#  Austin Farrer the Anglican Preacher

Austin Farrer (1904–1968) belonged to a circle of Christian thinkers and writers in Oxford that included his wife Katherine Farrer, C. S. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, and J. R. R. Tolkien. Among them, Farrer was the preacher as well as the theologian. I myself arrived as a student at Keble College a year after Farrer arrived as Warden (President, in U.S. terms); he died four years after I graduated. He preached in chapel a couple of times a term and for one or two reasons they were exotic experiences. It was partly his sing-song voice, but partly the compelling nature of what he had to say. He was nothing like the evangelical preachers I was used to, but I knew I was hearing the gospel.

Returning to live in Oxford decades later, and going to Keble chapel again each Sunday, made me go back to his sermons, more of which have happily been published and republished since his death.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nearly all were preached in Keble, in Trinity College where he was chaplain before coming to Keble, in Pusey House the Anglo-Catholic center for study and prayer in Oxford, or in churches in Oxford. My wife Kathleen and I have read many of them together, and Kathleen commented one day that Farrer belongs up there with Augustine and Origen for the personal and profound way he speaks about God. The Keble Philosophy Tutor who was subsequently Nolloth Professor of Philosophy, Basil Mitchell, described him as “one of the most remarkable men of his generation” (*CF* 13), and my Old Testament tutor who was subsequently Bishop of Salisbury, John Austin Baker, described him as “one of the great preachers of his generation” (*EM* ix).

## God’s Personal Relationship with Us

Austin Farrer talks about God’s relationship with us in a way that doesn’t tell us that it’s a reality but unself-consciously demonstrates that it’s a reality. He speaks naturally about the actuality of God and of his presence in us and with us in a way that conveys the actuality of God and of his presence and thus draws you into that reality. The effect is a little like that of someone who “explains” a piece of art to you by describing what he or she sees there, and thus enables you to see it. He doesn’t give the impression of seeking to have that effect; part of the beauty and effectiveness of his preaching is that it doesn’t seem calculated, though I suspect it may actually be more calculated than it seems. Sometimes the myths and misapprehensions that he hears among his students poke through the surface of the text, and one realizes that he is responding to them even when he doesn’t quite say so. So it’s preaching, it’s rhetoric. But it’s a rhetorical presentation of something real, not a rhetorical attempt to persuade you of something that might not be true even though the orator is keen for you to accept it.

In the services in which I join in worship, the people who preside give the impression that they really mean what they say, and thus their liturgical ministry is life-giving. It draws us into the presence of God. I like to believe that it does so by accident, or at least as a byproduct of the fact that the ministers are themselves truly relating to God and thus draw you in (but I am also aware that it is possible for a liturgist to be play-acting, and possibly still to be successful in facilitating people’s worship). But when it comes to the preaching, generally the preachers whom I hear don’t talk with the same reality, in the way that Farrer does.

If you could pray when you set yourself to pray, then perhaps you would not need to pray. . . . But you have got to pray—you have got to pray yourself out of prayerlessness . . . . Pray in your insincerity until your prayers cease to be yours alone, until the sun of God's charity has warmed you into life, and turned your heart of stone to a heart of flesh. You do not believe in God. No, but neither do you disbelieve. Your belief and your disbelief are insincere alike. Pray your insincere prayer until he who is sincerity and truth itself overcomes you, until his rays prise open your eyes. . . . Go out and walk in that light—but the darkness will have you again, but you must pray again, be continually reborn. (*EM* 29).

A spiritual insight of our time, he comments, is a sense for the social function of religion. But a blind-spot, he goes on, is a lack of sense for the personal reality of God. And it is Jesus who embodies and provides the evidence of that personal reality (*CF* 87–90). “Perhaps you are all set to hear a terrific sermon about the state of world affairs,” maybe associated with the possibility that “the end of all things should chance to be at hand.” But if it is, “there is all the more reason, while we have time, to get acquainted with the God who made us” (*BM* 1; *ES* 93).

You know what is the special mercy of Christ to us in the sacraments. It is, that he just puts himself there. He does not make it depend on anything special in us who receive , certainly not in anything special in the bread and the wine ; nor in anything special about the priest. . . . The supreme mercy of God [is] that he does not wait for our dignity or our perfection, but just puts himself there in our midst. . . . He who gave himself to us first as an infant, crying in a cot, he who was hung up naked on the wood, does not stand on his own dignity. If Jesus is willing to be in us, and to let us show him to the world, it’s a small thing that we should endure being fools for Christ’s sake, and be shown up by the part we have to play. We must put up with such humiliation of ourselves, or better still, forget ourselves altogether. For God is here: let us adore him. (*CF* 109, 111; *ES* 102, 103–4).

In lockdown online Eucharists, some churches encourage people to pray the prayer of Alphonsus Ligori:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Blessed Sacrament. I love you above all things and I desire to receive you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though you were already there, I embrace you and unite myself wholly to you. Permit me never to be separated from you.

Or as the hymn puts it, “Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee.” I say and sing those words, but I don’t know quite what to mean by them. In prayer I like rather to picture Jesus sitting on the sofa across from me. And when I think of death and resurrection, I think of Jesus holding my hand and walking with me and walking me into the new Jerusalem. Now I wouldn’t be surprised if Farrer would be happy with those words of Alphonsus. He does speak about the reality of the implications of God’s “self-humanisation,” of God’s having intercourse with us as friend with friend (*CF*, 89). And when he wants to remind people of the reality of God as a person, he reaches back for the story of God visiting Abraham under the guise of a mysterious stranger. “In dealing humanly with his human creatures, the creator moulds himself in mercy on the creaturely form and becomes as that which he has made” (*CF* 88–89; but I confess I am not sure about the transitions in these sentences as he speaks of similarities and differences between Genesis, the first Christians, and contemporary Christians). But like Paul, he also likes to emphasize that God is in us and is not just someone other than us (*BM*, 3).

## Thinker, Disciple, Poet

Students sometimes properly fret over how to hold together their academic work in theology and their relationship with God, and they may protest that even in a seminary there is a disjunction between the two. One response I give is to invite them to accept that we are the heirs of a disjunction that developed in Western thinking and life several centuries ago, and that recognizing the problem doesn’t mean people or institutions can instantly solve it. But reading Augustine and Calvin may at least inspire us to make forays into the holistic way of thinking and praying that is more instinctive for them in their context. It’s an example of a “two horizons” way of thinking. From my limited and bifurcated horizon I may be able to find my way into Augustine’s or Calvin’s more holistic one, and then come back to extend mine.

For Austin Farrer, there was no disjunction between theology and spirituality. There was a disjunction between the spirituality and the theology of his day. “Perhaps, in these humanist days,” a sermon on “The Brink of Mystery” begins (*EM* 10). In the Oxford of the 1960s, the Humanist Society was a big deal, and one day in my middle year, over breakfast in the Keble dining hall my friends and I were discussing the newly published book *Honest to God.*[[2]](#footnote-2) Eric Mascall, Austin and Katherine Farrer’s friend at Christ Church (and my theology tutor), had not long previously published his poem (which later refers to Farrer’s disrespect for the kind of theology Mascall is lampooning):

Hark, the herald angels sing:
      "Bultmann is the latest thing!"
      (Or they would if he had not
      Demythologized the lot.)
      Joyfull, all ye nations, rise,
      Glad to existentialize!
      Peace on earth and mercy mild,
      God and Science reconciled.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The change from the 1960s is that now the average sermon needs to incorporate a generalized comment on Christian commitment to peace and justice and on God’s identification with the poor. In the broader Christian culture, then, Farrer stands as counter-cultural in the twenty-first century as he did in the 1960s. Farrer could not know about the new perspective on Paul, either (*EM* 120–24). It was after Farrer’s death, when the theological atmosphere changed, that there came to be broader interest in and appreciation of him than there was during his lifetime. He then spoke and thought like someone who belonged to a different century or millennium, when the academic and the personal had not come apart. It was one of the factors behind his being an independent thinker. He had this extraordinary mind, yet he was also a simple man.

He could never be rationalist. He comments on the way theologians often say that the importance about the miracle stories in the Gospels is what they tell us about the disciples’ view of Christ. Not so, he says. The important thing is the attitude of Christ himself (*EM* 74). The key was being available to God’s will. And sometimes “the tide of the divine grace carried him beyond all boundaries known to us, and did wonderful things we cannot explain. . . . Jesus experimented with Omnipotence, and let it find its own limits.” He wouldn’t simply keep doing impossible things, because order is important, too (*EM* 75). Farrer neither depends on quasi-scientific arguments for Christian faith nor dismisses science. Panels of doctors sift the evidence for alleged cases of miraculous cures at the healing shrine at Lourdes, “and no doubt the evidence, if genuine, proves something or other of importance, though it’s difficult to see what” (*EM* 73).

There is hardly any worse expectation of a preacher than having to preach about the Trinity. As a theological college principal in England, I used to notice that the priests with whom ordinands served on placements often asked the ordinand to preach on Trinity Sunday. They recognized that they themselves didn’t know how to preach on the Trinity and they thought that a theological student might. And in a way they were wise to funk it rather than go in for talk about clover leaves or triangles. I wonder what the undergraduates at Trinity (!) College, Oxford, on Trinity (!) Sunday, 1961, made of Farrer’s sermon on the Trinity (*CF* 72–77; *ES* 76–80). He offers two images. We talk to ourselves, he notes, and we relate to other people whom we love. They are images that speak of the personal, not the impersonal. Farrer does something similar in his “Trinity of Love” sermon (SS 112–18).

He is a thinker, but he also has the imagination of a poet. He disagrees with the teachers who told him that Genesis 1 was so much more profound than Genesis 2. “I could not accept the great executive deity, who does everything just by giving orders, in place of that dear God whose fingers are on our clay and whose breath is in our nostrils; and who, when he has made us, comes to walk with us in the orchard-paths of his paradise” (*CF* 210). One might rather say that he has the imaginative instinct associated with Ignatian meditation. Noting one year how the lectionary prescribed a reading of the Transfiguration story at a point midway between one Good Friday and the next, he suggests that we are nevertheless or consequently “recalled to the memory of the cross” and to the story of Jesus’ last days. “Not all the Bible is equally useful to read or to ponder on, and not all parts even of the Gospel take us so straight to heaven as do these final scenes. . . . Merely look with all your eyes on one scene at a time. . . . Then see if the overflowing mercy which unites you to him will not make something more of your giving yourself to God” (*SS* 158–59; *ES* 123–24). “Let us turn to Scripture for this above all, that we may see the face of God in Christ Jesus. . . . The Gospels can be endlessly meditated, and what more do we need?’ (*SS*, 152).

## The Preacher and the Scriptures

Austin Farrer’s preaching is not expository. He does not take a passage from the Scriptures and present us with an analysis and seek to show us how its different facets are significant for us, as I often do. He does not gives us concrete illustrations of how the text might find embodiment in someone’s life, as I seek to. He does sometimes work through a passage. In talking the congregation through 1 Corinthians 11 (*EM* 125–29), he recreates before people’s eyes the worship feast at Corinth and the sacrilege that was involved in it. He notes how odd their practice will seem to us and how we might reconsider our practice and our thinking that separate the sacred and the everyday, in light of theirs. In its way it is as expository as one could ask for. Anyone can retell the Ruth story. Farrer can bring it to life and make you imagine Ruth as you have not before (*EM* 90–93). He has a vivid portrayal of John the baptizer getting people to think (*CF* 108; *ES* 101), though that portrayal is a jumping off ground for reflection, which is often the way his preaching works; hence my commenting that it is not expository.

He has a neat way of hooking people with some statement that they may be expected to agree with, before saying something that undermines the apparent agreement. In this connection, one of his rhetorical tricks is to sound as if he is disagreeing with the scriptural text. The sermon on 1 Corinthians 11 works that way. He begins with a verse from the chapter that refers to being guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, and then with the comment that the words “appear to us rather gratuitous, and even unkind” (*EM* 125). Another comes from a sermon for the Sunday after Easter Day. “When the lesson for the day contains a really awful text, it seems mere cowardice not to preach about it. And what can be more shocking than this? *Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed*” (*CF* 78; *ES* 53).

He undertakes this move especially with the Old Testament, which gives any preacher lots of scope (you will forgive me from focusing more on the Old Testament, but that especially interests me, and Farrer pays more attention to the Old Testament than many preachers). I like to imagine him turning to the lectionary passages for a Sunday with his apparently childlike simplicity, with a wide-eyed openness that reads a story as if neither he nor we had ever read it before, but also with disarming Oxford apparent skepticism. “A very old and doubtless very barbarous tale” describes Jacob wrestling with God (*CF* 55–56; *ES* 89); but it turns out to be illuminating. The stories about Daniel are surely characterized by “clumsiness and naivety,” but they turn out to be characterized by brilliant symbols and ideas (*CF* 91–94).

“There is a primitive, not to say savage, story in the Second Book of Samuel,” he begins (*CF* 112). David is being given a choice of horrifying chastisements for an apparently harmless misdemeanor, that of commissioning a census of his kingdom. There are ways of explaining why the misdemeanor was so dreadful and why the chastisement might have worked out as it did, and Farrer mentions those, but he focuses on the phrase of David’s that provides him with the title for the sermon: “It is better I fall into the hands of the Lord—for his mercies are great—than that I fall into the hands of man” (*CF* 112). On another occasion he notes that the fearfulness of God may seem a distinctly Old Testament theme, but begins the sermon with Hebrews 10:31: “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Theis falling remains fearful if we don’t give ourselves to repentance (*BM* 14–18; *ES* 97–100). “According to Moses, God is jealous. . . . According to Christ, God is generous. . . . Yet this strict jealousy and this free generosity are not contrary to each other” because they relate respectively to humanly-made images and to the living images that God makes, or rather begets (*SS* 49–50).

He retells the story of the witch of Endor. How many preachers do that? He gives the learned congregation every opportunity to doubt whether it is “just a story,” without its being quite clear what he himself thinks about this question. It is often his way with texts that offend modern sensibilities. He thereby makes it harder to dismiss the story because its possibly fictional nature offends them but apparently doesn’t offend him. Whatever the answer, what the dead Samuel had to say was what the living Samuel had to say. Thus Farrer makes translucently clear what people need to get from the story. “The lesson of the Old Testament is massively simple—that God and God alone suffices; and that he seeks us where we are, in our present existence, by the voice of prophets who call for our present response.” And “the lesson it eternally valid; the Old Testament is not annulled by the New. The will of God is everywhere present: it is experienced by being obeyed” (*EM*, 142–43). Farrer has a steel hand inside a velvet glove.

In a sermon on “The Potter’s Clay” (*SS* 78–82; *ES* 16–18), he brings together Genesis 2 and Jeremiah 18. He begins from the fact that the author of Genesis knew nothing about cosmology—or rather, from the fact that Farrer himself doesn’t know anything about it. But he offers the picture of God’s shaping hands and thinks about our human hands. Then he finds his way to Jeremiah and the potter and his hands. “There is never a moment for the clay, when the potter is not doing something with it. God is never standing back and watching us; his fingers are on us all the time. . . . There is no end indeed to God’s making of man.” But the goal of that making is already known and achieved. It is Christ. “What never ends is our receiving the grace of Christ, our growing up into the image of Christ” (*SS* 81–82; *ES* 18).

## Homiletics

Austin Farrer ignores most of the formal principles for preaching that I have urged upon ordinands. His sermons have no discernible structure, at least not in the “Introduction—three points beginning with P—conclusion” sense. And it was as well that the content held the hearers, because the delivery was indeed torturous. He could give the impression that he prepared his sermons on Saturday night, to judge from his occasional Sunday references to something that happened the previous day (but maybe that’s another aspect of the rhetoric, or that he had been thinking about the sermon through the week and simply wrote it then). He does so in his story about climbing onto some steps and a stack of copies of the *University Gazette* the previous day, in order to change a lightbulb, which was fine as long as he didn’t ask if he was secure; and so “it is not in looking at our faith that we have conviction of God, but in looking at God, and in obeying him. God can convince us of God, nothing else” (*CF* 59; *ES* 171). That story does illustrate his capacity sometimes to use concrete realities of everyday life as an illustration. The reality and specifics of his human life then come through and thus encourage the sense that he is talking about reality when he talks about God.

If I am asked why I am an Anglican, I may explain that it is the default way of being a Christian in England—or it used to be. But if I am asked what I appreciate about being an Anglican, then the answer includes the liturgy and the way worship is not dependent on the ineptness of the worship leader. But the reasoning includes especially my appreciation that we are a lectionary church, so that we read three passages from the Scriptures plus a psalm at every service. No doubt the lectionary has its shortcomings, but it is marvelous that we read the wide range of Scriptures that we do read. This prescription cuts right down most of the need for agonizing about a subject for next Sunday’s sermon. I myself will often talk for a few minutes after each of the passages. What I don’t do is look for some way to interweave them, all in ten or fifteen minutes.

As the chaplain of Trinity, Farrer often gave a brief homily which also made no such attempt.[[4]](#footnote-4) Often he is not a lectionary preacher because he preaches in the context of a sermon series, in Keble Chapel or in Pusey House. He is usually then given a topic, which he will often question. “How can we be sure of God?” (*CF* 59; *ES* 171). “There is something absurd, or even indecent, in the task I have been given this morning,” he begins. He preaches a series of four “Bible Sermons” on passages from the lectionary at Pusey House in 1963, my middle year, and the term when the temperature never rose above freezing; he comments on the twenty degrees of frost (*BM* 26). To an Evangelical like me, how odd that there should be “Bible Sermons,” as if there could be any other kind!

Like most great preachers (I suspect), he works from a script. When I was newly ordained, I was pressed by my rector to start writing my sermons. Working from notes, he observed, I didn’t necessarily say exactly what I meant the first time I sought to articulate a point, and I thus had to say it again. I was frustrating everyone and wasting their time. Working from a script means, among other things, that Farrer knows exactly where he is going and knows how he will get there, though I am not sure whether he knew where he was going when he started writing the sermon. I thought it was the Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren who said that his own preaching method was to tell people what he was going to say, then say it, then tell them what he had said, but I have discovered that it is one of those sayings that are attributed to several sources. Whoever formulated it, Farrer does not work that way. He does not tell you where he is going, at no point in the sermon are you likely to be able to guess, and at the end you cannot remember or work out where it has been or how it got to its conclusion.

I suspect one of the reasons why preachers may aim to have a clear structure to their preaching is the forlorn hope that people may then remember it. But I have come to realize that preachers shouldn’t worry if people can’t remember the sermon an hour or two after it was preached. The more important thing is whether God spoke to them in some way—whether God became real to them, or they realized they need to take some faithful action. But the preacher can’t control, maybe not even influence , what happens between God and people during the preaching. “This is the work of God. It may have no direct or logical relation to what the preacher said, yet the preacher did not speak in vain” (*EM* 72). (I preached in Keble chapel, long after Farrer’s time, on the parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16, and talked about the way he recognized when the time had come to make a decision it helped the Keble bursar come to the conclusion that it was time to resign his position.)

Rather surprisingly (or not surprisingly, because if Farrer were ever to be surprising, it would be by stopping being surprising), his last sermon in his first book of “proper” sermons, entitled “David Danced Mightily,” includes the comment that “religion should be danced” (*SS* 184).[[5]](#footnote-5) It is not his only reference to dancing. “That well-meaning minority, the Christian dons” (that is, professors) engage in “pastoral efforts” in their relationships with their students, but in reality like preachers “we are completely powerless: as powerless as—as powerless as Jesus Christ” (*EM* 107–8). Farrer implies that dons are like John the Baptizer and Jesus in being fated to wail but not arouse lament, to pipe but not move to dance. At that point (a third of the way through the sermon) Farrer reveals that he is preaching on Matthew 11:25–30 where Jesus comments that God reveals things to babes. It had been the New Testament lesson, and he hints that he assumes people may remember that fact, which seems a fine act of Christian charity.

In the churches where I have regularly preached, I have not usually needed titles for my sermons; if people were going to come, they would come, and if they were not, a snappy sermon title would not make them change their mind. I eventually discovered that sermons need titles in the United States, and they need them in Oxford, too, because they get advertised. But the sermons preached in parish churches get them, too: one for the harvest festival in the village of Bletchingdon is “Reaping Faith.” Farrer’s titles would surely do the job: the first two in *The End of Man* are “The End of Man” itself, and then “The Death of Death.” I guess Farrer took that one from the hymn “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah” but I like to think about John Owen writing his treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* only a couple of years before he came to live down the street in Christ Church in 1651.

## Introductions

I once heard a lecture on communication that critiqued the habit of beginning the sermon with a story that had at most a tenuous relationship with the sermon. The apparent presupposition, the lecturer commented, was that preachers think they will get our attention with the story in a way that they would not if they went straight into sermon. But this supposition implies we are not interested in the actual message, which contradicts Cranmer’s principle of charitable assumption, and it also implies that as soon as we discover what they are really preaching about, they will switch off. I promptly gave up the practice and I now as the listener to sermons consistently say within myself, “Please get on with it and get to the message.” Perhaps the preachers are just giving us and themselves time to settle. Karl Barth once declared that “basically, the sermon should not have an introduction.”[[6]](#footnote-6) His most profound argument is that introductions presuppose that we think we need and can find a point of contact with the listener’s inner being, whereas sometimes the only one who can do that is God,[[7]](#footnote-7) which links with Austin Farrer’s conviction that everything depends on God.

Farrer can go in for long introductions. An example is the reflection on death that opens a sermon called “Gates to the City” (*CF* 95). It doesn’t make me wish he would get on with it, because it does have substance. His story about changing a light bulb is actually the second of two introductions to the sermon on “How Can We Be Sure of God?” (*CF* 59; *ES* 171). Something similar is true about the sermon on “The Trinity of Love.” It begins, “there can be no doubt that either life is too short, or we are too lazy,” after which one would like to stop for a moment and think. It’s neat to be able to do when reading the sermons. But orally delivered, this introduction leads into a disquisition about moles (*SS* 112) before eventually coming to the Trinity. For All Saints Day, Farrer has a long story about children brought up by wolves (*CF* 104). On the eve of the feast of the unknown replacement disciple, St. Matthias, Farrer begins with a story about being successor as Warden to Eric Abbott, who had become Dean of Westminster and was then much better known than Farrer (*EM* 116)—though ironically not now.

When we were in America—and it feels odd, I must say, being in America. They treat the academic visitor as a talking book; the text is something you published twenty years ago, but footnotes, they hope, are going to spurt *viva voce* from your living person, wherever they stick a pin in you. Under this sort of treatment, you can see that it is difficult not to grow a trifle pompous. (*CF* 72; *ES* 76)

The story issues in significant self-mocking comments on the Trinity.

“What happens if you put a pair of rabbits on a desert island?” (*EM* 1; *ES* 23). If humanity continues to multiply as the rabbits would, it could be the end of the world and the end of man, which today would lead into a sermon on conservation, but in 1966 led into a sermon on the end of man in the sense of the point about humanity: “the end of man is endless Godhead endlessly possessed, but that end flows back in glory on our mortal days, and gives a hope and meaning to whatever Christians do for love of God or love of one another” (*EM* 4; *ES* 25).

Farrer can begin with a phrase that could draw in anyone whose mind was somewhere else. “The plague broke out in Constantinople” (*CF* 123; *ES* 125). “The people we read of in the Bible brought their lamb or their kid to the altar, and there they cut its throat” (*SS* 155; *ES* 121). His last sermon begins, “The Gospel for today shows us John the Baptist underfire” (*CF* 108; *ES* 101—I think it’s a comment on Mark 1, but interestingly, it’s not possible to be sure, from the sermon that follows). ”St John in his Gospel seems determined, whatever may happen, to show the wisdom of God, and the foolishness of man” (*BM* 155; *ES* 42). “Once upon a time there was a country doctor, a pompous and unimaginative man” (*SS* 27; *ES* 204): a sermon for Christmas Day. “The Lord’s Prayer consists of three hearty wishes, and three humble requests,” and it is thus “truly terrifying in its simplicity,” but Jesus prayed it and we can enter into it as we enter into him (*WL* 1–2).

Or he can go straight into the sermon. “Very early in the morning on the first day of the week” (SS 72; *ES* 49). “When Jesus died on the cross, says St John, there came away three things from his body: breath, blood, and water” (*CF* 100; *ES* 72). After that beginning, one is surely going to listen. He goes on to talk about baptism, confirmation, and eucharist and then quotes from the Jesuit prayer:

Breath of Christ hallow me

Body of Christ keep me

Blood of Christ inflame me

Water from Christ, wash me.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (SS 106; *ES* 19) sounds like the routine preface to a sermon. But this being Farrer, it isn’t. He draws attention to the way this preliminary declaration places the preacher under God’s protection and indicates that preachers lose themselves in the truth they preach. Ah, if only, I am tempted to add. Because something Farrer says here points to how seriously he takes preaching—not seriously in a humorless sense (actually he likes to be humorous), but seriously in the sense that he treats it as a means God can use to move people on in their relationship with him. It is not clear that all preachers believe that, and perhaps the sense that they are going through the motions and that their preaching will make no difference is self-fulfilling. Farrer goes on to comment that preachers especially need to be aware of sitting under God’s protection when they preach about the grace of God, because the task is impossible; “one . . . can only stand aside, and let it shine” (SS 106; *ES* 19).

## “The Ultimate Hope.”

In a sermon on Revelation, Austin Farrer guesses that he has fifteen years to live before he sees “the end of the world” (*EM*, 132). Actually, it turned out that he had two years. But he was ready.

The sermon I am going to preach to you came to me readymade—It drove into the Front Quadrangle where I happened to be standing . . . : a brisk little van with this inscription painted on its doors, ‘Crosses and wreaths made to order.’ . . . Crosses and wreaths can be made to order, and that is a very comforting thought; for when something so *un*-made-to-order as death turns up, it is a pathetic sort of consolation for us to switch our attention on to something that can be made to order. Death cannot be called to order, or got under control by us; the souls of the righteous, and of the unrighteous too, are in the hands of God, not in our hands; but we can get crosses and wreaths supplied to our order.” (*SS* 22; *ES* 177) .

The sermon on “the End of Man” plays with this latter phrase as it talks about the possibility of our bringing life on earth to an end. It then moves to the end for which we were created, to God as the end of man, and thus to the end of man as “endless Godhead endlessly possessed” but with the result that “that end flows back in glory on our mortal days.” Nevertheless, “we cannot, in this life, wholly pursue the end which we pursue in anticipation” but look forward to the time when “man may possess his everlasting end and, emptied of himself, be filled with God. All must be caught up and transformed in that death and resurrection which Christ fulfilled for us” (*EM* 4–5).

“First we live and then we die. . . . By living we become ourselves, by dying we become God’s” as “everything we have become in our living is handed back to the God who gave us life, for him to refashion and use according to his pleasure” (SS 13; *ES* 10). Ideally, “the dying and the living would go on side by side from the start; life would be full, constantly enriched, and also constantly surrendered to God.” What Christ teaches us “is not living but dying, not how to be ourselves, but how to surrender ourselves to God, and for God’s sake to mankind” (SS 14; *ES* 11).

“Well, but can you really choose your crosses?” (*SS* 24; *ES* 178). Not really. “The very heart of the Christian mystery is this, that there is a wonderful interchange between Christ and us, both of crosses and of crowns. Our little crosses are no more than token payments for our crowns” as “Christ unites them with his own cross” (*SS* 25; *ES* 179). The phrase “wonderful interchange” is intriguing. The expression occurs in Martin Luther and in John Calvin; I don’t imagine they were Farrer’s bedtime reading. “This is that mystery rich in divine grace to sinners, that by awonderful exchange(*commertium*)our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s and Christ’s righteousness not Christ’s but ours.”[[8]](#footnote-8) And “this is the wonderful exchange (*commutatio*) that he made with us out of his immense goodness: having been made Son of Man with us, he has made us sons of God with him. . . Taking the burden of our unrighteousness by which we were oppressed, he clothed us with his righteousness.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

“The Ultimate Hope” was the unwittingly appropriate title of his last sermon in Oxford.[[10]](#footnote-10) “A speaker who knows his job saves up his main point, but I’m going to spill mine out straightaway. My precious truth is this: that Christian hope is not one thing, but two. . . . There’s hope for this world; and there’s hope for a world beyond it” (*CF* 117; *ES* 199). We do not trust Christ to show us the way round a universe that is stable and enduring “but to draw us into a new creation, . . . a new world beyond mortality.” It is possible because the risen Christ “spliced the new creation into the old, and grafted eternity on time” (*BM* 7).

“I was looking the other day at a friend of mine, dying slowly and painfully and not at all old” (*EM* 15). The sermon is undated, though I wondered whether it referred to Charles Linnell, assistant chaplain at Keble in my time, who died before reaching fifty (see *CF* 214–18). That sentence comes in the middle of reflections and declarations of confidence about resurrection. He thinks much about death, and about resurrection, though he makes the typically thought-provoking Farrer comment that it’s easier to imagine resurrection than death (*CF* 97). The culture encourages us in February or March each year to think about Easter and about the rising to new life, but not so much to think about the dying. Farrer was fond of Mark’s Gospel, where the focus lies on the dying even though there is certainty about Jesus being alive. It gives us “some reason for the concentration of our worship on the groaning cross, rather than on the bursting tomb. . . . Our religion is the victorious life, but that victory is seen more in the humanity of the passion than in the divinity of the resurrection. Truly Christ risen is human, still; but our clue to that humanity is the life he suffered in our flesh and blood” (*EM* 12).

“Faith and hope . . . are the hands love stretches out after an everlasting good” (*BM* 30). If you wanted a phrase to sum up Austin Farrer, the Anglican preacher, than that would do.

1. I refer to them as follows: *CF* = *A Celebration of Faith* (reprinted London: Hodder, 1970); *EM* = *The End of Man* (London: SPCK, 1973); *BM* = *The Brink of Mystery* (London: SPCK, 1976; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); *WL* = *Words for Life* (London: SPCK, 1993; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); *SS* = *Said or Sung* (London: Faith Press, 1960) = *A Faith of Our Own* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960); *ES* = *The Essential Sermons* (London: SPCK, 1991), in which many of the sermons are reprinted. Many of his works and works about him are listed in *Austin Farrer: Oxford Warden, Scholar, Preacher* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Stephen Platten with Nevsky Everett; London: SCM, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963). The book argued that we need to see God as more the ground of our being than someone outside us. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Pi in the High* (London: Faith Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Leslie Houlden’s comment, *WL* xi–xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I say “proper sermons” because *Said or Sung* was preceded by a collection of “weekly paragraphs” called *The Crown of the Year* (London: Dacre, 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barth, *Homiletics,* 124-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Martin Luther, ***Psalmenvorlesung 1519/21*, *Schriften* 5 (Weimar:** Böhlaus, 1892), 608. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It would have been so appropriate if it had been his very last, but *CF* 108, 117 suggest it was his next to last. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)