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A GEORGE ELIOT QUOTATION ON A PUBLIC OCCASION

By Kathleen Adams

At the funeral of the Queen Mother in Westminster Abbey on 9 April 2002 the Archbishop of Canterbury delivered the sermon and, in describing her life, used these words – ‘There was about her, in George Eliot’s lovely phrase, “the sweet presence of a good diffused”’.

These words are taken from the last part of George Eliot’s poem, ‘O May I Join the Choir Invisible’, in which she describes her own feelings on immortality:

May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardour, feel pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty –
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense.
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.

The poem was read at the unveiling of the memorial stone to George Eliot in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abby in June 1980, and again at the 20th anniversary ceremony in June 2000. It was cited yet again in June 2001 at the Wreath-laying ceremony in the Abbey (see this issue, page 10).

It was moving indeed to hear that particular phrase used on a solemn and splendid occasion so close to George Eliot’s own memorial.