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# Foreword

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THERE WAS NEVER ANY real doubt that C. S. Lewis would be widely remembered and honoured on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. Far from indicating that his influence is waning, the passage of time has shown it to be increasing. Why is this? This collection of lectures, essays, talks, reflections, and dialogues about Lewis helps provide an answer. As a literary critic, a Christian apologist, and a creative writer, Lewis had an unerring instinct for the heart of matters that will continue to matter: the matter of language and reality; the matter of God; the matter of the meaning of life itself. Moreover, his arrows somehow hit the centre of their targets convincingly without compromising their complexity; he managed focus without being one-dimensional. His celebrated distillation of theology and religion into “mere” Christianity is characteristic. He regularly treated important and complex issues by translating them into a memorable essence, but without reductionism or crass dumbing down. This might sound like a merely rhetorical device. It was not. Lewis believed wholly and sincerely in the substance of what he was trying to communicate, not just the form of it. Small wonder his thought continues to inspire, and to be honoured. Aspects of it may date: the heart and spirit of it never will.

But was it also inevitable that Lewis should be honoured specifically in Westminster Abbey? Clearly not. All sorts of contingencies are at play here. The Abbey is a place for British national remembrance of many kinds: it honours statesmen and social reformers, monarchs and military leaders, scientists and secret service heroes, engineers and explorers, not just literary and religious figures. So there is no space for every possible candidate. Decisions will depend on a variety of judgements and priorities.

Yet in the end Lewis's place amongst all these others now seems utterly obvious, entirely right. The oft-quoted final words of one of his essays, used as the inscription on his memorial stone, are an elegant expression of why this is so: "*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.*"<sup>1</sup> In other words, a robust and authentic Christian faith is not an exclusive vision. It is an all-embracing one. Lewis's vision was never narrowly ecclesiastical but of a God who is truly God precisely because God is of the whole world, not just of the church or of religion. As such he surely sits well with all that social, scientific, political, artistic effort represented in those other Abbey memorials.

To be sure, Lewis had sharp words and warnings to offer about the way in which this "worldly" human effort is sometimes interpreted in a reductionist or self-referential way (not least in his warnings about scientism). But he never retreated from full-blooded endorsement of the world *per se*, and everything in it, both natural and human. And that is because, for Lewis, its concrete reality (and value) is inseparable from the even more concrete reality of God as its ultimate source. As he wrote elsewhere: "it will be agreed that, however they came there, concrete, individual, determinate things do now exist: things like flamingos, German generals, lovers, sandwiches, pineapples, comets and kangaroos, . . . a torrent of opaque actualities . . . *God is precisely the source of this torrent.*"<sup>2</sup> It was a vision that Lewis pursued not only in explicit apologetic but also in his fictional narratives, which celebrated the wider world of nature; in his science fiction, which encompassed the whole cosmos; in his repeated recognition of all people of good faith and character (whether or not Christian); and in his willingness to broadcast this "mere" Christianity to the whole nation in time of war. So it is that the memorial's setting in Westminster Abbey is indeed so fitting. For the Abbey too, founded as the Monarch's church to serve nation and wider world, is bound to this vision—one that relates God to that wider world, not just to religious or ecclesiastical life.

It is also fitting because of the transcendent frame of the vision. As a full-blooded theist, and (in some respects) a Platonist, Lewis equally affirmed another world, not just this one. There is no contradiction here. The crude caricatures of both Christianity and Platonism, which chide them for downgrading this world by their belief in another, are just that—crude caricatures. It is *because* of the transcendent source and goal of this world, not in spite of it, that the world matters as much as it does. This vital

1. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" Paper read to the Oxford Socratic Club in 1944. Reprinted in *C. S. Lewis. Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley.

2. Lewis, *Miracles*, 90, emphasis mine.

connection between this world and another appears throughout Lewis's writing like Blake's golden thread, woven within it all. It is the same thread that gives "joy"—as he writes about it in *Surprised by Joy* and "The Weight of Glory"—both its poignant pull and its elusiveness. It appears most memorably in *The Great Divorce* and in *The Last Battle*; it becomes gossamer thin in *A Grief Observed*; but it is never entirely broken. So too in the Abbey. There too transcendence is embodied inescapably in its Gothic architecture, and gestured daily through its liturgies; there too it can be stretched and strained by the many memorials to bitter experience; but there too, like the paschal candle in its most sombre vigils, it is never finally extinguished.

There are other places where Lewis is actively honoured. Most notably there is Oxford, the provenance of several contributions to this collection, where the University's C. S. Lewis Society has been in continuous existence since 1982.<sup>3</sup> There is Cambridge, where students will benefit from a scholarship supported by proceeds from the memorial service.<sup>4</sup> Likewise there is the work on Lewis carried out by a number of distinguished U.S. institutions.<sup>5</sup> So, when over six hundred people came to a day's symposium at the Abbey, and many more joined us to dedicate the memorial itself, we were adding to a worldwide tribute that already had great momentum—and all of which is similarly fitting.

None of this, of course, is to idolize either the man or his work. He was of his time and is open to critique like anyone else. But it is to show how much of his work also transcends his time and richly deserves to. Our sincere hope now is simply that this collection of essays, and the memorial itself, will help make this happen, even more.

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3. E.g., see *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, ed. Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe.

4. Enquiries about donating to the C. S. Lewis Scholarship Fund should be sent to [database@alumni.cam.ac.uk](mailto:database@alumni.cam.ac.uk).

5. E.g., The Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois; The Center for the Study of C. S. Lewis and Friends at Taylor University, Indiana; The Department of Apologetics at Houston Baptist University, Texas; The C. S. Lewis Foundation, Redlands, California; The C. S. Lewis Institute, Springfield, Virginia.

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