtered?

Pius XII's shocking story is that of a man who put the prosperity of his own church above that of common humanity. For as long as he believed that the survival of his faith was more important than the survival of ordinary people, he was powerless to help human beings on earth. When he was told of the honourable Dutch Bishops who bravely took the other course and protested to the Germans, he became angry, even deliberately exaggerating the effects of their protests – 92 people died, not 40,000 as he pretended – in order to justify his own cowardice. By the most charitable interpretation one may say this was a man who had his priorities skewed. But by any humanist judgement, his 1942 Christmas message marks him as suffering from an evil, an evil in its way as corrosive as that which led to the murder of the Jews in the first place. What are we to make of a Pope who, in the only public reference to the camps in his whole life, could not even bring himself to utter the word "Jew"?

One might think this is a historical aberration of no consequence, no more important, say, than the Inquisition or any one of the religious wars which scarred the Middle Ages, simply the usual story of the wrong man in the wrong place. It might by now, with the passage of time, be thought to have no particular significance. But the disturbing fact is that it was the very intensity of this man's religious faith which led him into his terrible behaviour in the first place. The recent news that people in the Vatican are now lobbying to confer sainthood on the man who did most to discredit Christianity in our age makes you wonder if it is not endemic to this religion – or at least to this form of it – to put the need to prove you are right above the need to prove you are compassionate. At one level it is amusing that it takes four hundred years for a church to admit that it was in error when it broke the greatest genius of the Renaissance and destroyed his life. But at another level the problems Galileo had with organised religion have not gone away. When these same Cardinals tell gay men that they are in sin when they wear condoms, you are aware that a Church which funk'd the greatest moral crisis of the century, the extermination of the Jews, is now funk'ing another, the spread of the new plague – and for exactly the same reasons. These are people who truly do believe that there are more important things on earth than our common humanity.

You may think it unfair of me to appear to implicate one church in the crimes of another. Be clear: that is not my intention. What Rome did cannot be Canterbury's fault. But I use this example – the most egregious piece of Christian behaviour in our time, and the aftermath of it – because it illustrates the very thing which worries me most about Christianity: that it almost necessarily encourages men and women to take their eye off the ball. No religious statement of the present day has moved me as much as the member of the million-strong congregation who shouted out spontaneously at the present Pope just as he raised the cup for a mass communion in the open air in Nicaragua: "We asked for bread and you brought us stones". Many Catholics, in good conscience, now have the integrity to ignore the worst of what comes out of the Vatican. But even so, for myself, I cannot get over the fact that they belong to a universal fellowship whose inevitable, and, I think, fatal tendency is to have one eye on this life and one eye on a second. It is, I am afraid – and from this stems my fundamental distrust of it – an essential part of Christianity to believe that our aim is not towards this life, but towards another. I can only say, based purely on my own experience, that I do not believe this is a healthy way to live.

My position, self-evidently, is that of the agnostic. But I do not, like some agnostics, say "We do not know". I go further. I say "We cannot know". And given that we cannot know, we are faced with a choice. Which is more moral, which is more creative? To live as if we are only here once and make what sense of things we can? Or is it better practice to offset all the disappointments and pain of life by investing our hopes in some sort of eventual get-out, a moment at which the judgements we have made on earth will be reversed? Should we live for the moment when we see other meanings, other values behind the discernments we have made?

Of course, in asking this, I know that all the Christians I respect believe that their mission is in the here and now, and that they must have no expectation of any future. Over and over again, they repeat that they must count on nothing for themselves. Nothing is guaranteed. The best Christians are the ones who work as if there is no tomorrow. But I still could not help observing in the months spent with my vicars that there is a subtle loss of urgency, a certain psychological softness in the way you approach life if you subscribe to a religion which teaches you that there is something else beside life itself. There is a moment at which your mind drifts upwards. Justice on this earth seems to matter less to you if justice will one day be delivered in another.

I suppose I cannot help believing agnostics live a life which is tougher and in some sense nobler than yours. Whatever your sincere mutterings about your own shortcomings, the fact is, all your money is not on this face. You have a side-bet, and that side-bet is with someone whose intentions

you cannot hope to understand. For us, there is only one life. Judgement is here, either within ourselves or within the hearts of the people we love.

Therefore for us it is bitterly hard. Not for us the consolation of the famous joke, which I admit does amuse me, even though I know it to be wrong: “Cheer up, life isn’t everything”. We cannot go peacefully to our graves unless we feel at peace with what we have done here and here alone. To you, waste is a necessary fact of existence. It is written into the contract. For us, waste is a sin. For you, everything will one day be put right. For us, we must work to make it right now. For you, the way you die scarcely matters for it will seem to be irrelevant under the eye of eternity. For us, eternity has no eye. How we die will be the test of our humanity.

I have spoken here today in the Abbey because unlike those in what I have called the Christian fall-back position I happen to think it a matter of great importance that we do work out exactly what we believe. It is time well spent. I have always had the instinct that even if it does not matter today, it may matter one day – and sooner than we think. The most important fact of my life happened before I was born. In the Second World War millions of people died in defence of a belief, and the sense of squalor and disappointment of the post-war period seems to me inexorably to have stemmed from the feeling that the sacrifice they made has somehow been squandered. I mean no disrespect to Salman Rushdie when I say that his story in the last six years seems to me to be that of someone forced to decide whether they are, indeed, ready to die for their beliefs. When he was first put into a form of effective imprisonment, Salman was seen to thrash around like a man who could not actually believe that he might be killed for the principle of free speech. He issued contradictory statements, said things he later regretted, and generally behaved like someone who was being treated in a way which he found unfair. Yet as the years of captivity have gone on he appears to have found, through his own moral struggle, a form of acceptance – not, goodness knows, an acceptance that he is willing to die, but that if he dies, it will have been for a cause worth dying for. From the moment of that acceptance his stature has only grown. Which of us could have done better?

The one thing that remains to me to do in conclusion is to explain the title of this talk *When Shall We Live?*. It is part of a pagan saying which – if I may pay an inverted compliment – seems to me to have a force which is almost Biblical. Some of you will know it. It comes from Seneca. Fond, as you might say, of his food and relishing the company of his friends and the prospect of the moments in front of him, he would sit down at table and ask a simple question, just before the dinner was served. This question – a form of grace, let’s call it – rings with a historical urgency which is almost pre-Christian, and which one day in some unimaginable future may even justify that strange word ‘post-Christian’. Looking at the feast in front of him, Seneca liked to observe: “When shall we live, if not now?”.