

honorary President of the Society in acknowledgement of his leadership in promoting Merton, his enthusiasm and of his place as one of the few people in England who had actually known Merton and could bring that knowledge and connection to the fledgling society. Donald graciously accepted and over many years was a boundless source of encouragement and support to the Committee and to the Society as a whole.

Donald's presence, his enthusiasm and his stories will be greatly missed from future gatherings of the Society but his spirit will no doubt be remembered and his stories retold. And I'd like to conclude with one such story that sums Donald up so well. When asked for his advice on what a speaker should bring to an audience Donald's immediate and simple advice was: "Give them poetry, poetry, poetry!"

Donald Allchin – Wisdom & Joy

Rowan Williams

The sermon preached at the High Mass of Requiem for the Reverend Canon Dr Arthur McDonald Allchin, St Mary Magdalene, Oxford, 12 January 2011

'Him who comes to me, I will in no way cast out.'
John 6.35-40

Many years ago in Cambridge, the late Professor Geoffrey Lampe was speaking at an event to mark the retirement of another Donald—Donald MacKinnon—and he said in the course of his words, that he recalled how, many years before, they'd been sitting at adjacent desks in a university examination. Donald had finished his papers early and (said Geoffrey) had risen to leave, 'I might have said "leaving his desk empty", but emptiness was never a quality that could be predicated of any desk with which Donald (MacKinnon) had had anything to do.' I suspect that that might be an epitaph for the Donald we celebrate today.

Emptiness was not a quality of any desk, any room or any conversation with which Donald was involved. And it is that fullness we are celebrating today, the fullness of a man and a mind and a heart receptive in a very rare way to whatever gifts the Father gave. Sometimes we think of wisdom—the wisdom of God as we receive it—as a power that sets things in order in the world. And it's very tempting to think of order as something that works only in straight lines or in tidy patterns. Yet the wisdom of God, as we apprehend it in Scripture and in our own lives, is a wisdom that works far less by setting things in clear lines and tidy patterns than

by evoking echo after echo after echo of the same life-giving word; image after image after image of the one eternal image. And that was the wisdom we were privileged to see reflected in our dear friend, a wisdom that depended on two great qualities. Obviously, first, in the light of what has been said, a wisdom that depended on a capacity for welcome, a spiritual and intellectual hospitality the like of which is rarely seen. Perhaps one of the reasons that Donald found his pilgrimage had so much resonance with that of his friend Thomas Merton was that something of the same quality can be seen in Merton—a hospitable soul in which echoes are constantly evoked, images constantly generated again and again and again.

And in the words of today's gospel we are reminded that welcome is something which we not only extend to God but which God senses, feels, enacts in his very being. God is a receptive God. We who rightly hold to the belief that God is supremely, unceasingly active, need to remember the paradox that this action is so often expressed in revelation in terms of God's willingness to *receive*; and God incarnate among us, Jesus Christ, speaks in this gospel of how he *receives* from the Father the gift of the world. Living in that Christ-like wisdom, we seek the wisdom of receptivity, the wisdom of welcome—but not only welcome. If welcome is to be real and joyful and lively it is a welcome rooted in *wonder*.

Which of us will not remember occasions when Donald broke out with that favourite word of his—on the telephone, in conversation, in preaching—'wonderful'? 'Wonderful in the sight of the angels' (one of his favourite openings

from the poetry of Anne Griffiths)—and that wonder, that joyful welcome of what God was giving was part of the wisdom he exercised and showed. Perhaps it allows us to say (with conscious boldness) that God 'wonders' even over the world he has made; that he in and through the incarnate Christ allows himself the joy of surprise as again and again new things are generated by that one word, that one image; a wisdom that lives by welcome and by wonder. (No preacher can resist alliteration!) But in all these ways we saw something of the Christ-likeness which Donald manifested in his thinking life and his feeling life and in his pastoring, that excitement and delight not only in ideas but in persons, that eager willingness to help the lives of people echo one another. 'You *must* talk to so and so', 'Oh, here is someone you *must* meet', 'Wouldn't it be *wonderful* if you could have a conversation with so and so?'

So we thank God for his wisdom, the wisdom of *joy*. The more we talk about wisdom in straight lines and tidy patterns the more we're inclined to forget that wisdom in Scripture is a wisdom that *rejoices*. It is eternally, primitively, the joy of God in being God, the joy of God in God's own mind and God's own heart. Into that wisdom we are called; Jesus doing the will of his Father, incarnating the eternal wisdom of God, incarnates also the joy of God. It is Jesus after all who speaks of joy in heaven at the fall of the enemy into darkness, at the welcoming of the sinners and the lost into their eternal household. We shall pray today that something of that joyful, welcoming, wondering wisdom may be in us as we share wisdom's feast.

One of Donald's obituaries spoke of a

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'childlike' quality in him. It's not quite the right word and yet it captures something very deep and very essential that has a great deal to do with those qualities of welcome and wonder. And it's that image of a childlike wisdom with which I want to leave you in words from Thomas Merton's great meditation on holy wisdom:

'Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, *Donum Dei*. She is God given and God Himself as Gift. God as all, and God reduced to Nothing:

inexhaustible nothingness. *Exinanivit semetipsum*. Humility as the source of unfailing light.... She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with Him. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory. Because she receives perfectly there is in her no stain.' (*Hagia Sophia*, 1962)

Wonderful in the sight of the angels!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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