

SPIRITUAL ESSAY

Lear and the Future of the Church

THERE IS IN SHAKESPEARE'S MOST UNSPARING drama, *King Lear*, and in an earlier passion narrative, that of the death of Jesus and the birth of the Church, a similar structural polarity: the opposition of 'inside' and 'outside'. I wish to explore this polarity and to suggest that the experience of Lear and those with him 'outside' on the heath offers a model for the future Church seeking to become what it is, a wilderness community.

Already in the New Testament the Church looks to the wilderness for inspiration and for light on its path. In the story of the wanderings of the peoples of Israel on their desert journey from Egypt to their Promised Land there is prefigured our Christian pilgrimage. Jesus, the new Moses, leads the people into the wilderness and there provides for them bread, bread in the desert which is bread from God (John 6). We are, in the New Testament imagery, 'strangers and exiles' on earth. We look to, and learn from, those who 'seek a homeland'. 'If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one' (Heb 11:13-15). The text of course idealizes the aspirations of the desert generation but, no matter, images are there to offer ideals.

The imagery continues in the mainstream of Christian devotion:

O God of Bethel, by whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage,
Hast all our fathers led.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see?
Coming for to carry me home . . .

We are all new-age travellers, a condition with which we shall more readily identify as the same financial pressures which have closed pits and dockyards force the closure of churches. We shall have to take to the road as the doors close behind us on the plant we can no longer pay for.

The image is biblical but the wilderness landscape which we must now enter is not Sinai. It is somewhere else. But where it is is one of its mysteries. The fact that the location of the heath, the setting of the central scenes of *King Lear*, is unspecified contributes to its universality and to its powerful hold on our imagination. We do not know where these things took place any more than when. What we witness is how it is, everywhere and always.

To be sure, in Shakespeare's day the heath was very close at hand, if not less mysterious and terrifying. Michael Ignatieff writes:

In Shakespeare's time, this no-man's land was very close, at the edge of the city and the village. It began where the line of enclosed fields ended, where the ambit of the parish constable and the magistrate trailed away, where the employer gave up the chase. The heath was the huge expanse of England beyond the reach of enclosing agriculture and the centralizing state, a realm of wild growth and darkness without patrols or police, king's highways or lights. It was the home of escapees from village order, paupers denied a parish settlement, vagrants escaping the oppression of wage labour, masterless men without land or trade of their own, madmen like Tom o'Bedlam, fugitives from justice and old people abandoned or thrown out of their families. This world beyond custom and obligation exerted a deep hold on Shakespeare's imagination.¹

We recall how Lear came to be there on that heath. Lear enthroned had depended on fawning admiration to sustain not only a sense of worth but also a sense of self. Like other tyrants he suckled on adulation, needing that constant nourishment to be sure not only how important he was but also who he was. His identity subsisted in the regard of others and he never troubled to consider how much of the honour done to him was heartfelt and how much hollow flattery. So greedy was he for love and so ignorant of the laws of love that he had sought to auction his kingdom among his daughters, offering the choicest slices to whichever of them professed the most extravagantly her love for him. Only his youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to join in this grotesque charade and as a result she is banished, together with Kent who had dared to take her side. Lear abdicates his throne but imagines he can retain the panoply of kingship, all the trappings, all the salutes, the fanfares, the ovations. But these dignities are mercilessly stripped from him, his retinue of knights is dismissed, his servants ignore or insult him. His elder daughters show their true colours and set about their systematic psychological dismemberment of him. Lear, without his power to order, to manipulate and dictate, is reduced to nothing. Unable to command the deference and compliance of others, he has nothing in himself by which to maintain his self-respect or his sanity. So madness threatens. He goes out into the night, into the storm, into the wilderness. And they close the doors on him.

But he is not alone. With him is his shadow, his court jester, his 'all-licensed' heartbroken fool. And there are others in this cruel landscape enduring 'the winds and persecutions of the sky'. There is Edgar, the banished fugitive, playing the part of Tom o'Bedlam, the mad beggar. There is Kent who had dared speak up for Cordelia. He too is now disguised and, unrecognized, he continues to attend his master. So we have this little company, none altogether himself or what he seems. Together they submit to the privations of the wilderness, and what by choice or folly they suffer there turns out to be a kind of redemption.

In other and contemporary wildernesses there gather those who are sometimes described as 'base Christian communities'. Such people's theology is not learned by pious rote; it is a theology worked out in fellowship, in the crucible of what together they endure. I do not think it is whimsical or far-fetched to see Lear and his companions as such a community. This at least is certain, that there is no aspect of life beneath the visiting moon that Shakespeare has not explored and understood at those depths which it is the responsibility of theology to investigate. To be the Church is at least an exercise in human relationships, and reflection on what it means to be the Church without reference to the one who understood those relationships better than anyone else is a refusal of light. I do not think that there is anything strained in suggesting that the Church has all to learn from this strange quartet on the heath, because the invitation to become the Church is also a summons into the wilderness, a summons onto the heath.

The wilderness in the landscape of *Lear* is the wasteland outside the gates. When Lear, in his rage and despair, goes out into the storm his daughters call for the castle doors to be closed on him. The wilderness is outside. The invitation to become the Church is also a call outside, a call into the wilderness, and to respond to it is to know the gates have closed behind you. The New Testament text which most frequently deploys the wilderness imagery is the letter to the Hebrews, already quoted. Towards the end of the text is the summons to become the Church where Christ suffers and that is, always is, outside. 'So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp' (Heb 13:12-13).

As the castle doors close behind Lear and his companions, so the city gates close behind Christ and his Church. Implied here is a view about when the Church was born. It is to understand that, while Pentecost may have been the day of the party, the birthday itself was Good Friday. 'As the community of Christ the church understands itself as the church out of the cross and the church in solidarity with men and women who are living in the shadow of the cross.'² The Church is outside. Back inside the castle there is security, comfort and freedom to decide what will happen next. But the Church can no more clamour to be let back inside the castle than we can beat on the gates of Eden to demand readmittance.

To say that the Church is 'outside' is to make a theological statement about where in principle the Church belongs. The empirical church, where we were on Sunday, still has one foot on the hearthrug as well as one on the heath. But that place by the fire cannot be ours much longer. We are all on our way out. My argument, in the light of *Lear*, is not that we must make the best of that fact but that that reality is in truth the best for us. The history of the Church which we are living is the record of our journey back outside where we belong. To be sure it is not the story of a sudden expulsion, but rather of gradual disengagement from positions of privilege and of power. The currents that carry us out are not only financial, as banks at last foreclose on institutions which no longer

can pay their bills; they are equally the consequence of pluralism, in the light of which any privileged status for Christianity is increasingly recognized as an unjust anachronism. And so – and I write as an Anglican – parsons will lose what residual powers they have in parishes as bishops will in Parliament. The process is protracted and painful but it is irreversible, and however much we pine for the castle and its comforts (Egypt and its cucumbers, the cool glades of Eden) there is no going back and we must be glad it is so. In going outside we go where the Church was constituted and where it is most truly itself. The Church's journey turns out to be the route we all individually must tread.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.³

What signs of the Church to come are to be seen in that circle around Lear on the heath? Clinging to each other in the storm, they form a base community bearing certain marks, characteristics all the more apparent in Shakespeare's telling of the story as he alternates the scenes 'outside' with the scenes 'inside'. So it becomes clear that expulsion from the castle is also a deliverance. For the secure world of the castle is a scene of conflicting and destructive self-interest. It is a callous, rapacious, humourless world and the imagery Shakespeare consistently uses to describe it is drawn from the predatory encounters of beasts of prey and monsters of the deep. The castle is also the setting for any number of those charmed circles (whose magic and menace are so brilliantly exposed in C. S. Lewis's 'The inner ring'⁴), to be on the inside of which is such an attraction for all of us with a taste for gossip and the pleasure of knowing what others do not. The exposed landscape of the heath, by contrast, becomes a school for the study and practice of Christian virtue. I wish to draw attention to three features of that little company of Lear and those with him in the storm, characteristics which, I would urge, must become the moral hallmarks of the future Church: attentiveness, courtesy and a sense of comedy.

It was Simone Weil who in our own time taught us that all that is required of us is our attention and our consent.⁵ But as always Shakespeare had seen as much. King Lear will learn at last the nature of that 'exultant consent' which is possible only for those whom love has liberated.

Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' t'cage.
(V iii 8–9)

But already on the heath he learns awareness, to be attentive. Even as madness overtakes him pity is born. So to his fool,

My wits begin to turn.
 Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
 I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
 The art of our necessities is strange,
 And can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
 Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
 That's sorry yet for thee.

(III ii 67a-73)

The contrast here between Lear enthroned and Lear in the wilderness is total. The Lear of the opening scenes registered nothing of the reality of his situation nor did he really notice anyone else. Other people were objects who either promoted or obstructed his wishes. Now for the first time he recognizes them as fellow human beings. He is attentive to his Fool but that awareness of his immediate neighbour kindles in Lear a wider compassion. His heart now goes out to all those, the hungry and the homeless, who suffer most in the storm.

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
 Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,
 And show the heavens more just.

(III iv 28-36)

This is not the rich man in his castle 'feeling sorry' for the poor man at his gate. Lear's attention is altogether more deliberate and considered. It is most surely not dispassionate but neither is it clouded by emotion. His attention dwells on those whom the storm most affects and he asks what is to be done for them. He does not assert what is to be done for them. He invites us who have more than enough to imagine what it is like to go without, but this appeal is not to excite our guilt. It is the appeal to us to act as if, despite all appearances, the universe were morally organized.

What is affirmed here is a Christian social ethic, although Shakespeare is altogether too reticent and tactful to use Christian vocabulary. It is the ethic of Gloucester's later, and parallel, words: 'Distribution should undo excess and each man have enough' (IV i 70-71). But the distinctively Christian tone is in the attentiveness, in Lear's tenderness to his Fool, in his acute and lucid awareness of what a storm does to someone without food or shelter. The future Church will continue struggling to articulate its message and to carry out its mission in a world where resources are inequitably distributed. It will try to be obedient to the reign of God in situations where that reign is cruelly

contradicted. What will be required of a Church in such a world? Not the rattling of tins in the way earlier Christian warriors rattled sabres, not righteous indignation and ringing exhortations from pulpits and other moral high places, but simply attention. Lear learns to attend as will a Church converted at last to the ethics of the kingdom.

Terry Eagleton comments on Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*:

The hardest thing is to transcend our tedious egoism, purify our desires, and look with steadfast selflessness on the luminous reality of others and of the world. Only through such truthful apprehension of the real will we become moral beings and if art matters supremely it is because it provides us with the finest image of such imaginative self-transcendence.⁶

The Church has such an image in the story of Jesus and of the company who meet outside under his cross. The passion of Lear on the heath provides another such image. I find that the stories of Lear and of Jesus and his companions illuminate each other but I do not find that the light of the Lear story is a borrowed light, reflecting that of the gospel. It is itself luminous with the truth at the heart of things. If the drama of Lear and those with him on the heath provides a model for the future of the Church, that is because it is Shakespeare's independent and original exposition of what is needed to make us people who live for each other. Shakespeare may have stolen the story of Lear from an earlier play, as indeed he plundered Plutarch, but he is never derivative nor does he descend into allegory. His images are of truth, not of other people's images of the truth, not even of such hallowed emblems as the Christian symbols. The correspondence of the two stories, that of the community outside the castle and that of the Church 'outside the camp', is the correspondence of both narratives to the same truth of what constitutes human fellowship.

A complaint that the rest of the world might make of a Church which for centuries has enjoyed most of the advantages is that it has lacked courtesy. Originally courtesy meant the appropriate and required disposition and manner of conduct of those who served 'at court', those who served the sovereign's establishment. The Church is those who serve the reign of God ('the sovereign's establishment') in the spirit of Jesus. For such a community courtesy is thus a cardinal virtue. It is much more than politeness or etiquette or a kind of old-world chivalry. At the risk of sounding precious we could describe Christian courtesy as the distinctive characteristic of the 'courtiers of the kingdom'. Courtesy is the essential moral expression of faith in the reign of God. It is a virtue as fundamental as it is neglected.

One of the countless interwoven paradoxes that the drama of *King Lear* explores is that courtesy, absent from the palace, the court, abounds on the heath, in the wilderness. Around Lear's throne courtesy is mannered and artificial. On the heath it springs from the heart as the little company of the dispossessed behave with exquisite deference to one another. There is the

extraordinary scene when, some shelter from the storm having been found, each in turn encourages the other to go in first:

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| LEAR | Come, let's in all. | |
| KENT | | This way, my Lord. |
| LEAR | With him! | |
| | I will keep still with my philosopher. | |
| KENT | Good my Lord, soothe him; let him take the fellow. | |
| GLOUCESTER | Take him you on. | |
| KENT | | Sirrah, come on; go along with us. |
| LEAR | Come, good Athenian. | |
| GLOUCESTER | | No words, no words. Hush. |

(III iv 179–185)

Courtesy is the core ethic of the kingdom of God and the moral health and credibility of tomorrow's Church will be measured by how far we practise it. 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.' The opening scenes of *Lear* are sufficient commentary on those words. But then we move outside the gates: 'But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become the youngest, and the leader as one who serves' (Luke 22:25–26).

To whom is this courtesy required? No doubt to all, but that debt of courtesy is greatest to those to whom it has most conspicuously been denied. I will not dwell on the neglect of courtesy by the Church to women. All I do notice is that the icon of Christ in *Lear* is both male and female. Cordelia is 'the woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief'.⁷ Of her it is said: 'Thou has one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse' (IV vi 206–7). But if Christ is Cordelia, so is he the Fool. The two are one and Lear's mind does not wander when at Cordelia's death he says, 'My poor fool is hang'd' (V iii 305).

There are others to whom justice is due for neglect of courtesy. There are the children, sat by our Lord at the centre of his disciples, upheld to the Church as a pattern of discipleship, yet denied the sacrament of bread and wine. For such discourtesy millstones are reserved.

Because our theme is the Church 'outside', more must be said about those outside the Christian tradition, those of other faiths, the 'Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Hereticks' of the Book of Common Prayer's Good Friday collect. Only a Church that understands itself as a wilderness community, that has emerged from its ecclesiastical bunkers, is appropriately situated to begin making the reparation due to them. Courtesy is obedience to the maxim that I treat other people as I wish to be treated myself. The principle of practising towards others what you seek for yourself demands the affirmation of the other person, not least of what he or she believes. This does not mean I agree with everybody else. But it does mean that I allow that members of other religious traditions are entitled to trust their religious experience and that of their fellow believers. Just as I wish you to allow to me the validity of my religious insights and the

authenticity of my prayer and worship, so I should do you the courtesy of allowing you the validity of your faith, your spirituality. This is what John Hick has called the 'intellectual Golden Rule'.⁸ If I invite you to take seriously the claims of my faith, so must I regard with equal seriousness the claims of yours. Courtesy requires no less.

Does the wilderness enjoy the best climate for such courtesy? It could be argued that the model of the wilderness community encourages in the Church a much more defensive, barricaded attitude to the faith once given – as if, as some in Israel supposed, our one task is to protect the ark. It is such a picture of the wilderness community that in South Africa is set in bronze in the Vortrekker monument above Pretoria: the circle of ox carts, with all outside that circle perceived as a threat to the survival of the people of God. But I commend a different picture of the Christian community's wilderness condition. We are 'outside'. We have left the castle, the fortress of our faith, and we do not set about building a new one. We are outside on the heath and there we are exposed to others who formerly were strangers and whose ways and wisdom were foreign to us. Now, in shared privation, we are brought closer to one another and the superiority of which, inside, we felt so confident is shed so that at last we hear what these others say to us.

King Lear, when we first meet him, does not question a world-order expressly arranged, he supposes, for his personal satisfaction. Outside in the storm it is at last apparent to him that the universe is not in fact consistently benevolent, to him or anyone else. And he asks why this should be so, a question which, like all ultimate questions, had not occurred to him in the sumptuous security of his castle. He turns to Tom o'Bedlam, the naked hermit of the heath, who, one with nature, must be supposed, like some *sanyassi* of the forest, to be close to the truth of things. 'First, let me talk with this philosopher. What is the cause of thunder?' (III iv 159). (Thunder in *King Lear* symbolizes the contradictions and, apparently, the cruelty of how things are.)

The Church as wilderness community has gone outside. It has forsaken its strongholds. It no longer claims any special right to be heard, whether in Parliament, in education, in the media or anywhere else. Still less does it claim any monopoly of truth. It does not throw its weight around. It eschews such crass discourtesies as decades of evangelism. It is prepared, after centuries of trumpeting its world view from turrets of wealth and power, to spend time – long, long time – in dialogue with those who have a different story. And the better part of that dialogue will be attentive silence.

The wilderness Church, like the 'base community' on the heath, is vulnerable. It is this vulnerability which alone allows it to enter into genuine dialogue with those of other faiths. Because it is vulnerable the Church is not only open to what others say. It is also capable of being changed by what it hears. The dialogue entered upon by an invulnerable Church, which allows others their say only out of politeness, is no dialogue at all. It is not even the dialogue of the deaf. It is the monologue of the monomaniac. Vulnerability is weakness but it is the weakness of Christ. So, paradoxically, the dialogue which such vulnerability

makes possible is the only authentic form of evangelism, for such dialogue alone reflects and commends Christ crucified, the altogether vulnerable one.

The vulnerability of Lear is most eloquently symbolized when on the heath he tears his clothes from his back – ‘Off, off, you lendings!’ – to identify with the naked beggar, Tom o’Bedlam, and in so doing to be one with all humanity, for he recognizes in ‘poor Tom’ humanity as such, ‘. . . the thing itself, unaccommodated man . . . the poor bare fork’d animal’ (III iv 109–110). At this point in the drama Lear and those with him are very close to Christ, whose incarnation and crucifixion are the great act of divine divestiture. When the garments of Jesus are stripped from him and he goes naked to his cross that divestiture is complete which is the ‘kenosis’, the self-emptying, of the Son of God. It is that divestiture which is commended to the Church as the supreme norm of its moral life. ‘Let that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself . . .’ (Phil 2:5–11). We may dress up to go to church – clergymen do so eagerly Sunday by Sunday – we must do the exact opposite to become the Church.

To be the Church is to be in tune with the divine comedy. The first disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. A harder lesson for them and for us is to learn to laugh. Anthony Burgess has said that the world needs clowns as much as it needs saints.⁹ The failure of the Church to honour its clowns reflects its unlimited capacity to take itself too seriously. (So much of what we do in church, not to speak of what we sing, is comical but, as Kierkegaard said, ‘no one laughs.’) More seriously, our contempt of the clowns reveals a defective understanding of the reign of God, though ‘we are without excuse’ because Scripture teaches us that the reign of God is also the foolishness of God. The mission of Jesus was clown’s work, for what else at heart is the clown’s role but to ‘put down the mighty’ and ‘to exalt those of low degree?’ (Luke 1:52). Our laughing Lord goes about debunking the pretentious, puncturing the gasbags, placing the divine banana skin in the path of the pompous.

The text in the New Testament which has most to say about the order, discipline and worship of the Church is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Paul’s response to the series of problems with which the church in Corinth confronts him is rooted in two theological principles. One principle we continue to emphasize, in our liturgies if not in our life: ‘we who are many are one body’. But the principle which Paul first lays down as equally the basis of all that will follow – and this principle we overlook – is that of the divine folly.

As King Lear plummets from power, those who in his ascendancy had courted him and cultivated his patronage desert him. That, after all, is the wise thing to do. The Fool himself agrees that that is the only sane and sensible course of action. ‘Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following’ (II iv 71–2). But the Fool, fool that he is, does not follow his own good advice. So when Lear dashes headlong into the night, the Fool stays with him. ‘The Fool will stay,’ he says, ‘and let the wise man fly’ (II iv 82–3). ‘Who is with Lear?’ asks Kent. ‘None but the Fool,’ he is told, ‘none but the Fool who labours to outjest his heartstrook injuries’ (III i 15–17). In the

end the pain of Lear breaks the Fool's own heart and, at the sixth hour, he turns his face to the wall. There are others who, like the Fool, obey love's irrational requirements and suffer the penalty. And for none of these crazy people is there any eschatological reparation or vindication. For this is *Lear*, not Job, and the last page does not record God compensating his playthings by lavishing on them large numbers of she-asses.

To 'go outside' into the rain is folly. But the ethic of Jesus and the example of Jesus consistently advocate just such injudicious, ill-advised behaviour. 'Turn the other cheek.' 'Go the extra mile.' 'Lend without expecting repayment' and so on (Mt 5:39-42). Such tomfoolery is inappropriate, indeed impossible, inside. But for the community outside, under the cross, love has its own new rules. Right and wrong are not the same thing out in the rain as under a dry roof. The Sermon on the Mount at least is more practicable on that 'green hill far away' than at a board meeting where other people's investments have to be profitably managed.

No doubt the Church as a human institution will need all the wisdom of the world to manage and deploy its resources economically and efficiently. But such wisdom, for those who have had the divine folly to follow Christ outside the gates, will not always have the last word. The Church of the kingdom will sometimes have the vision to play the fool. That will be as easy for the individual, tempted to indulge eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, as it will be difficult for the institution, locked into inherited structures. Too easy for the individual, too difficult for the institution. But the pattern of church life offered by those on the heath is neither individualism nor institutionalism but community. They are a cell group, a fellowship both small enough and big enough to function humanly.

King Lear, 'a Christian play about a pagan world',¹⁰ informs our faith for the future of the Church. It is faith for frameworks, or better for a frame of mind, more adapted to the great design of the reign of God. Stubbornly obstructive institutions and attitudes will survive but faith, certainly as it is understood in the letter to the Hebrews, is stubborn too, and it persists in believing in the possibility of what it prays and works for: a Church reshaped in mind and plant to be a more effective instrument of God's coming kingdom. Our faith is for a Church which will meet again outside, outside the gates, in that wilderness where the only shelter is beneath the branches of the cross and where those rare, lovely, but delicate flowers grow, the virtues we have seen blossoming in the exchanges of charity between the broken king and his companions in the storm.

We have seen how the narrative of Lear and the story of how the Church began reveal the same underlying polarity, the contrast of 'inside' and 'outside'. It would be interesting to explore how far the same opposition characterizes the structure of the foundational narratives of other faiths. The first impression is that it recurs repeatedly. Israel is constituted as a community of faith 'outside', in the desert of Sinai, and the continuing tension between the court with its established priesthood and the prophet crying in the wilderness is the conflict between the supposed security inside, where the cult keeps God at a safe

distance, and the danger outside, where an unmediated encounter with the Almighty is an all too real and dreadful possibility. In Islam the faithful are those outside, the *Muhajirun*, those who, like the Prophet, have fled, those who have left their home and emigrated in the way of God. And those who go to the Buddha for refuge, whether or not they literally renounce all earthly attachments, follow the teaching of the one whose path to enlightenment began with palace gates closing behind him. There are many paths, it seems, on to the heath.

'There is still a heath', writes Michael Ignatieff. He speaks of the 'vast grey spaces' of our society: 'On the wards of psychiatric hospitals, the attendants shovel gruel into the mouths of vacant or unwilling patients. On the catwalks of prisons, dinner is slopped into tin trays and thrust into the cells.' He writes of the heath, 'where millions of hands stretch out to receive the milk from the pitchers, the cup of grain from sacks that come from the rich countries . . .'¹¹ But we could all draw our own maps of these modern wastelands 'outside the city wall' where the Church under the cross must recover its identity and renew its mission. And it would be a simplistic theology and a shallow reading of Shakespeare to limit the extent of the heath to areas of social deprivation. We can readily identify such materially destitute areas and a future Church will be better placed to serve them if it is less institutionally encumbered. But the heath is not only around us. It is within us. It is a realm of the mind, a territory of inner emptiness, of alienation, loneliness and lovelessness which crosses all the social and economic barriers. The Church must venture on to such heathland too. But that is a longer, darker journey than we can travel now.

The wilderness is a metaphor of where the Church is most itself, as indeed all our talk of 'inside' and 'outside' is metaphorical and as such not to be taken literally. Nothing said here implies approval of homelessness or nostalgia for the rural life. Nor is any single model sufficient of itself to interpret the identity and the task of the Church. The great Shakespearean and scriptural image of the heath, the wilderness without a city wall, does not provide a complete description of where the Church must be. That model will need to be complemented by other symbols, whether from Scripture, literature, or modern life, to save us from a one-sided view of what it means to be the Church. The image of the heath is not sufficient. Nevertheless, it is to be commended to a Church always in danger of turning its home into a castle.

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An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a Sion College Lecture on 14 December 1992, the day of the death of Alan Ecclestone, priest and Shakespearean scholar. The lecture was given and this article written in grateful tribute to him.

NOTES

- ¹ Ignatieff, Michael, *The needs of strangers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p 40.
- ² Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Church in the power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p 86.
- ³ Eliot, T. S., *Four quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944).
- ⁴ Lewis, C. S., *Transposition and other addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), pp 21–23.
- ⁵ Weil, Simone, *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).
- ⁶ Eagleton, Terry, *The Guardian*, 20 October 1992.
- ⁷ Tribble, Phyllis, *Texts of terror* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p 36.
- ⁸ Hick, John, *An interpretation of religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p 235.
- ⁹ Burgess, Anthony, in a eulogy given at a service of thanksgiving for the life and work of the comedian Benny Hill held at St Martin-in-the-Fields, 23 September 1992.
- ¹⁰ Maxwell, J. C., *Modern Language Review* xiv (April 1950), p 142ff.
- ¹¹ Ignatieff, Michael, *The needs of strangers*, pp 50–1.