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Review Article

Farrer in the Pulpit: A Systematic Introduction to His Sermons

ROBERT B. SLOCUM*

Austin Farrer, the hundredth anniversary of whose birth is celebrated this year, has been described as the greatest Anglican thinker of his generation. He was a philosophical theologian and biblical scholar, as well as a noted preacher and pastoral writer. He published extensively in all these areas. This review article provides a systematic introduction to the theology of Farrer's published sermons, focusing on his anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Points of note include Farrer's frequent use of human experience as a starting point for theological reflection, his use of analogy to convey theological understanding, and his emphasis on the lived application of theology in human lives of faith.

Austin Farrer (1904-1968) was an Oxford don and a noted preacher whose sermons reveal the depths of his theological insights in the context of living faith and pastoral application. He may well be the most significant Anglican theologian of his era. Although the theology of Farrer's preaching and teaching is quite well integrated and connected, it is helpful to identify the various systematic areas of his attention as separate points of reference for understanding his contribution in biblical and philosophical theology.¹ This approach should

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¹ For additional background on Farrer's life and contribution as a preacher and scholar, see Philip Curtis, *A Hawk Among Sparrows: A Biography of Austin Farrer* (London: SPCK, 1985); Charles C. Hefling, Jr., *Jacob's Ladder: Theology and Spirituality in the Thought of Austin Farrer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1979); Robert B. Slocum, "Light in a Burning-Glass: The Theological Witness of Austin Farrer," *Anglican Theological Review* 85 (2003): 365-373; David Hein and Edward Hugh Henderson, eds., *Captured by the Crucified: The Practical Theology of Austin Farrer* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

prove helpful as the hundredth anniversary of Farrer's birth is celebrated in 2004.

Anthropology

Farrer's understanding of human nature provides an appropriate starting point for considering his theology in a systematic way. It is only in our own life that "we can possibly touch the nerve of God's creative action, or experience creation taking place."² He starts with the person, "the willing I, the I who chooses and cares," who is "that real I which has to meet God's will." This is the most basic "point of contact: I have to face God."³

Farrer clearly recognizes the interplay of human free will and divine initiative as one of the most important and challenging of theological questions. Our freely chosen engagement in the saving process is necessary. He explains that "God's plans do not simply leave room for free operators, they employ free operators in carrying them out."⁴ And yet, our free will may not be all that we think it is. Farrer draws on a psychological understanding of the human unconscious, and warns that "our independent freedom of will is very slight: it is the conscious surface of the mind." But there are "what depths beneath, of which we have little notion, and which, doubtless, affect our actions to an indeterminable extent."⁵ Farrer uses the analogy of himself swimming over deep water to illustrate this understanding of our "conscious life," observing, "We keep to the surface of our mind and think we are free. We make a great to-do with our kicking and striking, and think that we are going where we choose; but when we look round and take our bearings, we find it is the currents that have carried us."⁶ We do have free will, and it matters greatly, but we may also be "moved" by influences that affect us below and beyond the level of our conscious awareness.

Farrer also considers the basis of our humanity, in terms of how we come to full personhood. The first answer for that question would

² "How Can We Be Sure of God?," in Leslie Houlden, ed., *The Essential Sermons* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: SPCK and Cowley, 1991), 172. Preached in the Cowley Fathers' Church, Oxford, 1967.

³ "You Want to Pray?," *Essential Sermons*, 106.

⁴ "Grace and Resurrection," *Essential Sermons*, 137.

⁵ "God's Will and Mine," in Charles Conti and Leslie Houlden, eds., *Words for Life: Austin Farrer* (London: SPCK, 1993), 23.

⁶ "God's Will and Mine," *Words for Life*, 23.

be: *not by ourselves*. He warns that we would have remained "like idiots in the cradle" if "no one had smiled us into smiling back, or talked us into talking."⁷

Christology

Farrer's Christology also reflects his emphasis on the realities of human experience as a starting point for understanding. Jesus lived a human life; he was born to a human mother, he grew up, he had relationships with others, he made decisions and acted in specific ways, and he died. Farrer states emphatically that Jesus was not "a divinely mesmerized sleepwalker, a jointed doll pulled by heavenly wires" or "a painful pedant, carrying out with pharisaic exactitude a part which had been written for him by a divine hand."⁸ Jesus had nothing less than a full humanity, and his humanity was lived in ways that we can understand. Indeed, we must understand Jesus' humanity to understand *him*.

Farrer offers an interesting analogy to bring home the reality of Jesus' necessary human growth and development. Urging that Jesus "learnt the job of living in the school of life," Farrer observes that Jesus "had no bad carpentry to unlearn, when he learnt his carpentry from Joseph; he had to learn it, just the same, by mastering in order the tasks his earthly father set him." Similarly, Farrer states, Jesus "had virtue, or obedience, to learn from his heavenly Father, by rightly deciding every choice which Providence presented to him."⁹ These were human decisions and situations that Jesus encountered humanly. Jesus lived humanly. He encountered the challenges, opportunities, and frustrations of life through his own human actions and decisions, as must we. However, it is important to realize that for all the reality of Jesus' humanity, and for all Farrer's use of carpentry imagery, Farrer is entirely clear that while "everything Jesus does is human and natural, and the speech or act of a Galilean carpenter," yet God speaks through Jesus' "perfect human nature."¹⁰

⁷ "A Share in the Family," *Essential Sermons*, 174. Preached for All Saints' Day.

⁸ "Grace and Resurrection," *Essential Sermons*, 138. Preached in Mercers' Chapel, London.

⁹ "Four Bible Sermons, (3) Lent 1," in Austin Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery*, Charles C. Conti, ed. (London: SPCK, 1976), 31. Preached in Pusey House Chapel, Oxford, 1963.

¹⁰ "The Hidden God," *Words for Life*, 8.

Farrer explains that Jesus was not “a god in masquerade” in a doctetic sense of merely seeming to be human. His humanity was “as entire as his deity,” and he “spared himself nothing” of human experience. Jesus “wove up his life, as each of us must, out of the materials that were to hand. He found his way by groping and he knew his Father by trusting; only he made no false moves.”¹¹ Jesus did not walk “down from heaven a readymade man, with a complete outfit of true ideas in his head.” Instead, “he needed a mother to smile at him, a father to talk to him, if he was ever going to be a man.” He needed his parents, kindred, and friends—as do we all—because “we cannot go on being human, anymore than we can get to be human, without other people.”¹² Jesus did not become Jesus or live as Jesus in isolation from others. For him, as for us, “humanity is a social fact.”¹³ Jesus’ very identity was shaped by Mary and Joseph, by the unknown rabbi of his village, by “the disciples to whom he gave himself and the poor people to whose need he ministered” so that “the life of God, incarnate in Jesus” was in fact “a spreading complex of personal being, centred in Jesus, and annexing his companions” so that all the faithful are included in “the social body of Christ” and “he is what he humanly is by his relation to us.”¹⁴

Ecclesiology

The church is empowered for life and ministry by the Spirit, who draws together and sends out the church into the world, incorporating many members into the one body of Christ. Relative to Farrer’s own leading the church’s prayers of intercession, he states that he goes through the motions and speaks the words, but God gives the Spirit, and the church prays in the Spirit. The church’s prayers include many good requests—“for sun and rain, for plenty and for peace, for everything it is wholesome and natural we should desire”—including the prayer that “the undertakings our wishes prompt, may be prayed into harmony with almighty love, through the Spirit that lurks in us.”¹⁵ The Spirit’s activity is not for the sake of giving us what-

¹¹ “The Magnet of God,” in Austin Farrer, *A Celebration of Faith* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), 89. Preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, 1967.

¹² “A Share in the Family,” *Essential Sermons*, 174.

¹³ “The Magnet of God,” *A Celebration of Faith*, 89.

¹⁴ “The Magnet of God,” *A Celebration of Faith*, 89-90.

¹⁵ “Moving God’s Heart,” *Words for Life*, 31.

ever we desire; the Spirit guides us into sharing the truth and life of God's love.

Farrer strongly emphasizes the corporate nature of the church, the connected fellowship of believers who share life in Christ. Of course, as individuals we "have to go on our own feet." But, Farrer explains, "we climb together as alpinists do, bound in one chain by the mutual working of common faith." The warning for Christian praxis that comes with this analogy is that "if any of us fails to cooperate, he does not merely spoil his own life, he betrays the common endeavor and weakens all other believers."¹⁶ In this regard, our Christian faith is not otherworldly or to be lived in isolation. Farrer explains that "we are all responsible for one another's happiness; and we are bound, as Christians, to pay regard to the providences by which God puts us in one another's way and makes us one another's concern."¹⁷ We are not to "creep into a quiet corner" to make our individual peace with God. Instead, we are to engage the Christian life tangibly in and through the church, "for the Christ who turns your face to his own is still in the world and you must meet him there." Until we surrender to Christ's human body, the church, we are "not reconciled to his divine person."¹⁸

The life of the church is the life of Christ. The members of the church are members of Christ who "are dying members as soon as they become detached from the body and from the head" because "we have no life in ourselves."¹⁹ We share living faith in communion with other Christians because our communion is with Christ, whose "dying and rising faith" overflows and runs "in the veins" of all Christians.²⁰ The church provides us fellowship with Christ, and with others in Christ, and that fellowship is precisely what we need. "Life has to be shared," Farrer warns, "or it doesn't even live." Even God's own Trinitarian life is relational. Similarly, we are to share "a fellowship with human friends, which is to be at the same time a fellowship with the persons of the Godhead."²¹

¹⁶ "Communion of Faith," in Austin Farrer, *A Faith of Our Own* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1960), 49-50.

¹⁷ "Responsibility for Our Friends," *Essential Sermons*, 135.

¹⁸ "Forgiveness of Sins," *A Faith of Our Own*, 70.

¹⁹ "Sabbath and Sunday," *A Faith of Our Own*, 86.

²⁰ "The Gentleman-Apostle," *Essential Sermons*, 15. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford.

²¹ "The Mingling Waters," *A Celebration of Faith*, 206-207. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford, 1960.

The Christian fellowship is a unity of love that brings with it both abundant love and abundant responsibilities. Living friendship with Christ means living friendship with others, which is the life of the church. We wrongly imagine that we are "separate units" who communicate by "signaling to one another across physical spaces by physical signs." Instead, "our prayers invade and enliven one another," and we share with one another as Christ shares with us "to be the heart in that community of spiritual creatures which serves the Father Almighty."²²

Farrer likewise emphasizes Christ's active presence as central to the reality and power of the sacraments. The "special mercy of Christ to us in the Sacraments" is "that he just puts himself there," not making his presence in the sacraments "depend on anything special in us who receive," or anything special in the elements such as the bread and wine, or anything special in the priest. God "does not wait for our dignity or our perfection." The sacraments "grow on the great branching tree of the Apostles' ministry," which is "the tree planted by Christ."²³ Christ is the source and power of the sacraments, as he is the source and power of the church which makes the sacraments now available to us.

We are to participate in the life of Christ through the sacraments of the church. Farrer states that we should "bathe in the waters of her font as in the stream that flowed from Christ's side, take the bread as his body, hear the absolution as from his lips."²⁴ Speaking to the congregation as celebrant at the eucharist, Farrer urges that "as I move about the altar, as I break and give the bread, I am still dancing myself and you into sympathy with the heart behind the world."²⁵ Our sacramental participation in the life of the church is all about our life in Christ and Christ's life in us, so that we may find ourselves increasingly "danced into sympathy with the heart behind the world."

With respect to the eucharist, Farrer notes that as we feed on Christ and have union with Christ in the sacrament, "we have union with all his people, all his mystical body."²⁶ The Christian communion

²² "The Burning-Glass," *Essential Sermons*, 21. Preached in St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

²³ "Walking Sacraments," *Essential Sermons*, 102-103. Preached in Holy Trinity, Northwood, at Edward Ryan's First Mass, on the evening of December 22, 1968.

²⁴ "Forgiveness of Sins," *A Faith of Our Own*, 70.

²⁵ "Moving God's Heart," *Words for Life*, 30.

²⁶ "A Share in the Family," *A Celebration of Faith*, 106.

"is held together most of the time by prayer, ordinary companionship, and sheer faith in a bond invisible, which Christ sustains, not we." Our communion with Christ is ongoing. It is our environment, and surrounds us constantly like the air, or the "water in which we swim." The Christian communion is "visibly manifested and physically united" at the Sunday eucharist.²⁷ Farrer explains that "the whole of our religion is summed up in Christ," with "no aspect of it" left out, as the eucharist "presents Christ, his birth, death, resurrection, and his present existence: his manhood and his godhead, his being in himself, and the service of his Father."²⁸

At its most basic level, the bread of the eucharist shared by the community gathered provides "the immemorial bond of common food," so that "those who build their bodies from one loaf are one body; just as those who draw their being from common parents are one blood."²⁹ Those who share the blessed bread "have their common existence from a common stock."³⁰ Of course, when we share the bread of the eucharist, "we do not merely stock our bodies from the same stuff as Jesus used for stocking his." Our sharing the eucharist is our sharing Jesus. We have nothing as Christians "but what we draw from Christ."³¹ The bread is Jesus' body; we feed on him, and his body unites us.

Farrer's understanding of sacramental theology translates directly into application relative to how we are to live our lives. In the eucharist we receive Jesus in our mouths and hearts, so "that we may go and be Jesus in our place and calling, and in relation to all those with whom we have to do."³² Bodily, we are to share the eucharistic sacrifice. In our own lives we are to live out Christ's dying and rising that is at the heart of the eucharist.

²⁷ "Fish Out of Water," in Austin Farrer, *Said or Sung: An Arrangement of Homily and Verse* (London: The Faith Press, 1960), 120-121.

²⁸ "The Hidden Spring," *Essential Sermons*, 146. Preached in St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

²⁹ "This Is My Body," *Said or Sung*, 128. In light of the significance of bread as common food, Farrer notes that Paul's statement, "Since the loaf is one, we many partakers are one body; for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17), was not "saying anything remarkable" from Paul's perspective. It was "quite a matter of course." "This Is My Body," *Said or Sung*, 127-128. Presented to the Eucharistic Congress in the Albert Hall, May, 1958.

³⁰ "This Is My Body," *Said or Sung*, 127.

³¹ "This Is My Body," *Said or Sung*, 131.

³² "Committed Christians," *Essential Sermons*, 182. Preached in Pusey House Chapel, Oxford.

The church is to live in openness—to doubts, questions, differences of opinion and perspective. Farrer warns that “the spirit of faction, and of that self-hatred which is the twin of self-righteousness, can so bedevil religion as to make it a form of positive evil, and a blinding of the heart.” In this light, religious believers are often seen by the world to be “grinders of axes” who do not judge with “unbiased appreciation” due to “fear of disturbing their prejudices or cherished beliefs.”³³ Farrer may be likened to the Episcopal theologian William Porcher DuBose (1836-1918), who states that “truth is only made known and indeed only knows itself in conflict with error.”³⁴ DuBose trusts the “collective mind of the church which sooner or later excludes what is spiritually false and includes what is spiritually true.”³⁵

Farrer strongly criticizes “the cowardice, the unwholesomeness, the stupidity and the implicit lack of faith” of some at Oxford University who were “going about here and advising their friends never to think or study along any line which raises religious doubt.” The “worst” advice for an inquiring mind, Farrer states, “is to try not to think.” He offered advice that was “positive, not negative,” urging his hearers not to run away from “disquieting considerations,” but to “feed your soul on God” and believe that “God is able to persuade you of his own truth by the revelation he has made.”³⁶ The church may even learn something true and valuable from surprising sources. It would be well, Farrer states, for the church to listen even to “our own heretics,” and seek to understand what drove them into heresy, instead of being most concerned to condemn and suppress them.³⁷ The church “need be afraid of no questionings,” Farrer states, “as long as you allow a fair field and no favor,” and do not weight the scale against faith.³⁸

Eschatology

The Christian faith is oriented to fulfillment in the future, beyond the limitations and possibilities that we now experience. Our

³³ “The Day’s Work,” *Essential Sermons*, 111.

³⁴ William Porcher DuBose, *The Ecumenical Councils, Second Edition*, Vol. 3 of John Fulton, ed., *Ten Epochs of Church History* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 29. See Robert Boak Slocum, *The Theology of William Porcher DuBose: Life, Movement, and Being* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 97-102.

³⁵ DuBose, *Ecumenical Councils*, 321.

³⁶ “Assurance,” *Essential Sermons*, 6. Preached in Pusey House, Oxford.

³⁷ “Double Thinking,” *Essential Sermons*, 85.

³⁸ “Assurance,” *Essential Sermons*, 6.

faith is more than "a this-worldly religion," with the chance of "a bonus hereafter." Farrer warns that "God has put his infinity in our mind, and if we cannot stretch out for him beyond the little beginnings here allowed us, we must let go of God and loose him wholly." This is not to demean the significance of what we now see and know of God. But there is so much more. Offering an analogy of standing outside a door and seeking entrance, Farrer states that for now "it is a marvellous thing to have been admitted so far, to have a crack of the door open, and half a foot on the sill; but it is always in the future, that we shall make something of the beginning which has been so mercifully allowed to us."³⁹ Farrer's hopeful orientation to the completion of salvation in the future may be likened to Jürgen Moltmann, who states that "the perfecting of our here-and-now new birth in the Spirit will be completed only in the raising of the dead and the life of the world to come."⁴⁰

With respect to heaven as our future in God, Farrer warns that it is "a state of being, to us unknown,"⁴¹ and that "our pictures of heaven are all of them false." But Farrer does offer some specific descriptions of what heavenly life will mean for us. The greatest of blessings will be "a direct, unclouded perception of God himself," including experience of "all the greatness of his mercy." As with much else in Farrer's work, his understanding of heaven has to do not only with God, but how the heavenly relationship with God carries over into relationship with others. For those who know the heavenly glory of God, their openness to God comes with "a natural response on their own part," so that "they cannot feel the heart of God, and not themselves share his love for a thousand other happy creatures." Similarly, "they cannot know the will of God, without performing it, in all the splendid works that he has designed for them to do."⁴²

Farrer describes heaven in terms of possibilities we have never known previously. He states that in heaven "the obstacles to one

³⁹ "Always Beginning," *Essential Sermons*, 165. Preached in Keble College Chapel, 1968.

⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis and London: Fortress and SCM Press, 1997), 35.

⁴¹ "The Magnet of God," *A Celebration of Faith*, 90. Preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, 1967.

⁴² "Into the Hands," *A Celebration of Faith*, 115. Preached in St. Mary's, Primrose Hill, Advent, 1959.

man's knowing a multitude of individuals are done away."⁴³ Heaven will mean a closeness of community with others that we have never before experienced. "Even in heaven," Farrer states, "we shall keep a fellow-feeling for our own kind," and we "shall not be able, even, to delight in God himself, without calling in our friends to share our delight, while we also delight in their delighting." In heaven, we will surpass the limitations and falseness of human relationships as we have known them. In heaven, "we shall read one another's hearts, and have no need of those natural veils and cultivated reserves, which in this earthly life mask shame, disguise ill-nature, or cover emptiness."⁴⁴

Farrer's eschatology is in no way otherworldly, or dualistic in the sense of denying the goodness or significance of the material world and the daily life we live. The heavenly reality is beyond but not unrelated to the present world we know. Farrer explains that "the loveliness we have known always increases our desire for the delight to which it points and leads us on."⁴⁵ The beauty and goodness we see in this world serves to point to the fulfillment in God of all beauty and goodness. Farrer states that "creation, like everything else, will be perfectly manifest for the first time in heaven."⁴⁶ The love we know and share in this world also points beyond itself to the fulfillment and completion of love in God.

Our "end" is "endless Godhead endlessly possessed."⁴⁷ God "wants to make us like himself."⁴⁸ The "end of man," as Farrer calls it, our end in God, "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." Our lives and love have an ultimate significance, and "we are all heirs of everlastingness," so that "whatever we do or are furnishes material to the hands which out of perishing stuff create eternal joy."⁴⁹

Farrer sharply rejects an either/or way of thinking that would value either the world's future or heavenly bliss, but not both at the

⁴³ "The Magnet of God," *A Celebration of Faith*, 90.

⁴⁴ "Into the Hands," *A Celebration of Faith*, 116.

⁴⁵ "Always Beginning," *Essential Sermons*, 165.

⁴⁶ "The Painter's Colours," *Essential Sermons*, 4. Preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, 1963.

⁴⁷ "The End of Man," *Essential Sermons*, 25.

⁴⁸ "The Window into Heaven: On Making a Retreat," *A Celebration of Faith*, 212. Preached in Keble College Chapel, 1965.

⁴⁹ "The End of Man," *Essential Sermons*, 25.

same time. "Nonsense," Farrer states. "Heaven alone gives final meaning to any earthly hopes; and to take it the other way round, we have no way to grasp at heavenly hope, than by pursuing hopeful tasks here below."⁵⁰ Our heavenly end and future hope give meaning to all that we do and encounter in the present; and all we do in the present is the only way for us to approach and realize the future hope of salvation in Christ.

Farrer's sermons were concise in expression, pastoral in application, and substantive in theological content that spanned various areas of systematic analysis.

⁵⁰ "The Ultimate Hope," *Essential Sermons*, 200. Preached in St. Andrew's, Headington, Oxford.