

Some causes of Accidie in the Ministry.

IT has been our great privilege in recent years to listen to addresses and papers of fine intellectual and spiritual quality on the difficulties and problems presented to the Church and ministry by the modern world. I have no ambition to add another—and inferior—address on a subject which has been dealt with so ably. I have chosen a humbler, though not unrelated, theme—Some Causes of Accidie in the Ministry. The word “accidie” was first made familiar to some of us a generation ago by the Introductory Essay to Bishop Paget’s noble book, *The Spirit of Discipline*. It was the mediaeval name for a spiritual fatigue to which monks and other cloistered persons were particularly subject, a certain lassitude and melancholy, a dreary sickness of the soul, which, if it persisted, became one of the Seven Deadly Sins. F. W. Faber, in his valuable *Spiritual Conferences*, does not use the word, but he gives a sympathetic account of the trouble in its more common forms under the heading “Weariness in Well-doing.” “We feel,” he says, “the immense importance of an effort, but have no heart to make one. . . . It seems to us that we really can go on no longer. Perseverance is hopeless. Nothing has come of the past. Less it likely to come of the future. The present is vacuity.”¹ And in a very recent book, *The Religious Crisis*, one of the best and cheapest books on the present situation, Roger Lloyd gives an admirable definition: “If one phrase can describe the sin,” he says, “it was, at bottom, loss of faith, not in God, but in any real purpose in living.”²

Now, the causes of this spiritual condition in the ministry are many. It may be the result of a culpable neglect of the devotional life, or of an incomplete surrender to the will of God, or of common sloth that spreads to the spiritual life. It may come of resentment at the conditions of our work, of thwarted ambition, of wounded pride, of envy of the position of other ministries, of preoccupation with questions of stipend and status with its inevitable injury to the sense of vocation. With these and similar causes I do not propose to deal. I want to confine myself to causes more general and less reprehensible, not to search the heart and probe the conscience but to point to some influences and errors which may have more to do with ministerial despondency than we are apt to think.

1. One wonders, for instance, how much of the restlessness and discontent in the ministry, of which we hear more than enough, is due to a spiritual weariness *which has its source in*

¹ p. 274.

² p. 154.

the spirit of the age. In a striking analysis of the mood of the present day, Roger Lloyd declares that accidie is the root sin of the post-war world. Almost everywhere there is a sense of disillusionment and frustration, of the paralysis of peaceful purpose and goodwill, of inability to cope with the immense problems of social, national, and international life, and of personal insecurity and aimlessness. Much of this is due, of course, to economic stress, and to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world. But behind all there is the chaos of morals and faith. "There must be," says Lloyd, "a higher percentage of people to-day in the Western world who find life an empty futility than at any other time for the last five hundred years."³ Paget pointed out forty years ago that the influence of the time might have much to do with accidie in the life of Christians.⁴ And it is obvious that it is very difficult to escape from the atmosphere in which we are living. We are unconsciously affected by it. In a disillusioned age we are prone to be disillusioned too, and our work seems to partake of the general frustration. Our difficulties and problems seem to be insoluble because we see them through the grey mist that pervades the common life. We are not optimistic about the Church and ministry because no one is optimistic about anything. We may never have held the false doctrine of inevitable progress once so widespread, though we may have shared the cheerfulness of outlook that had no other origin. But we may insensibly be carried away from our own moorings in the Christian faith by the general reaction from that doctrine. It is not necessary to pursue the matter further. It is enough to recognise that a very potent cause of this unhappy lassitude may be outside ourselves in the spirit of the time, for to recognise the cause is to go a long way towards loosening its power.

It is not a new thing in the world. History never exactly repeats itself, and our own age has its own peculiar characteristics and difficulties, but this mood is recurrent. Matthew Arnold speaks of the "deep weariness" of the Roman world into which Christianity came, and Roger Lloyd draws a very interesting parallel between that age and our own. To read such a fine historical novel as the Danish Petersen's *The Street of the Sandalmakers*, with its authentic picture of life in the second century, is to understand a little better the dejected spirit of the Christians of the time who are reproved in 2 Peter for asking hopelessly, Where is the promise of His coming? Merejkowski's picture of the fourth century in *The Death of the Gods* makes clear the moral and intellectual strain of a time when, as Edwyn Bevan puts it, "to be stationary seemed

³ p. 155.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 43.

an achievement.”⁵ Bernard of Morlaix’ great hymn *De contemptu mundi*, with its familiar lines :

The world is very evil,
The times are waxing late,

reflects the pessimism of the middle of the twelfth century, though in a few years there was to be the sudden springtime of St. Francis. But to come down much nearer to our own day. There is no finer book for young ministers to read repeatedly than Phillips Brooks’ *Lectures on Preaching*, a golden book. The lectures were delivered in 1877, and could be delivered without alteration, though perhaps with some addition, to-day. Speaking on “The ministry of our age,” he says : “The notion of fixed helplessness, of the impossibility of any strong power of a man over his own life, the mitigation of the thought of responsibility which, beginning with the sublime notion of a man’s being answerable to God, comes down to think of him only as bound to do his duty to society, then descends to consider him as only liable for the harm which he does himself, and so finally reaches the absolute abandonment of any idea of judgment or accountability whatever—all this is very much more common than we dream. . . . With it come the inevitable consequences of hopelessness and restraint pervading all society and influencing all action, different in different natures, hard and defiant in some, soft and luxurious in others, but in all their various forms unfitting men for the best happiness, or the best growth, or the best usefulness to fellowmen. That is what we find scattered through the society in which we live.”⁶ It is worth quoting that passage for its own sake, and because it almost exactly describes the tone of the present age as we find it in life and reflected in much current literature. The tide may have gathered strength and swelled in volume, but it was flowing many years before the War, which is sometimes supposed to be the source of all our woes.

This is the world in which, except for the brave decade when the trumpets of hope heralded the birth of social democracy, some of us have been living for a long time. If we have escaped its deepening disillusionment it has been partly through the recognition of such causes as Phillips Brooks pointed out, but even more to the discovery that to hold the Christian faith intelligently, and not by mere tradition, is to be immune.

For my own part, I see no ground for despondency, in spite of the semi-paganism of the age. I do not underestimate the gravity of the task that confronts the Church; and I do not base my confidence on “campaigns” which seem to

⁵ *Hellenism and Christianity*, p. 111.

⁶ p. 222.

me to take little account of the forces that have to be overcome without; or even on the signs of revival within, which, however welcome, are too small to buttress faith, but on deeper considerations—on the nature of man, and the sufficiency of the gospel, and the vitality of the Church. If the gospel is true, then sooner or later, and sooner rather than later because of the failure of all else, men will discover their need of it. But our peril is not only that we may underrate the temper of the time, but, even more, that we may underrate the resources and strength of the Church. It is the fact that the Church is better equipped morally, spiritually, and intellectually, than it was years back for dealing with the facts of modern life. The defenders of Christianity are more honest and more capable than some whose works were put into my own hand when I had need of them. I think, too, one is justified in saying that the intellectual battle with humanism, that old enemy with many faces, is already won; and that materialism as a system of thought is bankrupt. In the end ideas rule the world, and the Christian of to-day has no reason to be dismayed. And as for the vitality of the Church, whether we consider the fierce testing of the industrial depression and its strain on the resources of the Church, or the still-extending triumphs of the mission field, or the lives of a vast multitude of believing men and women, we must, I believe, agree with Lloyd when he says: "The divine principle of energy, operating through sacrificial love, was never in all the history of Christendom so fully revealed in the Church as it is to-day."⁷ We must not permit ourselves to be intimidated by statistics, or hustled by fearful souls who tremble for the ark of God. We should rather consider the young generation which is rising around us, healthier-minded because it is freer than the youth of the past. I am convinced that in this generation the Church will have a greater opportunity than she has had for fifty years. I do not minimise the changes that must take place in the methods and orientation of the Church, or the cost of them in the sacrifice of old and dear traditions. It is a question whether or not the Church will have the wisdom, as she has the love, to answer the real calls of the age that is close upon us, and adapt herself to the new conditions. With all her imperfections she has not failed in the past, and I do not believe she will fail. But it is absolutely necessary that we do not share the accidie of the world.

2. To come to more personal causes. I am persuaded that many sincere and earnest ministers suffer from a spiritual despondency which is due to a mistaken reading of their condition. They have not lost faith in the sufficiency of the gospel, or in

⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 288.

the resources of the Church. But they have lost faith in themselves as true witnesses for Christ. Keats, in one of his letters, says: "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body."⁸ This is largely true of the ministry, and the minister feels at times that he is the most unspiritual "of anything in existence." It is not always realised, even by ourselves, how much we who serve in the active ministry live, like the poet, in the imagination; which is not to say that we do not live a true life, because the imagination is the power by which we touch reality. It is not only that our imagination is exercised in our apprehension of the invisible to which we bear witness, or that, on a lower level, in the constant preparation of sermons and addresses we are envisaging in the study the people to whom they are to be delivered. It is that, in the nature of things, we live creatively in the lives of others, in the epics of their loves and hopes and sorrows; we enter so fully into their most spiritual experiences, that it seems sometimes that we have none of our own, that we have no "identity." And this means that there are times and moods when we suspect that our life, like the life of the tree, is all on the outside, and that nothing is left within. In such moods we feel that we are utterly unworthy of our vocation, and that if our people knew the poverty of our own personal life they would cease to respect us as ministers. We may make frantic efforts to recover what we think we have lost, and, failing in that, come to regard our work as, if not hypocritical, yet lacking the final touch of reality in that it does not represent the truth of our own spiritual life.

Now I do not suggest that any one is worthy of so high a vocation as ours, but I do seriously suggest that all this may be utterly mistaken. One is reminded of the old story of Wilberforce, who lived in the sufferings and for the redemption of the slaves, and the very evangelical lady who was anxious about his soul. "Madam," he exclaimed, "I had forgotten that I had a soul." The anecdote has often been quoted as a quite unnecessary warning against too great an absorption in the welfare of others. It is rather a proof, if proof were needed, of the spiritual stature of Wilberforce. Have we not the highest Authority for believing that whoso would save his soul must lose it? But may not this fear lest we have spent our spiritual life in our work be due to a misapprehension of the nature of the spiritual life? It is not something secret and private that can be isolated from our work and activities. It is our whole life as persons, imagination, mind, heart, and will.

⁸ *Forman*, II, p. 173.

And if our life is enlarged and enriched by those activities, if we grow in understanding, sympathy, and love, through our identification with the infinitely varied lives around us, what is that but spiritual enlargement, enrichment, and growth? An intensely individual consciousness is not necessarily a sign of spiritual vitality. It is as we find our centre outside ourselves that our personality is realised. The higher the personality the more universal it becomes, and the highest of all was that of the Son of Man, who included all men in the vast circle of His life. And to us is this privilege given that, by the very conditions of our ministry, we are called into this larger experience. To lose "identity" in this sense is, most profoundly, to find it. Provided that we are really fulfilling our ministry and going forth from ourselves into the lives of those we serve, our concern for our own life is misplaced. We shall discover when our own testing comes, and we have to face trial, temptation, and sorrow in our own experience, that our faith and courage, and our realisation of God, are equal to the strain. Our "spiritual life" is far richer and deeper than our introspection would suggest. To lament this "cost" of the ministry is to miss the point and, perhaps, the blessing.

Yet, of course, there is the inner life of devotion, and closely connected with the misgiving to which I have just referred there is often a sense of frustration in prayer which is very discouraging. I am assuming that prayer and meditation have their necessary place in our life. Of the inevitable weariness and spiritual deadness that come of the neglect of these there is no need to speak. Without prayer which is the realisation of God in an act of self-committal, without meditation which is the lifting of the mind to Him in adoring thought, it is not conceivable that the ministry can be anything else but the most spiritually destructive and disappointing of all vocations. It is better to break stones by the highway than to attempt the ministry without a constant and conscious dependence on God. And yet, is not this the secret and depressing trouble of many a sincere and humble minister, that though he may speak earnestly and even with rapture—such is the influence of a worshipping people—of the joys of mystic communion with God, he himself is painfully conscious that he knows little or nothing of them? He comes nearest to experiencing the power and intimacy of prayer not when he is alone in his study but when leading the congregation in the great act of common worship. There, in the sanctuary, when he bears the needs of his people upon his heart, and his own personal life is merged in the life which is theirs and his, he may pass through the veil that hangs between this world of time and the eternal

loveliness. But when he is alone again the vision fades, and he seeks in vain to recapture the glow and ecstasy, and mourns the coldness of his own devotional life, even if he does not come to question—and this is possible—the truth of his experience in the common prayer. Much of this particular trouble would disappear if we thankfully and frankly recognised that it is true for the minister as for others that there is a power in the fellowship of worship which goes beyond the merely private experience of prayer. It is part of that enlargement and enrichment of personality through identity with others of which I have spoken. It is no indication of the poverty of our devotional life that it does not repeat an experience which depends for its intensity, and almost for its nature, on the corporate adoration. To expect it to do so is to invite a disappointment which may have serious results.

What makes the disappointment more common and the peril greater is the widespread prevalence of mystic ideas of prayer. The revived interest in the mystics which marked the closing years of the nineteenth century was significant in many ways, and contributed greatly to the widening of the horizons of Christian people. We owe to it some of the finest religious literature of recent years, from the profound writings of von Hügel to that pearl among devotional books, Evelyn Underhill's *The Golden Sequence*. On the other hand, it was one of the earliest signs of that flight from reason which has not a little to do with the present chaos, and it is mainly responsible for the all-too-familiar appeal to an undefined "religious experience" which is the last refuge of the hazy-minded apologist. One deplorable result of the vogue of mysticism was that multitudes of half-educated people cultivated a religious quietism in which thought was at a minimum, and misty emotion took its place. Religion became almost wholly subjective, and the great objective facts of the Christian faith were comparatively, and often entirely, neglected. "Immanence" was the magic word that opened the cavern of unearned wealth. Much of the devotional literature which is still read is characterised by the vagueness and shallowness of that period. One has only to compare it with the religious classics, Augustine's *Confessions*, Baxter's *Saint's Rest*, Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, Law's *Serious Call*, or Traherne's most glorious *Centuries of Meditation*, to realise what poverty can overtake a religion when it substitutes feeling and sentiment for thought and reality. No wonder that so many are ready to welcome the robust reaction of Barthianism, though as a theology it has all the limitations of a reaction.

But this revived interest in mysticism did more than call into existence an anaemic army of pseudo-mystics; it set a

standard by which many devout Christians began to measure their own devotional attainments. The "mystic union"; or some rapture, however brief, of unmediated vision; or, at least, a foretaste of peace unutterable, became the test of prayer's achievement, and the prize most earnestly to be sought. Now there are several things that need saying about the "mystic experience." In the *first* place, there is nothing peculiarly Christian about it. The true mystics are of all religions, and even, if we accept, as I think we should, Middleton Murry's account of his own experience, which is not unique, of no definable religion at all.⁹ In the *second* place, though the apostle Paul and, in a less degree, the fourth evangelist were mystics, there is nothing in the teaching of Christ or in the New Testament that even remotely suggests that the mystic experience should be the conscious quest of the Christian, or the proof of his progress in the divine life; and there is nothing in the least resembling the directions given in books on mysticism as to the steps and stages through which the seeker after God mounts through the "Dark Night of the Soul" to the Beatific Vision. And, in the *third* place, the true mystic is born, not made. He is as rare as any other kind of genius, and it is nothing short of disastrous to make his experience in any sense a norm of ours. And, to do them justice, the great Christian mystics are wise and humble enough to disclaim any sort of spiritual superiority over their fellows who do not share their visions. "Visions," says St. Bonaventura, "neither make nor reveal the saint; otherwise Balaam would have been a saint, and the ass which saw the angel."¹⁰

The point of all this is that when we read, without criticism, devotional books written along mystical lines as so many are, and when we try to cultivate a mystical devotional life as many do, where there is not self-deception, in most cases there is disappointment, a sense of something wanting and unattained. Because of the absence of the glow and vision we are apt to disparage our seasons of quiet prayer and meditation. They become a routine and a weariness, with consequences easy to foresee and far too common. Does not the restlessness, the worldly anxiety, the fear and the fever of many a ministerial life point to something wrong at the centre, and is not that wrong thing often a disappointment in the devotional life due to accepting too unquestioningly the mystical standards?

Then of the THEE IN ME who works behind
The Veil, I lifted up my hands to find
A Lamp amid the Darkness; and I heard,
As from Without—"THEE ME WITHIN THEE BLIND."

⁹ Vide his *God*, pp. 34ff.

¹⁰ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 16 (note).

I am very far from suggesting that there are no special experiences of God in the lives of us common men, no hours of vision, no seasons of revelation. But they come not of our seeking but of the grace of God, and they may come not only in the time of prayer and meditation but in the busiest day; or in an experience of joy or trial when a window may suddenly open upon the infinite; or when, like Elisha, we are listening to music; or when the beauty of some natural scene invades the soul. We may even know hours when the whole visible creation is translucent with the uncreated Beauty. To each his gift. But the frequency or rarity of such experiences is no test of the reality of our devotional life. There was no greater saint in the nineteenth century than Thomas Erskine, of Linlathen, and his *Life and Letters* is a treasury of devotional reading. In his old age, Principal Shairp had a conversation with him which he thus records: "He spoke of the awful silence of God, how it sometimes became oppressive, and the heart longed to hear, in answer to its cry, some audible voice. Then he quoted that word, 'Be not silent to me, O Lord; lest if Thou be silent to me I become like them that go down into the pit'; and then I know he added, 'But it has not always been silence to me. I have had one revelation; it is now, I am sorry to say, a matter of memory with me. It was not a revelation of anything that was new to me. After it I did not know anything which I did not know before. But it was a joy for which one might bear any sorrow.'" ¹² One revelation in the life of a great saint who lived in the very atmosphere of prayer and heaven! Should we be discouraged or grow weary of our prayers because we fare no worse, perhaps even better, than he? If God gives us such joy, it is well. If He withholds it, it is still well. "Why," asked Merut in the Indian myth, "why do I want presents from Rama? Rama is always in my heart." We should be abundantly satisfied if our prayer and meditation assures us of what we believe, keeps God in the centre of our thought, and so puts quietness into our soul.

The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,
 And what we mean we say, and what we would, we know.
 A man becomes aware of his life's flow,
 And hears its winding murmur, and he sees
 The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze.
 And there arrives a lull in the hot race
 Where he doth for ever chase
 That flying and elusive shadow, rest.
 An air of coolness plays upon his face,
 And an unwonted calm pervades his breast.
 And then he thinks he knows

¹¹ Rubaiyat 34.

¹² Letters, II., p. 377.

The hills where his life rose,
The sea where it goes.¹³

In prayer, as in life, we live by faith, and if it please God that now and again faith becomes vision, let us praise Him for the gift. But vision or no vision, let us continue in prayer, remembering that what hides God is not darkness but excess of light.

The quotation of a passage from Matthew Arnold suggests one more fruitful source of spiritual fatigue. The accidie or depression that overtakes a minister is sometimes due to his failure to cultivate *all* his powers. Most modern lectures on preaching deal with the minister's reading, and warn him against the danger of reading only or mainly with a view to his sermons. Many of us know how this habit can interfere with the right use and profit of the Bible. It is a danger difficult to avoid, particularly in the minister's early years. And yet it is true then, as it is always true, as the faithful lecturers point out, that the best preparation, not only for the sermon but for the whole work of the ministry, is the preparation of the man himself. They have in mind, as a rule, the devotional life of the minister. But I would urge that this is not nearly sufficient, or rather, that it is perilous to separate the devotional life from other necessary activities of the spirit. The exhaustion that overwhelms many a minister and makes his work a joyless labour, in spite of his desperate attempts to maintain his devotional life, is often due to his coming to the end of his mental resources. Men are sometimes warned against cultivating intellectual interests at the expense of their soul's welfare. The opposite warning is more frequently needed. Our spiritual life cannot be split up into compartments like this without loss. We need to study for the sake of a full spiritual experience. Theology, philosophy, science, history, literature, are nourishment we require. It is not a matter of becoming authorities on these or kindred subjects, though in the present day their importance to the minister's work cannot be exaggerated, and as Dr. Whitehead says: "So far as concerns religious problems, simple solutions are bogus solutions. It is written that he who runs may read. But it is not said that he provides the writing."¹⁴ It is; for most of us, the simple fact that not to cultivate the powers exercised in such studies is, sooner or later, to experience the weariness of spirit that takes all delight out of work and life. Incidentally, it may be remarked that the finest answer to a godless Humanism is a noble and Christian Humanism which claims all knowledge and art for Christ. But more especially, I urge, we need to cultivate the imagination which is the genius

¹³ Arnold, *The Buried Life* (Poems 263). ¹⁴ *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 207.

of the ministry. There is no power so easily lost, and the loss of which is more tragic. We should read good fiction, not as mere relaxation but as part of our spiritual culture. (For refreshment there is, from the minister's point of view, a good deal to be said for detective stories. Among other admirable qualities, they are cheerful oases in the deserts of scepticism, where so many clever but dismal young authors are extolling the gritty barrenness of sand. For in them virtue, if not always rewarded, is vindicated, and wickedness is always found out and punished.) But the great novels from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* down to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and on to Morgan's *The Fountain*, expand the horizons of the minister, and give him a more abundant entrance into the life of humanity. But most of all we should read poetry, the best of the past and the present. "The devil can do many things," wrote Francis Thompson, "but the devil cannot write poetry."¹⁵ It is no accident that the great prophets of Israel were poets, and that the greater the poet the greater the prophet. The failure of many interpreters, not only of the prophets but of our Lord Himself, who was the greatest of all, has been a failure of poetic imagination, for which no scholarship can compensate. Middleton Murry is right so far when he says of Christ: "The essence of Christianity is the utterance of a pure and morally great poetic nature; and in this order like must be attuned to like."¹⁶ The poets, in virtue of their divine endowment of vision and language, illumine life and the universe as no philosopher or scientist can do. And to no people in the world has God given so rich a heritage of poetry as He has given to us. Ours is "the tongue that Shakespeare spake," and in him the dreaming soul of the world found its mightiest prophet. Thomas Erskine knew Shakespeare only less well than he knew the Bible.¹⁷ Robertson of Brighton learnt the "Inferno" of Dante off by heart, made a special study of Wordsworth, but gave to Shakespeare the attention due to one he regarded as "all but omniscient."¹⁸ There is no study that will better repay the minister than the serious study of our greatest treasure next to the Bible. No doubt modern psychology can teach us much about human nature, though psycho-analysis is far more likely to betray than to bless. But, even apart from other things, the man who knows his Bible and Shakespeare will know more about men and women than he will learn from any textbook. Here is human life itself, with its tremendous background of mystery, as realised by the greatest imagination, save one, that ever tabernacled in mortal flesh.

¹⁵ Shelley, p. 69. ¹⁶ "Pure Poetry," in *Countries of the Mind*, 2 Series.

¹⁷ Letters, II., p. 367. ¹⁸ Life and Letters, I., p. 353.

Shakespeare is peerless, but he has great company. There is Milton, a mighty spirit in revolt. There is Keats, who died before his time, but who was of Shakespeare's tribe. It is a spiritual education of special value to a minister to read and study his great letters, and so learn how God tunes a poet for his work.

There is Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* should be studied line by line. There are the great poets of the nineteenth century, who kept its soul alive. But Wordsworth, apart from his supreme and abiding value as one of the world's greatest poets, is unexpectedly related to one of the most distinctive features of modern poetry and life. Professor Garrod says of him: "Wordsworth's poetry is essentially mystical. But whereas the mysticism of other men consists commonly in their effort to escape from the senses, the mysticism of Wordsworth is grounded and rooted, actually, *in* the senses."¹⁹ Now, both for good and ill, modern literature and the modern life it mirrors is insistent on the rights of the sensuous life as part of the indivisible nature of man. But here, as elsewhere, the poets have vision. Meredith, who ranks with the moderns, in *Earth and Man*, and *The Woods of Westermain*, is emphatic that man can only attain the spiritual by doing justice to the physical life. Bridges, a great poet of a very different order, assures us that:

This spiritual elation and response to Nature
Is Man's generic mark,

and this response is by what he calls "sensuous intuition."²⁰ Masefield can only describe the conversion of Saul Kane in terms of the transfiguration of the world of sense.²¹ It is not what our fathers would have emphasised, though Traherne did it in the seventeenth century. Abercrombie, in *The Eternal Wedding*, finds in sexual love, sublimated to its highest, the revelation of spirit:

God known in ecstasy of love,
Wedding Himself to utterance of Himself.

Binyon, in *The Sirens*, which has been called the greatest Ode since Wordsworth, sees the spirit that is in man answering to the Spirit that is in the universe, and turning *all* experience, mental and physical, to its high mysterious purpose.²³ And there are others, who are singing to-day like birds before sunrise and whose presence among us is God's pledge for to-morrow, for the poets are His harbingers. Surely all this is excitingly relevant to the life and thought of any man who

¹⁹ *Wordsworth*, p. 105.

²⁰ *Test. Beauty*, I., line 209 (318).

²¹ *Everlasting Mercy* (Poems), pp. 125ff.

²² *Poems*, p. 263.

²³ *Poems* (lyric), p. 323ff.

would understand, and speak to, the soul of this generation. The poets are its true interpreters. We should read poetry to keep alive our imagination, and our insight, and our hope. Before I was admitted to College I had, according to the "Midland" rule, to preach "trial sermons" before selected congregations. On one of these occasions I stayed with the minister. I have not forgotten how, in a break in the conversation, he suddenly rose and from a dark corner of his bookshelf produced a Shelley. "My people do not know and might not understand," he said almost apologetically, 'but I love Shelley, and find him very helpful.' There is no cause to be apologetic about any poet, nor should we think of poetry as relaxation, or as an escape from the world of reality. Our highest powers are exercised in the study of it, or we get nothing. And, if there is escape, it is into the world of reality from a world that often deceives us as much by its shadows as by its light.

I have dealt with three or four common causes of accidie in the ministry. There are others, such as forgetting that the ultimate responsibility for the world is not ours but God's, and that the Almighty, if I may quote Francis Thompson again, is not "a constitutional Deity, with certain state-grants of worship, but no influence over political affairs."²⁴ But perhaps you will permit me to close with a personal word, which will not be irrelevant to my subject. When a man has been a long time in the ministry there are many things he regrets. He knows he has made many mistakes. He knows, too, that many more were unnoticed by him, and are therefore unremembered. It is of God's mercy that it is so. God puts His hand over most of our errors and hides them, lest we should be discouraged too much. But I regret most the stern and harsh judgments I passed in my earlier years. Perhaps youth is always apt to be hard in its condemnations, and indeed there were some one cannot regret. None the less, such things become a painful memory. As one grows older one grows more merciful, and, realising far more of the tragedy of sin and folly, and especially of folly, one has learnt much of the mysterious depths and strange and frequent beauty of human souls. In the beginning one sometimes wondered why God loved the world. In the end it seems the most natural thing for Him to do, He being Himself and the world what it is. The world of men is worth loving and worth redeeming. With the increase of objects of love, life increases in joy and interest. And without the love that can forgive everything, even as God has forgiven us, none of the things of which I have spoken can save us from the ultimate doubt.

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²⁴ *Shelley*, p. 71.