THE UNPREPARED APOSTLE

By GEORGE EARLE

I CAN THINK of no better place to start this article than at the doors of Heythrop College — but it could just as well be any other college. Young Eric has just completed his course. Let us assume that he is unusually satisfied: the syllabus happily included outlines and topics studied in depth; the teaching methods combined tutors, who provided attractively presented information, coupled with gentle, but effective, stimulus. Students were given every opportunity to direct and follow up their own investigations. Helped by his tutors, his fellow students and his own personal work, Eric can now feel confident that he has covered most of the highways of philosophy, theology and his chosen secular subject; that he has been in contact with some of the great minds of the past and the present; and that, far from being overwhelmed or filled with second-hand opinions, on most subjects he has a mind of his own. The crucial fact or the critical argument are never far from his finger tips. Eric has every reason to be pleased with himself and his college. When a feeling of dread comes over me it is, I hope, no desire to deny or destroy an accurate estimate of life in an academic institution. It is simply that my mind will wander on. I see Eric opening the door to Miss Winstanley and Mr Bagshaw, who want to marry in a few weeks time. What will they make of his theology of marriage or his deft allusions to Ephesians 5 and Hosea 2? I see Eric carrying his notes on John's gospel to an ill-attended meeting of the Guild of St Agnes. I see Eric struggling with his temper and the rite of reconciliation; it is the last period in the afternoon and those who have to be reconciled are the warring bottom-streamers of the Little Flower Comprehensive School's most difficult fourth form. Heythrop College no more prepared Eric for these ordeals than for jousting or parachute jumping. When we mention his problem to members of the academic board, some look disapproving and say that their aims are not vocational. Others are more sympathetic and say that serious consideration is being given to courses in sociology and communications. After a few days in the pastoral front line, Eric begins to feel that he has learned nothing; or, when the first shock has receded, that everything he has learned has to be laboriously translated into several new languages.

Mary knows how Eric feels, because she has been on the school and parish treadmills for twenty-five years. Her college notes have been lying unread at the bottom of a drawer for twenty years; none of the groups she taught, not even the teachers, seemed the slightest bit interested in her theology of grace. Now she is less inclined to look at them, because in recent years she has become convinced that they are out of date. Rows and rows of new books have appeared on the library shelves, which she has not had time to read. An occasional summer course, jammed between her holiday and her annual retreat, give her a glimpse of the promised land which she is unlikely ever to enter. She is self-critical, sensitive and experienced enough to know how ineffectual her words have become, but a busy life, weariness and lack of self-assurance prevent her from finding remedies. Monotony has become both a comfort and an anxiety: she is kept going by a familiar routine, which is at the same time a straitjacket, reminding her that she is too stupid, too unimaginative and too frightened to change. She envies those whose dissatisfaction can be soothed by domestic chores or staff-room politics. She wishes that she could answer her anguish with the smug motto: Somebody has to do it. Try as she may, any amount of shopping and cooking, extra work on the school magazine, campaigns for stricter discipline or better catechetics, the increasing round of meetings, cannot conceal the pain she feels when she hears the questions: Am I proclaiming Christ's message? Am I building up the body of Christ?

It is tempting to solve Eric and Mary's problem by bringing them together and getting them married. What he needs is her experience and what she needs is to go back to her books with Eric. But, as Bernard Shaw said, when a beautiful young woman proposed marriage to him: 'Supposing the child has your brains and my looks'. We can imagine what a monster Eric and Mary could produce; with all his abstract terminology and irrelevant information and all her jaundiced disillusionment. Experience gushes forth abundantly in deanery meetings and learning in senior common rooms. Are we wholly convinced that Eric and Mary are going to be restored by drinking at these two oases?

If we doubt whether the wells of learning and experience, admirable as they may be for other purposes, can quench the thirst of Eric and Mary, we may want to look for skills and techniques, which are not often taught in lecture halls or gatherings of the elders. 'Do they teach you nothing in the seminaries?', I was once asked by an exasperated parish visitor. We can all think of techniques which Eric and Mary should learn to become complete apostles. Simply to start the list I suggest:

voice production, the art of preparing and structuring talks for different types of audience, practice in counselling, the use of themes, a keener historical sense and a realization of how words have been used at various stages in the development of spirituality, psychology or sociology. We could stress that we are more interested in practical applications than in theory and thus develop forms of field work for budding apostles. I do not intend to expand this worthwhile topic. For one thing there is no point in doing work which others can do better. For another, each one of us is likely to reveal, in the proposals we make, our own personal inclinations and prejudices. What we stress, what we include and what we leave out, is likely to tell us as much about ourselves as about ideal apostles. But my main reason for hurrying through what could be the substance of this paper is that all techniques bear the stamp of their own limitations. I can cultivate a beautifully modulated voice, deliver my sermon with striking contrasts of pace, pitch and volume, avail myself of the most sophisticated amplifying equipment, apply the skills of expert journalists, and still fail to communicate my message. I have heard that Rubinstein, when he was fifty, decided to stop concert work for a time in order to perfect his technique. He did not do this to play flawless scales to himself, but rather to interpret Chopin in his own unique way to audiences all round the world.

I conclude this over-rapid glance at techniques with a few bald assertions. Immensely helpful as it may be to get my statistics, my breathing or my vocabulary into better order, and intensely crippling as it may be to have them in a state of disarray, techniques are of value only in so far as they serve a vision or a message. A technique which does not go beyond itself acquires the sterility of mere technique. Professionalism can be used in a double sense: it can praise the expertise of the lawyer, the doctor or the architect; or it can refer to a self-destructive inwardness, which fails to grasp the wider horizon. Conversely the amateur, when he possesses sufficient vision, can sometimes transcend inadequate technique. Amateur actors are occasionally more powerfully moving than professionals. Eric and Mary, in their hurried moments with the text and a commentary, may learn and say more than a skilful exegete. My purpose is not to pull down the professional and exalt the amateur; nor would I deny that many of us need to be more professional than we are. I simply want to stress that both the professional and the amateur must go beyond their techniques. Both must be like Balaam, 'the man with the far-seeing eyes'.[1]

[1] Num 24, 15.

As soon as I tell Eric and Mary that they must become visionaries they quite naturally protest. No, no, we are very ordinary people. Their objections have a familiar ring:

> But, my Lord, never in my life have I been a man of eloquence. . . . [2]
> Forgive me, my Lord, but how can I deliver Israel? My clan, you must know, is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least important in my family.[3]
> What a wretched state I am in! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.[4]
> I do not know how to speak; I am a child.[5]
> She was deeply disturbed by these words . . . Mary said to the angel: But how can this come about, since I am a virgin.[6]

All the protests have the same pattern. They say something about God: He could not or would not choose me. They say something about myself: I am not the sort of person to be chosen. And yet all the evidence points to contrary conclusions. God does choose weak, reluctant and improbable people like Balaam, Jonah and Paul. When he does so, it is to bring back other unlikely people like Balak, the people of Nineveh or the Corinthians.

> In the days to come — it is the Lord who speaks —
> I will pour out my spirit on all mankind.
> Their sons and daughters shall prophesy,
> your young men shall see visions,
> your old men shall dream dreams.
> Even on my slaves, men and women,
> in those days, I will pour out my spirit.[7]

One could pile up texts from the Old Testament to Vatican II to show that authentic christianity has ceaselessly demolished the notion of a spiritual aristocracy, whose task is to dazzle, inspire and entertain a sheep-like proletariat. Whenever we are tempted to dwell on our own inferiority or that of others, we should turn back to Paul's picture of a Spirit-filled body, in which each person has his unique contribution to make to the common good of the Church.[8]

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2 Exod 4, 10.
3 Jg 6, 15.
4 Isai 6, 5.
5 Jer 1, 6.
6 Lk 1, 28-34.
7 Acts 2, 17, quoting Joel 3.
8 1 Cor 12.

The perfect wife of today and the perfect wife of Proverbs, 'like a merchant vessel bringing food from far away',[9] are strong in arm and vision. Their shopping baskets tell us about visions of edibility, cleanliness, taste and economy. Working within a limited budget they have to buy meat and vegetables, lux and domestos. English, french, indian, chinese and african shopping bags will carry different contents, reflecting different visions and values. Perfect wives will be able to distinguish between food and clothing, furniture and tools. They know that potatoes have to be cooked, wool has to be knitted, that arm-chairs should not be burned to keep the family warm, and that it is silly to dig the garden with a knife. Already in the smallest domestic scene we can delineate the essential features of a vision: a personal appropriation of an external world of soil, plants, animals and climate; of a group of people variously called family, race or nation; a world which is determined by its past. But the perfect wife is not simply the passive victim of nature, society and history. She does battle with them. She does not see why she should pay exhorbitant prices for vegetables and grows her own. She is not going to put up with this ridiculous school uniform and sends her children to school in casual clothes. She enters into a creative interaction with the resistant facts of nature, society and history.

A tour of a few parishes next Sunday would be as revealing as the perfect wife's shopping basket. Here a distant murmuring makes people aware of God's incomprehensibility; elsewhere there is a preoccupation with the parish's tottering finances; in another parish there is a warm welcome and a sense of community. We are introduced to the visions of several parish priests. We notice that there can be separate visions in one small scene. Sometimes the visions harmonize well enough: good administration, which we observe in the Canon's carefully kept filing system, fits in well enough with the meticulously prepared liturgy. Sometimes there is patent incompatibility: it is not possible to preserve the church as a fitting monument to the last parish priest and to satisfy the aspirations of the curates.

The housewife and the parish priest will normally possess visions which go beyond their shopping and their parishes. The housewife will not see her children merely as receptacles for her food or clothes pegs for her garments. She will look forward to the time when they will play their part as courteous, honest, responsible, distinguished, adult members of society. The parish priest will look out of his window at the ruffians playing football in the street and see them as a historically

[9] Prov 31, 14.

continuous, worldwide band of sinners and saints. There has to be, therefore, a rough hierarchy of visions, from lesser to greater, from narrower to wider, from less important to more important. When Monsignor regularly hurries through Mass in order to be on time to take his dog for a walk, we know there is something wrong with the order of his visions. Whether we like it or not, visions dominate us and determine the patterns of our actions.

If being formed by and formulating visions is as natural as seeing, eating and breathing, it seems strange that such a vital human function can break down. However far away from hospitals we manage to keep, we have to be exceptionally self-enclosed to deny that even the sturdiest human organs do cease to work. How and why does vision become clouded and cease to move us in the right direction? In the first place, we close frontiers between ourselves and the outside world. We go through days and weeks as though plants, animals, soil, the recent or remote past, neighbours did not exist. Can we distinguish between one sheep and another? Do we keenly watch the weather? Is there any period of history about which we can talk enthusiastically, because we think it has affected our lives? Can we name a single local politician and discourse about the interplay of parties in our borough? Closing the frontiers means that the interior world is starved, which, in turn, makes us leave an ill-defined stamp on the world around us. Questions about the interior life have come to be embarrassing, best left for sickly discussions between chosen souls and their spiritual directors, or neurotics and their psychiatrists. The price we pay for failing to cultivate the garden of the soul can be seen in the mindless, shoddy, ill-planned building in any of our large cities. Concern for people, materials, craftsmanship are as much the work of the interior life as the writings of St Teresa.

Probably my vision withers most when I close the frontier which ought to permit the fullest interchange between myself and other people. It is a curious feature of visions that they must be, simultaneously, completely my own and wholly shared. If the vision is only my own then I am an isolated lunatic; if it is only the vision of others then I am no more than their screen or recording machine. I need mutually enriching relationships, in which I am appreciated and appreciate, am cared for and care, am the responsibility of others and responsible for them, have the wonders of creation placed before me and am called upon to create. Thank God, our families have done this for us; but the man who has been trying for a number of years 'to put aside all merely natural affection for his relatives' and has failed to 'convert it into

spiritual by loving them only with that love which rightly ordered charity requires',[10] is likely to have an impoverished interior life and sense of vision. Think of a budding apostle, recommended by his superior in these terms: 'He has a tender heart, a vivid imagination, a great understanding of others, a strong sense of belonging and of being needed; he thinks he has a unique contribution to make to any community'. Contrast this obnoxious young man — admit that we have already come to dislike him — with the countless priests and religious we have met, who find it hard to believe that anyone loves them. When they go into hospital, they are often proved right by the minute trickle of visitors and cards they receive. We say that they have 'lost heart'; this is a compressed way of referring to a diminishment of man's unique receptive, interpretative and creative gifts, which at their best bring into play so many levels and so many facets of a personality. Brightness of eye, delicacy of touch and movement of hands, sharpness of ear, freshness of memory, penetration of intuition, rapidity of association, sureness of judgement and ease of recognition; all have become stiff with unaccustomed and undemanded use. 'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken'.[11]

Marooned on a desert island with so much of reality out of sight and not a soul to talk to, it is not surprising that speech dries up. Most of us are incapable of grasping abstractions or of expressing the ever-expanding range of our visions except by means of pictures of familiar objects and people: the lamb, the shepherd, the bread, the wine, the potter. This is symbolism, which leans on ordinary and important experiences drawn from nature, history and society, and assumes a facility in passing to a higher, invisible level. There is a chicken and egg relationship between vision and symbolism: no vision — no symbolism; no symbolism — greater difficulty in expressing vision. The poverty of our experiences and visions explains why we are not at home in the thought-world of prophets and poets. Ill at ease with their language and way of thinking, we have difficulty in dreaming their dreams. It is painful for apostles when they cannot understand or construct the images that give shape, colour and depth to their visions. As a wise pastor once remarked: 'Whether we say *agnus Dei* or lamb of God, we are still using a foreign language'.

When we are cut off from the sources of our visions — in the outside world, in our interior life, in our communications with others, in the

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[10] *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (ed. Ganss, St Louis, 1970).

[11] Lk 24, 25.

words we use — vision does not cease altogether. Were it to do so, life itself would wither and die. Visions become stunted and dislocated and so lead to stunted and dislocated lives. The test of whether lives are more less debased or glorious is in our self-awareness. Christ refused to be drugged. In doing so he was fighting for the child, who is inclined to forget everything, for the old person, who is for ever wandering off into a stupor, and for all of us in our distractions and evasions. The malfunctioning of visions is a form of amnesia and paralysis: I do not know who I am or where I am going.

Sometimes there is severely restricted vision: the housewife can only think of feeding the family; the parish priest can only think of keeping his parish going. They have forgotten that there is more to a family than food and more to the Church than getting to church. At times there is self-deception, as we talk a great deal about love and community, when all the time it is clear to others that our dominant visions are safety, self-protection, regularity or the respect for authority. Consciously or unconsciously we can give greater emphasis to lesser visions: the victory of a local football team or promotion to high office can become all absorbing. Greater visions lessen or vanish altogether: prayer and visits to the sick and elderly are crowded out altogether. Incompatible visions jostle side by side: Christianity and violent nationalism, my old job and my new one, self-indulgence and self-sacrifice, the urgency of the present and the importance of long-term plans. Because there is no wider, unifying vision, different compartments of life are affected by different visions: home and office, altar and presbytery, study and social life; each has its separate and mutually exclusive vision. Doctors despise their own prescriptions and good cooks sit down wearily to a slice of cold ham. Similarly there is no single vision to give coherence to yesterday, today and tomorrow. Old visions of deep and satisfying companionship, of problems neatly solved by omnicompetent parents and teachers, of a hierarchically well-ordered society, of publicly acknowledged success, of freedom and irresponsibility, of frightening forces beyond my control; the reach-me-down garments of childhood are brought out of the cupboard and no longer fit my present person and situation. Think of the ludicrous consequences of wearing infantile visions of authority, obedience and responsibility in adult life; middle aged men behaving like children, because they are treated like children. So many of our divisions within and between churches are founded on conflicting visions and their correlative symbols: little flock or conquering army, clay in the hands of the potter or trustworthy friends, frequently wrong or invariably right, marching

on or safely encamped, an invitation to the banquet or forcible feeding? Successive or competing visions can only be criticized and composed into a single picture if there is a vision that rides above and masters all the others.

If we have to possess one transcending vision in order to make sense of our other visions, then the price is too high and we seem doomed to live without vision. For once theologians, defending the respectable theses that no one can see God[12] and that no one has ever seen God,[13] can form a common front with philosophers, successfully picking holes in great systems, and historians recounting the horrible details of the universal visions of Hitler and Stalin. Better to proclaim the absurd, whether in anguish or serenity, than to perpetrate the evils of a single vision. Our pluralist and secular society echoes the accusation of the Jews: 'Even more intent on killing him, because, not content with breaking the sabbath, he spoke of God as his own father, and so made himself God's equal'.[14] I can think of meetings with good christians, in which it was unthinkable to mention the hand or the will of God; no need for stones; fear of ridicule and blasphemy was enough to drive me out of the ranks of the visionaries, who make themselves the equals of God.

The apostle, then, can only sit by the roadside and cry: 'Jesus, have pity on me. . . . Courage, they said: he is calling you. . . .What do you want me to do for you? Master, let me see again.'[15]

> I have come into this world
> so that those without sight may see
> and those with sight turn blind.[16]

Blind apostles are the best prepared apostles, and apostles, who say 'we see'[17] are blind guides.[18] The experience of blindness is necessary for an understanding that 'no one has ever seen God',[19] and that we are 'blind from birth'.[20] Then we can feel the force of the words: '*only* the Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, has made him known'.[21] 'To

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12 Exod 33, 20.
13 Jn 1, 18.
14 Jn 5, 18.
15 Mk 10, 46-52.
16 Jn 9, 39.
17 Jn 9, 41.
18 Mt 23, 16.
19 Jn 1, 18.
20 Jn 9, 1.
21 Jn 1, 18.

have seen me is to have seen the Father'.[22] But we apostles of the twentieth century are not in the happy position of the first apostles. Jesus reminds us:

> I shall not be with you much longer.
> You will look for me,
> and as I told the Jews,
> where I am going
> you cannot come.[23]

No, we are in a different and happier position:

> You believe because you can see me.
> Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.[24]

Our blindness includes the honest admission that we worship an absent Lord, whom we cannot see. Where can the christian fix his gaze? What can our apostolic vision possibly be?

Many years ago some of us were trained as apostles in large, remote country houses, reading detective stories about other large, remote country houses, eating baked beans and luncheon meat, saying our prayers, yawning our way through lectures, where sound doctrine was taught, preserving a sense of community appropriate to a victorian orphanage. When I ask myself where we expected to see Jesus, I am reminded of the apostles at the Ascension, 'still staring into the sky'.[25] Our philistinism, the unruffled state of hearts and minds, the safe distance from family and friends, the refusal to get involved in political clashes far away: these were signs that we thought the Mount of Olives the best place to catch sight of Jesus and that there was no point in returning to the bustle and mess of Jerusalem. Our teachers rarely had the bad taste to point out that we were denying the humanity of Jesus in our lives.

Jesus opens our blind eyes to another vision: Behold the man.[26] He does not want us to look at him, but at ourselves:

> Do not cling to me . . . but go and find the brothers.[27]
> No one has ever seen God,
> but as long as we love one another,

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22 Jn 14, 9.
23 Jn 13, 33.
24 Jn 20, 29.
25 Acts 1, 10.
26 Jn 19, 5.
27 Jn 20, 17.

> God will live in us
> and his love will be complete in us.[28]
> A man that does not love the brother that he can see
> cannot love God, whom he has never seen.[29]
> Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? . . . When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome? . . . In so far as you did this to the least of these brothers of mine you did it to me.[30]

Jesus invites us to go with him to the sick to give them his health, the destitute to give them his riches, the prisoners to give them his freedom, the strangers to give them his welcome, the sinners to give them his pardon, the dead to give them his life.

What, then, is this vision of man, blessed by Christ and blessed with Christ? Our own lives, our neighbours, the Bible lies open to us. Here I want only to underline some obvious and forgotten features of Christ the man. He walks through light and darkness, in fair weather and foul, across mountain and sea; he notices the seasons and is affected by good crops and bad; he reacts to plants, animals and birds. We can re-read Job chapters 38 to 41 or Psalm 104. This is the world to which he belongs. We belong to a world of park keepers, civil servants in ministries of agriculture, and city dwellers, ignorant and contemptuous of nature. He lives in a close network of family and friendship. Erase them from the Bible or from the life of Jesus, as they have been erased from so many apostles' lives, and we get some idea of our deprivation. I am writing these words in a diocese, where all but a few of the clergy live alone. Try to give an account of God's mighty deeds and man's desperate failure without telling the story of Christ's family. When salvation history was in fashion we never mentioned that our own history was more important — for us — than the history of Abraham's sons. Christ reveals the depth and variety of human responses — joy, suffering, tears, tenderness, fear, anxiety, wonder, praise, thanksgiving, steadfastness — in the common language of nature, kinship and story, but in a way that is distinctively his own. He simultaneously acknowledges this world and another: on earth as it is in heaven, now and for ever, not mine, but thine. He can only do this by the use of symbols, which span both worlds — water, fire, bread, wine, temple, marriage — rooted in this world and pointing to, leading to, the other world. Movement, change, loss, gain, growth, are essential to him: he is a

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[28] 1 Jn 4, 12.
[29] 1 Jn 4, 20.
[30] Mt 25, 37-39.

tent dweller,[31] both at home in his present caravanserai and restless to return to his true home; the seed, fallen into the ground, conscious of the perfection he already possesses as the everlasting Word of the living God,[32] but aware of the demands and potentialities of a seed, which is sown perishable and raised imperishable, sown contemptible and raised glorious, sown weak and raised powerful.[33] 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve'.[34] This is a statement of his own vision and of his approach to other visions. He does not reorganize jewish religion, roman government, methods of agriculture, but leaves them rights of citizenship within the kingdom of his vision. Sometimes he gently incorporates and strengthens what is best in other men's aspirations. I am thinking, for instance, of the rich young man or the slow correction of contemporary ideas about the Messiah. Only rarely does he enter into conflict with other men's visions: Peter[35] and the Pharisees[36] have set up barriers to his vision, which have to be torn down. Lastly, dreaming dreams and seeing visions do not paralyse his action. On the contrary, they are the spirit and substance of his apostolate:

May they all be one.
Father, may they be one in us
as you are in me and I am in you,
so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.[37]
I am the light of the world;
anyone who follows me will not be walking in darkness.[38]

Jesus is asking the blind apostle to see by his light and so to be, in his turn, the light of the world;[39] to see his Father, his Spirit and his creatures as he sees them. Far from being a hindrance or a periodic supplement to their other activities, this vision is the apostolate, embracing prayer, work and community.

Love one another;
just as I have loved you
you also must love one another.
By this love you have for one another
everyone will know that you are my disciples.[40]

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31 2 Cor 5, 1.
32 1 Pet 1, 22.
33 1 Cor 15, 42-43.
34 Mt 20, 28.
35 Mt 16, 23.
36 Mt 15, 1-9; 23, 1-39.
37 Jn 17, 21.
38 Jn 8, 12.
39 Mt 5, 14.
40 Jn 13, 34-35.