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Westminster Abbey Wreath-Laying

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WESTMINSTER ABBEY WREATH-LAYING June 22nd 1991

OUR GUEST OF HONOUR WAS BILL ADAMS, CHAIRMAN OF THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP.

THE OCCASION MARKED HIS TWENTY YEARS IN THAT OFFICE.

HE GAVE THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS:

It seems incredible that it is now eleven years since the very exciting and moving day in June 1980 when a great congregation of some seven hundred people witnessed the consecration of this memorial to George Eliot. In the years before, the Fellowship Council had to make some momentous decisions. Among the most important was the choice of an inscription for the stone - words which would be on view here in the Abbey to millions of visitors for perhaps hundreds of years into the future. We needed to find a phrase which came as close as possible to an expression of George Eliot's philosophy. According to our records, the choice was made at a meeting in September 1975; I read with interest and not a little *frisson* of pride, that the Chairman made two suggestions, one of which was adopted. This is the reason why Michael Forrest was asked to read to you today the passage from 'Janet's Repentance' containing the quotation, 'The first condition of human goodness is something to love, the second something to reverence'.

I want to consider whether we achieved our aim. In the story George Eliot is clearly talking about the effect of a religious faith on human behaviour. She herself, as a young girl, had ardently embraced religion as a foundation of her life, and at this most impressionable age she witnessed at first hand the plight of the very poor in Nuneaton and Bedworth. We are often temporarily upset by the sanitised version of poverty and starvation shown on our TV screens; it is different actually to be amongst those in dire need, and I think we should remember that the condition of the poorest people in the early nineteenth century was akin to that of those in the so-called Third World today. The religious ardour of Mary Ann Evans faded, but there remained perhaps the most powerful emotion which influenced her adult life - compassion. This awareness of the need to give love and to receive it was strengthened both by her innate reticence and her painful conviction of her own ugliness.

There is a modern sense in which we interpret the word goodness - we talk about feeling good, being confident, having an air of satisfaction and fulfilment. It is the kind of confidence that came to George Eliot when at last she met George Lewes and found someone to love and someone who would love her in return. In her Journal in 1857, a full three years after they had taken up life together, she writes:

The blessedness of a perfect love and union grows daily. Few women, I fear, have had such reasons as I have, to think the long sad years of youth were worth living, for the sake of middle age.

So, it is true for her, that something, or perhaps more personally - *someone* to love was an essential element of a complete life. To quote again her words, from *Adam Bede*:

What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life - to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting.

In the final part of the quotation, the reverence to which she refers is clearly a religious response; but a definition of the word describes reverence as 'emotion awakened by the intelligent appreciation of the greatness or authority of another'. I believe that George Eliot's own reverence was awakened by humankind - the whole race of Man. It is this, combined with the compassion about which I have spoken, which informs all her work and accounts for the understanding and sympathy that she applies to every situation that her characters encounter. So she balances dreams with reality, delusion with truth, and brings to her judgement not the narrow perception of black against white, but consideration of the myriad shades of grey that lie in between. This great gift of compassion coloured her own life as well as her writing - she was valued very highly by her friends as one on whose opinion they could rely.

Yet in the end, it was characteristic of her that she should be fully aware of her own limitations. In Chapter 20 of *Middlemarch* she is dealing with the awful situation that has developed between Dorothea and her husband Mr. Casaubon. Almost at the beginning of a masterly analysis she remarks, in a most powerful sentence:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow, and the squirrel's heart beat, and we would die of that roar that lies on the other side of silence. As it is the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

The final remark is typically modest; but I believe that we remember today someone who came very close indeed to the other side of silence, through the love and the reverence that sustained her. I am happy to leave our choice of words here for others to read and ponder.