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ADDRESS GIVEN BY REVD. B.A. RITCHIE
AT THE UNVEILING AND DEDICATION OF A
MEMORIAL TO GEORGE ELIOT

Wednesday 11th July 1984
In Holy Trinity Church, Coventry.

There is no difference in kind between our human
celves and those particular human beings who we
have learnt, throughout our history, to call the
artist, the thinker, the hero, the saint. The
difference is not one of kind, it is rather one of
intensity of experience. At the highest level in our
culture the artist, the thinker, the hero, the saint
are those who, according to one of the leading
theologians of our age, have ventured on our behalf
on a journey of intensification. It is, of course, a
journey that, to a greater or lesser degree, we are
all involved in making for ourselves. However, so
often we lack the courage to move forward on our
own journey of intensification; we fear where the
search for integrity and truth may lead us. Like the
infant Teresa, we are, from time to time, caught by
a vision, a hope, that leads us to stumble forward
once again, but before long the uncles of convention
block our way and we are persuaded that it is best
for us to return. That it is best for us to learn to
accept the evils of our world, to come to terms with
the warfare, the violence, the lack of justice, the
lack of compassion, the immorality. The artist, the
thinker, the hero, the saint are those who refuse to
turn back on their journey of intensification. Rather,
by moving forward with courage and integrity they
map out new terrain, they help us to enlarge once
more the horizons of what is possible for humanity.
That George Eliot is to be counted amongst this
special group is not to be doubted. The novel was
supremely the Nineteenth Century art form and among
the Nineteenth Century novelists she stands alongside the very greatest.

We, however, have met here this afternoon for what may seem to some an unusual event. The dedication of a plaque to mark the fact that Mary Ann Evans attended worship here. It is unusual, because in the popular mind at least, it was in this church that she lost her Christian faith. Pope Pius the Eleventh said: "The great scandal of the church in the Nineteenth Century was that it lost the people of the great cities." Perhaps the great scandal of this church in the Nineteenth Century was that, like the majority of the churches at that time, it was rigid and intransigent when faced with the demands and opportunities of that turbulent age and by so being lost the allegiance of one of the greatest minds of that century. For us, well over a hundred years after the event, we can neither feel guilt for the shortcomings of that long dead church, nor grief for the loss of an orthodox Nineteenth Century faith - for we have the novels. In the words of the great Twentieth Century philosopher Paul Ricoeur - like any classic text "they present us with a World that we might inhabit and wherein we might project our ownmost possibilities". Each of George Eliot's novels is a map of part of a journey of intensification taken by a great artist on behalf of the human race. What occurred in the mind and heart and spirit of that young girl, between these four walls and under this roof all those years ago, was but one step on that journey. We, who know the heights to which that journey led, we who acknowledge the moral vision enshrined in the texts of those novels, a moral vision that continues to reverberate around our world, can only offer our thanks that that step was taken, that that life was lived with
courage and integrity. It is in this spirit that we shall dedicate the simple plaque that will remind all who read it that George Eliot, for a brief spell in her long and creative life, attended worship here. God grant us a little of her courage and integrity as we face our own journey of intensification, our own search for truth.