

August 22, 1971  
Norman S. Ream  
First Congregational Church of  
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

IN MEMORIAM

Gerald Heard

(1889-1971)

This is not the sermon I had intended to preach this Sunday. As a matter of fact it probably cannot be considered a sermon at all, yet it is something I feel I have to do to pay tribute to a man who died a week ago and who contributed more to my religious life and understanding than any man I have ever known.

If I have been able to give some help and comfort to those who have fallen under my ministry, it is primarily because I first knew Gerald Heard. He taught me far more about God, prayer, suffering, and the meaning of life than all the men I knew in theological seminary put together. It is not an exaggeration to assert that I came to know God because I first knew Gerald Heard. To know Mr. Heard was indeed a high and rare privilege, and not many men and women are vouchsafed such a blessing. I shall always be grateful to God for having had the privilege.

I remember him saying many years ago that we always seem to want to know the least important things about another person-- where was he born, where did he go to school, what degrees does he have, where is he employed? These things tell us very little about a man. What is really important is what does he know, what has he experienced, what truth does he possess?

But human we are and we would like a modicum of biographical information concerning any man who has accomplished something worthwhile with his life. Gerald Heard was an Englishman, the son of a free church clergyman. His early life was a series of tragedies. He graduated from Cambridge and published the first of his over 35 books in 1924. His major field of study was anthropology and history. In the early thirties he delivered a series of broadcasts over the BBC in which he gave popular science lectures which were subsequently incorporated into three books. He came to the United States with Aldous Huxley in 1935 and settled in California. He lectured at numerous colleges and universities. He was never married.

While the prominent emphasis in our culture during the past 50 years has been scientific analysis, Gerald Heard's emphasis has always been to use his amazing genius in synthesizing: How does

this fact in the field of anthropology relate to this discovery in the field of astronomy, and how does that relationship affect men and their destiny? Gerald Heard was both an intellectual and a spiritual genius, and a genius can only be defined as a rare gift of God's grace. He had an encyclopedic mind and one that never forgot anything. It was a mind that ranged over the entire field of human knowledge and constantly asked questions.

Walking with him one day on the shores of Green Lake some years ago, he looked at the water and suddenly exclaimed, "Norm, there is something we need to explore more--the nature of the cataclysmic! Why does water turn suddenly to ice at 32 degrees? Why does it not slowly thicken as the temperature drops?"

Aldous Huxley said of Mr. Heard:

"Gerald Heard is that rare being--a learned man who makes his mental home on the vacant spaces between the pigeon holes. He has looked into a score of specialties and out of what he has seen there has constructed a comprehensive picture of the world--a picture in which the most diverse elements of reality take their places and are seen in significant relationship. At a time when it is becoming more and more difficult to see anything but the trees, he helps us to become aware of the all-embracing wood."

W. Somerset Maugham said of him:

"It is not exaggeration to say of Gerald Heard what Dr. Johnson said of Edmund Burke: 'Burke's talk is the ebullition of his mind; he doesn't talk from the desire of distinction but because his mind is full.'"

W. H. Sheldon insisted:

"Considering the whole panorama of human life, historic, anthropologic, and archeologic, Mr. Heard may well be the best informed man alive."

The depth and sweep of his mind was revealed in the variety of things he wrote, from scientific treatises to Gothic mysteries and detective stories, one of which won the Ellery Queen first prize in 1946. But in all of these books he drew upon his vast knowledge and insight concerning man's environment and God's limitless variety of creation.

## II

There have been and will be many brilliant, scientific men. What makes Gerald Heard so distinctive is his lack of specialization, or perhaps one might say his specialization in universals and his deep interest and concern with ends, goals and means. As Doctor John Haynes Holmes put it, Gerald was scientist, seer and saint. The world is blessed with such a life only once every hundred years or so.

The late Doctor Roy Burkhart, who was pastor of the large Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, in writing about his own spiritual pilgrimage, said:

"I had met a man in New York City who influenced me greatly, and who told me of a man by the name of Gerald Heard who had come to have some amazing insights. This friend suggested that I read Heard's books.

"Later on a trip to the west coast a friend of mine took me sixty miles outside of Los Angeles for an hour's interview with Gerald Heard. From many standpoints that hour was the most important hour in my life. Never before had I met a man who knew what seemed to be perfect peace. His voice was quiet, but the life that was in him shone in his eyes. He was alert and alive as no one I had ever seen, except George Washington Carver.

"Gerald Heard's awareness was amazing. There was something special about him. I decided that if prayer was the key to what he had and was, then I would take the road of prayer."

Mr. Heard believed strongly in the existence of an all-creative God whose will man could know, and in the doing of whose will there was alone meaning and fulfillment for life. That God and his will can be discovered through prayer and contemplation. Two of his books, almost all of which are now out of print, dealt with the discovery of God in nature and in history (he was very strong on natural theology). Several of his books dealt with prayer and the spiritual life. Two of his books most easy for the casual reader to digest deal with the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes.

Gerald Heard knew a great deal about God and the God-created universe. But of much greater significance, he knew God! I was never more convinced of God's existence and God's loving nature than when I was with Gerald Heard. Somehow or other he radiated the God who was so real to him. For him God was the end and goal of all man's striving. Listen to his words:

"God is. That is the primordial fact. It is in order that we may discover this fact for ourselves by direct experience that we exist. The final end and purpose of every human being is the unitive knowledge of God's being."(1)

### III

When Gerald Heard died last Saturday (August 14, 1971) he was 82 years old. For the last several years of his life he had been an invalid, having suffered something like 25 petite strokes

(1) Prayers and Meditations, Harper, 1949, page 21

which gradually robbed him of his powers. It is something which I cannot explain nor understand. Were I not convinced of God's love and wisdom it would seem to be a most cruel hoax foisted on a 20th century Job.

Gerald, however, knew that that too was a part of life. He had written me in 1964: "As you know this past year in which 75 has struck, physique reminds the psyche that 'the days of a man are three score years and ten', and if he be so strong as to go further, then the handicaps begin to pile up."

All of the difficult and painful experiences of life, of which he had had so many, he referred to as "ordeals", and defined them as necessary if man was to grow and develop and finally be initiated into the full and unitive knowledge of God. But they must be faced positively and with faith.

A short time later he wrote, "As to life expectation, my doctor has given me to date no forecast as to the residue of months remaining. . . As far as one's own will is concerned, it agrees with St. Paul, 'to depart is far better'. The body is an increasing handicap and the evidence which we have of the post-bodily existence points to a life wherein it will cost less to be of more use and where we can learn far more than we can here. Meanwhile, I hope, however many more days are to be spent in this world and vehicle, they may be of use to you and to others."

And now with Gerald Heard's translation into a larger and richer experience and existence, a tremendously significant era in my own life has come to an end. I hope I am not being hypocritically humble when I state that I do not know why God granted me such a blessing and such a privilege as to know this man as well as I did. Within me there is a strange, almost eerie feeling, that my life would have been completely different had I not known him. It is a lesson in how important one person's life can be to another and I understand better the impact of Jesus on the lives of his first disciples.

If I lament Gerald's passing it is only for selfish reasons. Many years ago when a mutual friend died Gerald had written, "He left on that journey where we know he will meet with a wonderful welcome. He made a fine battle, and for such the departure for levels where the atmosphere is considerably clearer than it is down here is occasion for still another celebration-of-rebirth."

I recall once riding with him down a mountain road in California when we were discussing the high incidence of heart disease in America. He reported that he had not yet had his coronary, and then in all seriousness added: "I expect to have a lot of fun when I die!"

Writing in a little book which I have read at least a dozen times and shared with many of you in prayer groups, Gerald closed a brief article on death with these words:

"Death does not imprison. It sets us terribly free--to go on swiftly to God our goal. . ." (2)

So he has gone; so we must one day go.

Prayer:

Lord of life and death and more abundant life, who has set a door of birth leading from one into another; help us to keep our focus clear and sharp during this earthly span, distinguishing the real from the unreal, shadow from substance, so that entering into life eternal our souls may be fully awake to the wonders that lie ahead. Amen. (3)

(2) op. cit., page 138

(3) Ibid. page 138