

EQUAL BUT NOT THE SAME

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Chapter One

if you say so...

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Rom.5.1-4.

The appointed time has come... repent and believe the Good News – Mk.1.15. Am I a believer? How do I know? Does faith show in my everyday living? This is the key question to be addressed by anyone searching for God. Our Father in Faith – Abraham – wasn't able to recognise God's voice; he'd never heard of the one God; surrounded as he was by a plethora of gods. There was nothing familiar about the call.

*This is the difference faith makes, to believe is to be familiar – of the family of God; and so move slowly and gently from a new awareness – not simply *I believe in God* – but *God believes in me* – which is why he gave me the free gift of life.*

There is a problem here – until I realise I believe far more than I understand. This is apparent in our relationships, when we, so often, are incapable in our normal way of understanding,

what we are experiencing. This where faith abides – at the very core of our experiencing value, along the felt need to go on searching.

We gradually become what we believe – allowing sensitivity to the unfailing presence of God-within-us. Faith slowly lets me believe: *God loves me, and because what God does is who God is – in loving me, I become lovely!* I will never understand that – but I am challenged to believe it. It is true – but have I inhabited it worthily? And, as this is universally true, have I made it difficult for others to believe it? A valid question, as I have felt myself impeded by others. In faith, we are no longer sinners, but forgiven sinners.

Everything happens within God – there is nothing *outside* God. There is no valid reason for making a distinction between sacred and secular, between holy and profane. Everything created has God's DNA. It is not for us to make things holy, but to recognise and reverence everything, by the ways we live within it. This is *as it was in the beginning*, and becomes infinitely more compelling in the Incarnation.

Before the *Word was made flesh*, we could only know God from the outside, as if looking-in. God's presence was certainly experienced, accompanying people in everyday living. With the Incarnation, we now can know God from the inside – the giving of the Spirit helps make clear everything Jesus told us. We can now know as we are known. The *reason why* of the Incarnation is to invite us to experience God as one of the family – Father, Son and Spirit. This three-fold dimension is with us now, as our need to love, to be loved and to enjoy the experience.

This we know with certainty – not scientific certainty, which flows from historical research – but coming from God's own self-revealing – *the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us* – Jesus from Nazareth.

Along with passing interests, we have normative experiences needed for life in the world. We can identify with such norms without the need to compromise. When we seek to embrace such values *honestly*, we will make mistakes, we may not be right, but we won't be wrong. Honesty demands change when awareness of mistake dawns.

The fruit of honest living is the growing awareness of where I really come from, and where I am going – Jn.8.14, is how Jesus describes his authority for saying *I know where I come from... where I am going*. Such authority owes nothing to power, which makes it attractive – we see the many who found faith in Jesus. We also have a similar experience when our deeply held values are trivialised or openly ignored. To attack my faith is to attack me.

Abraham was not confronted by God, demanding to be recognised. It was much more mundane and readily available – a family crisis! There were now too many sheep for too little grassland. A challenge to do something, is how God becomes audible to us. Accept your responsibilities, *and do something about it*. S Luke says – *if you cannot be trusted with little things, how can you be trusted with greater things?* – 19.26. Abraham knew nothing about God speaking to him, he simply accepted his ordinary responsibilities and got on with it. A proper exercise of personal freedom.

We belong in our world through a variety of relationships, which are not fixed in stone, but are constantly renewing or disappearing. Jesus refers to this – *I have come that you may enjoy life* – Jn.10.10. There is need to appreciate the difference between value and valuables. Valuables are things outside self, to be sought after and become *mine*; like power, wealth, status and privilege. There can be value in valuables, but only when seen as opportunities for service. *THE* value is expressed unequivocally by Jesus: *I have come not to be served, but to serve* – Mt.20.28.

These words are inspirational, and slip easily off the tongue – but their reality is staggering. When Jesus knelt and washed his friends' feet, he was in the place *he desired* to be. He was letting God be God through him. In as much as our valuables help us serve the well-being of others we are serving, not just making sure others are served. We are Kingdom people.

Value is always personal, discovered within. It is the way self is experienced through integrity facing reality. When life's serious moments are upon us – a birth, a death... value pays no attention to valuables. What are we experiencing when someone close to us is dying, and we know the greatest we can offer is our love – which, seemingly, is not enough to save. What is the point of love that cannot save? It is in moments like this that realising that our love cannot save, that faith tells us that it doesn't mean there is no salvation! Such was the difference between Peter and Judas. Both realised what they had done; both wept bitterly in their guilt – they had disowned love. Both were unable to forgive themselves, and Judas hanged himself. Jesus' glance at Peter, after his denial, told him whilst he could never forgive himself, he could be forgiven – if only he would let it happen!

Forgiveness is the bedrock of faith – it has become synonymous with believing in Jesus. But what have we done with it? It has become as meaning having no feelings against the sinner. Which is far from the reality. Forgiveness belongs solely with the one sinned against. To imply that *we have to forgive*, can add further injustice to the one sinned against, since many do not feel they want to forgive – which is to re-victimise.

Forgiveness is first of all gift, freely offered. Someone might feel unable to forgive, because the mere mention of a name brings the hurtful experience flooding back – it shows that the sinner still wields power, despite even not wanting it.

Experiencing forgiveness means that the power over us has gone. It doesn't mean going with outstretched arms towards the sinner – the inability to do this is in no way incompatible with forgiveness, simply, thoughts of revenge are no longer there.

It is not possible to approach fire without feeling its warmth. It is not possible approach love without feeling loved. Forgiveness rising up has its part to play. How sad to hear *I can forgive but I cannot forget!* If the Creator had meant us to forget we wouldn't be gifted with memory – the gift received makes me able to forgive without having to forget.

One of the problems with institutionalising religion – true religion is vibrantly active, not just being faithful to things set deadly in stone. True religion means true relating. There are many ways of being happy – and yet they are all the same, actually experiencing the heart's true desire, either now, remembered from the past or looked for in the future.

“Religion”, however, tends to deal with things about God; “Christianity” is all about God-with-us as everyday experience, fully alive, making us able to make God present by the ways we are present. All this because: *it is he who is the “Yes” to all God's promises. This is why through Jesus Christ our “Amen” is said to the glory of God – 2. Cor.1.20.*

Jesus is God with skin – in him the divine and the human are totally one. The man who receives the all of God; and God who is totally self-giving. The bringer and the receiver. Jesus achieves in the flesh what Word means in the Trinity. Through the Pentecost giving of the Spirit of Jesus-risen, those gathered in his name are the chosen Sacrament of this. The Church – the guaranteed experience of God with us.

The Church became necessary when Jesus, the gift, was rejected. He brought the invitation for everyone – to receive the ability to experience life abundantly. *To all who did believe he brought power to become children of God – Jn.1.* We went to great lengths to silence the Word, through threats and actually killing. But God never withdraws what is offered – the offer is there, the primary mission of the Church, to make it visible and accessible – the way Jesus actually brought it, through our serving and relating. Pope Francis reminds us constantly – to encounter the Church is to experience compassion, forgiveness, understanding – everything ordinary folk met when meeting Jesus.

The Church is not to be an obstacle course. Obstacles there are, and many of our own making, but no person our groups of persons is to add to these by making unnecessary rules or demands. All structures must serve life – not demand the life serve structures.

God invites us to travel together in faith, towards the abundance promised; promised as worthwhile, not as a reward for being good. See this in those who saw and were fascinated to go back and have another look, and even ask *where do you live?* – Jn.1.38. To hear the open invitation – *come and see!* We are not told where they went or what they saw. It seems that what happened didn't matter as much as they actually accepted the invitation. They opted to live the next moments on the word of another – the first step towards believing that another believed in them.

Is it reasonable to live like that? It means realising it starts from outside us – something offered freely, without any terms and conditions apply! But the actual movement is prompted from within us. It is becoming aware that our personal horizons in no way satisfy our experienced longing. Abraham was prompted by personal integrity, unwittingly he was struggling to make room for Grace [God's presence], to be open to far more than he could ever achieve by himself.

He accepted what he was hearing, all the while unaware of who it was. He didn't believe because he knew God. He came to know God because he first believed – dared to move out from first hesitation, from fear of the unknown, risked not having to be in control. It was this Word that became flesh in Jesus, so that we too can dare to believe we are loved uniquely [every one] by God rejoicing in who we are.

To look for more information is more like the Baptist's father [Zechariah] than like Abraham. No one would deny that Zechariah was being reasonable. All the evidence – old age, barren – was against there being pregnancy. He was hedging his bets. Written or spoken words will never suffice for a believer, only the Word made flesh: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* – 1Jn.1.1.

This allows what started when God gave me to myself in creating me, to move forward and receive intimacy with God really present, through my integrity, making me whole [holy]. My life is gifted to me, if I would know why – I need only ask the Giver [pray always]: *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus* – 1Thess.5.16, the Father [Abba} from whom all belonging originates, the Son in whom everything is eternally received from Abba, by their mutuality, the Holy Spirit.

Abraham had no other believers to encourage him. He had never heard of God. He had an awareness of the pantheon of gods being worshipped all around him. He has every right to see his son, gifted in his old age, as a reward for his believing. But is now being asked to sacrifice this very light of his life. The conversation between father and son is enlightening – to help persevere in faith, whatever the cost. We need not only the Word of God, but God's understanding of this Word – faith.

Faith gets mixed with lots of other interests, needs – which is natural. From this mix we are asked to trust and to change – *be converted and believe* – Mk.1.15, something that involves not a little apprehension – will this Gospel win a hearing from me?

We experience inadequacy – all the way from ecstatic rapture into the depth of worthlessness and the unfairness of injustice. We are tempted to become the fleeing refugee rather than a pilgrim on a journey. We know in our heart of hearts that while we cannot be self-saving – but we can be saved! The divide between these two is bridged by the reality of the Cross. *Lava quod est sordidum, riga quod est aridum, sana quod est saucium* – *wash the soiled, water the parched, heal the bruised* – is the Church's prayer.

This is not meant to help us feel better, but more and more to relish life, the life faith is offering; accepting myself in need of the healing Word, whose one desire is to become that – for me. The presence of Spirit creeps up on us, rather than overwhelming us. Leading us

along paths to experience how much God loves us. Such ways are never handed out as a map before hand – faith living is living by the word of another – like being in love.

Morality is all about who we are, not simply on what we do. We are made from the coming together of body, spiritual and emotional experiences, fed by hope and haunted by fear. We have likes and dislikes, and all sorts of prejudice, all of which surface in our behaving. To emerge from this, we need to put faces on people, and names on faces. Human nature is neither sinful nor virtuous. It is relatively easy to name certain activities as sinful; but it is an entirely different exercise to apportion guilt or otherwise of a unique individual who is loved without limit by Abba.

Morality is about being able to say *the reason for what I do is who I am*. Jesus' behaviour was not governed by the 10 Commandments., but by what being the beloved of Abba-made-flesh, means. It is to do with *my yes* to God's invitation to intimacy in giving me the freedom of life.

We are flesh and blood, body and soul persons, invited to full life through the primacy of the spiritual in us. We are limited, influenced by history and culture, yet graced by God, able to be true to the destiny planned for us, saturated by the ordinary of everyday – if we are willing. Called to be ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well. We see the fruits of such living in Jesus. What he is by nature is ours by Grace – if we say yes, and mean it.

What is the how of this? *God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children* – Rom.8.10. Karl Rahner says of this: *as the coming together of the historical and the personal, which clears the way into faith-living*. This lets Revelation be real and inviting. Faith requires much more than an inner conviction. We need familiarity with knowing God through Jesus sent.

Faith-knowing is unique – not like our ordinary ways of knowing; something *out there*, waiting to be discovered and understood. Experience happens in a new way, with equally new priorities – *love your enemy, feed hungry people, first go and be reconciled*. Mark 1.15 – *now is the acceptable time, believe and change...* But, paradoxically, this happens only when I have the true humility, to believe that coming to be out of Love, and as God's Word is ever creative – I am lovely – whether my behaviour matches this is the ongoing challenge of life. Whatever this might be, it can never erase God seeing me as lovely!

To be true my DNA in God is to truly live as receiving myself from another – if I would know how God sees me, I have only to ask. God has a WORD for me – *to believe in God is to believe in Jesus whom he has sent* – Jn.6.29.

When Francis of Assisi counselled his brethren about the exercise of authority he had his own take on the meaning of *Almighty God* – a helpless child, clinging to a human breast!

Be of discretion, of praiseworthy reputation, no private loves, lest while you show favour to one, you beget scandal in the group. Be a man in whom zeal for prayer is a close friend... available to be stormed by everyone, providing for all with kindness. Avoid the sin of favouritism... comfort the afflicted, be a resource for the troubled; bend stormy characters to meekness... forego what is rightfully yours, to be of help... do not bring down the fabric of justice I eagerness to retain status.

Celano 2ndLife

Chapter 2

Become what you believe...

I saw mummy kissing Santa Claus... [Popular song]

Presumably inferring *What would Daddy say?* Because of the special and committed relationship between mummy and daddy, this shouldn't be happening! The appropriateness of behaviour is not just what I like, but how a committed person – whatever the commitment – should behave. Such a value seems to be in short supply in today's world.

This can be seen in some devotional expressions to Mary, Mother of God. The Church has beautiful Marian Doctrine – Immaculate Conception... Virgin birth... Divine Motherhood... Assumption... Supporting all these is a simple, uncomplicated woman, about whom the Gospel says she was betrothed to Joseph, who became her husband and she his wife. Why do we not have devotion to *Mary, wife of Joseph?* She wasn't asked to do anything special, like Isaiah or Jeremiah. She was asked to be the self she would receive from the Holy Spirit: to be mother to the Word made flesh, she, the wife of Joseph, she was asked to be the self, given to her by the Holy Spirit – to be Mother.

Devotion to Mary, wife and mother, calls for mature reflection – she enabled the responsible adult in Jesus. To miss this point risks treating her as the mother we always have to have with us, someone safe to cling to when we can't cope. S Francis comments to his brethren: *we are all mothers of the Lord, conceived through Word and Sacrament, to bring him to birth by the way we live.* He prayed to the Mother of God, *who made the Lord my brother.*

Being wife tells us that the choice she made for herself was marriage. It is out of her lived experience as wife of Joseph that she became Mother of God. She was asked to become *mother*, not just give birth. When we honour Mary as Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God – we must not isolate her, when her own choice for life was to *be with* [marriage]. We have Jesus' own authority for saying she is blessed – she heard the Word and kept it. Fully involved in her chosen way of life, she presented the world with its Saviour.

This would not have been possible without the *over-shadowing* of the Holy Spirit. *The Holy Spirit will overshadow you... the child will be called Son of God.* She gave thanks that her emptiness was assured. There appears no *obvious* way for us to satisfy our eternal longing for meaning, with only finite means. Education, assiduous work; gaining qualifications – all excellent, but none able to satisfy our infinite thirst for meaning – none can *assure our emptiness*. Faith tells us this is neither crime nor accident – we created empty so that the infinity of God can fill us.

However, by the time we become aware of this, our emptiness contains our own best efforts to fill full. As people with this infinite thirst we try and try and try... until we are gifted to hear: *be still and know that I am God* – Ps.46.10. A process of making room, of emptying, is needed.

We share the assurance Mary rejoiced to receive – we cannot fill ourselves full, but we can be filled! Mary's priority should become ours – *prius mente concepit quam ventre...* she conceived in her heart before her womb. There is a world of difference between a free person, and the dangerously one who preaches freedom from the head but not the heart. One invites difference and welcomes it – the other tolerated it as unfortunate.

Truth will set you free – Jn.8.31. This is far from inertia. Truth [not truths] can reconcile opposites – see Jesus as Truth, reconciling death with life through the Resurrection. It finds it unnecessary to tell others what they believe or think. In relationships it is kind and gentle, with regard to nature it is self-controlled.

For this to happen, it takes more than conscious decisions – the subconscious is a necessary partner. To claim *to do the truth in love*, without including the smouldering embers of anger, is doomed. Which is why Paul reminds us: *Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of*

Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
Eph.3.17...

To be free, we have to have it happen to us – we must be set free. We must be at home with living and dying belonging to each other. Recall what Jesus told Nicodemus:

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.
Jn.3.3-5. This is what makes free the rich and the poor, the happy and the sad, the clever and you and me!

To do more than just hear the Word, calls for honesty, for integrity – because honest living cannot be wrong living, even though it may not be *right!* Once an honest person realises that his/her honest living is not what it ought to be – to remain honest, there will be change [conversion]. Honesty + Truth = Change – no matter what the cost.

We need wise guidance – faced with discovering I'm going the wrong way – I need to ask, where to from here? Like Paul on Damascus road. Paul owes his conversion to his persecuting the Church honestly – and his freedom.

Slavery to law casts a long shadow. It leaves no room for providence. Obedience becomes perseverance, poverty reduced to thrift and community little more than a necessary evil. Value gives way to valuables, and solitude often seen as time-wasting. The signs are eloquent *be careful of what you say; lack of sensitivity to others.* See what happened with Martha's over insistence on efficiency – and she is canonised. The *better-part* is seen as being unhelpful.

Paul tells us that Law convinces us of sin. Hear his plea in Romans – *how do I do what I would rather not do? Who can rescue me?* He answers – *thanks be to God, Christ Jesus*
Rom.7.25.

Jesus is Truth – Jn.14.6; which means that to be truthful is to be intimately related! There are consequences – lest any of them be lost, they have been formulated as creed and doctrine. But it is crucial to remember where the priority lies, if I am to be a believer in Jesus and not just in Christianity.

Faith in Jesus is what is met in people who both profess to believe in him, and are actually trying to live every day. Professing Christianity alone, is like the wake of a ship – something more important has gone before. It is all too easy, once necessary Institution has been set up, to have orthodoxy replace intimacy. This applies equally to the way we live with each other as well as with God.

The first followers were attracted solely by the person Jesus. What came to be called Christianity was how that attractiveness was reflected upon and articulated – very different from *experiencing* intimacy first-hand. For all who came later there was a corpus of doctrine. An unfortunate, and unintended, consequence was seeing our belief in God as knowing the Catechism. So much so, that *we had to be told* about a preferential option for the poor – something not necessary for those who walked and shared with him. Does a parent have to be told to make a preferential option for a child?

We have the picture of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus before we believe; whereas, for the first followers, it unfolded gradually as they spent time with him. Creed, Code and Doctrine can lead us astray just as it surely did for S Paul. He believed he was doing God's work in hounding those who believed differently. Until the crucial factor happened – Jesus met him!

See this happening elsewhere, when the villagers listened to the woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well. They went to find him, and came back to thank her for telling them about him, but now we believe, because *we have met him ourselves*. In Religious Life there is always the danger of *keep the rule and the rule will keep you!* Once again, observance replacing intimacy.

Jesus came – he tells us – that we might enjoy living; that we might experience abundance – Jn.10.10. For those in authority to be more concerned about running a tidy ship, might provide smooth sailing for those above decks – but more like a slave-galley for those below.

As creatures of our past, we have been severely influenced by dualism – helpful in sorting out one from another thing; but when this trespasses into value systems we have problems. The distinction between body and soul – indicating the transience of one and the permanence of the other, has led to disregard for one in favour of the other. Which paved the way for *save your soul*, and *mourning and weeping in a valley of tears*, all the while confessing belief in the resurrection of the body. Certainly, Jesus is very clear about the primacy of the spiritual: *But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he's the one to fear* – Lk.12.5. Abundant life is about integration, not segregation. Life flourishes under new management – freely handed over to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, instead of remaining under the spirit of self. Thus does the dust of the earth has become the body of God.

Our individuality along with our uniqueness is unquestioned – gifted by God, who doesn't make copies. We are individually created as social beings, in a world where we belong; so that both these qualities can flourish in abundance, able to cherish and be cherished between two freedoms – in relationships.

Friendship is mutuality in trust, sincerity and fidelity. Ritual-gesture-living gets by with superficial good manners, backed by words of hollow ring. Abraham and God were friends, and God spoke to Moses as friend to friend. Jesus told his disciples *I call you friends – because I have shared with you, everything the Father shares with me* – cf. Lk.12.4; Jn.15.14.

Paul, as usual, is blunt –

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God
Eph.2.19-22

This is *the peace the world cannot give* – Jn.14.27. This is experiencing with an undivided heart – *the tranquillity of order* – is how Augustine speaks of it. For this to become more than a pious wish means attending to exclusions. The peace Christ is bringing is the fruit of overcoming exclusions [all of them] and injustice. Bullying is the destructive chaos of imperialism.

Many people are never content with always grumbling, complaining, or being quick to correct others. They consciously choose to live differently, and to let the fruits of it, not just be seen, but are freely on offer to share, without T's and C's!

Our life is not pre-packaged. We earn our i.d. through our relationships. In genuine encounters, nothing is pre-planned. A late bus, seeing someone unexpectedly etc.. are opportunities. But meeting never happens if the two remain anonymous; much more than polite conversation is needed. Freedom is needed for good will and wishing well. Making space for others to be themselves, enjoying the difference they make. For this to progress into genuine friendship, the two must remain two! Love, respect, always require there be sooner, and someone else.

Love does not require me to first decide to be outgoing, or devise ways to make others welcome. My first experience of *other than me* is a new experience of myself. I am not self-starting, nor do I carry within me my own explanation. My life is total gift – with its origin and fulfilment totally beyond me [which doesn't prevent me from doing otherwise].

It is for us to receive the gift of life appropriately – which begins with gratitude for the gift, and an eagerness to discover why I have been gifted. Perhaps I will be perplexed to hear *whoever would save their life, must first lose it* – Mt.10.39. There is a world of difference between genuine self-love [loving it as gift], and self-centredness. The potential for relationships is enhanced by responsible choices, made in the light of perceived value. The more I go out from within the giftedness of my life, so much the more will I discover my identity.

This is what has been given to us in the gift of the Incarnation – love going out and creating other loves in its own image – able to receive and become what is received, the ability to be fascinated and to see with insight as well as eye-sight. But this comes with a health warning. We have been exposed to relationships going wrong – there is evil, and all good things don't have to be done. This calls for discernment – some attractive flowers are toxic! Just as we have been hurt by relationships that have gone wrong. We have inherited prejudice and harmful habits, spiritual as well as physical. We can never justify ourselves as products of history.

How sad to hear this expressed as *I'm only human*. Would that I was! It is my brokenness that denies me being truly human. Our history is forged the other way round – by the ways we exercise our freedom. Here and now. Would that we could say: *my word is truth... and truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32. It is Jesus who is our salvation, not just his words and deeds; to whom we have access through relating to him [pray always].

Often the negative response to what we see as a good idea gets the response: *why, what's wrong with it?* We feel that something *wrong* is not being suggested. The issue is not is it right – but is this request appropriate. There is nothing with buying a car – but it doesn't have to be a Rolls Royce! There has to be discernment, not discerning right from wrong, but discerning good from good.

Attitudes to the story of the Fall are not helped by ignoring the literary genre. Not taking into account *how* something is written makes it difficult to see what is actually being said. The prohibition from eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil – is nothing to do with apples [even though only the word fruit is mentioned]. We are being reminded that it is not for us to decide what is good and what isn't.

At the root of enmity, division etc. is one side trying to enforce its version of good on another. Jesus is emphatic – *only God is good* – Lk.19.17. Goodness is Godness, which is revealed to us by him who fed the hungry, who sought the powerless and gave them Good News. Jesus the Christ – goodness made flesh. The Good News is not that everything is all right – it clearly isn't! Everything is not all right – but that is all right!

Openness to God's goodness means resolve to change the experience of anyone suffering injustice. We cannot be the mystic without being the prophet. I cannot appreciate love without an urge to share it. *Where there is love, join in and enjoy; where love is fractured, help heal it; where it is missing, bring it with you!* What was unique in Jesus from Nazareth, has become universally available in the giving of his Spirit, by Christ. Risen. *To all who believe he gave power to become, to know God as Abba* – cf.Jn.1.12.

To be a believer is not like picking up a hymn book on the way into church, returning it on the way out. To believe is to live differently all the time. Even God is not safe when I insist on *doing it my way!*

Jesus did not accept the established order uncritically. For him Almighty God is Abba. He placed himself beyond the prophets of OT when he says: *You have read how... but I say to you...* He had equal space and time for ritually unclean women and children, as well as for men. All this was against the rules. As we admire his integrity – we also have unjust personal structures, which he will just as surely resist. It is one thing to applaud Jesus with the leper – but what of our rejecting people we can't cope with? The crucifixion of the *different* shows Redemption resisted.

Difference respected is crucial, because God created difference [not division]. After Mary's yes, what followed was not according to the book; an unmarried woman pregnant, angels talking to shepherds [the dregs of society]. This was to become the pattern of her life; especially discovering that *another* had first claim on her son's affection: *Didn't you know I must be about my Father's business?* – Lk.2.49... *who is my mother, my brother and sister?* – Mt.12.48. Is it any wonder we hear that she kept all this in her heart?

Jesus always seemed to be bigger than she expected. Likewise, the Church has always believed far more than she understands, as do we in our personal believing. Her inability to understand, feely accepted, set Jesus free from the limits of her expectations. No wonder we read that ancient invocation: *Blessed is she who believed – even on Holy Saturday!* Hopkins spoke of her whose faith let God's glory through; all because she *let things happen according to the Word* – Lk.1.38.

Where love is not – the poor, the sick and the excluded have no place. When routine sets in compassion is missing – as when words are recited, rather than spoken. Mary did not make sure she did her duty. She didn't just give birth – she became *mother*. Such integrity is far more compelling than physical virginity. She identified herself with her vocation.

To say yes with integrity happens only through will-power; something sadly missing in today's world, which favours living by preference – I don't like it, so I won't do it. Pernicious individualism sets in. Free living is much more than good behaviour. Seeing freedom as simply the absence of the unpleasant, is not only unreal, it has no room for the presence of the Incarnation – seen in such comments as *preacher, stick to your pulpit*.

Freedom means taking life as it is – not as I would like it to be. There is something of the brother of the Prodigal in all of us. We love God now, not yesterday or tomorrow. *Now is the acceptable time* – Mk.1.15.

Grace is what says – unearned and freely given, no strings; no debt or mortgage. Jesus asked what value is there in loving those who love you? *You must love those who hurt you* – Mt.5.44. God did not make statues, made us able to make ourselves in responding by *gracefully* organising our choices, trying to be ordinary in extraordinary ways. In this we find ourselves like Mary, able to bring from within us, much more than is there by nature.

This is possible when life, and my purpose in life, coincide. The way into such living is through every honest attempt to do so. – honest, not necessarily correct. Honesty makes gifts out of mistakes – honesty will not let me continue travelling in a way which I am discovering by living, to be a dead end. Honesty has us turn round [conversion] and become able to present the world with its Saviour! Learn why Mary is what God would be in all of us.

Chapter 3

God believes in me

We know that Jesus is not Superman; a truth not always honoured in observance. So many Christological heresies happened because Jesus was not allowed to be one like us – we can't let him have the same needs we have, even though the Gospel is quite clear about this,

presenting him as footsore and weary on a hot day, waiting to ask for a drink of water – *he had no bucket!*

We know stories about the unwitting use of precious things. Antique furniture used as a work bench; a piece of crystal as an ash-tray; a valuable painting as a back support under a mattress. But the most outrageous misuse is of ourselves and our immense potential. The Incarnation brings such to the forefront, and challenges us to believe it.

When the early Church spoke of *Jesus the Christ*, something special was being said. Hear the words of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism by John – *This is my Son the **beloved**, listen to him!* He didn't have an identity crisis. He is **the** beloved – a relationship, not a title; and his life's purpose centres around this – to gift what is his by nature to anyone willing to accept it. We are the beloved of Abba – if only we would believe it. Interesting to note that the evil spirits have no problem with this – *we know you are the Holy One of God* – Mk.3.11. Note that simply knowing who Jesus is, doesn't make us good!

Redemption is freeing-up the potential *to know God through Jesus, whom he has sent* – Jn.6.29; 17.3. The *sin of the world [original sin]* reached its lowest level in doing away with the Word of God on Good Friday afternoon. Such distortion is at the core of human behaviour – when *my way* tries to suppress *the way*, which is responsible for the tangled knot of our relating – our insistence on being self-explained, self-centred in every way; rejecting the potential to be gift to Creation – able to make God present by the way we are present, through realising our God-given potential: *to make God present by the way we are present.*

Paul speaks of Christ being made sin, for us [not to sin] 2Cor.5.21. Jesus has a human nature, which suffers the effects of sins of the world. Humanness as it is meant to be – leading to intimacy with Abba. To this end Jesus brought the energy to make this possible for anyone who believes him – able to know God as Abba, and know self as loved by Abba – Jn.1.1.

Moses knew God from the back – Ex.33. Jesus brings us face-to-face with Abba – *who sees it to be very good* – Gen.1.33. Jesus offers redemption by the way he lived a fully human life; his final words as he hands himself over to the Spirit – *Father, they are now yours!*

This cannot be begged, borrowed or stolen – it is totally, graciously free – *to all who believed he gave power to God as Abba.* There is no way whatsoever we can reach God, which is why we have been reached by God. Which shows whenever we open ourselves with the same freedom, for others – all it takes is one step beyond self [both for saint and sinner]. We are not just receiving redemption, but living it for each other. Isaac Newton, walking along the shore-line was impressed by the variety and colour the shells he saw – unaware of the vast ocean of unrealised truth right in front of him. Michelangelo working on a sculpture of lion, was asked by a young boy – *how did you know that was in there?*

Faith is about Someone who does know what's in there in every human being. Every child is ready for faith. A child will believe anything. Sad evidence of this is the spiralling of child-abuse cases – where the problem lies not with the credulity of the child, but with the predator who takes advantage of this.

However, there is a paradox about faith – as it is actually me believing in myself. Whenever there is a conversation which includes God, it is automatically presumed God has pride of place. Whereas God has another priority. The real meaning of *Almighty* God is not that God can do anything, but that God is pre-eminently at the service of love, as Calvary graphically illustrates. God is total integrity – faithful to the spoken Word: *so my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it* – Is.55.11. The Word, made flesh in Jesus. *Almighty* means there is nothing whatsoever that can stop God loving us.

The basis of the Christian experience is the life-giving awareness of the great sympathy God enjoys for us; we exist for no other reason – God desires us, because we are desirable. This is life, to know this through Jesus who was sent to show and share this with us. *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe* – Heb.1.1. I am not just gifted with life, also with knowing the *why* of it. Jesus said it like this – *I know where I come from, I know where I am going* – Jn.8.14.

The well-used term *state of grace*, is a little unfortunate if it simply means being free from sin. Its primary meaning is God's total love for us – uniquely for each, as we have noted, God doesn't make copies.

To be fully alive through being loved, is to be forever open to the *something more* Hebrews promises – 11.40, possible through relationships. Many are not quite sure how to describe *grace*; but have no problem with its opposite – *disgrace!* Why not stick with that? My presence is disgraceful when I deliberately resist grace. When I turn my back on who I could be. Augustine reminds us of this with *Omnis homo Adam, Omnis homo Christus*. We can be both Christ and anti-Christ.

This is where theology comes into its own – to *enlighten*, not distract. We need to become aware of being known by God, before ever we know. [To know is to love]. Yet, we know there are times when we are not interested – when God's love is not big enough for us, we prefer to look elsewhere. But there will never be a time when we are not big enough for God.

Not only did we turn away, we tried to drag creation along with us – the history of abuse in creation is so evident; climate change, rivers choking with toxins, discarded plastic infestation... In the face of a universal no, there was one who said yes – and did something about it. In Jesus divine and human – we have both the offer of the gift of creation, and the fervent yes please to the offer. Living within our human lot of brokenness, though himself sinless, he changed our ultimate rejection into the ultimate in love – *Greater love than this, there is not...*Jn.15.13.

Death was always meant to be a universal sacrament of Grace. It touches everyone, without exception – not simply as the end of earth living, but the end of the journey through history – when *end* doesn't mean it's finished, but we have arrived for what is to be next.

My first experience of living was in a sea of delight – carried in my mother's womb, wanting for nothing. Birth brought a major disruption – I am *other than* where I have been; I am me, not you! At first, my separateness is the last thing I need. Nurture teaches me that I have to match up to external expectations.

Opting for God is not one option among many. It is a conscious and deliberate opening up to the reality of God and me – as revealed by God in Jesus, telling me *The life I now live, is not me living in me, but Christ fully alive within me* – cf. Gal.2.20. Can I really know this? God is beyond description, no thought, image can open this up for me. I cannot know God as God is; yet I am known by God as I am.

Because to be known by God is to be loved, there is real communication, something to be experienced. Everything we see and appreciate, as well as all the mystifying facets of creation beyond my ken, all are traces of God; though none are God. Does this also mean my experience God's presence are not God? We cannot come face to face with God. This isn't a prohibition – simply inability. I cannot reach God; but I have been reached by God - *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* – 1Cor.13.12.

Am I ready to be known in a way in which I could never know myself? Am I willing to accept being loved in this way? Am I open to being real, only at the word of another? Paul speaks of us being servants of the Mystery – 1Cor.4.1. This means moving from living *my way*, onto living by the vision another has of me – which asks for trust, to have faith in the one inviting me. A trust that allows me to live, knowing where I come from, and where I am going. Which Jesus referred to as his *authority* for how he lived.

As I am known... can be communicated to me through relating – this is why prayer matters. In daily practice, prayer is often limited to petitions... whereas the heart of prayer is to hear what the Lord has to say to me, about me – *I will hear what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* – Ps.85.8. Knowing myself means believing what I hear. Which is why we should *pray always* – 1Thess.5.17.

There are still echoes of *God is dead!* Science and technology are playing catch-up. Scientism suggests that everything, ultimately, will emerge with scientific explanations. No longer need for the God of the gaps – invented to console our ignorance. We can now manage on our own.

We are not entirely, products of evolution. There is a reality about us that demands much more than physical explanation. There are *hopes and fears*, the ability to cherish, to be cherished. The mystery of why we don't all fall in love with the same person. There is so much happening within that requires more than self for an explanation. Indeed, life within the world doesn't carry its own explanation or its purpose.

Before the waters were muddied by Medieval controversy – Revelation spoke: *he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight* – Eph.1.4. Whichever way we see the coming of Christ – as *redemption, Life of Grace, Divine filiation...* none of them demand there be the Incarnation. But there is one effect that couldn't happen without it.

If Creation is to be the perfect expression of God, outside the Godhead, all the while remaining one with God, this could only happen by God becoming part of creation. In the humanity of Jesus, creation is already achieving its purpose.

We have reference to creation as *something still lacking* – needing the sufferings of Christ. This will happen when what was individually realised in Jesus, becomes universal in creation. *The face of the earth will be renewed* by the way it is lived-in, by those embracing faith living.

We are not programmed by Mother Nature, with an app for every eventuality ranging from fear to ecstasy. There is no way that physicality can deliver freedom. We must turn to what allows us to orient ourselves towards God, realising there is much more within us than what nature provides. God's Word in our flesh and blood sensitises us, not to what is good, but to goodness – *only God is good* – Mk.10.18 – good is not objectified, but personalised in relationship [being – rather than doing]. Its importance is seen by its absence – which prompted Bonaventure to tell us: *wherever you see goodness, celebrate it; where you see goodness damaged, repair it; wherever it is missing, bring it with you!*

Seeing the Risen Christ with the five wounds of death has a message for us. In all of us, even in the new-born, there is energetic refusal to embrace death. When Jesus surrendered his life on Calvary, he didn't surrender his self. It was fidelity to self that actually led him to the cross. Can we save ourselves without losing our lives? Jesus tells us that it is precisely in losing our life, that we find it!

It has been suggested that Jesus could have avoided death by shielding! By staying away from public places, by not making controversial statements... Peter tried to warn him about this, and earned a rebuke! For him, to take such terms would be a living lie. His mission was to show, by his living, how much God loves Creation, and not attach terms and conditions. He

was sent to show love at its best. But there was a cost. *Greater love than this there is not, than to lay down your life for another* – Jn.15.13.

He no more wanted to die than any other; he had not come to die – Abba did not send him to die, but to show love and not count the cost – doing the truth lovingly! - *speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* – Eph.4.15.

Life will always confront us in truth – even when we feel we have other [pain-avoiding] priorities. It is in being non-selective, non-exclusive, that we are trying to live in spirit and truth: *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life* – Jn.14.5. To ignore this is to make the cross present – for others!

Peter was genuinely trying to protect Jesus in urging him to stay away from Jerusalem. He was expressing his own truth – but not Jesus' truth. The harsh-sounding words he got in response – *get behind me Satan* – show the cost [for the lover] of true friendship. How do I allow others to *do the truth in love*? This is holy ground, onto which we so often trespass – thinking we are being protective of another. Often, cruelty is the difference between *doing the truth in love* and doing the truth from any other motive. This not two different interpretations, but two different realities.

The uniqueness in discovering my own truth lovingly, is equally unique for you. Respecting this in his behaving, is what led Jesus to Calvary.

The poverty of the cross – is the absence of certitude, with hypocrisy never an option. See something of this in priestly ministry. There is the view, a clerical view, which suggests living within a specific role, with a degree of separation [privilege?]. Others see priestly ministry as being as open and non-selective as Jesus was – *having nowhere to lay his head* – as one writer expressed it: *They [the people] do not see us as teachers, since there are no certitudes; nor as pastor, since they manage life themselves; nor as father, since they do not own the previous generation.*

If to love is to set free, to respect the freedom of everyone to say yes or no. The ability to say no love, however, is in need to redemption. To love is to offer without demand of acceptance [respecting the no]. When love is offered genuinely, and thoroughly rejected, there is nothing the lover can do – other than *Father, forgive them, they don't know...* Lk.23.34. Such love has its origin way beyond the evolutionary process.

A world without God is an oxymoron – a seeming contradiction in terms [death means life]. For confirmation of this, look no further than the fact that the rich are getting richer at the expense of the poor getting poorer, accompanied by inevitable violent reactions. There will no peace on earth and a tangible absence of good-will, as long as *living well* [Jesus' declared mission –Jn.9.39] is selective. We have been overtaken by life for the pleasure principle – comforts, pleasures and luxuries – which could be the lot of everyone, if those who have were content to have less, to allow those who have not, to have a little more – any chance? It's a gentle reminder that the Creator did not create property – just gifts.

Picture a world without pain, without fear, without injustice and the like – and you have a world with no room for incentive, no need for the challenge of creativity; and compare it to a world where there is the challenge of creativity, especially for the well-being of others, ready to accept responsibility for the necessary changes – ask, which would be preferable?

When God creates, this is what happens. The world was not made as a finished product, a masterpiece waiting for an owner to arrive. The world was made, able to make itself by the way it is inhabited equally and responsibly and affectively. Fully alive means self-transcendence not self-indulgence. We are made in the image of the self-emptying Father, the likeness of the self-giving Son, in the mutual affection of the Spirit. This is the giftedness

embedded in being created, a presence within. It is allowing what is already there, to surface – if we would know the reason why of Creation – God’s will.

God’s will is not a progress chart of do’s and don’ts, for dutiful servants. It is God’s overwhelming desire to communicate, through lived experiences, the ecstasy of love. When this birthmark is actually noticed, it opens us up to new vision of our world, which lends credence to Jesus saying we need much more than bread to live, fully alive. Our felt need for meaning and purpose, or need to be held and cherished, as to make contact with the greatest of our gifts – *to know the love God through Jesus who is sent*, for this very purpose – Jn.6.29.

Living without Jesus, perhaps never heard of him, or ignoring him, leads to a takeover by imagination, seeing the world as my supermarket! Without the authentication of the Word made flesh, our interpretation of what is all around us, is wide open to our dreams – and nightmares! Good people in Israel were prepared to point out the way to Jesus to perfect strangers [Magi] while staying at home themselves. Are we any different? We cannot cope with too much reality if we are not ready to trust and change [be converted and believe] – Mk.115.

We have well-sounding motivations – like *preferential option for the poor* – and yet still feel impotent with the next poor man at the door; we can be sincere invoicing concern for peace with justice, and remain silent at the insensitive application of rule and regulation. Structures are needed for any form of building; but are intrusive when the scaffolding has to be left up after the house is built. Structure, rules and regulations must serve life – not the other way round. We have made progress with RCIA programs, and Sacramental preparations – and yet have no time for people and ideas that don’t fit our agenda, through domineering agendas.

The Holy Spirit is the author of love, through change; not a spirit of cemetery preservation. Paul had powerful words for those for anyone making ends from means. *What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas,"- I follow Christ.* 1Cor.1.12. Which is why I, as a Franciscan, need to remember that the one thing Francis was not, was a Franciscan! To see Christ is to see the face of God: *whoever sees me, sees the Father* – Jn.12.45. Jesus is not a problem solver; God isn’t a problem – God is mystery.

Mystery isn’t something I can know nothing about, rather something I can’t know everything about. The more I discover, the more there is to discover. Even in the life to come this will be so. But we will know differently, since as 1Cor.13.12 tells us, *then we will know as we are known.* To be in a static situation forever, in which there is no more, is to be in hell. *With us in mind, God promised something more* – Heb.11 – as a way of life.

Jesus reveals the all of God – be that as the Christmas new-born, or hanging on the cross; evidence of things unseen, which occasionally breaks through, as in the Transfiguration.

Chapter 4

Authority is not Power

Deus providebit – assures us that God will provide. How do we know? What are we saying with *may the divine assistance remain always with us*? Does it mean do your best and leave the rest to God? Is life divided between our best and God’s rest?

The story of Naaman, the leper – 2Kings.5.1-15 – is about a well-to-do, who had everything – including leprosy! He tried everything to be rid of the scourge – beseeching every god he could think of. His Hebrew slave-girl told him about her God. Willing to try anything, he set out with gifts and recommendations to meet the Hebrew King.

The King was outraged, believing he was being asked for something only Yahweh could give, and dismissed Naaman. Elisha, the Prophet, intervened, asking to see Naaman. He told him to go and bathe 3 times in the river. It was Naaman now who was indignant. Have I come all this way to be told to have a bath, we have far better rivers at home?

His servant said – if you had been told to do something difficult, you would have done it, without question. Why not try this simple suggestion? Naaman agreed, and was cured.

The point is – the three interventions were unsolicited: the slave-girl, the prophet, the servant. None had to do what they did. They simply did something or someone in need. Which is how *Divine Providence* works. It is ever-present, simply needing hearts and hands for it to be relevant. Something done by ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

After the rail and air disasters at the close of 1988, angry and cynical people were asking *where was your God in all this? Where were the so-called Guardian angels?* Listen to a survivor – *I was lying, trapped in wreckage, doused in kerosene, unable to move in darkness and noise, dreading most all the spark that would end it all. My Guardian angel suddenly appeared, wearing a fireman's helmet, and sprayed me with foam – he wasn't on his own, other angels, some in nurse's uniforms, and many others.* May such divine assistance remain always with us; love at its best.

Jesus multiplied bread and fish for hungry, helpless people. This is a reminder that we too have that same spirit *which has been poured into our hearts* – Rom.5.5, and finds expression, for example, through *Children in Need, Cafod, Save the Children...* as well as the unsung heroism of all – often very young – who sacrifice time for others in need, and provide dignity for so many *forgotten folk*.

Such oneness with Jesus Christ happens spontaneously in anyone sensitive to needs in others, enough to do something about it. It is all too easy to presume that simply fostering democracy promotes universal peace. Are we in the land of the free when there are so many man-made obstacles to anyone wanting to come and live with us? Is democracy automatically *of the people, by the people, for the people?* Winston Churchill hit the nail on the head – *Democracy is a poor form of Government, but is the best we have.* Is there *freedom before the law* when structures, economic and political, disenfranchise the majority? Decisions about the lives of others, should be made *with them*, not just *for them*. Whether this be State or Church. *Good intentions* can make bad law. Pope Francis is determined that the Synod for the laity, should have the laity equally represented. Jesus came to set people – no segregation, all people – free. Do our parishioners enjoy such equality? Or are they to accept *Father knows best?*

Jesus came to set people free, and he told us that those who claim to be free don't need him – Mt.9.12. During the pandemic we heard often – *no one is free until everyone is free.* There are freedoms on offer, we are encouraged to know our rights – not always to respect our neighbours' rights.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues, they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

Mt.23.1-7.

True as this is, it only deals with *externals* – the deepest need is for *inner freedom*. Jesus wasn't a crusader for people with no money. He was totally present to those weeping,

thirsting to be treated as someone, not something; most especially for all who are helpless in their own regard. The Gospel takes us into the heart of it all: *Jesus looked at him and loved him* [a wonderful aspiration for the Sacrament of Reconciliation] Mk.1.10. To love someone means being active for their well-being – we cannot be involved without first being-with.

The young man asked Jesus what he should do – *sell-up and give to the poor*. He certainly couldn't have said to Jesus, why don't you practice what you preach? Could I counsel thus with equal integrity? Am I impeded by having so much to defend, not just possessions, but by attitudes etc. that stretch my credibility.

We speak of the laws of nature, as though we wrote the, and can turn them on and off at will. If we demand to ignore them, we'll soon discover our impotence. We can't decide to have no sunrise, change the order of the seasons; or have the arrogance to deny responsibility for climate change. Knowing about such things does help us locate ourselves within reality; even harness them for our well-being [not abuse them for our benefit]. Goodness appreciated is part of the worthwhileness of life, which, for completeness needs celebration.

It was customary – maybe still is – to see God as a manufacturer of products that can go wrong, and needs to intervene and repair. Philosophy/theology are not immune here, hinting that fated by some eternal plan, pursuing its pre-set plan, regardless. Part of the problem is assuming that freedom, and the ability to choose are synonymous. *Choice* is not the essence of freedom. A person cannot be constrained in any way made unfree, otherwise than by consent. Pressures can be imposed for intimidation, but unfreedom cannot be inflicted; though it calls for heroism of the highest order to sustain this truth.

The conditions imposed on students in Peking – May/June 1989 – were intended to intimidate, yet while the identities of those imposing is now forgotten – not so the sole student who stood and defied such armed aggression in Tiananmen Square, destined to be a hero of freedom.

Lord, do not remember only people of good will, remember also those of ill will. Do not remember their cruelty, and their violence. Instead, be mindful of the fruits we bore because of their cruelty to us. The patience of some, the courage of others. Recall the fellowship, humility, the fidelity and bigness of heart they awoke in us; grant that the fruits we bore may, one day, be their redemption.

[**Words by an anonymous hand inscribed on the walls of Ravensbruk Concentration Camp**]

Coercion, the imposition of one's will over another, is not uncommon between parents and children, teachers and students – but always prompted by good will, for their benefit. Yet to impose it as the way of life is to create the atmosphere Jesus fulminated against when he spoke of authority. It was a new understanding of paganism – *Do not be like pagans, who seek to make their authority felt* – Lk.22.25. An abuse of power – found in all aspects of institutional life in Church and State – *I'm in charge... Father knows best...* to control, even justify, the status quo.

Power is commonly seen as the ability to get results. Whichever description of power – nuclear or just plain horse power – we are being told *how much power*. There is not a vast difference between such power and deliberate bullying. As both prince and pope became enmeshed in power-games, the *freedom of the children of God* – cf. Rom.8.21 – became *freedom to do as you are told*. Justice is not served well by power.

Christianity seeks [should seek] to ensure that human beings retain control over system. Christ must always prevail over power centres. Power cannot save, but can become of service when seeking well-being for all – no exclusions. The deeper meaning of the Sabbath observance – providing space and time to remember to be with God. We are all, to an extent, contemplatives, able to discover who we are: *The Sabbath is with us in mind* – Mk.2.27.

Justice which Jesus brings, also needs structure, but is not constrained by it. It is right and good to write down workers' rights, for example, and have them respected. But they are not written on stone tablets – we know of people unjustly treated, yet of whom it can be said *they received their due!* There is a necessary non-conformism in obedience to the Gospel, because justice is based on Charity, which is ever seeking to embrace the excluded. Justice seeks progress, living non-conformist and peacefully, within the status quo, so that it remains

open to a new and better future, for all: *In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away* – Heb.8.13.

The Easter proclamation, that Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever – a sameness that is unchangingly and always new – Heb.8.13.

Evil is not firmly rooted in the human heart. We are vulnerable, open to the influence of goodness – and its opposite. Sin isn't located simply in individual hearts; it is found in structures, often to a degree that removes culpability from individuals. If we must go on obeying certain laws, we go on sinning. Some legislation makes it impossible for us *to walk justly, to love tenderly and walk humbly with God* – Mic.6.8.

We aren't saved by good intentions – we have the reality of personal sin, within structures that are sinful. The Gospel cautions casting out one devil and making room for several more. Conversion is real when both heart and structures [personal ones] change. The worst scenario is not all-pervading injustice; rather, the Church either seeking to harness such structures to its own advantage, and accepting tyrannical regimes rather than rock the boat.

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Rom.7.14-20.

There is a place for coercive power, but imposed as a way of life is inimical to freedom, especially when couched in good intentions [*reserving compassion for our friends, and justice for others!*]. Coercion makes personal-worth irrelevant, with primacy given to what is pre-planned, without recognition of the individual who has to live with it. Persuasion is seen as too time-consuming – it needs communal listening, discerning and evaluating together!

God isn't immune from receiving such treatment. *Almighty God* suggests unlimited power-over. Revelation, however, is clear that *infinite power* is God's inexhaustible capacity and desire to *be with*. To accept coercive power in God is to see our relationship with God rooted in weakness – helpless and hopeless left to ourselves. This we surely are, but is this how God sees it? The Incarnation shows *with us*, as where God wants to be. In need of redemption we certainly are, yet wherever we decide we want to be, God waits for us there.

Almighty is the energy to be wherever we decide to be. Far from weakness, this has a foundation in strength. God wants to be with us wherever we are., not to be in charge of us. God loves us exactly as we are – the Incarnation tells us this. Weak, helpless and sinners – yes. But we are in a position of strength, not weakness. I can ignore, resist, walk away from God – something God cannot do to me. How we tested this – by scourging, and crucifixion. Peter's recognition of this – *if you stay with the likes of me you are going to get hurt! Yes, but if you stay with the likes of me...* Lk.5.8. Thank God for salvation.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin Rom.7.24-25.

He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Heb.7.25.

God's presence and love are present not because we undoubtedly need them – God is with us, long before we ever realise it; not because we are good, but because God is good. What we should ask ourselves is are we big enough to accept such freedom? Without the saving presence of God, we are lost – no question. But what S John tells us is true – *what matters is not our love for God, but God's love for us* – 1Jn.4.10. We owe God everything – yet God

says we owe nothing! When we are called the New Israel – the word means strong against God. *I will their God, they will be my people* – Jer.31.

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" Jacob, " he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Gen.32.22.

How do we choose freely? How are we persuaded by value? Personal conviction is helped by good example: *Imitate me as I imitate Christ* – 1Cor.11.1. What does it take to say in genuine humility – *imitate me as I imitate Christ*?

It requires us to face alternative goods. Choosing this partner for life, and not another... the fruitfulness of celibacy rather than the loving creativity of marriage... the challenge to live a fully alive single life. We are responsible for who we become; we become infinitely more through persuasion, than by coercion. Love lures away from our strong self-centredness; into realising the wonder of commitment over the timidity of coercion.

Scripture is saturated by accounts of God pleading, urging, persuading – even debating, as with Abraham, and losing with Jacob [Israel]. Hosea presents God pleading with an unfaithful wife – *come back to me...* While the *Song of Songs* spells out how God sees us. None of which happens without the freedom to do so. Sadly, this was not enough for the young man in Mk.10 – even though he *went away sad!* We all know times when God is not enough for us – there never will be a time when we are not big enough for God.

Can we learn from what this required from God – *the Word was made flesh – and lived among us*? Incarnation is commitment language. Unfortunately, coercion is becoming more and more the way of life – and it rubs off into the way we tend to see God – *I'm watching!* The one thing love can never do is be aggressively coercive. Jesus reacted to this, not in like manner – but, *Father, forgive them...* Lk.23.34.

We are not piano keys, waiting to be pressed into repeating the same sound – though many in authority would prefer this from us. We are dependent on many things – from earth, air, fire and water, along with affirming affection. We have been influenced physically, spiritually, historically and emotionally... along with our own unique temperament. None of these, singly or collectively, can compel us one way or another. They can condition and incline, but they cannot replace inner freedom – even though we let them try!

This tells us that our freedom needs to be set free. It is one thing to have the ability, but it takes not a little courage to invest self in it. We learn from our parents *how* to walk, not *where*; *how* to speak, not *what* to say. We all carry an amount of unfinished business, necessarily so. We protest when we are treated as finished products, which others claim to know – *you can't tell me anything about her...* We need to realise what it means to say that any specific moment does not contain all there is of us. So much is yet to be made flesh.

It is not difficult to choose good from bad – but what about one good from another good? Modern cultural ways make it increasingly tough for commitment to be an option. When flight becomes more attractive than fight. [an L of a difference!].

Where is the Divine Plan in all this? That every single part of creation, each in its own unique way, share the total love that is God, Father Son and Spirit. This begins when the human creation accepts the challenge to live differently – no longer by my or our way, but by the One who is *the way, the truth, the light* – Jn.14.6, and so live in creation as the Maker intended.

And thou shalt renew the face of the earth – Ps.104 – by the way we live in it. It has already happened in Jesus' way of life. What was individual to him, he has made universally possible by his giving us his Spirit, the Spirit who breathes over the face of the earth, as we read in

Genesis. *Send forth you Spirit and we shall be created, and renew the face of the earth.* The face it had before we disfigured it.

For some, invoking love means justifying anything. Everything normally forbidden, unlawful, unhealthy seems to be given approval under this umbrella. This forgets the *love and truth* are inseparable - *speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* – Eph.4.15. This prevents *mothering* down grading into *smothering*.

This is gradually dawning on a world emerging from its fear of the body. Experiencing the emerging of the necessary *otherness* through love – and not simply our expectation of it. It might sound surprising, but this is what the virtue of chastity is about, and is incumbent on everyone seeking integrity. *Adam knew his wife...* was regarded as a prim and proper expression of what actually happened. To love is to desire to know, in a most profound way, a complete opening of self without disguises or masks – *then we will know as we are known* -1Cor.13.12.

When we can learn, through the Mother of God, to let life happen *according to the Word*, we will see how everything becomes sacramental of its own origin and purpose. However, there is much disorder in our world – and not all of it of our own making; concealing the truth – God has lived these disorders fully, without succumbing to them, but being unjustly accused, condemned and executed. Where was Abba on Good Friday?

The cross was not the price Jesus had to pay to redeem us. The Word incarnate brings us the fullness of the love God has for us – free and unconditional. We said no – go away – but love cannot comprehend rejection; no matter what the cost – and what a cost it was. Showing us there is nothing we can do to stop God loving us – we can turn away with a no-thank-you – but it will never stop.

Jesus was not sent to die, but show that love never counts the cost. We are not placed on this planet without purpose – we have needs and desires, we want to be-with; we don't just feel – we co-feel. We belong, which means relating, relationship means leaving self for another. Wherever such relating is real – it brings freedom for us and others to make room for the difference we individually make. Such is the impact of this, we now desire to live the differences we are discovering.

Life is fully enjoyed when room is made for difference [not division]. This is reason why we all have different gifts and talents, to enjoy by giving and receiving self for each other to flourish. No hint whatsoever of coercion, no must, no must not... Our gifts and talents are given to us to help us become gift for others. This is to accept being in the image of God – who is totally self-giving; *no terms and conditions apply.*

To try to bring people together simply by ritual or role is unhelpful – creating more of a gang than a community. Equally unhelpful is good-will masquerading under the cloak of preserving order. We are not Jesus' conscripts to serve *the cause*. We have seen the barbarism of such behaviour, when terrorism is used to subjugate in the name of *the cause*.

Equally, full living does not do away with pain [bereavement etc.]. *Fullness* is all about quality of life, responding appropriately of life as it is – not as we would like it to be. *There is a time for everything under the sun* ...Ecclesiastes.3.1. The appropriate response to bereavement is sadness, just the appropriate response to surprise is happiness. To be fully alive in dignified living is as much the prerogative of the terminally ill, as it is for those in good health. Life's happenings are, largely, beyond our control, but the quality with which I inhabit them is entirely mine.

What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.

Velveteen Rabbit – Margery Williams

We all have limitations, and often we resent this, particularly in ageing. Yet we can be free within them! A severely disabled, chronically ill person can either fold up and endure such a burden, or live a full life within this. Such is heralded in the Serenity Prayer – *Lord, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, the wisdom to know the difference!* We have all witnessed people severely constrained enjoying life to the full. Such fullness is real and not theory. Life is designed for fullness, whatever the circumstances. How well-named was the BBC programme *Does He Take Sugar!*

Annually [when pandemics allow] there is a gathering to honour handicapped children – *Children in Need* – and to applaud their courage and ingenuity in living a full life. How sad that there are life terminating laws which prevent this, when disability is discovered before birth!

We are often betrayed by our thinking – we speak of *handicapped people* – it never occurs to us, when sympathising with the unsighted – that we too are handicapped in our inability read braille. It is not so much some people are handicapped, as some limitations happen to be more apparent than others – all are equally real.

Jesus not only earned eternal life for us, but showed us how to enjoy it, especially with the greatest handicap – how live our dying. Not for us to play God, deciding who will live and who will die – but to discover how to die into fullness of new life; By responding to Grace freely offered – the appropriate response to Grace is gratitude. If we ponder what *Grace* means – we surely understand what *disgrace* means, *Grace* is the opposite!

Chapter 5

Joyfully gentle

Jesus healed a blind man – all he could tell the authorities questioning him was: *all I know is that I was blind and now I can see* – Jn.9.25. The difference faith makes doesn't create new realities. It makes apparent what was always there but unseen by reason unaided. The Letter to Hebrews speaks of: *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see* – 11.1. This is not simply another way of knowing, but another way of living. One which is totally given, yet given from within self.

Listen to Martha talking with Jesus after Lazarus, her brother, had died. *I believe in the resurrection at the last day, but if you had been here he would not have died* – Jn.11.24. Jesus replies: *I am the resurrection, I am the life...* Faith lifts us up, experienced as already within us, out of the finality surrounding us, into a hitherto unknown realm. *I will raise you up!*

Faith is a seed sown in Baptism, seeking a healthy environment in which to flourish. It is a *tender* shoot, until it slowly dawns that faith is not just another option, but *the only* way live attains purpose. *Only* – because it can cope in a world that has death in it.

Its energy is fuelled by heart-felt searching for meaning. It belongs in the quality of our relationships, not in giving an intellectual nod to formulated truth. Aquinas says a believer makes an act of faith in the person whose living words compel attention – beliefs are secondary. *To believe, is to believe-in... accepting being acceptable to God* – Tillich. This the

essence of faith – believing I am acceptable to God, irrespective of worthiness, because God tells me. This is why faith changes us – leading to conversion – taking to heart the word of God.

We have no idea what this experience meant for Peter – but we do know the impact it made. He seemed to become aware, for the first time, of the sheer goodness of Jesus – which makes him say *if you stay with the likes of me, you are going to be hurt!* Jesus says – *yes, but if you stay with the likes of me, you will be fisher of men* - cf. Lk.5.8. Everything about Kingdom living comes through relationships.

This why renewal programs in the Church need to begin with realising that, if this friendship Jesus offers is only one-sided on his part – then look forward to pernicious individualism. The capacity for friendship is foundational for faith-living. Friendship is not capricious – attractive to some but not to others, but a bigness of heart to make known to others that God calls all of us friends, not servants – Jn.15.15. Love personalises.

A community can never be such, as long as it relies on the one-in-charge to hold it together; neither will it survive simply through good will. Independently of its members, a community has its own mission. While the individual mission, whatever its shape, ultimately strives for unity in diversity for each individual – so too the community strives for this same oneness as a community.

These missions are not just to be *for* Christ, but to allow Christ be really present by the way individuals and the group are present to each other – *I have called you friends* – not just colleagues. Something that has no chance whatsoever of survival in communities that, in fact are simply structural mechanisms for a tidy ship. The rules have been made and defined as in stone tablets – this is how we do things here; as a newcomer you have nothing to offer to change this. Likewise, the judgmental silent treatment when things are not to the individual liking.

Renewal at the level of economics and mission alone, is pointless, without the personal commitment of each to each other, of community to Church and the World: *How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert; and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as you yourselves are!* – Mt.23.15. A warning against *Magni passus sed extra viam*. Individualism flourishes not just in overtly selfish ways, but also in many seemingly self-emptying ways.

Jesus did not immediately praise Peter's faith; he first gave thanks that Peter had been open to change - to *my Father in heaven*. The ability to respond in faith is gift, which is not just a one-off moment, it continues being given, since faith is a living reality. To believe is to recognise Jesus as the Christ, sent by Abba, and to let this become the sole motivating power for full living.

This means that faith must be *experienced* and not simply known. Simply knowing did not prevent Judas from destroying himself, unlike Peter who openly said *I haven't a clue what you are saying – but if you say it, that's enough* – cf. Jn.6. Expectations are good and helpful, but they can get in the way of what faith asks. Jesus was crucified because he didn't match-up to their expectations of a Messiah.

An interesting legend says that the rich young man who went away sad in Mk.10, reappeared – he found himself alongside Jesus crucified – and said *remember me?* Apocryphal this might well be, but it serves well to illustrate that we are never abandoned by love – *Jesus looked at him, and loved him* – Mk.10.

If we insist that everything must stand the test of logic, we are going to have problems with things mysterious, with wonder and the like. Certainly, to violate reason is to embrace the absurd, and open us to legitimate ridicule. Faith and Reason are not synonymous, through no fault in reason. Reason will take us as far as that place where we have nothing to rely on, other than the word of another. *Seek not to understand so as to believe, believe so that you may understand* – Augustine.

Reason brought Newman as far as it could; but not far enough. We know this from his own words – *Lead kindly light...* What faith asks is courage, the appealing conviction of real presence, when all other persuasions must remain silent. *Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief...* Mk.9.24. It will become urgent to fit this new awareness into the mind, so that – like Peter – we can give an account of our faith – 1Pet.1.7. Augustine speaks of the *restless heart* – Rahner speaks of awakening to something that has always been there, truly present, but not yet understood.

The instinct for God – where we come from – is not something that comes and goes. It is the abiding reality of personal freedom: *For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength* – Eph.4.20. To experience irrelevance and inadequacy is not pleasant. Think only of the very best you can offer a loved-one, your love, seemingly, it isn't enough to keep death away! Jesus begged for the cup to be taken away – yet knew that this is the reason he came to us; integrity would not allow him otherwise- Mt.26.39.

The Spirit of God in us, works in tandem with our believing – not remaining static, but every point of arrival becomes a point of departure. The working Spirit is felt through promised gifts: *peace, patience... self-control*. Paul lists these gifts as present all together, and not coming and going as solo items. This why we need to be wary of the ascetic who has no joy; and to question authority that has no sensitivity. Simply having Jesus around is as insufficient now as it was for all the folk of his own time, when many more saw him and didn't believe than those who did. The fire of the Spirit is needed – *enthusiasm* literally means having God within.

For the non-believer faith is either a non-starter or an enigma – maybe because it often suggests credulity. Newman said, in his experience, thousands of problems do not make a single doubt. To believe is to accept that life's purpose comes from Life – *I am the way, truth and life* – Jn.14.6.

There is a difference between faith and beliefs. Faith is a personal attitude to God. Jesus didn't say I know what is true, he said I am Truth. To believe – *credo*- means to pledge one's heart. This why the response to Baptismal promises is *I do*, not *I agree*.

The New Testament presents faith as living, centred on Jesus, whom God has sent – and not just accepting information about him – beliefs. This how faith brings change to the believer, bringing a new way of being humanly alive. To pledge one's heart [what *credo* means] asks for re-structuring of everything we have, thus far, taken for granted. It is asking for primacy – to love as we are loved, to feed the hungry [not only with food], to be with the lonely – without such commitment from a believer, faith is neutered.

For centuries we have been over-catechised and under-evangelised. It is obviously good to articulate the consequences of *credo*, which happens through creeds and formulae – but without a personal challenge to our behaviour, it remains little more than a good idea.

In recent times, programs for renewal have embraced greater sensitivity all round. Faith cannot flourish on starvation rations by simply making programs available, no matter how well-intentioned. Pressure for lack of time and shortage of helpers, is real and important. It is neither honest, or truthful to confess living faith without the good works that make it all extremely relevant.

To believe, is to believe in *someone*, not something; to find oneself compelled to go out and be-with, to let understanding seep into experience. What Paul calls *doing the truth in love* – Eph.4.15. This means not just a change of habits, and the way we do things; not a change of heart, but a heart transplant. Which can happen if we let it – *I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh* – Ezek.36.26. It is not a resolve to pray but to become prayer; which happens *when the poor become truly blessed* when visited by such a person. See it in action through SVP and similar organisations; in order to sensitise to the mystery of the reality of God's presence, and not simply good social reform.

Listen to the Prophet Amos -

I hate and despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring

*choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness
like a never-failing stream!* Amos.5.22-24.

*It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I
cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths, and your religious gatherings; they
are all corrupted by your sins.* Is.1.13.

*In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among
you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there has to be differences among you to show
which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's
Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private
suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have
homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who
have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!*
1Cor.11.18-22.

To believe in God is to be aware of being really present with God, and not simply having devotion to the Jesus of history. Jesus-risen is the unchangingly always new – *the same today, yesterday and forever* – Heb.13.8, always unchangingly always new, unconstrained by time and space. We can never *get used to God!* We are invited into intimacy with God. We believe in much more than a good man who helped the needy. Faith proclaims Jesus the Christ Jesus replied, *Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven* – Mt.16.17.

When Jesus spoke of his authority, he simply says: *Jesus told them, these claims are valid even though I make them about myself. For I know where I came from and where I am going, but you don't know this about me. You judge me by human standards, but I do not judge anyone.* – Jn.8.14-15. This what faith invites us to experience, through him; the Mystery we are caught up in, telling us that Abba is our Father also.

Over the years, we have moved away relying on this powerful involvement – we drift in and out of the cul-de-sac of fundamentalism and ill-disguised superstition. Faith-living is often under threat from selfish self-interest living, and the frenetic rush of science and technology, vying with each other to provide the good life for us – *no need for God.*

In the midst of all this it is refreshing to meet people we perhaps would regard as *primitive*, whose life-style is basic, home comforts minimal – yet are wide open wonder and mystery, even though beset by superstition. I recall meeting a few people in Zambia, while driving between mission stations – on the outskirts of the Kalahari Desert. We stopped and asked if we could help – they said we are waiting for the bus. When does it come? Sometimes today, sometimes tomorrow! They were peacefully content to wait – how would I cope?

The value of solitude is being lost. Nowadays, time means profit or loss. There is little tolerance of what is seen as time-wasting. Forced to be on our own for whatever reason – personal inadequacy, exclusions – is de-personalising. By contrast, *solitude* is a willed experience of being there for someone else. It is often asked how did S Francis cope with so much aloneness, frequenting hermitage living, so often? The presumption was – he must have been lonely. Not so – he looked forward to this, *to be with his heart's desire.* Solitude is be there for someone else.

Written into the horarium of religious communities is a time for recreation – like solitude, only collectively, it is to be there for others. Not simply relaxation in common. Relaxing is by personal preference – to be there for myself – a good and useful practice. The list of what happens is as long as the numbers present. Recreation is different, it is hard work being there for others, but recreation has no chance without personal solitude.

There appears to be, for whatever reason, a tendency to use the expression *quiet time*, in preference to the traditional word – *meditation.* For clarity: *quiet time* is both welcome and necessary, necessary because there is a reality within us which could lie dormant and un-experienced otherwise. A deeply rooted need to be there for someone else, besides self.

Which is the hallmark of *made in the image and likeness of God*. Solitude is to open this up, by choosing to be there, to hear who we are, from the one who made us – as we are.

This is not to decry the wonderful gifts of science and technology. It is a wake-up call – from having to have the company e.g. of recorded music lest we find ourselves all alone, with nothing to do. While it is a good thing to have such benefits of music, radio and TV, we should remind ourselves that all good things don't have to be done; especially when they hold us back from simply enjoying our own company, to be there for others.

Another way of saying this: *knowledge that doesn't merge into love, is unhelpful* – cf. Hos.4.1. Take wisdom away from knowledge is to be left with information. Faith-living involves harmony between God and all that is not God. Which happens with the heart transplant – *I will take away your heart of stone, and put a heart of flesh within you* – Ezek.36.26. This furnishes us with the credentials to make good and informed choices. Not just being aware of what *is*, but of what *ought*.

The chaotic insensitivity abounding today results from eating the forbidden fruit – of reserving to oneself what is good and what isn't. Life is not dependent on what we can achieve by gritting our teeth and straining to get there. Fullness of life is in God's gift – on how much we are prepared to receive. Paradoxically, what I receive can also mean achieving less – by my own unaided efforts. This is why *merit* needs careful understanding. It does not mean: in no way can we merit, earn or deserve intimacy with God, but we can receive it as gift – no T's and C's apply!

Becoming fully alive is not achieved by our involvement in the process – other than as recipients of gift. Good works do not *merit* heaven. Being graced with God's presence energises my given potential to become God's gift to Creation! Which, at first hearing, seems and outrageously arrogant claim – till we realise we are *gifted with this new living – no merit*. Gifted, yes, but the gift now needs to be lived fully. I can speak words which condemn injustice, but they are gratuitously offensive if they are simply my words. We are invited to be co-creators, with God – whose incarnate Word in us co-shapes the world, by the way we live in it.

Light lets us see what was hidden in darkness. The light, God, helps us see everything, except lights' origin. There is an inbuilt resistance to living in the dark; yet we do have a shadow. In our world we surrounded by so many ruins of what used to be, that there is no expectation of eternity now – though we have deeply felt longings for it, in a hope big enough to outlast any suggestion of impermanence to good, Life is not yet full to the brim – but will be.

Faith copes with negative experiences, turning them into positives. *No one can see the face of God and live* –cf. Ex.33.20. In his newly discovered faith, S Francis was able to respond: *if death allows me to see God's face, welcome sister death!* Seeking to fill emptiness is natural – be it with power, wealth, status...

Faith allows us to fill the infinite emptiness which finite resources can never do: turns meaningless emptiness into openness to the infinity of God. Like Mary, who gave thanks that her emptiness would be filled. There is always mission attached to God's presence – Mary was able present the world with its Saviour. So can we, by the way we live in the world.

Life lived fully, creates a nostalgia for its origin – Jesus spoke of this: *I know where I come from, I know where I am going* – Jn.8.14. This nostalgia takes the form of indignation when faced with injustice; of appreciation through harmony. Even evil-minded people feel the need to try to convince victims that this good. We see the fruits Gospel living all around us – in art, poetry, music and variety of attempts at creativity. Pope John XXIII spoke of the world's need for the medicine of mercy.

Many do criticise the Church for confining what is good, obviously attractive about Jesus in orthodoxy. The Church no longer gets ordinary folk to say what they said of Jesus – *this man speaks with authority* – Mt.7.29. Such appealing authority [not power] is lost when the focus on ritual purity, doctrinal rectitude takes precedence over the well-being of everyday lives of

the poor. This not only true of the Church, but wherever life is made to serve structures, instead of structures serving life.

Francis discovered this in himself – with the things he took for granted as important: wealth and status – he discovered this through having both, but purpose in life was missing. He gave up his old ways – or so he thought – what actually happened was that in letting-go of these things as owner-occupier, he, unwittingly allowed them to come back to him in a new way.

No longer possessions or *things*, but as sisters and brothers, as proclaimed in his Canticle. If his relationship with Jesus was as friar, then everything owing its origin to this same Creative Word deserved the same relationship – no more than that – welcome brother Sun, sister Moon!

If we are prepared to venture beyond the boundaries of mind and sense, out into the world where faith belongs, we will begin to see, without eyesight, the vastness of the potential within us, as a result of God giving us to ourselves. First we must liberate ourselves from the confines of our perceived needs. This allows faith free rein to seek and find what God has really given us by giving us to ourselves in freedom.

But how can we know what, by definition, is unknowable? How can we know God? This is why we have been blessed with a new way of knowing; which, if we embrace the gift, lets us know ourselves *as we are known*, with the knowing of God who made us. God knows, but cannot be known with our ordinary ways of knowing. There is no way we can ever reach God – but we have been reached by God. To be known by God, is God loving us, and in freely accepting this [not easy] gradually become the loveliness God sees – for others to see and enjoy.

There is no point in speaking of God in terms of *before/after...* There is no beginning or ending in God. How can God love me before I existed? Listen to Paul –

you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory – Eph.1.13-14.

What was God loving before I was born? The gift of my life, when lived in faith, allows me discover the face I had before I was born. A face I will never see, because it is meant only to be seen, to be seen by anyone looking at me, without preconceptions. Then do I see who I am, reflected back to me in the eyes of those who love me.

And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified – Rom.8.27

If fidelity [full faith] is not able to be touched, seen or held - *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – 1Jn.1.1.* – without this, faith is bogus. The Word became flesh! So must our words-in-faith. This what Grace brings about – our letting ourselves be loved – to receive it – to become what we have received.

This cannot be earned, begged, borrowed or stolen – neither can it be defaced by *what we have done and failed to do*. Paul tells us God loves us even when we see ourselves as unlovable. All I'm being asked is to say yes to the greatest gift possible God's eternal and personalised love for me, just because I'm me!

Jesus told us *I have come for sinners – so that we might enjoy living*. No longer sinners – but forgiven sinners – who needed to be forgiven. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we not only celebrate our being forgiven, but we are graced to become for others what we have received. This is pre-eminently so in the Eucharist – where hear *this my body, for you... my blood poured out, for you*. Take and eat, not just to become one with Christ, and with each other... but also to become Eucharist for all not present, everyone we meet beyond the table. We are able to become body-given, blood poured-out – able to serve!

Chapter 6

Redemption, not amnesty...

Love is not a fruit of evolution; it doesn't issue from developing physical matter. Made in the image of God, we have love's DNA. It is something we can't analyse, or scrutinise under a microscope. But we do know its presence, through the fruits it produces in us; especially the gifted ability to present the world with its Saviour, by the way we are present – as with Mary: *And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God - Lk.1.35.* Mary didn't just give birth, she *became* mother; S Francis reminded his brothers – *You are all mothers of the Lord; you have conceived in Word and Sacrament, now bring him to birth by the way you live.*

Our origin is Love as is our destiny – what is on offer: *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them – 1Jn.1.4.* When there is an ominous absence of love, God has not gone away and left us.

We have been groomed to expect God to be in the quiet of a chapel, we miss out on the vast all-abiding presence of God within; even God's presence makes our sin simply a need for healing presence – never a reason for absence. Living faith lets us know the unknowable, dream the impossible, see the invisible and be held close by the intangible.

There are as many ways of actually living faith life, as there are individuals. For some, Religious Life helps, for others it is priesthood – for the majority there so many other ways. This truth, like so many others, has been hijacked into thinking only the first two are called *vocation*. Vocation means being found by God, and is the birth right of everyone, believer, agnostic or atheist. The fact that I can't see God, or have no room for religion, doesn't mean I'm invisible to God. After all, so many simply, and honestly want a good life. *Only God is good!* – Mk.10.18! Find good and you have found God.

We enjoy and cherish friendships – we can meet, text, and be with. Peter tells us: *You have not seen him, yet you believe – 1Pet.1.8.* Jesus told us *to have seen me is to see the Father – Jn.12.45.* As his friends went after him, to be with him – they not only became aware of the presence of God, they also became aware of their real identity. See the difference – after Good Friday they were huddled away in a room with doors bolted. After he came to them risen, all fear was gone. They went out to share their new found joy, with any and every one. When they accepted his invitation to *come and see – Jn.1.39 – they experienced [not just heard about] truth, compassion, courage, understanding and friendship – and there wasn't a church in sight!*

They were not asked to form an elite gathering of Religious or Clergy, but to do whatever was needed for them to be really, truly present – wherever they were. He taught them not to objectify reality, making demands before others could be with them. Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus *you have got it all wrong* – when Zacchaeus insisted on changing his ways, living differently. He didn't tell Judas *you are wrong!*

He invited all – us included – to tell him if they were enjoying life: *I have come that you may enjoy living – cf. Jn.10.* When Peter [the fisherman] realised the goodness in Jesus – he was anxious: *depart from me a sinner – or if you stay with the likes of me you will be hurt – only to hear: but if you stay with the likes of me I'll make you a fisher of men!* – Lk.5.8.

Personal truth must be allowed to meet Truth made flesh, and not just hear what others say about him. This is seen with the woman who met Jesus at Jacob's Well. When she told her neighbours, they went to see for themselves. *Thank-you for telling us, but now we have seen him for ourselves – Jn.4.5-42.*

2000 years on, doesn't change things. Industrialisation, the separation of everyday living and religion, the emergence of scientific ingenuity etc. have left their mark. Jesus did not setup a cultural environment – he simply continues to invite us to get involved. The world will be changed only by the way it is lived-in – as we seeing to our cost, environmental damage. He didn't just suggest we do things differently; he gave us the wherewithal to do it. The choice

to live by the lowest common denominator allows the powerful to prosper – and the poor the *privilege* of staying where they are!

The central theme of the Incarnation is God claiming equality with us, through self-emptying giving, to show us our destiny, and how to get there. Pressures from life always tempt us to compromise here – slipping into a quasi-robotic rubric observance, simply parroting words – getting our prayers-in! There is no repetition in God; if we experience repetition in reading the Word of God, we need to pause in order to listen and not simply hear.

Accepting Baptism in Jesus Christ means not just owning the effects of sinful living – but realising the root cause is self-seeking and isolating others. We read of the first Christians taking as long as 3 years' preparation for Baptism, living so that no one is held in disregard. Especially our attitude to salvation – not just seeing Jesus as Saviour, but aware that we really do need saving. Vat. II. Constitution on Liturgy: *The wonderful works of God for the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to our redeeming in Christ.*

We sing - *The hopes and fears of all the years...* at Christmas – but it is equally applicable for Good Friday. The promise we hope for in Bethlehem, is kept on Calvary. The man nailed to the cross is the only one showing the enormity of God's love, without any thought of the cost. That was the promise which Jesus honoured, not his death. Jesus is our salvation, not his dying. At Christmas, we are not in a world of tinsel and make-believe, celebrating Jesus' birth; so also we do not celebrate the death of Jesus, but the living, dying and rising of the Lord, here with us now.

Redemption is not amnesty from sin, but the possibility – with capability included – to live our human life in an entirely new way. Paul celebrates this with what, at first, sounds strange: *He who knew no sin, was made sin for us [not to sin] – 2Cor.5.21.* In no way did Jesus sin, but did not flinch from taking on the consequences of sin in the world, especially the sin making death absurd and meaningless. Death is now the end of the beginning into new living, without end; linking everything and everyone into unity which respects and honours diversity.

Of this potential, always with us, we made a Gorgon's head of knotted selfishness, exclusions and isolations. Jesus lived his relationships, the everyday happenings, in such a way as to unravel the tangled mess we had made of our relating. Not only that, but offered us the ability to do the same: *as the Father sent me, I send you – Jn.15.12.* Redemption is humanness properly and completely lived. Salvation is taking up the offer of the Spirit to achieve this.

We would benefit much more by reflecting what is being offered, rather than on what we believe we need. There is wisdom in the adage: *if you want to make God smile, tell your plans!* We need to take in such creative and unimagined generosity.

As with most gifts, quality is more impressive than quantity. It is noteworthy to see how people who offer us service, are sometimes treated. Stand in line at the check-out in the Supermarket and just listen! Yes, we have needs – but so too do those who offer to serve us. God help us, if friends only call when we need them to. We need to lift our gaze above horizons to see things as they are in themselves, not in the context of when I need them. God saves us, not because we need saving – but out of anticipating love. This is salvation – ill-served by us simply carrying out duties, or keeping the rules.

There is nothing else but love in God – love eager to be there for others, without exception. So, paradoxically, we who owe God everything, owe God nothing! Thank-you is never owed – but humbly and freely given. We are loved exactly as we are – there is nothing we can do to change that; but we can be changed by it!

Which comes first – gratitude for the gift; or repentance for ignoring it? Gratitude happens when we realise we are not alone, even when we are determined to follow our way. When we have ignored, but not been ignored. Saying *I love you*, doesn't create a relationship; it brings to the surface what has been happening within for some time, and is now calling to be heard; and in its expression gives a glimpse at what we have been created for.

The mission of the Church is to serve the Kingdom – to offer experiences of love as a fore-taste of what is promised. The Church is not a self-preservation organisation; it is a service –

not that all may *know* the love of God; but all may *experience* the love of God. As S John says – *what we have seen touched and tasted* – 1Jn.1.3 is what we bring. This is why the cross is key – the connecting point of good and evil. In practically every way, evil prospers seemingly over good. So why make the effort to be good?

Evil can't cope with death – and death affects literally everyone. Evil is surely on the side of death, but only when it is abusing power and inflicting death. Evil has tried everything to get rid of good – even to watching it be crucified. Having done its worst, even death is redeemed and given to us the path to new life.

The cross is the reliability of love – provided we don't separate dying from rising. The cross is the worst of evil alongside the best of good. Meaningless death is redeemed by Jesus dying, but not staying dead! *Greater love there isn't than you give your life for another* – Jn.15.13.

The worst that sin has done through what it has done to our experiencing death. Had there been no sin, biological life would still have come to an end, in a very different way. Having been taken hostage, it has created fear ever since.

We can, at times, be lyrical about death. Think of songs and poems about the beauty of autumn leaves – which are dying. It is when death gets too close, in family and friends, that it causes anguish and bereavement. Faced with the imminent death of a loved-one, all pretence at self-sufficiency evaporates. What sin has done to death echoes throughout creation; what was crucial was that Jesus not only brings new living, but also new dying. Think about it – it is only the human side of creation that has done this.

The impact of what Jesus actually achieved was not immediately appreciated. Both Peter and Paul had problems with the cross – initially. At first it was seen as a terrible mistake on the part of Jewry. Gradually, Paul's letters show enlightenment, as to how cross and resurrection belong together.

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Acts.2.22-24.

Now, a human being can do what only God could do, give the Holy Spirit – referred in Old Testament as the *Messianic Gift*.

On Paul's journeys, he met a host of problems. He seems to have been a walking disaster: beaten, scourged, stoned and exiled. He remained faithful to his mission, witnessing to the Second Coming and the Resurrection. The feed-back, especially from Timothy, assured him that the seed was growing. There obviously was strength in weakness, and the favoured place for the Spirit to be fruitful.

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: you suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews-

1Thess.2.14.

He experienced disproportion between what was asked of him and the tools given to him. A reminder, to seek to operate only from what we believe to be our strengths, ends up transmitting religion, ideology, even Christianity – but not Christ!

Weakness is not something unfortunate – but a pre-requisite. Jesus had none of the attributes of power; which is one reason why so many follow him, and why many of the powerful are taking to the level where power is irrelevant. They saw a man with authority, but without power. Unarmed truth has no room for lying, cowardice, injustice... for statements like: *It is good that one man should die...* Jn.11.50.

The simplicity of honesty – where yes means yes, no means no – is the basis for trust. Sadly, much of Public Life and Social Media today have little regard for truth, when it is inconvenient. Jesus' lack of power was not just an inability to defend himself, he couldn't

solve other peoples' problems. God's *almighty power* is no more an external force than Jesus' miracles were inaugurating salvation through the spectacular.

Evil has no permanent abode within hearts – so the possibility of change is ever present. Conversion is not changing taskmasters, but the confidence to trust good-will being active in pursuit of peace with justice.

The pull of power is always available for anyone in positions of authority in the name of God, as we see from the many who have succumbed. Jesus has a special name for such people – a name we are familiar with, but not in this context. He describes as *pagan* those who make their authority felt – Mt.20.25, Mk.10.42. The Church professes to be a servant Church – often happening only with *Father knows best!* There is an impressive air of freedom where service is real, and total.

The New Testament is clear – all systems, structures, are subordinate to Truth – to the *person* who is not just Truth, but also the Way and the Life – not an ideology called telling the truth. Being truthful is a relationship, not just a good idea. When the Church is fully at home with the powerful, it descends to simply an organ of state; often silent and even shoring-up oppressive regimes.

There is nothing new here. Paul, called the Isaiah of the New Testament at times, must have reflected on – *only when a man is aware of his own weakness can he be filled with the power of God* – Is.10.23, 11.1. This was the catalyst for change for him, when we pondered how this was evident in Jesus *whom you are persecuting* [still happening after the crucifixion] – Acts.22.7. No longer is he content to proclaim Resurrection and Parousia, but Death and Resurrection: *For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you* – 2Cor.13.4.

He is not saying *as long we are failures, all is well*. He says weakness is strength, not because it is weak, but because in weakness there is no one left but God! When Jesus cried out *my God why* – Mt.27.46 – he didn't say *God*, but *my God*. He felt abandoned – but had not abandoned God. He was saying *I have done everything you asked of me, I am where you asked me to be, not nailed to a cross, but showing how reliable love is*.

God is not served by, nor well-pleased by suffering and dying – he asked that Jesus show how great love is – no matter what the cost in doing this. Jesus came to bring *abundant life* for everyone; however, love isn't always trusted, and is seldom allowed to choose its own way of expression, because *freedom* is its essence. It is for others to decide what to do about love-offered.

This is the life we have said yes to in Baptism, in the Sacramental actions established by Jesus:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Eph.2.4-10

Faith enlightens us of our need for a Saviour, and Baptism lets us do something about it *Baptised into union with him, you have put on Christ, as a garment* - Gal.3.27 Rom.7.4. In receiving the Holy Spirit [Baptism] we can *experience* God as Abba – as the disciples saw in Jesus at prayer.

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures

1Cor.15.3.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
Rom.6.3.

Baptism is not just an event, it is taking on an attitude; the zeal and enthusiasm Jesus showed to heal and to console. We receive the same energy [Holy Spirit] for the same purpose, to continue Jesus' mission, reconciling the world to its Creator.

And so the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith. Now that the time for faith is here, the Law is no longer in charge of us. It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself.
Gal.3.24-27

Why Faith *and* Baptism? Why not just Baptism? Our need for salvation didn't disappear once we received Baptism. Baptism makes us able to live differently – but we still have to do the living! Faith strengthens us when we face temptations to compromise and to infidelity. Baptism is much more than initiation into a new community, it introduces me to the Saviour faith tells me I need. The actual saving event in Jesus, is located in history; at specific time and place. Baptism perpetuates this – not as something to remember, but to experience, here and now.

Being born does not complete me as a human being. I need nurture and nature to guide me into maturity, to provide and environment in which life can flourish. I need the community called Church [the local Church] to help make me real, and send me towards others who need help. This is why the Rite of Baptism focuses on Parents and God parents also: *I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them* – Hos.11.4.

Jesus didn't just make ritual changes... he changed the Law, he didn't abolish it. He replaced it with himself. The Law had served its purpose, revealing the Word of God, and preparing for this Word, made flesh. *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit* - Gal.5.25.

Fine in theory, what about *keeping in step* in the nitty-gritty of every day? What does this actually feel like? Even though I have the Spirit in me, I don't need much reminding me that I am still a sinner. It's from the reality of this that the Spirit is gently leading me along paths I've never known. All the while, the shadow of the cross is never far away.

It is pointless to take to take to spiritual exercises, presuming that discipline is all that is needed. The exercises might be praiseworthy in themselves, but they cannot give what they haven't got. They cannot change a heart of stone. Negatives do not disappear overnight when love is around; but they cease to be primary. When there is *fidelity*[faith] committing to the new way, negatives will fade through lack of use! No one relishes dying to self, simply because it has to be done [ask any recovering addict]. It is all change when the needs of others become life's passion. This is what led Jesus to Calvary.

Such a capacity for loving meets corresponding desires to be loved. There is an appropriate *sense of sin* in all of us, not seeing self as vile and worthless, but blest with an entitlement to Christ – who says *I have come for sinners* – Lk.5.32; Mk.2.17. This tells me not just change is necessary, but with this help I can and I want to change. It is called *enthusiasm* [which literally means God is active within]. At first, the Prodigal went home for selfish reasons – he couldn't cope where he was – but when he actually arrived, all that was needed was to let his father be his Dad [Abba?].

This is why externals – like sacramental rituals – are not meant to be on their own. That things will be put right by simply confessing sacramentally – as if a duty; believing all is well with God, without any reference to the one wronged. Jesus was aware of this and said - *leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God*. Sin isn't just a bad attitude; it is turning my back on God. I don't forgive myself, I am forgiven. Everything about salvation is pure gift. Which is

why in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I am not passively forgiven, but also challenged to become for others what I am freely receiving – the Grace of the Sacrament.

As I cannot evangelise the poor before being evangelised by the poor, I cannot be an indigent sinner, without the conviction of betraying love. Ritual cleansing is powerfully symbolic, but never a substitute for a profound sense of sin – a betrayer of love.

I do not ask for forgiveness in order to do things better, but to be allowed access to the goodness, the justice, the compassion and responsibility – which aren't mine – but mine for the receiving. *Create for me Lord, a new heart, put a steadfast spirit in me* – Ps.51.

Chapter 7

Reached by compassion

We can think, choose and cherish – but it all seems beyond us. We are created with a thirst for the infinite, with the offer of being able to reach it – *with this in mind, God promised something more* – Heb.11. How can we be sure of this? How do I know I am for God and not just for myself?

God is not reachable – but we are reachable by God! So much so, that Scripture tells us that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.
Ps.139:1-4

We are trapped inside self-centred living, in need of healing grace and the energy of faith – to speak truthfully with God. This need is not felt at first, residing in the will. It is only detected in the way Jesus tells us - Jesus tells us – *by their fruits* – Mt.7.16. To live in Faith requires appropriate involvement with and for others – moving away from self to be free for others.

This is the world of the Eucharistic Community. St John's sixth chapter speaks of a [understandable] reaction to Jesus saying *unless you eat my flesh, and drink my blood...* How shocking it must have sounded. We are accustomed to Eucharistic language – but hearing it for the first time!

We are accustomed not to accept unproven [the evidence] statements. This actually is only a problem for believers, non-believers can just dismiss it. All we have is Jesus' word – he offers no explanation. The majority walked away, this was too much. Not Peter! What he says *I haven't a clue what you are talking about – but if you say it, that is enough for me!* – Jn.6.60. Credibility issues from integrity. The Eucharist is *Mysterium Fidei*.

The centrality of the Eucharist is expressed in Jn. *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you will not have life in you...*Jn.6.53. Seeing the inability of many to accept this, he said: *It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is of no avail; my words are spirit and they are life...* Jn.6.63. He is telling them that this giving is something deeper than flesh and blood, given. None of this makes sense, in the ordinary way of things.

When Ludovic Kennedy [agnostic] was asked to discern which of the major religions made an appeal to him. After a time, he came back and said – the Catholic religion appealed most – but for two things he could not accept: The Resurrection from the dead, and the Real Presence in the Eucharist – he thought they made no sense. His questioner asked – *they make no sense, but are they true?* Peter's answer, if we can't accept – *to whom can we go?*

If the Eucharist is so central and crucial, why is it so zealously guarded and hidden away? We preach that Christ is necessary for the world – but is the *necessary Christ* able to be got at by the world? The Gospel tells us when Jesus believed they were about to carry him off and make him King – Jesus hid – Jn.6.15. The core purpose of the Eucharist is for us to *take and eat/drink*. Can Jesus be reached by *anyone* who needs him?

Eucharist is for people, and our gathering to share, to take and eat must reflect this. The Eucharist is our most substantial presence of Christ – it is not static, not a once only event,

Christ enthroned, simply requiring the adoration of creation. It is Christ really, truly, substantially with us – *the plunging of Divine Unity into the depths of the Multiple* – Chardin. Is this adequately expressed by simply *going to Mass*? Is it something we do, almost passively?

The Sacrament of the Eucharist makes a hidden reality present and active among us. Jesus came to be God-with-us, who, in our sinfulness, had no desire to be with God; which is why to be himself, God-with-us he lived by the way of the cross. The significance of the Resurrection, when divisiveness and exclusion had done its worst, shows that the worst sin can do has been challenged and removed.

The disintegration of death is transformed into Resurrection through the manner of dying – *greater love there is not, than to give your life for another* – Jn.15.13. Through the Eucharist we have been given not just a new way of living, but also a new and positive way of dying. Which happens many times before our ultimate death into life.

God feeding his people was not novel: *This is the bread the Lord gives* – Ex.16.8, proclaimed Moses. Jesus fed hungry crowds. At the Last Supper, Jesus used sacrificial language – he spoke about shedding his blood for the forgiving of sin. Something was being offered, within a familiar setting, a ritual meal in thanksgiving for deliverance from captivity.

The atmosphere was gently intimate; Jesus making it clear how the Mystery of Incarnation and Redemption was to be *really, truly and substantially [universally] present* – until the end of time. It is *the bond of Charity*, in as much as all who share in it become what they are receiving. It is not just a profoundly mystical experience for the individual, but real and vital common union [communion] of each other in Christ, with Abba –through the Spirit.

As Sacrament, it is entrusted to the Church, but for the world. The Eucharist gets from the Church into the world, through all who receive this oneness becoming what they receive for others – body-given, blood poured-out – a life of service. Only then does the Church live up to its name – Servant Church.

In that Upper Room the Apostles gathered with Jesus, unaware of what was about to happen, other than the annual paschal supper. When we gather – *we do know* – to become one in Him and each other. But our way of knowing tends to miss our oneness in receiving and sharing. The *how* of the Eucharist will forever remain the Mystery of Faith. It is the Risen Lord really present in Sacramental form.

Why did the crucifixion have to happen? This is asked everyday by all suffering bereavement, suffering the pain of injustice. Lazarus' sister confronts Jesus head-on with this: *if you had been here this wouldn't have happened* – Jn.11.32. We know God is present where we least expect it – in tragedy and disaster. On Good Friday, however, Martha could not have said *if you had been here this wouldn't have happened!*

An aspect of prayer that tends to be overlooked is that it can be alienating. It can take me away from myself; I need to be convinced that my salvation doesn't come from within me. I need to move from being *one in need of salvation* [which I truly am] into the life of the One whose confessed purpose in life is to be my salvation.

Prayer is gratefully accepting *Jesus is the God of my salvation*. Am I not just willing to pray, but equally eager to receive the gift of belonging. *Everything is prayer... prayer is an unaffordable luxury... love is prayer... prayer is discovering God's action in the world...* all of these may be true, but they will be just as equally pointless, without addressing our real heart's desire. I surely need to pray – but based on I cannot be myself, who and

We need to become aware that we are not the ones to save the world, but to allow the world to be saved by the way we live in it. It is God's heart's desire that everyone should have the chance to hear and respond [whatever the response] to what we will hear – whatever form it will take, the invitation is to be with God as equals – let God be Abba.

We all have a *word* which describes who we are, our self-awareness. We can freely choose to share this word with others, a word going out from us without leaving us. In as much as that word is received as it is spoken, without interpretation, it can form a bond of friendship – when the gesture is reciprocal. Which tells us that we need, not just to hear God's Word, but

also God's meaning of God's Word – not interpretations of it. Why is there so much concern about which translation we should use, and no mention of God's meaning of God's Word – the necessity of prayer?

The Eternal Word of God is not a book – it is Jesus, the Christ. We need to remember the happening at Jacob's Well between Jesus and the woman. She was so impressed with *him* not just with what he said, that she had to share it. Her village folk were so impressed they went to see him for themselves. They came back and thanked her *for her interpretation* – and said now we believe because we have heard him ourselves. There is no *wrong way* to God if it gets us to God. Such is the wonder of God's love – whatever route I have followed in my life – sin included – if it has brought me to God, it is the only way I got to where I am! Thank-you Lord, for making of my life what I couldn't make of it. Give thanks for all of my life – nothing left out, if now I can own Jesus as Lord.

To cry-out to God in pain, is to speak to one familiar with pain; while this does not take the pain away, it honours it with meaning. Listen to Paul recognising this: *So our hope in you is never shaken; we know that just as you share in the sufferings of Christ, you also share in the help we receive* – 2Cor.1.7. In the depth of darkness, soothing words spoken from a safe distance, offer no help – whereas the real presence of one willing to be where we are, simply because we are there – can be a comforting reminder that the cross belongs to the Eucharist, the Real Presence of God-with us.

S John urges us to take and eat, and become Eucharist for others – body and blood poured out in serving the poor. Christ does not die again, his real presence is Jesus who rose from the dead, and the Christ who will come again. We communicate with Abba through the now glorified humanity of Jesus – being with the Father happens through being with the Son – *who sees me, sees the Father* – Jn.14.9.

This is why the Eucharist is for much more than our personal devotion. It is the Sacrament of the Church – our unifying bond of Charity. Vat.II reminds us that having been made children of God through faith and in Baptism, we are called together to praise God in the heart of the Church, celebrating Eucharist [Const. on Liturgy].

We are deeply within the cycle of birth, maturity, decline and death. Natural evidence would say this is to be for ever. Yet there are symbols which appear to be for much more than they signify: *Night shall be no more, light from the sun not needed, the Lord will be their light* – Rev.22.4.

Faith is grounded on death on the cross and eternal life are with us forever – a life beyond the reach of death. The irony of this is that the world was looking for greatness elsewhere when this happened. Rome had never been so powerful. Emperor Caesar Augustus knew nothing of the baby born in Bethlehem, on the outskirts of the empire.

The Church is a creation of the Resurrection, at Pentecost became aware that Jesus, with whom they had shared so much over the last three years, and had seen him brutally executed, was alive, and one with God. They were literally *confirmed* in this. No longer would they hide away, not knowing what to do next. No longer apologists for Jesus, but now witnesses to his Resurrection, who was with them, as he promised – *I am with you always* – Mt.28.20. His Spirit had overshadowed them, and like Mary, were also asked to present the world with its Saviour by the way they were present: *He called them, to be with him, that he might send them out* – Mk.3.14.

In the early days of the Church, the Second Coming was expected to be sooner than later. But much was to happen before this comes about – there is to be *evangelisation*, so that the whole world may know. It soon became clear the Resurrection was to be more than a local event. The whole Creation is to be taken up into this Mystery. It was hinted at in the Old Testament: *Fiend though you are, you are setting us free... since we die for the King of the Universe, who will raise us up to a life made everlastingly new* – 2Mac.7.9.

The story of Dives and Lazarus – Lk.16.19-31 – centres around eternal happiness, with Dives in his misery, thinking of his brothers. The dying Jesus promises hope to the thief

dying alongside him: *today, you will be with me in paradise* - Lk.23.43. Not a promise from one sitting as an awesome judge, but with the warmth of welcome, brother.

The community was already growing aware that the future life was already with us, in part: *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit* – Eph.1.13. Paul saw how death as the tyrant that blighted lives, until he saw differently *the last enemy to be overcome is death* – 1Cor.15.26.

The novelty of this must have astonished his hearers: *According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep* -1Thess.4.15. The hallmark of a believer in Jesus Christ is the given ability to cope with a world with death in it. Jesus has even redeemed death, giving it back to us as the doorway into eternal life.

Jesus' actual dying is the claim to life – *He became obedient unto death, therefore God raised him up* – Phil.2.8.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.
Rom.6.9-11.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive, but each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ – 1Cor.15.22-23. What Jesus experienced is now open to everyone: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me* – Gal.2.22-23. Anyone in love knows what *he life I now live, is not mine!*

Calvary is not a static event, a once-only happening, looked-back to with reverence. Certainly, Christ died only once. The Resurrection shows how the living, dying and rising Lord is ever present [*with you always*] *Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life* - Rom.6.4.

Being *in Christ* allows me to be my authentic self. We don't have a fire-extinguisher God – waiting for the fire to come to our aid, when we can't cope. We all resist the Spirit, each in our own way. It is the gentle laving of Baptism that reassures us *it is all right to leave home*.

Resurrection is not resuscitation: *And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you* – Rom.8.11. Our bodily resurrection is the culmination of the Spirit working in us. For Paul, death matters, not because it puts an end to all our bodily limitations but because *for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain* – Phil.1.21. He goes on to confess that he would not know whether to go on living this life, or to move into the new and promised life through the new way of dying.

To claim to live in the perfect community, is to make the Eucharist redundant. Communities are built out of tensions and struggles, hopes and fears – the kind of communities for which Christ died: *I have come for sinners* – Lk.5.32; Mk.2.17. We become gradually, through the quality of our Eucharistic celebration. Likewise, with *compassion*, which we assume to be a human virtue. Compassionate is not what we are – but what we are called to become – *be compassionate as is Abba*. We are invited to become through Grace, what we are not by nature.

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there has to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and

another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!
1Cor.11.18-22.

We must be sure or being together, and our celebrating does not embarrass the poor. Repentance has to be efficacious, issuing through changed behaviour, because of the heart of flesh which replaced its stony predecessor. Without this, all the communions in the world will offer nothing to communion.

Chapter 8

Deliriously happy sadness

The whole gamut of life's experiences, from courage to depravity, is open to everyone – even to being the hero in the morning and the villain in the afternoon, saint and sinner. Jesus warned us about this when he spoke of the sower sowing in different types of ground. It is not a question of which terrain am I – rather I can be all of them from rock hard to fertile soil.

We have energy for evil as well as for good. This is a reminder that life is lived from now, not from yesterday or tomorrow. Birth and death, and everything in between, always happen now! We don't love God yesterday or tomorrow, *now is the acceptable time* to love. – 2Cor.6.2.

St Peter – who had every reason to say this – reminds us that *God does not call our past sins to mind* – 2Pet.1.9. If at this moment – now – Jesus is enough for me for him to be the centre of my life, and for me to live this, helping others do the same, then my life, the way I got here, all of it – the good, the bad, and the ugly, brought me here, and for all of my life I say *thank-you*. This is not being indifferent to my sinfulness, but being mindful of *where sin abounds, grace abounds even more* – Rom.5.20.

We are no longer sinners – but *forgiven* sinners. Salvation belongs to my whole life, calling me forward through living in the now of life, enlightened by the gift of the Spirit. While Scripture assures me that my past sins have been washed away, are not remembered; they are remembered by me and should be. We do not confess belief in sin, but in the forgiveness of sin – in a manner appropriate for one needed to be forgiven.

The ones I have betrayed through my infidelity may well have forgiven me; but if integrity means anything, forgiveness – far from abolishing what has gone before, simply highlights my selfishness, which brought this about. Truly, love is greater than sin, grace abounds infinitely more than disgrace. As well as accepting responsibility for my behaviour – no scapegoating – I also accept being forgiven; which is why it takes a little bit longer to reach a *happy sadness*. Not just forgiven, but needing to be forgiven.

Knowing I am a sinner, albeit a forgiven sinner, means I have betrayed love. Aware of God's love in so many happy times, is different from such awareness in my sinful times; yet love bids me stand upright in joy, without the plague of guilt – I was guilty – but now... To go on bemoaning my sin, is rejecting forgiveness and wallowing in self-pity. How can I make my sadness happy?

Betrayal is not nearly powerful enough to quench God's love for me – but makes living it more painful for both sinner and sinned against. Many a parent has had to sit in a courtroom and be humiliated by what is being said, but they will be there. It is God's desire that Creation reflect perfectly the love which brought it about. Betrayal, far from removing this love, made the expressing of it infinitely more painful, as Calvary testifies.

The mystery of humanness is its ability to bring from within itself, much more than is there by nature. Mary shows the purpose of being human – hearing, and becoming

what she heard – *the Lord is with you* – Lk.1.28. The gift of being able to make the Lord present by our being truly present. We are a mix of physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual realities; which, when brought together allows us to know where we are from and where our destiny lies. This, through the Spirit, making clear everything Christ told us – Jn.14.26. Living this requires discipline – not as commonly understood in Lent – but in its true sense – *the art of the disciple*.

It is sad that the *Institutional* Church has not sufficiently highlighted this; with undue priority given to well-intentioned implanting doctrine through imposition of observances – which surely have a place – but never primary. The appropriate setting for discipline is the fostering of *enthusiasm* [en theou – to have God ever-present]. Exposure to offered value is the appropriate setting for enthusiastic living.

Christ made himself food – something we need and desire – to become one with us and with all we are with – this lets the ecclesiastical warm to the ecclesial in a ministry of service. Universality in belonging is infinitely more important than any juridical uniformity – which too often is concerned with defending a position rather than fostering synodal dialogue.

Why do so many, who are eager to return to Gospel values, feel they need to part company with the Church? The Church is truly named the *bride of Christ* – is this a happy marriage? The Church is the guaranteed, institutional experience of the presence of God – *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*– Col.1.19-20.

The Church must embrace this priority and not simply be content in preserving the status quo. To do this means starting with the Gospel – not simply interpretations of it; which has, albeit unintentionally, the undesirable effect of conforming the Gospel to us, instead of the other way round. So much Church praxis has little or no Gospel foundation; which, in itself is not wrong, but tends to rob mission of credibility.

Mission is not a take-it or leave-it option. It is a basic Gospel value; the nitty gritty of everyday life is the raw material for mission, mission is not something pre-conceived to be delivered like a message. It is a relationship-offered, with the express purpose of improving the quality of life – and so can never be a one size fits all. Mission has its origin in the Gospel as it is, not in the Church as it is.

People asking to join the Church, are invited to join those *already in*. The steady decline in Church membership suggests something ineffective here; yet the Church still goes on. Starting from the Gospel, which is prior to the Church, lets us ask *how did Jesus see mission?* Without relying on Church custom, *this is how we do things*. Jesus faced what was actually happening every day, not what was supposed to happen. He affirmed and denounced appropriately, setting free and engendering hope.

Belief in the universal, yet unique love of God must be seen, touched and cherished. This can only be done in the way Jesus did it, and which was prominent in the early days of the Church – *see how they love one another!* Which started with an invitation – when a group of friends asked – *where do you live?* He invited them to *come and see*.

There's a story told about a drain cover, lifted and left on the ground, behind a newly built bungalow. The gardeners presumed it was there for a purpose, and landscaped around it. The new owners said what a pity it wasn't sited in a less prominent place – the surveyor investigated it, to find nothing beneath it.

Institutions tend to gather such covers! Some do have useful purposes, which require ongoing maintenance; others were left there when it was simply a convenient spot – and to be removed later! The Church is faced with such practices, and needs to see the architect's plans – go back to the Gospel – which was there before the Church arrived, to discover what is and what isn't helpful – which made Pope John XXIII call Vatican II.

Did Jesus found a Church in such a way that all we need do is appoint new CEO's every so often? Are we not expected to do what Jesus did – be among the people, see if

structures are serving life – as they should be, not life serving structures. He came among us to bring *life in abundance*, not a code of restrictive practices. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of *with us in mind God promised something more* – Heb.11.40. – not quantity, but quality! Such a priority lets us welcome life-enhancing structures.

But – before this, we need to welcome ourselves as people of worth – each one individually and uniquely, able to make God present by the way we live in it – *God did not create it [creation] in vain, he made it to be lived-in* – Job.38.4; Ps.33.6; Is.42.5.

In God's eyes we can do this, our worship is underpinned by our *worship* in God's eyes; as we are graced by the Holy Spirit. Pray with Augustine – *noverim me, noverim te* – to know you is to know myself. S Francis prayed one prayer, over and over again the night of the Stigmata – *who are you Lord, and who am I?*

What about so many good folk who don't believe, don't see any need to do so? There is a natural curiosity built-in to us, a need to know about what really matters in life. Integrity is evidence that knowing and loving are inseparable – *perfect love casts out fear* – Jn.4.18. To be known by God is to be loved by God, whether I'm aware of it or not. God knows everything God made!

This is why part of mission is to name God for others, [not drag them into the Church]. There is a necessary element of risk involved, since the desire to know more about where we are from and where we are going is much more than acquiring information:

My beloved spoke to me; come my darling, come away. The winter has passed... rise up and come... My beloved is mine, I am his... Have you seen my true love? I asked. Scarcely had I left them, when I met my true love; I clung to him, and would not let him go –
Song of Songs 2-3.

Such love doesn't just call for acceptance, but for commitment. Whatever words we choose to describe this, we must keep in mind that the words be *prophetic* – they are saying that life, in all its circumstances of light and shade, will be contemplative, to make space for the passion of the lover. As Jesus put it – *pray always!*

John the Baptist was able to be still and tranquil in the desert – and full of fire when necessary. Mary Magdalen was taken aback by the sheer goodness of Jesus, which would not allow the barriers of custom and tradition to keep her away from him. We can only guess what happened to S Francis on Mt. L'Averna, in answer to his prayer – *who are you, Lord; and who am I?* His soul was seared by a given awareness of the enormity of God's love for him – resulting in the Stigmata. When Mt. L'Averna merged with Mt. Calvary.

Such experiences, and so many others, show the importance of intensity over simple success stories. We tend to settle for a ground-level experience of life, when so much more is on offer. We are sanctified by our zest for life – whatever catches our imagination *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. For some reason, there is a false hesitancy about such living – as if it is the preserve of *special* people.

Generally speaking, we get along without hurting each other – which has nothing whatsoever to do with the command that we love one another – *as I love you* – Jn.15.12. This asks us to be actively involved with ensuring each other's well-being; something very different from commendable good neighbourliness: *I don't trouble them, and they don't trouble me!*

It takes courage to be different in public, but if we are to learn from mistakes, there will be change. We can't take too much reality – especially in our relationship with God. To realise I am in a position of strength with God seems to run contrary to my sinfulness, and I owe my life to Creator God. Yet I can do something God can't do – I can go back on my word; I can lie, ignore... God can't do that.

God's love for me is the reason why God created me: *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it* – Is.55.11.

Through the birth, living, dying and rising of Jesus, we are being reached by God's compassion, in such a manner that we can *become what we are receiving*, and can become *a channel of your peace*. This the sure pathway for both saint and sinner; remembering that every saint has a past – every sinner a future. Jesus deliberately walked into our sinful situation – 2Cor.5.21 – so that we could freely choose to walk out of it.

All aspects of daily living – cherishing, laughing, crying – are not just optional extras in life, invented by God to keep us amused as we wait the summons to new life; they are helps to our becoming more human, and so become what was intended for us – a likeness to God. Jesus didn't come to show us how to escape flesh and blood living, but how to let such liveliness help make us whole [holy].

It is unfortunate that, over the centuries, Jesus' passion has become that last three days of his life. The Gospel is abundant evidence of his passion for fullness of life – Jn.10.10. There is, however, a link between being fully alive, and the Cross. We have the evidence in our own living, how the tragic has brought out the best in people. The heroism of countless numbers who have freely given themselves, so that others in need might enjoy life a little more. It is interesting to note that *tragedy* brings out the best – crisis comes from *crux* – from *cross*! Jesus is truly the *crux* of life. God is involved – listen to the words of Hosea, and the seductive God in the Song of Songs.

In the Incarnation, *the dust of the earth has become the body of God*. We live in holy grounds. Creation does not need to be blest. It is blessed in origin. What is still needed, is that it be lived-in appropriately – gratefully and with respect. This means resisting the temptation to define ourselves by what we are against – *I don't like...* etc. We are not *anti*-people! Jesus offers fullness of life to everyone – worthiness not required, just willingness to receive – *You received without having to pay. Therefore, give without demanding payment* – Mt.10.8

S Francis was never an anti-person, he would never be anti-abortion, but enthusiastically pro-life. Jesus never excluded. Such value allows me to be open to everyone [while not necessarily agreeing with them]. The richness of life is apparent when love is never denied – even when totally rejected! *Father, forgive them, they don't know...* Lk.23.34. It is ironic that we *do know* and still exclude!

Salvation is not a reward for me behaving myself! *Jesus is the God of our salvation* – 1Thess.5.9; he invites us to be with him in knowing Abba. Augustine insists, *God cannot be used – simply enjoyed!* The invitation comes through a variety of channels, because love creates other loves through which it moves onward and outward. We speak of *falling* in love; something not planned or expected, exciting and brim full of risk.

The risk is trusting the new identity being in love is offering – bringing me closer to God, without guarantees of coping! Risk is accepting Jesus' invitation to *come and see!*

We have spent time and effort working-out systems for formation etc. with ways of evaluating them. We have even found a way to the moon! Yet our awareness of where we are from and where we are destined to be, remains in primitive stages. We aren't asked to surrender our identity – even though we often settle for simply repeating the past – because it works!

God is never where he was *before* – God is unchanging – Scripture tells us. Not that God is frozen and static. What is unchanging about God is that God is always new. I cannot experience God as I experienced God yesterday – every experience of God, to be authentic, is always new. Every experience of God's love *is a new experience* of myself as lovely – if I can believe it! Which I can do if I stop trying to think myself into new ways of living – and live myself into new ways of thinking.

Being in love means living by commitment, not expediency. Our experience of bereavement underlines this. To love is to move beyond self – freely to live my life not just as I see it, but as I see it through being loved by another.

Commitment isn't and everyday happening – though without it, every day is threatened by fears and suspicion. We don't pledge our hearts [what credo means] to trivial pursuits; even when welcoming what they offer. Why do we need commitment? We are unclear about self-worth, and the value of being-with, without any guarantees. Commitment helps us appreciate the stability such belonging offers, asking to be responsible for an unconditional yes. Commitment is the servant of wholeheartedness.

Chapter 9

Almighty but powerless

I know from experience that I can't see God. We can see each other! Scripture insists that to claim to love God – who can't be seen, and despise our neighbour, who can be seen – is a liar! – 1Jn.4.20.

Am I being told that I am no closer to God than I am to the person I choose to ignore? Jesus' parables show us how to be ordinary in extraordinary ways. We know we tend to prefer the greener grass on the other side of the fence – he is showing us how to do ordinary things extraordinarily well. No exclusions.

He sees God in everything and everyone. In mustard seed, ripening wheat, a darkening sky, children... If we take him seriously, we will hear and heed the cry of the poor; and gradually – unlike Dives – respond positively and actively.

Wherever the will of God flourishes, it will harness our willing cooperation in the plan for all creation. Everything created has a unique place in this plan – to fashion creation and every part of it, beautifully. S Francis urged his brethren to be mindful of *conceiving* through openness to the Word and sharing the breaking of bread – so as to bring the Lord to birth by the way we live.

We are still constrained by the impersonal: *Supreme Being, who alone exists of himself, infinite in perfection...* Jesus would have us share his awareness – *Abba, Father* – by making his Spirit ours; and rescuing God from being seen as an isolated monolith.

Only where God is real can love be – How much reality can we take? We need to know how to celebrate and take to heart the difference the Incarnation continues to make. Creatures we certainly are, but created in the image and likeness of our Creator. The only God revealed in Jesus is Abba. Jacques Maritain reminded us that to offer the merely finite to humankind, gifted with a thirst for the infinite, is treachery.

What Jesus gives us in sharing his Spirit, is to discover our real self – children of Abba, at home in the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit; not simply that we are loved infinitely, but in freely welcoming this love, *we can love God worthily*. Such is the wonder of Grace received.

Our redemption is not a once only event. We haven't, individually, received an amnesty from God, who then moves on to do the same for others. Redemption is coterminous with life, it is now growing in greater sensitivity to the reality of God, not just my version of it. It is there, but has still to be lived daily by us. Which is why Paul saying our salvation is not assured – *For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins* – Heb.10.26-27.

We have been visited by love, and made able to respond positively, but what that means is having the courage to place our daily living entirely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – *I live now, not I, but Christ is living in me* – Gal.2.20. Genesis tells us, *it is not good for us to be alone* – 2.18. We desire to belong, which requires the welcome embrace of another. Where love is, there is always someone and someone else.

Such behaviour requires much more than our normal kind of justice. *Justice without charity is no justice at all*. Justice without charity is revenge. This means simply *being around* for each other is never enough. We often get disturbed when a sibling or a

friend suddenly freaks out, and we ask, genuinely, didn't he/she realise we are around? If, for whatever reason – embarrassment, fear etc. – a person cannot ask, we might as well be a thousand miles away. What is needed is *anticipation*. Being sensitive to the signs before the crisis happens, and doing something about it. Like the Incarnation! Compassion, indignation in God, is not as we normally understand it. Our efforts at this are but shadows of something, which by nature, we are not; but are invited to become: *Be compassionate, as is Abba* – Mt.5.18. We can only reach God in the way we have been reached by God, without even considering the cost!

We enjoy appropriate autonomy in the ways we understand things, no two of us in the same way – God doesn't make copies! *Communication* is hard work, and effort of a kind which allows for, and encourages authentically common experiences, never simply the way I see things! This means getting to know how the other experiences the same things. The wisdom of the Native Americans, who tell us not to judge anyone, until we've walked in their moccasins!

There is no universal experience of reality. For me to know what is real for you I must make room to experience your world as you see it. This requires me to lay aside, never abandoning, my way. This is doing what God did! *He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, to be in our likeness* – Phil.2.7. How often does a lover say to the beloved *no matter what the cost? For richer, for poorer, in sickness and health*. Life is not about how much we achieve, but how deeply we get involved in the wellbeing of another.

Fine words – but where is the God who is love, in a world where so many innocents suffer, where evil seems to prosper and injustice is the norm for so many? Where is the loving God of Creation leaving us at the mercy of fire, flood and earthquake? A world where the majority starve while the minority have more than enough? A God with no answer is not God. Jesus, at first glance, seems to acknowledge this. In our terms, his Abba, is weak and powerless. Where is Almighty God?

S Francis was always in awe of Almighty God, who is here as a helpless child clinging to a human breast. To be compassionate in the way God is compassionate, is to be strong enough to willingly enter into the sufferings of others, without having any answers. Jesus reveals God with us powerless, yet the saviour. If we are willing to let Jesus reveal this God, we will see, more and more, how both nature and ourselves can also reflect the one, true God.

To accept the God of Jesus, the God of compassion – even to the cross – is to see an invitation to restructure the world by the way we all live in it. To accept this invitation requires more than a change of heart – it means a heart transplant. *I will take away your heart of stone, and put in you a heart of flesh* – Ezk.37.26. This means becoming what we are not naturally, freely entering into the sufferings of others, simply because we want to be with them, and that is where they are. The poor Christ is always so for the enrichment of others, never for the narcissistic seeing how much we can do without.

Jesus puts God into our hands – and we nailed him to the cross! We mustn't hide behind the outrageous *sent him to die* – he came with the ability *to give fully abundant life* to everyone, no matter what the cost – it was we who killed him, not God! He was committed to show how much God loves what God created – the cost was high: *Father, let there be some other way* – Mt.26.39.

His humanity, properly, protested – human is for living not dying! He came not to suffer and die, but to show love without limit, no matter what it would cost. He didn't just suffer death, he suffered life by entering into the heart of it. Love is ever present – else it isn't love.

Some did listen, and asked for help. Some invited him to supper; some asked him to leave their village. Some accepted him in order to condemn him – he had come for all of them, and if these were their terms, so be it. Hear him say – *Father, forgive them, they don't know* – Lk.23.34. [can we say we didn't know?]. *I have come to serve, not*

to be served – Mt.20.28; Mk.10.35; Jn.13.1-17. By definition, a servant is at the behest of another, not to sit back and direct from a safe distance. A servant has no say in the why and wherefore – though having much to say about the *how, the quality of life*. Without accepting responsibility for the quality of life – dreams, plans and intent, are relegated to the sterile pile of good ideas.

S Francis, prompted by strong desire, longed to experience the suffering Jesus experienced. This was not out of any sense that life isn't real without suffering, - suggesting that goodness is not possible without hardship; rather was it from life in love is not possible without passionate involvement with the other. It is commitment, and fidelity to it, that brings ardour intensely. Be that in the joy of celebration, or the anguish of unnecessary injustice.

He found God's love unbearable, so much so that what he regarded what he thought were the absolutes in life, were all relativized, leaving him wide open to compassion. Who would question the fiery passion of Paul? His words and teaching are unequalled, zest for life not counting what the cost. Read the many trials and tribulations that he met head-on. Not determined to suffer, but not to be deflected from his desire to be with.

Why do we seem to want to canonise the negative? We have let ourselves believe that things other than goodness itself produce goodness – like making discipline and ritual correctness an end instead of them being a useful means? This has been the crime of misused authority, secular and sacred, making the attractiveness of personal, freely embraced discipline, become a control mechanism. Life contains enough toughness without adding to it. Only goodness bears the fruit that is goodness.

Wrongdoing is what it says, indifference is the opposite of love – the cold *I'm not interested...* We have labelled some behaviours as the drop-out culture, when some simply wanted a life outside the rat race. The desire to be away from consumerism – I want it so I'll get it, whether it is appropriate for me or not. The move away from consumerism is commendable – the descent into addictive behaviour, regrettable. Where was the Church for them? Where was the attractive freedom of Gospel living on offer and freely available?

Jesus could find no common ground with apathy, or the violater of love – cold indifference. He had an abundance of enthusiasm to be involved simply asking to be there. Conversion is difficult if there is no sense of a need for change. Where there is no need for change is a world without Christ. Our abiding obstacle – not only are we not good saints, we are not even good sinners. The indifferent don't need Jesus.

See how routine destroys freshness, making everything drab, dreary with more and more of the same; letting the letter keep away the spirit. We have done exactly that with law, suggesting that because we have sinned, God is against us – we'd better get to confession!

Revelation could not be more explicit; glad tidings that come undeserved are God trying to get through on a busy line. The cross has nothing of *see what you've done to me* – but if I'm hell-bent, it will be for him - *over my dead body!* We hear and read about the very real *wrath of God* – which is not against the sinner – Jesus actually said *I have come for sinners*. In a very real sense my sin is my entitlement to Christ. Not in any flippant sense of *God will always forgive me, so I can do what I like!*

People like Magdalen, Paul and Francis were inspired by this fury of God. Who among has not known anger over a wasted life? Not at the person, but at what has been missed or put beyond reach because of it? See Jesus' anger in the Temple: *How dare you make this symbol of total intimacy its complete opposite?* Paul tells us we are temples, capable of intimacy with God – what are we doing to it?

Both passion and compassion require total involvement of the whole person. There are some – often found in male Anglo-Saxons, who cover their genuinely felt discomfort at tactile expressions with – *it isn't manly...* while there is much posturing masquerading

as affection, it is healthy to remember that passion is what life is all about. Why have we reserved *passion* for the last 3 days of Holy Week, when Jesus' passion was for fullness of life?

Writing to the Church in Ephesus, Paul says: *you who were once far away, have been brought very near – 2.13 - by Jesus' passion – for life, not death!* Salvation is all about God's passionate involvement with us – who became one like us *to set fire to the earth – and will not be content until it is ablaze – Lk.12.49.* As he said in Genesis, *why are you hiding?* Come up from the ghettos, let ourselves be seen and loved in a way you have never yet known; and discover how to become what you are receiving.

Jansen would never see Paul as a patron, who says not only do we have a bridge into the passionate life of God, but that bridge is Jesus, the Christ. Those who have crossed that bridge have discovered there is much more to life than simple good manners and courtesy. Jesus did not analyse our problems from a safe distance, and write us a prescription; he got right in amongst us – just because that is where we are!

The crucial importance of commitment is to give a focus to our energy – without it we are at the mercy of every passing whim, influenced by the latest gadget or fashion. A committed person is never selfishly protective – it is the many substitutes we install in place of love that makes us build walls and erect fences. Let John get through to us – *perfect love casts out fear – 1Jn.4.18.*

Deliverance is much more than shifting from one system to another. The evil of capitalism is not removed by embracing socialism. Conversion never happens through constraining people. What is needed is much more than doing something. The Gospel tells us that the face of the earth will not be changed by sinners owing up; but by those who believe they have no sin, the sins of the just and of the systems must also be acknowledged. Once we discover what is amiss with *our best*, then we will discover to recognise our worst.

Everyone needs a personal saviour, and God, knowing our sin and our need, far from seeing it as our shame, converts it to strength, not because it is sin, but because it has enabled us to appreciate our entitlement to the Son, who said *I have come for sinners* -Lk.5.32. This focuses on the inadequacy of our loving – shot through with betrayals and infidelities.

Our language discloses our inadequacies. It is eloquent in letting others know what we appreciate and what we don't. We tend to manipulate our language to fit the occasion – making sure we look better; without reference to our real value centre. I can be eloquent in praising Jesus' poverty – from my own self-sufficiency. Would he have a credit card?

Far from being evidence of commendable non-conformism – our behaviour conforms rigidly. To trivialise language diminishes self-worth, and tends to disregard worthwhileness anywhere. I might find an accent amusing – but probably not when I remember my own inability to even speak the native language of the speaker. Jesus tells us how important language can be in carrying something special: *my words are spirit, and they are life – Jn.6.36*, probably not said with a recognisable accent!

It is a sobering thought to recall how silent Jesus remained during the tirades of abuse at his trial. The Word of God has nothing to say to such ones – never retaliates with *what about you...* Jesus was silent even in Herod's presence. Language is a gift – a medium of communication, enabling reality to be present. *The Word was made flesh.* What would happen if my words were made flesh?

Eliot's words have a ring of prophecy: *in the beginning there was wisdom; then came erudition; now we are reduced to information* Equally, rush and dash are ousting are instrumental in the move away from value, to valuables. When everything is a mad rush, we haven't time to go back and have another look – which is what respect means – *look again, and see!* This also impacts on things like celebration – when, apparently we have to have a reason to celebrate; celebration has its own value. Long may there

be reasons for celebrations, but never let us lose the value of celebration carrying its own justification.

The appropriate response to grace, is gratitude. Yet the experience of life for many, is less than graceful. There seems to be some confusion about the meaning of grace – but none about its opposite – disgrace! Life is most certainly not all sunshine and roses; no more than celebration means the absence of pain. Celebration is to be fully alive, whatever life affords. We all need to come together both to laugh and to cry.

If we neglect our priorities, we can identify with what Paul calls *the most unfortunate of people* – 1Cor.15.13. The Resurrection is the great celebration of life – be that in good health or otherwise. I have a vivid memory of being at the bedside of a young mother, dying of terminal cancer. A long-term friend had travelled from afar to be with her – but was a little angry. Apparently the dying mother always had the habit of saying *thank-God*. For whatever happened. Her friend, in her distress, said what have you to thank God for now? She looked at her, smiled and said – *for friends like you!*

Easter day lanced the boil of meaningless death. He was really dead and is really, and fully alive. Jesus has not just given life back to us, he has also given us new death – the gateway to new life. We don't have to wait until physical death [what Francis refers to as the second death] there are countless daily opportunities for dying to self-first, to help others. Just see the many – very young as well as older – who have given up what life could offer them, so as to care for another!

Faith lets us accept the uncorroborated word of someone we trust – makes us realise when I call for help, I'm not whistling in the wind; because I am held in a relationship, which, at the moment, is eluding me. Such is the love God has for me, just as I am, that I can still call out, with Jesus – *Father, why have you forsaken me?* - Mt.27.46. I may have every intention of turning away from God, but it is not possible for me to *step outside* God. God loves me, and will never stop – no matter what I do or say. There is nothing but love in our ever-present God.

Love means never having to say sorry – a popular quote after the film *Love Story*. Is it true? In our relationships, there is always a *happy-sadness*, happy to be-with, sad that isn't with the intensity we would like it to be. It might well be that my inadequacy, even my infidelity, with the one I love, is readily forgiven. But how do I cope with the fact that I needed to be forgiven?

When I eventually come face to face with God [*no one can see the face of God and live* – Ex.33.20, which is why S Francis shouts *If death allows me to see the face of God – welcome sister death!*] I will be aware of two things primarily, first – it is so true, there is nothing but love in God; second – a love focused on me, just as I am! This is why I need a bit of time [though there isn't time in eternity] to come to terms with this; then to come back, smiling but tear-stained, to smile and say thank-you. This experience is how I picture Purgatory!

On this side of death, Kingdom living is how to bring these 2 truths together. God even anticipated this by telling us how this can happen – *love one another as I love you* – Mt.22.39.

If I seriously opt for this new way of living, here and now, it comes at a cost: letting go of me, as I have worked so hard to establish my view of me – and to accept God's view of me, which I can only experience in faith, until sister death removes the veil. Here again I don't have to wait – I have been given others who love me – can I now accept what they see, as me? Love and its acceptance, are beyond my control, as with every gift. Can I enjoy such happiness – even with personal sadness? They are not mutually exclusive. Love requires energy if it is not to be mere sentiment; an energy prompted solely by self-emptying love, if it isn't to become manipulative.

We feel long before we think – our entry into the world means, at first, feeling our way; realising, in time, that life cannot be determined entirely feeling. There are going to be times when it is appropriate to say yes, to things we do not like, as well as saying

no to many things we would prefer. Feelings cannot be ignored, nor should they be neutered.

Communication is to promote well-being, and can only happen when we deal with people as subjects, not objects. All too often an urge simply to correct what we see as wrong, is uppermost. When preserving the status quo is the primary concern, keeping up appearances – with no thought about the devastating impact can have, when *system* is served by life [*keep the rule and the rule will keep you*] – every structure, every system is only of value when it serves life!

We have been conditioned to see power and authority natural partners. Jesus had no power but, as ordinary people said of him *he speaks with authority* Mt.7.29, Life is full of such people, if we care to look – no titles, no status, but brim-full of personal contentment, on offer to anyone wishing to share. One particular person stands out for me – on the face of it, he was just an ordinary Geography teacher, small rather than tall. He would walk into a noisy classroom, and there would be instant silence. He didn't say or do anything – I asked some students how-come - they simply said *we respect him, he respects us!*

Our world is enriched by such genuine goodness, which challenges us with – *we could do that!* Jesus' reaction to that question – *come and see!* Law and order can co-exist, when law is at the service of life; never the other way round! Sadly, today's world reacts to the intolerable with make laws against it.

Legislation is very well suited to being a function of service, excluding no one. By sad contrast, much legislation tends to prioritise the powerful minority over the majority. Social sin is flourishing in a variety of protectionist ways. This speaks eloquently of the need for ongoing redemption, if legislation is not to descend into plundering the well-being of ordinary people.

The official verdict of Jesus' trial focused on his violation of the Sabbath laws. He was murdered by vested interest, under the guise of protecting legislation. To allow him to go free would mean listening to him about the need to move on continually from the status quo – something very dear to Pope Francis, and for which he too is experiencing opposition. However, simply opposing such behaviour will be verging on hypocrisy, if we don't, each one, examine our own personal value system, before looking to the statute book. Conversion always starts from home! Why else did Jesus tell us to remove the plank from our own eyes, before challenging the speck in others? – Mt.7.5.

Chapter 10

It is hard to accept forgiveness

The life we have been gifted with by God, has a definite bias towards well-being – *that you might have life abundantly* – Jn.10.10; but what is often overlooked, is that we don't just feel life happening individually, we co-feel!

Jesus didn't tell us just to be compassionate – but be compassionate *as is the Father!* – Lk.6.36. Enter into the joy and sorrows of others, just because that is where they are – we co-feel our living.

The experience of intense feeling can be volcanic – which social conditioning would have us subdue! Feelings certainly can impair judgment. There is no such thing as a neutral judgment. Every point of view is a view from a point. What is not helpful is that by suppressing our feelings such conditioning disappears. Maturity requires awareness of what is happening, then apply the appropriate discipline to facilitate genuine living, through recognising what is – and not in spite of what is.

Jesus got on well with feeling people, even with those whose feelings were leading them astray; more so, than with *head* people. See him in action with the struggling, rich young man, glued to possessions; with the overly cautious Nicodemus – who came

by night; with the Centurion; Magdalen; Dismus [*the good thief*]. He even encouraged Pilate to step beyond safety-first.

To be real, we must enter into the experiencing of others, leaving our door always open. God entered our living, in Jesus – who, though sinless, *was made sin* – 2Cor.5.21 – leaving the door wide open! This is not just *I feel for you*, but *I want to co-feel with you!* It took one as big as God to realise this for us.

Because feeling is so volatile, there is an ambiguity. Instead of prompting to the pleasure of self-emptying, it can be distorted towards self-indulgence; a tendency for anyone living by the *pleasure principle* – when pleasure is indulged-in as an end for its own sake, instead of being a means for being-with.

All good things do not have to be done. *Only God is good* – Mk.10.18 – this goodness which only God has by right, has been gifted to us in and through Jesus – goodness made flesh. Reason and feeling can work in harmony. Reason seeks for more and more clarity, so as to understand better by what it uncovers, and to work-out disciplines well suited for allowing it to flourish – to be good, as God is good.

Reason is powerful, and will always seek to control over what it uncovers. As with feelings, so also does reason work within its own context for enhancing life-experience. Reason unrestrained can seek full control, and in the name of good order, can repress feelings in favour of the status quo; influenced more by the fear of making mistakes, not being able to cope with change.

When this is present, prophecy has no chance. Scripture shows the prophetic way needing people who will risk leaving the well-trodden path, in search of what could be, down the less-used ways. Reason can bring discernment to discover that not everything *new* is prophetic. But can equally repress by placing under suspicion anything that might be enjoyable.

We live in privileged times, where the resilience of the human spirit finds more encouragement than the tyranny of repression. Recent times have seen the toppling of totalitarian regimes, though there is more yet to come. Many new age prophets seem to advocate the removal of a tyranny, only to replace it with another. Marxism has failed, but Capitalism has hardly been universally beneficial – as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

The Gospel embraces the maxim that freedom is not with us, until everyone, without exception, has free and equal access to it. The pursuit of freedom for one's own benefit, at the expense of others, is selfishly aggressive. Wherever freedom is sought universally, without exclusions, it brings a gentle strength, capable of taking on suffering for the well-being of others – ask any parent.

Excess of any kind always impedes the way to universal freedom – as unguarded pursuit of the pleasure principle, apart from bringing a jaded existence, puts personal well-being unnecessarily before the well-being of others. Note the enclosures specifically erected around the properties of the wealthy. The gentle strength of open hands living moves towards the other for the other's sake – *it is not good for us to be alone* – Gen.2.18. It is truly and sensitively gentle, because heart and head are in harmony.

Does the statement *science holds the key* – bring reassurance? Someone, wisely, responded: *science is a lock, requiring a key!* The gifts of science and technology are truly to be welcomed – when not allowed to dominate life uncritically. S Francis would be in the forefront of those singing the praises of science and technology, as he was with the other gifts of nature, but would never blindly endorse the axiom *because it can be done it should be done!*

As we have seen with the wonderful achievements in developing vaccines for the pandemics; such achievements are to be praised for their humanising properties, specifically intended, out of respect for truth, care and universal well-being; well aligned to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5.

We are not isolated individuals, randomly scattered on the planet; we are here with the need and the potential to belong. Science and technology shine when they unambiguously foster this. Power must always be tempered by value [not valuables], true value respects humanity, and is accountable to it. *I have come that you may enjoy life* – Jn.10.10.

There is no shortage of cries for help, and for them to have any chance of being heard, much more than systems and good ideas is needed. There needs to be a dedicated environment where sympathy and empathy belong, which lets the cry of the poor be both heard and heeded.

History tells us that those who have time and space for others, were ready to step off the treadmill of custom and convention to be with anyone out of reach of them. People are worth wasting time with, be they rich or poor, sick or well, living or dying. Something militated against by a remark made during the pandemic concerning the numbers who died: *most of them were over eighty!* Values like that were embraced because they were seen as acceptable; and will take some effort to uproot. Ask anyone who has struggled with addictive behaviour.

This is where discipline belongs – as it is properly understood, as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Discipline is not like the efforts made during Lent. The word *discipline* actually means – *art of a disciple!* S Francis is now seen as a man full of compassion, a gentle strength, desiring to be-with. This didn't come naturally. He had to confront his feelings, not to repress the, but to own them fully, and allow them to be released creatively.

He became gently strong through cooperating the grace given him, to live by the art of a disciple. He became able to give to God by giving to others what his words promised. This was the motivation behind the penances he undertook – not to suffer – but to be in charge of himself, so that he could keep his promise to hold onto nothing of himself, in order to give himself away. *Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally.*

There is no suggestion in his Rule that the penances he imposed on himself, should become the norm for his brethren. Though he does urge us to be real, to accept responsibility for what must happen if the words we speak are to become flesh!

O humble sublimity! O sublime humility! that the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under a morsel of bread. Consider, brothers, the humility of God and "pour out your hearts before Him, [1](#) and be ye humbled that ye may be exalted by Him. [2](#) Do not therefore keep back anything for yourselves that He may receive you entirely who gives Himself up entirely to you.

Pride of place for God's ever presence – his Eucharistic devotion. The *reality of Christ's presence* was always apparent. Of all the solemnities, his preference was for the birth of Jesus, which he called the *feast of feasts* – when almighty God became a tiny baby, clinging to a human breast; God came, and always comes, by giving us someone to love.

This kind of love doesn't just happen, it is willed-love, deliberate searching, to relish to the full, what is being sought – *whoever says he/she loves God, and neglects neighbour, is a liar* – 1Jn.2.4. What value has any system that is content with *saying prayers* with neighbour forgotten?

To pray is to open up to God with us, bringing all that God loves, so that we can be fully present and welcoming. Prayer is God-centred, not self-centred, we discover [*it is gift – grace*] ourselves, not just open to others, but being sent. Wherever Grace is present, it always brings task – *to experience* that God is ever you-and-me-centred.

Teresa of Avila, Saint and Doctor of the Church, could not move beyond the words *Our Father* without being caught-up in the reality of them, so much so as to be left in silent adoration. Whenever life itself is *experienced* as it merits, the result will always be

adoration. God is self-emptying, we can never experience God's presence without realising who and what are the recipients of such self-giving. Which is what *love God and love your neighbour* means: when neighbour is *everything* other, yet also including myself.

Creation is able to *love* God and other, when that part of Creation meant to know this, humankind, lets nature be itself as intended. So intent is God to get through to us, that Paul writes: *If we are faithless, God is ever faithful, God cannot deny his very self* – 2Tim.2.13.

Being alive in Gospel living has one major impact, it moves us from being sinners to being forgiven sinners, which is evident when this causes us first to recognise others, and then to move towards being-with, with a new-found sense of actively seeking peace through justice. This is the *peace the world cannot give* which sets us free from the insidious *I'm a sinner, and God is onto me, I better amend my ways!* It is like the addict, hoping to shake off the habit, by just thinking about it!

Enjoying my life as a forgiven sinner is a tough task. No question – we are forgiven, but I need to learn how not just to believe this, but to let it happen every day – i.e. to discover the gift that lets me forgive myself – genuine forgiveness is freely given, no strings!

It isn't forgiveness that calls for repentance, but personal integrity, whose fruit will be silent adoration and gratitude [*the real response to Grace*]. What kind of response? Jesus tells us to *set our hearts on the Kingdom* – Mt.6.33. He is actually daring us to risk experiencing God's love as it really is; for us *exactly as we are!*

Before ever I can seek to evangelise, I must first be evangelised. JP II on his return from witnessing abject poverty in South America, said don't seek to evangelise the poor, without first being evangelised by the poor; a theme repeated frequently by Pope Francis. The integrity for such living is reflected in the words of Jesus: *This why I was born, this is why I came... to witness to truth* – Jn.18.37.

Jesus' demeanour with his contemporaries is significant: he was never advocates simply fitting-in, doing what you want – more like wanting what you do! His feelings for others were not just felt – but heart-felt. He had nothing to say [*God's Word has nothing to say*] to the likes of Pilate who back-track on promises to avoid making tough decisions through fear of becoming unpopular. Scripture speaks of the *freedom of the children of God* – Jn.1.12. Human nature doesn't sin [*putting the lie to – I'm only human as an excuse*] it is individuals; groups, systems and the like who sin.

Would that it was true that I be only human – there would be no sin, as in Jesus. Freedom allows me to own my behaviour, to accept responsibility for my choices. Which is why John focuses on the crucial factor: *truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32. This is not canonising code morality – Jesus did not say *truths*, but *Truth!* Not following the letter, but being with the person – *I am the way, the truth and the life* – Jn.14.6. He claims a relationship with us, and is faithful – what about our response?

Freedom also means risk – uncontrolled it descends into licence. Because of the reason why it is given to us, freedom is powerful, always seeking to be in charge, through making sure *I'm all right*. Jesus shows how to live with freedom. After his baptism by John we hear that he was *led* into the desert – he didn't decide to go. We have that same leader – breathed into us, and for the same purpose. The Holy Spirit is well suited to harness freedom to its right ordering.

Human life is intended always to be life-with, not to forge ahead in glorious individualistic living. Sin means being robbed of freedom, turning in on self, instead of reaching out – living by if it feels good it is good. Freedom is freedom-for before it is ever freedom-from.

Freedom is much more than doing or not doing something – *What I have done and failed to do!* The goal of genuine humanness is *to love others, as I have loved you!* – Jn.13.34. Actively promoting well-being is much more than not hurting. There is no law

obliging us to stay in one place rather than another, to send greetings cards, to take holidays, to enjoy Christmas. There is much more to life than doing or not doing what we are supposed to.

Ultimately, freedom means consciously opting for life-giving than simply life-preserving. Life-giving calls for creativity, and the element of surprise. Everyone makes some kind of commitment in life – lying is not so much telling untruths, as not living up to promises freely made. When the Hebrews cited the Law as their guiding light, Jesus' reaction is: *As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. 41 You are doing the works of your own father* – Jn.8.41-42.

Truth is not a possession, but a relationship to be enjoyed; what *ought to be* in me [why I was created] is *who* I am becoming – a child of Abba. Paul reacts to untruth with: *At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now* – Gal.4.21. Truth had been frozen to level they felt they could cope with, and then used as a weapon to enforce compliance. Paul doesn't stop with *they* – he says it is still happening.

In the presence of his accusers, Jesus speaks a different language. They accused him of violating an external precept – he has come to replace the externals with himself, as the God-given yardstick of freedom. This is what he means with – *the truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32 – *I will set you free!*

If we accept this willingly and freely, serious issues have to be faced like, *sin, law, death...* What happens to them? Sin is such because it wants to take over – *I did it my way* – Law fails whenever it tries to canonise a *frozen* state as the only acceptable way [as happened with Galileo]. Death is misconstrued as the end of life – when faced with the Resurrection.

As ever, Paul says it like it is: *the law cannot save* – Gal.2.16 – can only convince us of our need to be saved! We don't live by law, but by Truth [*Jesus – I am Truth*]. What is our feeling when I see a blue-light flashing in the rear-view mirror? Is it freedom – or something else? Gospel living allows access to freedom as an experience to be valued. Galatians 5 and Romans 8 clarify the impact of bondage to law. We are over-governed by statute after statute – which opens up to barbarism, when logic and cold rationalising reign unchallenged – getting rid of rain forests in the name of *spreading civilisation, or for whatever convenient reason*; as well as many other ways of bringing the jungle into the cities – and climate change.

Concern for our planet is easily labelled as *faddism*. Instead of being a necessary warning of neglect and destruction of God-given resources by our abusive behaviour. Rightly, and properly there has been rising concern for rampant abusive behaviour – but somehow missing out on abusing our planet!

There is nothing human-made in a desert, on a mountain-top, or a natural shore-line. The tradition of a call to a desert experience – even a desert day – is not to sit in the sand under unbearable heat! But to experience evidence, and invitation to enter into real evidence that there is far more to real living than what we are making of it. We don't need to travel to find such places – there is a made by God-alone centre in all of us. Underneath whatever we have piled on top of it, through culture, education [*religious and secular*] our own self-imposed conditioning. The desert experience is to work through all this, to uncover and enjoy the fact that we are made by God.

In former times, the Desert Fathers called this the *cell* we carry round with us, and into which we have free entry, once we know how and why. It is being in this cell that lets us know God through Jesus sent for this purpose – 1Jn.4.9. Such an experience as refreshing qualities, distorted by our own take on this, suggesting it is a joyless austere place; instead of *I will listen to what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* – Ps.85.8.

Pretence at self-sufficiency in a desert is a mirage – our desert centre is the oasis created by God in the over-heated world we are used to; and is free, for anyone who has ears to listen – Mt.11.15. What is seen and heard is *given*, never acquired by our own efforts. It is realising what ought, in the light of what is – all this through the life-giving Spirit of the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Our world does offer hints about this – I recall being with people the world would label primitive, in Zambia. People content with their own company, without the need of distractions. Having none of my home comforts, my variety of access to enjoyment. Our pace of life is getting faster and faster, with us opting for more and more for the preferred over the actual. They sleep when daylight fades, and rise with the sun – I asked a few people sitting by the roadside what they were waiting for. The bus, they said. When is it due, I asked. Sometime today or tomorrow! They were peaceful and content – how would I be?

I had a chance to walk along the length of the QEII, berthed in Gibraltar. A vast, towering structure, the pride of human achievement, and engineering skill – filled with every imaginable luxury. The reason she was berthed there was because during the previous week at sea, due to engine failure, she had been tossed around like a cork in the ocean, at the mercy of nature at its most ferocious. Only what is God-made brings safe passage through the storms of life.

Respect for nature is not an option – as we are discovering with fire, wind and floods – we must listen to nature's language too. At the start of the great Tsunami in 2004, nobody seemed to notice that before the deluge, wild life, bird life had gone to safer places. *Those who have ears, let them hear* – Mt.11.15.

Chapter 11

Stop calling evil go

Jesus' impact is always concern for full and free living for everyone. Matthew stresses that simply painting over the cracks in matters to do with honest living, is no different from whitewashing tombs – Mt.23.27-28.

Conversion/repentance is never real when reduced to occasional religious activity – *let your hearts be torn, not your garments...* Joel.2.13. That repentance is crucial we read: *whoever repents and is baptised, will be saved* – Mk.16.16. Conversion/repentance apply to everyday: *If the Spirit is your life, let yourself be guided by the Spirit* – Gal.5.16.

It means being ordinary in extraordinary ways – able to reach the heart of everything. Returning from the desert, Jesus was lean and sharp, ready to be fully present by being fully alive. There will be no conversion from an armchair – change means something other than my usual ways; not change for its own sake, but as the necessary means to a desired end.

We all feel, occasionally, the need to change in order to appreciate life better. A holiday can help this, in part, in that it tells us that change is possible, but there are limits. Can I be completely in charge of myself – aware of my strengths and weaknesses, in order to come out of hiding from God? As in the desert, pretence at being self-sufficient disappears – being compelled to live by what is there, not by managing things.

John the Baptist, wild and ungroomed, shows what happens in a desert: *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* – Heb.10.31. For people like the Bedouin and other desert dwellers, living is as prevalent as dying. Yet there are flowers that bloom there, and insects that have never known water! However, God led his people into the desert not to *experience nothing*, but to *experience nothing but God!*

What can this tell us about experiences of suffering and hardship? So much good is missed, so much life is uncelebrated, so much harmony lost – because we are

obsessed with pain-avoiding, be it physical, emotional or spiritual pain. We don't see what is on the other side of the hill, because we don't want to climb it.

Equally, we must dispose of the nonsensical *things can only be good if they hurt!* Such belief is offensive to all that is best in human striving for meaning. In the past such deviation crept into formation for religious life, when discipline was enforced, making it an end instead of a useful means. *The harder the practice, the greater the virtue!* This sins against the precious truth – *only goodness begets goodness*, issuing from compassion and sensitive affirmation.

Another interloper – Formation Houses were expected to produce finished products. One need only see the reaction of older members when the behaviour of novices is less than perfect! A level of perfection is expected from the Novitiate, which is not found elsewhere. Common sense surely suggests that those who are longer in the community should be able to be relied on for good example?

We certainly cannot live without structures, structures suited to the values being sought. But if structures are set in stone, immune to change, fossilisation is inevitable; and intimacy lost in favour of orthodoxy.

The Hebrew people left Egypt, rejoicing at new-found freedom – they were also leaving a land of plenty for the desert! There is nowhere to hide in a desert. They were exposed within their need for a saviour. *I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart* – Hos.2.14. We need to be where there is only ourselves and God. All my own security systems must go if the promise made in Psalm 147 is to be relevant: *I will put new bars on your gates!* If I am to be truthful and honest, I need to discover new ways, so as to disengage from everything other than God.

Raw enthusiasm dissipates and wastes energy. Erosion of banks of a river reduces its flow. Channelled enthusiasm allows direction and maximum force, powerful enough to drive turbines for heat and light. All kinds of inventiveness are employed – but they always remain means to an end. Helpful structures must be flexible, allowing for unique shape and personal growth – structures must always serve life, never what has for so long prevailed – life serving structures: *keep the rule and the rule will keep you!*

Expediency is an ever-present interloper. When we seem unable to find God at a particular moment, we invent a god of our own making. *Harden not your hearts... as on that day at Massah, in the desert, when your fathers put me to the test, though they saw my work...* Ps.94. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and we are ever-tempted to return the compliment. We need a latter-day Elijah: *Make your minds up, if the Lord is God, follow... if it is Baal, follow him!* – 1Kings.18.21. Not only are we not good saints, we are not even good sinners!

There has been vast improvement in the quality of life – but not universally. Life is gifted to everyone, with the inbuilt purpose of the Giver. We are to receive the gift gratis – but what about the reason why it is given? Jesus tells us what that intention is. *I have come that you might live well – enjoy your life in such manner that encourages others to do the same* – Jn.10.10. Life is for an abundance – which is not just living, but living-with – belonging.

When Paul was challenged by this on Damascus Road, he had to undo what he had carefully, and thoroughly established. He needed to experience the emptiness self-giving needs. He went off into the desert, like Jesus before him, led by the Spirit. We have little or no awareness of what happened during that time – but we have all benefitted from the fruits he brought back with him, and began to write.

What does it feel like to go to meet not only one's true self, but also where that self comes from. Jesus said *I know where I come from, I know where I am going* – Jn.8.14. So now does Paul, as he told us: *you may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* – Eph.3.18-19.

What happened when this was picked-up by Institutional living? What should happen is that this wonderful insight becomes available universally. The Church pursues this through Sacramental liturgies with life in common. Evangelisation is not just doing things for others, but inviting others to share in the life-enhancing experience of life-together.

Jesus chided Martha: *you are busy with many things – only one is necessary* – Lk.10.41. Being removed, even temporarily, from the good things of life, is life-changing. How can we cope? This temporary condition for the few, is permanent for the many. Jesus recognised the impact of this – *Father, the world doesn't know you* – Jn.17.25. This is still the world's malaise.

With the current global situation, is it possible to live by Gospel values? My stay in Zambia taught me a necessary lesson; living with people who have nothing but themselves, in a seemingly hostile environment. My overall experience was of my inadequacy – temporarily away from what I had presumed were the necessities of life. What came as a kind of healing, was seeing how the local people were very much together, in housing without doors.

Paul writes: *I am able to live in plenty, able to live in want* – 2Cor.8. Life is good through detachment, than through acquiring – even amassing. Detachment is never an end in itself, but a helpful tool for embracing new priorities – life is neither doing without, nor having – but awakening to the fact that God really does provide.

However, not only are we ruining the environment, we are also brutalising ourselves by embracing systems which tolerate the synthetic over the sacramental. As a pilgrim people in an environment suited to such living, we have become hostages of our own making. We interpret the very real emptiness within us as an unacceptable void needing to be filled – instead of delaying, and then discovering – as with Mary – our emptiness is assured – Lk.1.46.

We are created with an empty space for the infinite – which only the infinite can fill. Anything less than the infinite leaves the longing active and craving for satiety. We have seen the devastation of inner cities with urban violence, the pollution of rivers through discarded toxins, plastic in sea and sand, feeding global warming and uncontrollable floods, forest fires... the list goes on. And we boast – *I did it my way!*

One thing is certain – wherever the needed help comes from, we will not find it where we have been looking. When offers were made for free conversion of vehicles from petrol to diesel – there was a rush to get, in the name of protecting the environment – the ensuing loss of power, though minimal, had many revert to petrol – no mention this time of the environment.

Not only motorists – see what happens when the doors of the big stores are opened on Sales Day; or the dash to grab and hoard at the hint of shortages... these and many other happenings underline the need for a different kind of change. If we would know the need for real conversion – try letting God provide! Which doesn't mean sitting back and waiting for miracles, but seeing how, when God came to live with us, how he lived, and accept his invitation to come and see – Jn.1.38.

Poverty of itself is not virtue. There just as many grasping and keeping folk among the deprived as well as among the well-to-do, though the latter acquire a veneer of respectability! Being without possessions doesn't make us poor in Spirit – Mt.5.3. – no more than going to Church, of itself, makes us clean of heart – *ibid*.

The promise made through Ezekiel is still on offer – *I will take away your heart of stone, and put in you a heart of flesh* – Ezk.37.26. A head-transplant achieves nothing! The very best promptings of a willing head have no chance against a crafty, selfish heart. We like to believe we stand by our word – where is the evidence of such loyalty – *by their fruits you will know* – Mt.7.16. Are we really promoting life, or just tidying up the cemetery?

We appear to be obsessed by finding out who is right and who is wrong. This results from the tendency to see difficulties as problems waiting to be solved. Real difficulties need real *attitudes*; just as spiritual problems need spiritual not pseudo-psychological answers; so relationship difficulties are not helped by the glib *pray about it. Let God be real* and everything will show something really of God – even our sin!

I recall a book titled *Some Haystacks Don't have Needles!* A useful reminder that some problems don't have answers. But this should never compel the sufferer to be left alone with it. Compassion means freely entering the suffering of others, simply because that is where they are. The sincerity of this event is actually being there – instead of the somewhat evasive – *you know where to find me.*

We need to keep in mind that while being available is very welcoming; it does have a short-coming, often unnoticed. To be available says just ask, and I'll be there. What if a person can't ask – for whatever reason? Could be fear, pride, embarrassment – no matter what. Then, simply being available means I might as well be a hundred miles away.

Availability is greatly helped by *anticipation*. It doesn't need 20-20 vision to see distress and upset. That the distress may well be self-occasioned is irrelevant. What matters is, here is someone who isn't coping. What is of concern is that the reaction of some tends to enhance the isolation, whilst their situation is unfortunate, concern for rule, for not upsetting the status quo is more important.

How would I feel if that was God's attitude to me? Systems, rules, customs status quo etc... all must serve life, not be served by life. If such causes dilemma, ask *whose anxiety am I coping with?*

This not to be cavalier about systems – but the imperative – individuals are not excluded in the name of good order. There is not greater, no more primary, law than the law of Charity – seeking for the genuine well-being of the person, even to the point of reprimand and/or correction. The importance of fraternal correction, is that it is fraternal – not correction.

We are adept at importing substitutes. We think good thoughts, speak impressive words, but they have no value until they don't just reach or thinking, but are heartfelt – *where your heart [not head] is* – Mt.6.21. We are called to live our God-given heritage, not to museum curators!

Christian living has many qualities, not least is hospitality as the way we have been given to be with others: *as the Father sent me, I send you... to make known everything the Father has told me* – Jn.15.15. Hospitality is opening self for others, in a way which will resemble our openness to God, whether we are aware of it or not. Hospitality is what we first receive from God to enjoy, and share.

Hospitality is the way we create a welcome for the reality of others, and not what we make it, what they believe themselves to be; which I cannot know, until I let them show me. It is on occasions like this that we can discover others not appreciating themselves, when a welcome makes a difference. There is name for entering-into others – compassion, to be with others as they see themselves.

There are many good and valid reasons for restricting access to information – none are called *secrecy!* When secrecy becomes a way of life abuse of power is imminent, as a useful control tool. Keep in mind, there are no such realities as *community, parish, church...* these are legitimate, but abstract concepts. The *in-charge body*, whatever its name, is authentic when, as a system, it serves rather than controls the life of that body. *I have some to serve, not to be served* - Jn.13.1.

The structure well-suited to authorities is for the primacy of respect for individuals and society as a ministry of service, without exclusions and unnecessary secrecy [*I'll tell you when you need to know!*], and other armaments of the bully. The inbuilt passion for life of everyone must be encouraged.

Authority is well grounded when it facilitates *doing the truth in love* – Eph.4.15. This means Authority be able to listen and respond wherever need is apparent, without the trappings of status. Every demand for submission is a deviation from doing the truth in love. To be consecrated in Obedience does not mean abdicating responsibility for everyday living. The Gospel Counsel of consecrated obedience means a willingness to listen to the Word of life, whichever way it is mediated.

When law /rule exercises are proper role as tutor, it is at the service of freedom, uncovering the transparency of Truth Himself. Paul insists that the purpose of law is not to save – but to convince us of our need to be saved; and so avoid becoming what Jesus warns us against – *don't be like pagans, those who make their authority felt* – Mt.20.25.

Chapter 12

Make symbols real

It is passion that sends us to God, not fear. When we feel *our hearts restless* – Augustine. Restlessness of this kind has as many shapes as it has seekers; whether it be through direct divine illumination, or a need for conversion – it will either flourish or fade. There are no half measures when we seek abundance. It matters little whether the ardour actually names God, or it is simply a need to be committed *with all my heart* S Francis.

We tend to make our life-changing choices in pursuit of value [*not valuables*] – such value can either help or hinder, depending on the choice made. What is needed is freedom which enthusiasm brings [*enthusiasm means to be eager for God*]. It is the Spirit who clears the way to Truth – *who will make known to you everything I told you* – Jn.16.12.

Those who live by the Spirit of Truth will be evident by their fidelity to a personal rhythm, one which is wide open for anyone to share. They are commonly known as *good people*, good to be with, good to have around – blessed with extraordinary good sense, hospitable, without inordinate exaggeration.

However, we do not arrive at Truth, simply by being around such good folk. That is how ghettos form.

In the depths of conscience, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to the heart: do this, shun that. For we have in our heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is our most secret core and sanctuary. Where we are alone with God, Whose voice echoes in our depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour.

Gaudium et Spes 16.

Lying, deceit, avoiding blame at all costs... has become a way of life. Such behaviour isn't new, and doesn't disappear when exposed. To lie is to deliberately mislead, to deliberately become untrustworthy. *Truth is love experienced* – Jesus shows us what this is like when made flesh. Our salvation is firmly rooted through involvement with *the way, the truth, the life*.

Enthusiasm for abundant living, if it is not set free as soon as it is first experienced, doesn't disappear; nor can it be denied. It stays around, anonymously, inspiring other aspects of our experiencing, until our need for personal commitment is not just desirable, but now possible.

Friendship, hospitality, genuine affirmation does much to have us notice the difference others can make, if we are with them. To this extent are we each other's' keepers. Worth of this kind comes through belonging, being with, which becomes sacramentalised in various ways – not least in our common gathering to break bread,

and to hear and share the Word. There is need for vigilance if we are to avoid surrendering reality for symbol.

To live is to grow ever closer and intimately to God. It is a road characterised by self-worth respected and shared. This is why we find *static* situations bleak and unfriendly in their inability to allow for change; no recognition of the welcome difference every other makes.; content with more and more of the same, no room for God of surprise – the one-true God. The gateway to institutionalism masquerading as community.

Such can be the confusion between symbols and the God they are meant to symbolise, when hospitality is replaced by good manners, and an antiseptic politeness, reducing life to its lowest common denominator; how we manage this without threat to the status quo.

As friendship is co-terminus with Gospel living, so too is the welcoming of others; going out from self towards others and the friends of others. Friends belong to the core of human development – *I no longer call you servants, I call you friends* – Jn.15.15. Jesus found more welcome from the *officially bad*, than from the *officially good*!

When life is fully life in the Spirit, there will never be *bleak house*! Genuine conviviality and cordiality, once experienced, will never submit to so many look-alikes, where sentiment and self-indulgence are rife.

Life in the Spirit is essentially other person centred – which, paradoxically, always results in a greater sense of self: *it is losing life, that you find it* – Mt.10.39. Generosity and good will know nothing of jealousy, and the fading of interest. *By their fruits they are known* – Mt.7.15. The fruit of life in the Spirit, is the ability for friendship not just for others, but for all others – brother sun and sister moon!

Thomas Aquinas said: *it is more human to be motivated by passion, than by rational motivations*. What many seem to regard however, as passionate living contains not a little rationalising. A reminder that whilst we cannot *feel* our way to truth, neither can we *think* our way to love.

Violating laws of nature carries its own sanctions – as we are experiencing with climate change – if I put my hand in the fire, I will be burned. Violating the laws of the spirit carry dire consequences. Any dedicated group neglecting spiritual values, in favour of routine living, will sink into pernicious individualism, resulting in various forms of brutality: *It is good that one man dies...* Jn.11.51.

Our personal energy for life can be redeemed once we recognise what it really is. Redemption is personal – and all that is personal can be redeemed, once it is owned as it really is. To lose everything in love, is to be richer than one who has never loved, or experienced love.

There but for the grace of God... Grace brings heightened sensitivity to the reality of everything other; why we have strong reactions – likes and dislikes. While it is possible for us today to have a *comfortable* life, without making demands on others – this is a kind of Quietism: *don't bother me and I won't bother you!* Is it too much to ask to let me get on with my life? Yes – if it means ignoring the fact that true living carries mission – to be for others, as they need, not just as I see.

Enthusiasm allows for no half-measures; if it is not all or nothing, it may be good, but will never be enthusiastic. We seem to be developing into being pain-avoiders at all costs – hardly being well equipped to enter into the sufferings of others – compassionate! Are we ignoring *be compassionate, as your Father* – Mt.5.8?

The evidence is all around us – old people shunted out of sight, getting rid of the inconvenient unborn, resisting attempts to house the homeless: *not in my backyard!* We may not have the power or clout to remove people we find irksome, but we have developed ways of letting them know we wouldn't mind if they moved on. In some ways, to refuse to suffer is to refuse to love: *whoever says they love God and despise others – are liars* – 1Jn.2.4. Living in Grace makes us not only makes us sensitive to need, but also energises us to do something about it. There is bad news and good

news – the bad news, the many ingenious ways we are liars. The good news – we don't have to remain like that!

There is a heresy of good works! Being is doing. Without doing, being remains sterile; just as being without doing remains within an unconverted heart. *Only God is good* – Lk.19.17 – who says *I am who I am* – Ex.3.14. God-with-us in Jesus, makes it possible for us to share in this – if we believe him! To which we might say – *of course we believe!* Try this – when God says to you, in Jesus *I love you exactly as you are* – can you believe this without hesitation?

The Law merits its own dignified place – to serve life in the Spirit, a noble calling. The problem is not the Law, but what we have done with it. Jesus brought an entirely new way of being human. But it was choked within law. Paul was a great advocate of the law, until he, expectantly, ran into love – *and you are persecuting me* – Acts.9.5.

He didn't bother trying to change structures, he accepted the new way Jesus was bringing to pave the way into intimacy with God. It wasn't simply the right thing to do [*law-abiding*] his conversion was his enthusiasm to embrace the new way – because it brought intimacy with God. The one-time protector of the status quo became the advocate and prophet of this new way.

Paul's enthusiasm is patent in his writings. He notes that apathy is growing in parts of the early Church. Apathy is like a virus, highly infectious. It was beyond the leadership in Israel to cope with the down-slide into apathetic living. What was needed was the fiery zeal of a prophet – who wouldn't just talk about what was and what should be, but who lived what he said, so much so he could say with humility, *live as you see me living*.

We have seen that society has been unkind to prophets, if only because they cause anxiety about self-sufficiency. To place an embargo on anyone going public about what the Spirit is saying, is getting dangerously close to resisting the known truth.

God's will cannot be imposed. Interpretations of God's will, can be, and have been imposed. The Gospel tells us, while God's will is not imposed, there is within each of us, personally the need to discover where I come from and where I am going – God's will for me, not my will for God. Some will commit themselves to a way of life, under obedience to another. God's will can be mediated in such ways, but never to be regarded as co-terminus with the will of God. Nobody, but God and the individual can know the will of God for that person: *my ways are not your ways* – Rom.11.33.

No one can know my experience as I know it – nor can I give it to another *as I experience it!* I can certainly share what it is doing in me, but never as I experience it. Technique is the end result of effort, and has much to contribute to enthusiastic living, but will never provide a mechanistic way to enthusiasm.

Virtue without effort, knowledge without discipline, love without knowledge [*little more than curiosity*] have no place in committed lives. Love calls us away from self to the possibility of being fascinated by the reality of another.

Discovering people like Francis of Assisi, lets us see how our self and our world belong in harmony, and tuning into this, brings a feeling of privilege and joy. The fact that such people are rare, tells us how far we have wandered from what could be the norm. Good intentions are good, but never good enough on their own. They simply remain unforgotten in the out-tray.

People who compel respect, just by being themselves, always portray – if we associate with them – that in order to give, we must first receive. They didn't decide to opt for God; somehow, they were overtaken by God, often anonymously, so that nothing could be the same any more – God is unchangingly always new. They weren't told they were wrong, simply were they fascinated by *behold, I make all things new* – Rev.21.5. Which happens to ordinary people, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

Keep it simple doesn't mean *easy does it*. Simple means uncomplicated – but not easy! See it writ large in the Gospel – *let your yes mean yes [no matter what the cost] and*

your no mean no – Mt.5.37. Lying is deliberately misleading, saying one thing to cover another. Just see how readily the urge to do this comes when we want to avoid embarrassment, or justified blame... - such is our tenuous hold onto truth without compromise!

The Spirit is not an occasional visitor, dropping-in while passing-by. Released at Pentecost, is ever-present; our awareness of this impeded by lots of good things we have amassed, working hard to provide for those special to us.

The question of which goodness, is not an either/or – simply a question of priorities. Responsible living is not a task we have to set ourselves to establish. It is something we find ourselves prompted to receive. For some, it meant letting go of what was worked hard for – I know a young and talented surgeon, eminently established; who gave it all up to go and help the poorest of the poor – without any thought of reward. Such people show, that when the Spirit is active within, they bring forth much more than is within naturally.

What makes important things boring, is not their presence; but a restricted and qualified presence. Religion is such when it becomes set-in-stone, more and more of the same. God doesn't make copies! – We do! This happens when we unwittingly dispense with faith – we know it, all that is required is to parrot what we now know. We too try to hoard the ever-fresh manna from heaven, to save going out every day; no wonder it rotted.

Attempts to *fix* God within our needs has the same result, because God is never the same twice – God is unchangingly always new. Remember, an image of heaven in which God is known comprehensively, is in fact hell. When we hear *Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever* – Heb.13.8. – we are being told that Christ cannot be trapped in space and time – can never be comprehended.

If there is always more waiting to be uncovered, what happens to what we already know? We come from a past. There seems to be a subconscious awareness of this – we are within and *instant* culture: instant food, instant information, instant pain-relief. Is this a drive towards a purpose – or a fear of being left behind? Habit seems to favour the latter – if the ready way we dump things means anything.

Years ago, I was sitting in the tiny Portiuncola chapel – [*treasured by S Francis*] – which holds little more than 20+ people. Three tourists came through the front door, *wearing* cameras, and without stopping moved out through the side-entrance – a matter of a few yards – commenting *that's done, what's next?* It made me ask myself – is this also present in me somewhere?

If I spend my energy defending whatever is the status quo in me, in the name of good order, I am opening the door to chaos. If good order is both real and relevant, then no one would be excluded from it. The message the Spirit has for the Church, is not that the good order we are so keen on, is not wrong, but will never be enough to satisfy the infinite thirst for more deep within everyone. But every point of arrival becomes a new point of departure – until sister death takes to the one who is *all and in all* – Col.3.11.

Progress has happened in improving the quality of life – but not yet for everyone, wars an insurrections are still widespread. The farmer is able to plan, certain that with sunshine and rain respected, provision in abundance will result. But – are well set-up for creating peace and good-will universally? A world without aggressive competition, deceit, cruelty, injustice and inequality? Is life in abundance for all, seen as the priority?

What needs to happen for this to be real? We've tried, with calamitous results, to change only the name – now called *service!* The Gospel sets the true priority – the dignity of every person, and respect for creation, through enlightened stewardship.

Jesus shows that only *person* reflects the image and likeness of God-with-us. Persons desire to be with persons, and so find identity as children of the Creator. Love alone personalises, and male and female are we made. In the conversation between Jesus

and the Samaritan woman, at Jacob's Well, Jesus shows her, in the light of her *many husbands*, that more than sexuality is involved in relating. And the appropriateness of sexual living issues from the quality of a genuine relationship. A point that is often missed – *Chastity* is incumbent on everyone, the grace of sexual activity is frustrated when isolated by absence of appropriate belonging.

Chapter 13

Stewards, not owner-occupiers...

The identity of being human, is not just the ability to think and rationalise, but the need to cherish and be cherished. It is prudent to weigh the pros and cons before making a commitment – it is an entirely different experience to be with someone who steps into things, prompted by something other than logic; yet without being foolhardy.

Francis of Assisi was one such. He did not delay for speculation but immediately got involved – unusual for a poet and artist! What gave him the freedom to live in this way was the way Jesus Christ was central to all he was about. Revelation tells us to *test the spirit that is in you – to see if it confesses the lordship of Jesus* – does it produce in you the fruits it produced in Jesus?

To live Gospel values means far more than simply uttering the words *Jesus is Lord*. It means discovering the presence of the Sermon on the Mount influencing actions as well as words. *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world* – 1Jn.4.1.

Why did Francis sing his *Canticle* of Creation, and not a song of creation? A canticle steps beyond boundaries. A song can relate the wonders of creation: a canticle, in proclaiming creation's wonders, picks us up too, to take everything to God.

Jesus told Nicodemus – Jn.3. – it is necessary to be born again – why? He didn't mean *go back and start again!* He meant [*and means*] to be open to discover and entirely new way of inhabiting self; one that is more instinctive than logical. To live by logic is to be tied to the structures logic depends upon; structures that leave little or no room for the Spirit.

To be devoid of logic completely risks living without awareness that there are others around apart from self. Jesus is outstanding for extraordinary good sense.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?
Rom.8.22-24.

This shows the difference Jesus' *modus vivendi* makes. Without the Incarnation we would only know the natural, fear-filled dependency a creature. The Incarnation brings us to be children of God – to know as Jesus knows God – *Abba*. So wonderful to realise God has no grandchildren, everyone is a first-born – *You have come to the joyful gathering of God's firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, who is the judge of all people, and to the spirits of good people made perfect* - Heb.12.23.

The insensitive intrusion of structure has changed the *freedom of the children of God* – Rom.8.21. – into freedom to do what we are told; missing the real meaning of obedience – *heightened sensitivity the Word* – but a wide openness to the presence and needs of others – *as often as you did this to the least, you did it to me* – Mt.25.

To live a Gospel life with all one's heart and soul, mind and strength, hearing the Word is not just necessary, it is the foundation of genuine enthusiasm [*to have God within*]. To hear the Word, we must also hear God's meaning of the Word [*Jesus*] not our

interpretation of it – *all that the Father told me, I have shared with you* – Jn.17. We experience this through the gift of spontaneity.

Spontaneity – a word too often confused with *instant!* It is often said – *we will have spontaneous bidding prayers* – which really means instant! We cannot know in advance what will be spontaneous. We cannot react spontaneously to order.

Spontaneous – is something which has been fermenting within for some time, which intensifies and demands expression. S Francis' response to the Gospel of Matthew, read at Mass – 1209 – did not suddenly occur to him, but reminded him of what another reading had urged – *Repent and believe the Gospel* – Mk.1.15. So much of what he had been pondering over became clear, finding expression – *this is what I long for with all my heart!*

But when on a certain day the Gospel [Mt.6.1-6, 16-18] was read in [the church of the Portiuncula] how the Lord sent his disciples out to preach, the holy man of God, assisting there, understood somewhat the words of the Gospel; after Mass he humbly asked the priest to explain the Gospel to him more fully. When he had set forth for him in order all these things, the holy Francis, hearing that the disciples of Christ should not possess gold or silver or money; nor carry along the way scrip, or wallet, or bread, or a staff; that they should not have shoes, or two tunics; but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, immediately cried out exultingly: "This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart."

We've all had – maybe fleetingly – similar moments, when we say things like: *it was as though time stood still*. When everything seemed to fit – a beginning, a harvest of fruit. Unlike Herod, who had heard the wonders Jesus was working, immediately thought of himself in danger, the Baptist I killed, is back – Lk.9.7. Distracted by what he had done – he missed what was being offered.

We know the Gospel values – as information – but as long this remains static, as with other institutionalised forms of life, there is no room for the Word to be appreciated as alive and active, and descends into routine performance – repetition.

All kinds of needs clamour for our attention, the most urgent being for self-survival at all costs. Gospel life is not just one option among many. It is the one and only way of the courageous lover. Less direct ways are possible if *all-or-nothing* is a bit too much all at once. Such ways are well motivated, but are open to the hazards of pain-avoiding motivations. We keep love at arms-length – just in case!

Francis' conversion involved moving away from his mind leading his heart, in order to experience what he found his heart longing for. Knowledge has value when it fosters love; just as the will needs the guidance of understanding if it is not to devalue to instinct.

Revelation makes it clear that our relationship with God is *filial* [sons/daughters] which means our *reality* to each other is fraternal by nature. Jesus didn't bring this message from God – he is the message – Son of God, our brother. Francis picked this up and told us – *I no longer have a father on earth, only our Father in heaven...*

We can *think* God – Supreme and infinitely perfect Being. Something more is required if we are to experience intimacy with God. *Then you will know as you are known...* 1Cor.13.12. To be known by God is to be loved. When love is present, it remains active, seeking to share with others. Whenever true love is experienced, it always takes us to its origin – God's uniquely personalised love.

Plurality in God comes from perfection... the splendour and perfection of goodness finds expression through self-communication. Communication always moves from one to another one. Where there is communion, there is always someone and someone else.
Alexander of Hales. ofm.

We all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
Eph.4.13

Again, hear Jesus with Nicodemus – we must be born into a new way of living – Jn.3. The new way does not set out to forge its own identity, it is to *receive* identity through relationships. Being with others exactly as they are – even when they try to be other than they are, making them aware of the splendour of the real. To live by the Spirit is to be enabled to live free from the entrapments needs and desires always bring, without having to deny their presence.

Jesus' mission is to have us break from the spirit of the world of flesh and blood, to live as God lives, by the Spirit. This what Jesus claims as his authority for saying and doing – *I know where I come from and where I'm going* – Jn.8.14. Life is for more life – is his message; and we cannot hope to get there by ways that are partial, selective, exclusive... when faced with the necessity of dying.

The only way to break with one way in favour of another, is to replace the structures proper to the old way for those of the new. Principally, how to embrace death positively. Francis, facing what Scripture says – *no one can see the face of God and live* – Ex.33.20 – says *if death lets me see the face of God – welcome sister...*

*Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.*

*Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those who will
find Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.*

Jesus is never confrontational. He simply brought the new way of being human by quietly living it for everyone to see. The power of attraction is always more compelling than the power of coercion. Paul reminds us: *you are a new creation* – 2Cor.5.17. It might be more economical to fill the tank with water rather than petrol, no matter how persuasively this is done, it won't work. No matter how we allow our humanness to be inspired by anything other than the Spirit of God – it will not work.

To live by the Spirit of God doesn't necessarily require that we know about it. There are vast numbers who live the Gospel message without ever having heard of Jesus.

Because something works well for me, it doesn't follow it will do the same for you – God doesn't make copies. Jesus reassures with *as long as you do this to the least, you do it to me* – Mt.25. How sad to see this reduced to an anti-wealth campaign. Wealth is a gift of God – prosperity comes from Grace; and is to be freely attainable – no terms or conditions. The majority will probably opt for a more simple life-style; but they should never be deprived of change.

The opposite of wealth and prosperity is not poverty – but meanness. The spirit of self-first, sadly encourages an alliance between power and meanness, prosperity and *mine, mine...* Jesus did not come to change Banking systems, but to change hearts; making us capable of *living in plenty or living in want* – Phil.4.12.

Creation is from God – from Love. Its climax, therefore, is when this is consciously known in flesh and blood respectful living; it's missing the mark so far is highlighted by the current climate disasters. This is the mission of that part of creation that is able to know this and do something about it – humankind.

Such is the intent of Baptism, where the seed of life-in-God is sown; the energy which reshapes us, into becoming more and more in the likeness of God. In everyday terms this means not just loving God, but loving God in a manner worthy of God, and unique to each person. What could not be achieved by the creative act – a creature equal to God – has been achieved by the incredibly self-emptying of God:

We serve God whether people honour us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. ⁹ We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. ¹⁰ Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.
2Cor.6.8-10.

Our creature status suggests a servant-master relationship, which our sinfulness seems to confirm; but the Word of God Incarnate has a filial message for us – for those who accept the Word, and heed it, know themselves to be children of Abba. This is not out of reach of everyone – simply not yet realised. A world waiting evangelisation.

Who Christ is by nature, we are by Grace. We are a mix of body/spirit, incomplete as spirit, requiring us to be embodied spirits – we believe in the Resurrection of the body. Not realising this caused Paul to exclaim:

For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.
Rom.7.19-25.

To know God through Jesus sent to us – is our human destiny, within Creation, given to us to foster this within us. Creation happens with Christ in mind [*no suggestion of Christ as an after-thought, because of sin*] *he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*
Eph.1.4.

Our vocation is not to wait to escape from this world [*in the waiting lounge at Heathrow*], but to be more deeply inserted. Sadly, practical atheism is flourishing. The world is no longer heard speaking to us of God, as it did in former times. We live in the world as would-be owner occupiers, not as responsible stewards, entrusted with its well-being.

This not a plea for a return to simplistic living. It is an invitation to join together singing the praises of all that is [*like Francis’ Canticle*]. It calls for respect for the wonders of science and technology [*the speed of developing the Covid Vaccine*] as God-given talents, to continue making the earth a universally better environment. The world doesn’t have to be made holy – like us it has that from its origin – it is simply waiting for due respect; by the way we live in it.

Surely the rush to embrace green issues is out of line if done because otherwise we will be in trouble. Creation does not require the threats of danger for it to be respected. It is to be respected, as we should be, for what it is and where it comes from:

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?^[c]
⁵ You have made them^[d] a little lower than the angels^[e]
and crowned them^[f] with glory and honour.
⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands;*

you put everything under their^(s) feet:

7 all flocks and herds,

and the animals of the wild,

8 the birds in the sky,

and the fish in the sea,

all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 LORD, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Psalm.8.

The search for peace with justice, for the freedom to choose for our well-being, is and will be ongoing. Do we ever reflect on *why* this is? We are looking for life to be untrammelled, unimpeded in its way of knowing – for intimacy as its core value. Revelation addresses this head-on. Life is for us to know as we are known. Life is for more life – not death; life is to be able to say, because of Jesus Christ – *death, where is your sting?* - 1Cor.15.55.

When this eventually happened to S Francis, he thought he was doing something else! Reading the signs of the times as best he could, he presumed that to attain to this required of him a degree of renunciation. He did not want a divided heart. He set about renouncing every kind of ownership, believing he had to move away from such living.

What he did not realise at first, that the reason for letting-go was so that creation could come back to him in a new way – as sisters and brothers with the same Father. He was able to face the challenge given to us in Genesis – to name creation for God. *And that is what it will be called* – Gen.2.19. What a daunting task – but not if you simply realise we are all sisters and brothers!

We don't have to have the skill of the scientist to appreciate Creation, simply to have the openness to be in creation and see what is happening – how nature organises itself. Matter moving into spirit, to become one, as in humankind, able to plan and make decisions for the benefit of all creation, and stop using creation as a play-pen, there for our amusement. More than this, humankind is able to grace the journey with qualities intimacy always brings.

Body and soul are made for each other – the body is not a temporary dungeon for a restless spirit. How are we to profess the resurrection of the body, without being persuaded that it is such by God's design? The communion of body and soul is the basis of our stewardship of creation. This harmony tells us, through Grace, our otherwise unthinkable destiny, one with God whose body was formed from the dust of the earth.

Human beings can now move freely within and beyond creation's boundaries. The Word made flesh, lived, died and rose from the dead – to new life in God, a truly human Jesus the Christ. We are able, not just to know things as they are, but as they were made to be. We use the term *intelligent* to describe ourselves as knowing the *why* of things, ranging from multiplicity to unity in synthesis. We not only receive information, we also observe, interpret and respond.

Endowed with all this, we know also that we are here today and gone tomorrow! So why have all this wonderful potential when our allotted span is but three score years and ten? Surrounded by so much transience and limited, why do we have the language of the eternal?

We have a nostalgia about our origin, a dissatisfaction with goodness that has limits – we certainly know bereavement through death! When a mother puts down the phone after speaking with family, thousands of miles away, why are there tears? All this is

evidence that we are restless with limited goodness - *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace* – Jn.1.16. Ours is truly Augustine’s restless heart.

What is true of the mind is equally true of the will. Along with enlightenments, we have moral insights, letting us differentiate between experiencing goodness through living solely by the pleasure principle, and seeking goodness purely for its own sake. As knowledge can’t reach scientific stability without the mind enlightened, neither can behaviour be virtuous without the influence of goodness.

Disaster awaits anyone setting out on life’s journey unaware of the basic rules. Such ignorance is not removed by scientific enterprise alone. Listen-in to what Jesus discussed with Abba. *Father, the world doesn’t know you, I know you, and I have made your name known* – Jn.17.25. Thank God he was overheard praying; it identifies for us the role and importance of mission, which is attached to every enlightenment – to rid the world of ignorance of Abba – not just Almighty God. He didn’t talk about the Father, or give lectures about God, he simply lived publicly who he is *his Father’s Son*. Our role is no different, we are adopted children of Abba, with the same mission. We know how the Father lives – it is called the Gospel. Which tells us that the introduction to mission is, first, to receive in gratitude the life freely offered to us. That this is happening is seen by: *the second commandment is like the first, love your neighbour as yourself* – Mt.5.43; Mk.12.31; Lk.10.27; Rom.13.9; Jas.2.8.

History has more or less impressive efforts to establish communities of Gospel life: *liberté, égalité, fraternité; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* – but without Christ. Likewise, Liberalism, Marxism, Capitalism, Socialism – when we have been told *no one comes to the Father, except through me* – Jn.14.6. They have in common the false notion that life and the world in which life is given, are given facts; it is up to us to decide what to do about it. To present the finite and limited to the human is treachery; as the human is blessed with a capacity and a longing for the infinite – who is made in the image and likeness of God.

Christianity also is not free from blame. It has had moments neglecting, and starving human nature by attending solely to matters spiritual; which downgraded religion, making it a private matter between the individual and God, having no place in the important business [sic] of living.

In the hierarchy of Creation humankind has a special place, the axis round which the world turns. This turning is one-way – towards God, as flowers turn to sunlight. This is the God-given mission of humankind – but must first be received, and then to become what is being received – what Scripture refers to as being *priests, prophets and kings of creation* – Heb.1.1.

To trace the pathway to God means starting from where we are; people away from God, who have been reached by God. Creation is deliberately suited for this task, carrying helps deliberately installed there; helps which have proved attractive enough to become life’s search achieved: the landscape of the heavens, the mysteries of the deep, the awesomeness of nature itself.

There remains one more step: wonder at why we find such realities attractive, the ability to appreciate; to notice that the slightest movements of heart and mind are a summons to reach out to discover, and to love; becoming aware of ourselves being known and loved – 1Cor.13.12. Our capacity for fascination is God-focused, in as much it takes us, albeit temporarily, of of ourselves in wonder. God is totally and permanently self-giving.

Chapter 14

Love loves the lovely...

In theory, we are capable of knowing and loving God, and shaping the world accordingly. In practice, things are very different. Did God risk failure when, as we read

in Genesis, we were given the task of naming creation? Yes! Unless there is something we are missing.

The Incarnation didn't happen because we made a mess of things. Many fruits of God-incarnate could have been given without the Incarnation. We could have been pardoned and forgiven. We could have received Grace-living.

There is one thing which could not happen without the Incarnation – the vocation to bring Creation to full-circle completion as a perfect expression *outside God*. Creation happened with the Incarnation in mind: *before the foundation of the world, God destined us in Christ* – Eph.1.4. God always intended to be part of Creation. Bringing God into the streets. A consequence of this was to tone down and eliminate fear – the fear of Judgment, with Augustine, John Chrysostom, Bernard – and, latterly, Francis, who celebrated the giftedness of the Incarnation from Crib to Cross and Resurrection.

The Incarnation means that the way of the Word within the Trinity – is with us in space and time. Our behaviour pattern suggests that when we need something, it becomes a reason to get it. There is no doubt, we need redemption – but we miss the splendour and generosity of God, if we think we have redemption just because we need it.

Sin in no way determines the fact of the Incarnation. Love is the sole reason for the Incarnation. God intended humanness to reach its full capacity for intimacy and oneness with God: *[Christ] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.* – Col.1.20. Redemption is Christ-centred. *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life* – Rom.5.10.

A human being is body-spirit, not fully described by either alone. This must be uppermost in any spiritual way. If we were simply one or the other perhaps things would be less complex. See how Paul faces this:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.^[a] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Rom.7.15-25

Spirit holds primacy over body: *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell* – Mt.10.28 – allows us to be fully alive, knowing God through Jesus who was sent. This means moving from childlike delight and excitement for so many gifts, on to the adult child's profound intimacy with the Gift-Giver: *Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* – Mt.18.3. The adult child desires the hug and presence of the Giver, which the gifts symbolise.

I must let Creation lead me through playing with its toys, on to the Giver. This is the work of the spirit, which always has the body in mind; this is not so if we let the body lead, as we saw in Rom.7. My body allows me to express what it means to be me, a unique person, able to make God present by the way I, being fully me, am present. S Francis, writing to his brethren says – *you have conceived through Word and Sacrament, now bring him to birth by the way you live.*

If I persist in making myself unrecognisable to God, I will succeed: *But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you – Mt.25.12.*

S Francis, prior to conversion, wanted not only everything, but the best of everything – after his conversion, he still wanted the best of everything. What happened was the spirit had now taken the lead, and showed him that the best of everything was *someone*, not something. He moved from *presents* to *presence!*

Jesus told us that when everything is as it was created to be, then Creation makes God present simply by being as it ought to be – with humankind letting this happen, instead of the mess we are currently making. Evolution is gradually revealing to us, nature moving towards some form of organisation, towards a union. Humankind is privileged not just to know what is, but also what ought. The impediment here is with us. We have much to say about our human rights, but comparatively little about human responsibilities.

We have been gifted with a critical faculty, so that information is just stored haphazardly, but requires a form of order. It actually orders itself within a kind of inner hierarchy already waiting. In knowing, moving from multiplicity to unity is what happens when distinguishing between sense awareness and rational understanding.

It is the way we search for the one through the many, a trinity harmony, enhancing our need for oneness through the threefold being loved, loving in return and enjoying the experience. How do we, who are here today and gone tomorrow, harmonise experiences which are permanent, but never the same?

Human know-how is not up to this by itself. We desire to see things, not just as they are, but as they can be. We need to see as God sees – with no beginning or ending. God never began to see/love me, there is no beginning or ending in God – *I am who I am – Ex.3.14.* But I had a beginning, there was a time when I was not, and is a time when I end.

S Bonaventure speaks of seeing the face I had before I was born. I am eternally loved by God, and it is in this experience of loving and being loved that I can see that face. Not as if in a mirror, but reflected back to me through the eyes of someone saying to me, and meaning *I love you.*

As a helicopter better coordinates traffic control, so intelligence see the possibility of a one in the many. This implies seeking something I am aware should be, but as yet is unseen.

We normally know through logical deduction rather than by intuition, which is sufficient to assert that the absolute is profoundly attractive. We do not know God when we search for God. The energy for our searching is fired by some expectation that we will find – and that any other result will never satisfy.

So too with goodness, we are biased towards goodness – as any evil minded intent has to present itself as good, if it is to succeed. This shows the relevance of the Genesis prohibition, it is not for us to decide what is good and what is evil. This not a negative prohibition, rather does it show that goodness and a universal right to experience it, is too vast for us to cope with – *Only God is good – Mk.10.18.*

The goodness that only God is, has been fully proclaimed in the Word made flesh; not information, but a relationship on offer to anyone willing to receive. Which when accepted, makes itself evident when I not only say hungry people must be fed, but seek to feed them, when I actually befriend the lonely, not just assert that it is good.

For this to be real, the will needs the freedom to pursue what is, in fact, its proper object, after being prompted to notice goodness missing. To see how things are meant to be, is seeing in line with where we come from, realising that anything less than everything will never satisfy – I need to give all of myself, not because it is expected of me, but because anything less in me will never satisfy. Love is always seeking the lovely, not just to know it, but to experience it – whatever the cost.

My will, attracted to goodness, my mind seeking truth, goes in search of the relationship with the one who says *I am the way, the truth, the life* – Jn.14.6. It is a kind of nostalgia for where we come from and where we desire to go back home – Jn.18.4.

Jesus' powerlessness in the presence of evil, eventually blossomed into life that evil cannot ever touch, and is open for anyone to receive – no charge; just a willingness to die for another – the greatest love – *greater love there is not than to give our life for another* – Jn.15.13.

Between God and creation there is an infinite divide. Not that God is simply a million times greater than the most perfect human being – God is totally other: *my ways are not yours* – Is.55.8. There is no way for us to reach God – but we have been reached by God, who came to be with us in Jesus the Christ, because that is where we are! Love loves the lovely

John Duns Scotus put it like this: the lover, the beloved, the love they share – Father, Son and Spirit. This love is gifted to anyone willing to receive it

I, therefore say this: in the first place God loves himself [love loves the lovely]. In the second place God loves this love in others, and this love is holy. In the third place, God wills to be loved worthily, by one who is not God. Finally, God foresees, independently of the Fall, the Hypostatic Union of this human nature, which was to love God in the most perfect way possible.

[Quoted by Eric Doyle,
ofm. Clergy Review. Sep-Nov. 1972.]

Paul tells us that we owe Christ, not only for salvation from sin, but our closeness to God before ever there was sin. Sin has no place in God, and did not cause a change of plan when it arrived. Interesting to insert verse 15 of Colossians.1. between verses 6 and 7 of Eph.1. a clearer picture emerges.

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

Eph.1.6-7 with Col.1.15.

Christ dominates history, penetrating and explaining the being and the becoming of everything, in a communion of Charity flowing out from God into Creation and back again. To live *in Christ* is to be an intimate, not an imitator. Without Christ the world is orphaned from the Father, unable to provide for the fullness of human dignity. This is why atheistic humanism is inhuman, since only God can release the fullness of human potential, made in the image and likeness of God – Gen.1.26.

The Kingdom of God cannot happen by simply rearranging the deck-chairs we already have. No person, no system can claim that the Gospel simply authenticates what we already have. Jesus is always in a minority of one.

The area requiring change is highlighted in the Gospel – we are to be involved with whatever it takes to remove the acquisition of power and the accumulation of wealth from the forefront of life, to be replaced by the dignity of the person [*every person – no exclusions*].

This malformation as penetrated every aspect of human experience, to such an extent that even our educational and cultural programming are geared to justify it. The side effects are all too obvious – see taxation systems geared to promote and protect

wealth, but only for those who have it or are intent on getting it. Equally, tax evasion is rife among the wealthy.

Pace e bene – Peace and good, form the atmosphere of Kingdom living; they are not products of either psychological or even religious good-will. They are only present by receding them, being of a kind we know nothing about: *Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, which the world cannot give* – Jn.14.27. Piracy used to identify itself with a distinctive flag. It is now more subtle, appearing in the ranks of big business and the multi-nationals as acceptable, provided one can get away with it.

What was once confined to the personal is now corporate, the need for universal redemption. Like Charity, Peace begins at home, with the healing of our myopia, so as to see that the world is not empty, waiting for us to get in there and fix it. We need to see people, not as causing over-crowding in *our* world, a world created for all people, literally all, to enjoy peace with goodness and justice.

The peace belonging to Christ has the same origin as humankind. Both are gifted. The very best, possible humankind, is to share a life of intimacy with God, on equal terms by God's self-emptying – equal but not the same: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life* – 1Jn.1.1.

To embrace this life means recognising what impedes it, and be intent on removing it – peacefully! This is not only for those able to recognise it, but also those suffering the side-effects. When efficiency becomes master, the temptation to make decisions for others proves too great to resist, personally and institutionally. We need a moratorium, so as to hear again and to heed: *follow me, for I am meek and humble of heart* – Mt.11.29. When some are hurting, it helps all of us to experience what the hurt feels like. Or as the Scripture says- *to hear the cry of the poor* – Prov.21.13, Job.34.28.

It is the perennial mission of the Church to maintain the proper balance, but only by being aware of the almost necessary encroachment of such values within her own ways. Something Pope Francis is determined to highlight. This is only a blemish when it is ignored or allowed to be unseen. The Church belongs in the heart of the world as it is, and it is fiercely infectious.

The Church will survive and flourish only by gathering together, faithful to the Word and the breaking of bread, attending more to the quality of the gathering, rather than being side-tracked by time and place.

Knowledge can stay simply theoretical, and full of good ideas, for information. Like the evil spirits – who said to Jesus, *we know who you are – the holy one of God* – Mk.1.24. Orthodox – but evil. Being right about Jesus isn't enough to make me good. Knowledge is truly such when it is a way of life, a product more of love than of reason.

But communication from God is infinitely more – the Word not only communicates, but is able to bring *experience* of what is being communicated: *whoever has ears, let them listen* – Mk.8.18. The appropriate place for such hearing is not the privacy of meditation, but the liturgical gathering to receive and to become what we receive – Eucharist. Body-given, blood poured out – service.

Reality is not simply what we see, hear and touch; but the quality underpinning all of them. We need much more than our senses if we are to be fully alive. There is a two-fold dimension to *reality*. Jesus never criticised sense-living, he showed great sensitivity in relating – be it to fellow human beings, or to the gifts of nature, as we hear in the parables. Neither does he urge on us the harsher ways of the Baptist. He integrates everything within the primacy of love, which he calls Kingdom.

Sorting and sifting is always a means to an end, not an end! I visited a family where the front room was kept locked in case the children made it untidy! Sorting life is ever a means – calling for a renunciation – in the proper sense, not just getting rid, but re-announcing life as under new management. Jesus didn't decide to go for forty days

into the desert, he was led by the Spirit. Our renunciation should never be denunciation.

Love seeks after every possible expression of the lovely; such reminders of God are in abundance in creation. Nature actually responded to S Francis. The noisy crickets hushed when he chided them for interrupting Evening Prayer, but said their time would come later! Birds listened a wolf heeded, brother fire was kind to him being cauterised – as if nature realised there was nothing to fear in this man.

Creatures sought to return his affection, smiling when he held them, answering his call, obeying his word – writes his biographer, Celano. Creation applauded him because he allowed it to find its way back to God. With the distortions consequent on possessiveness, greed and the like – harmony is lost, and nature, understandably, is suspicious *Francis' body was in harmony with his spirit, spirit in harmony with God – which is why Creation accepted his guidance* – Bonaventure.

Harmony with Nature is a fruit of charity, not a product of knowledge. As human beings we can be with God through knowledge in love, as embodied spirits. Nature reaches towards spirit, in seeking union with God. *To know God and Jesus whom he sent* – Jn.17.3 – is the proper purpose of both will and intellect – God present in the mind as the explanation of life, *in the will as goodness of which we have all received* – Jn.1.16.

Creation is a book of many chapters, but only one story. To read it requires some awareness of God. Such an awareness is proper to the soul, which in uniting with the body, helps us read *the signs of the times*. The message is confused with ambiguity, insufficient to provide awareness of God. It needs to be enabled, in order to see God in the face of Jesus; the gift of God within us need to meet God in Jesus, whom he sent. Awareness of the need for goodness, needs to meet this Grace in Jesus: *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* – Heb.12.2.

Crib and cross were not devotional inventions of someone needing to sit quietly in empty spaces. Only a person with confidence in nature would ever think of furthering devotion with nature's own mysteries. Devotion is meant to arouse – wishing a newborn and mother, well; being with her in the brutalising way of his death. There has to be room for sentiment in worship, because it belongs to human beings. Decadence in practice. doesn't take this away; it is a gentle reminder of the ongoing need for renewal.

Humanism is ever-present, upsetting the balance. We reach-out to God from within the world, through the *art of a disciple* – discipline! Again, a means, never an end – needing to see what ought to be, not what I would prefer them to be. Creation is a gift – we need to know what the Giver had in mind in giving it to us! The sense of self is so assertive, that everything that is not as self wants, is to be discarded. Hence, the help of the *art of the disciple!*

The paradox of human longing – it tends to surface amid well-being, asking *is there more to life than this?* Which was what happened to S Francis after he was released from captivity, and was back within his home security of wealth and social freedom! We have similar moments, when we are bored with the security we have. This is not so much making contact with our inner need for God, as we are daring to believe God is longing for us?

What is the mystery in this, is that something seemingly of such importance, is relegated to fleeting moments? Would it be too much to endure if it were at the forefront of our consciousness? Is it true, we can only take so much reality?

A common experience when praying, is the impression of standing outside ourselves, like watching a performance. Initially, I might be surprised by stillness enough for time to bring a sense of the infinite – *it seemed as though time stood still!* On other occasions I can wonder *how do I know I'm praising God, and not just talking to*

myself? Francis asks – *are you seeking the God of consolation, or the consolation of God?* Self-consciousness, in the first case, removes the sense of mystery, as trying to analyse dreams shows.

Fascination should never be minimised. – as it has the ability to take us out of ourselves, albeit momentarily, when all sense of time and place seem to go. Such moments are God-like, in that God is permanently self-emptying love. There is a phrase used in Scripture – *at the fullness of time, it came to pass – It happened.* What happened? Something very different from life as we know it. These moments tend to be transient, because self eventually intrudes. Which should not surprise us, as it is how we demean our relationships, letting self in.

Fascination has its own *modus vivendi*. Once we try to help it to stay, it dissolves. Working really hard for some good experience, while it enjoys modest success, can never be equated with being taken surprise by fascination. God is a God of surprises. It is amusingly said – *if you want to make God smile, tell God your plans!* Fascination is the ability to experience more and more, life as God-given. It puts us in touch with hitherto unexperienced degrees of truth.

How do we find an appropriate *art of a disciple* leading to self-detachment? *Appropriate* is important, since it is all too easy to confuse self-effacement with a healthy sense of self. The former seeks ever closer integration of our will with God's will; the latter, a healthy desire to be set free from various unfreedoms.

S Francis desired [*with all my heart*] nothing else but God's will. For this to have any chance, he had to be free to be himself! It is no coincidence that people like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, along with Francis stand out as unique personalities [*which all of us are – no copies*] unrepeated elsewhere: *equal, but not the same*. Francis known for his way to God through enjoying all creation, makes no sense without the relationship of *being friar* – no one left out.

Chapter15

Children like consistency...

What is it that insists we respect and cherish where we have been, without being detained by inordinate nostalgia? Are we being asked to let-go of our past, to enjoy more of our disposable present?

For an era that has walked on the moon, and probed well-beyond it with incredible accuracy, what do the times when we knew none of this hold for us? Is our past literally held in ruins? Holiday brochures invite us to see the Acropolis, the Pyramids, the Coliseum – make it seem so. We seem to have difficulty in finding anything more than parking space for our past. Even this is problematic, as more and more disposables, particularly nuclear waste, are piling up, so that we are running out of places to put them.

Nature, left to itself, doesn't have this problem – aspects of nature have a cyclic relationship, integrating the past and the present, to provide for the future. Think of the humble butterfly – feeds of the shell that once protected it, then spreads new wings and flies into a new future; neither rejecting or neglecting its past.

We are fast losing respect from where we came from, and so lack resources to help us face the future. Recall the overturning of tyranny in Russia, how an oppressive regime proved no match for ordinary aspirations: religion was banned, and ousted [*so they thought*]. With end of the tyranny – almost within days, churches were full, showing that something was happening as sustaining force during the dark times. Ordinary folk refused to be denied their past – which now blossomed as the future. Fine wine, fruit of the harvested past, respected and let mature into something appropriate for tomorrow.

The words *human respect* sound complimentary – but tend to mean that what other people might think becomes all important, to such an extent that dignity can be

violated and injustice allowed, just as long as it keeps the neighbours [*community*] happy! This is not a fault of the neighbours, but of our attitude towards them.

Authority abuse qualifies – fear of loss of face or status. One only needs see the difficulties Pope Francis faced, trying to set up a Synodal Church – when local dioceses tried watering down by saying matters of doctrine won't be discussed, final decisions will be left to the hierarchy... S Francis refers to ministers [*friars with the responsibility of leadership*] as the *firsts servants of the brethren* – which some undoubtedly are – but there are examples of *I'm in charge!* With dominance replacing service by example. Another name for bullying. When a sense of self is more aligned to *what I've got [status]* than to who I am and have professed to be.

Ordinary folk said of Jesus – he speaks with authority; his words made sense of their lives, and he lived what he said. He faced many problems, mainly from *officially good people!* People who knew what was right and what wasn't. He said of them – *they don't need me!* – cf. Mk.2.17. Can we ever not need him?

There is a song – *I've grown accustomed to her face...* becoming accustomed-to is part of relating, and properly feeds off the relationship, if the relationship is genuine. A couple in love will say *I love you, many times* – without a hint of repetition. When *more than self* is concerned comments like *I've heard it before* are not valid. Love is dynamic always more than before. Only sounding repetitious to anyone not part of the relationship. People who have regard for the other, often have a special name for each other – a name which is abused when hi-jacked when used by one not part of the relationship.

Our faith is in *Jesus the Christ of God* – not in interpretations of him, nor in simply admiring his values. We certainly need authoritative guidance in our searching for him – but it is Jesus who is the God of our salvation. Recall the villagers with the woman at Jacob's well. She told them about her conversation with Jesus, and that she thought him to be the Messiah. They went off to find him, and returned to say thank-you for telling us; now we believe *because we have heard him ourselves*.

There are other examples in the Gospel when Jesus was up against, not just his traditional enemies, but in his own family who sought to *have him put away* – Mk.3.21. It is comforting to recall this happening to us – less so, when we realise what we are doing to others. Family, community, sadly can become no more than those we have to live with – seemingly, we need to choose our friends not have them chosen for us. Jesus has counsel for us. Remember, it is not the choosing that creates hypocrisy [*Jesus' word*]. People are gifts of God, it is deliberately choosing and selecting, when I have publicly professed not to live like that.

The distinct possibility of *other faces in other places* is a sure protection against the intrusion of routine, and enslavement to the immutable norm. There is the constant temptation for the timid who feel unable to step aside from routine living, to role play – going through the motions of what is expected; a situation crying out for change/ conversion.

There are many who regret that their awakening to the need for change has come so late in life. Victims of abuse often find themselves in such *too late* situations. Abused children tend to blot out the memories of abuse, but are then building on shaky ground. When memories begin to return, what happens to the safe-world of no memories?

The real experience of being set free is not something consciously decided by time and place. It starts within an inner movement, recognising the possibility of being oneself, with nothing to hide – probably at first with one other person. There are such people – not too many, but they are there, waiting to be trusted, willing to listen without any hint of judgement. People who never use – *you must... you must not...* and the like, but who are hoping to walk with...

This depends very much on how we are present to each other. Jesus has harsh words for those who have no concern for others - *If anyone causes one of these little ones - those who believe in me - to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung round their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea: Mt.18.6.* A reminder of the presence of Grace, while we can and do deprive others of grace, we cannot return grace back. This can be a blessing - a reminder that we don't have to involve the abuser. Only God gives grace [*awareness of the presence of God*] and it is always there for the receiving.

Children remind us of what we have forgotten [*but not lost*] the ability to accept what we see as it is. When a child sees hypocrisy, they tend to ask questions - not because something is wrong, but it is inconsistent. I was visiting a family, and a young child was chattering away, and suddenly used some bad language; mum was shocked, telling her not to use it. The child asked, why is it all right for Daddy, but not for me? Why did Jesus advise us to learn from children?

A child accepts that mum and dad can do anything - and have all the answers to many questions. In a sense, a child is ready for faith, *if you say so it must be all right.* Listen to a child talking to everything it sees and uses. Jesus urges us to recover what we all had and have lost; not in naiveté, but openness, backed up by what maturity we have attained.

Growing up we live in the real world! - laying aside childish things; yes, but not *childlike* things! We surrender trust and embrace suspicion, just in case! trust lets us down. I recall getting a salutary lesson from a six-year old boy Who was telling me about his class football team. I asked - who was the best player; he tried all kinds of ways to describe him - but it never occurred to him to say he's black!

What would I have done? It's not the credulity of the child - but the duplicity of the adult! The adult child, Jesus from Nazareth, says we can believe everything we hear from him. If we can recover the instinct for faith [*to believe what we hear*] backed-up by the ability of right judgement, acquired through the years, our own instinct to believe will recover.

The Church is currently asking herself why she has moved from an openness to everyone, into an unhealthy selectivity. In calling for a preferential option for the poor, is it being forgotten that Jesus said: *blessed are the poor - not blessed are those who opt for the poor.* To be for the poor is not an option! As we travel through life, we move, almost instinctively, from economy to club class! And visit back when we need to - but not to stay! Pope Francis urges us to live *as* the poor, not just *for* the poor.

If we make a habit of doling-out from our abundance, we will undoubtedly be helping solve current problems, but, long term, it is perpetuating the begging bowl. Again the open-handedness of the child helps - a child will willingly give things away, there are other priorities than *to each his own!* Fine, if we have something, but offensive for one who has nothing.

Such a reality is a timely reminder that the side-effects of Original Sin are a long-time dying. We struggle with the need to let go of our personal convenience, in the face of need beyond us. The Old Testament has a graphic account of what we now call jubilee celebrations - the Year of Yobel [*ram's horn*] every seventh year: during the seventh year the people were told that debts be remitted, wrongs pardoned, prisoners et free, exiles welcomed back, so that everyone has the chance to experience the fatherhood of Yahweh - Lev.25.4.

It doesn't take a genius to see what can make a mockery of this - just wait for 7 years and all will be well! Yobel can be very costly. It soon came interpreted to mean this is what will happen in the end of times. We can almost hear sighs of relief - it's all right to continue life of profit and gain! Is this one reason why Jesus says *now is the acceptable time?* - Mk.1.15. The time to repent, to forgive, to welcome home is when we become aware that it is missing, no matter what the cost. How true - *my ways are not yours...*

Tribalism is rife – segregation and exclusions are common-place. Ways round law are many. We have all renounced Satan’s wiles every Easter – but what about our personal misdoings? What we see happening publicly is the consequence of the result of absence of personal responsibility/conversion at the personal level.

Jesus assures us that nothing is insignificant to God, not even a sparrow falling to the ground – Mt.10.29. But the sparrow still falls. Reflecting on pressure experienced in trying to live well, we must not exclude the way our mortality surfaces from time to time. This holds the key to the mystery of life: *whoever would save his life must lose it* – Mt.16.25. Jesus rising from the dead shows all who share humanity with him, will also share his rising.

There never has been a time – even before sin – when human beings were meant to be born, to live, to die – and that was the end. We are created to inherit eternal life – yet are we mortal. When Genesis.3.8 says God walked with them in the cool of evening – it is a fair question to ask, where was God for the rest of the time? Whatever they were experiencing, they were not yet fully within God’s presence. Some form of moving-on was needed, a *positive experience* of mortality, when life has served its purpose allowing us to see God face to face, in a bodily resurrection.

Paul homes in on this with: *the wages of sin is death* – Rom.6.23. There was always an end to our biological living. But, turning away from God who is life, we opted for everlasting death. Paul is telling us we have lost the precious gift of dying into eternal life. This is why we need Jesus, not just to live our life, but to live our death.

Now, death is no longer the ultimate separation from God, but the greatest gesture we could ever make – *greater love there is not than to die for another* – Jn.15.13. Jesus has restored death to its original purpose, letting us see the face of God. Nothing matters more than we, not only live well, but die well, to see God’s face and live – which is why S Francis spoke of welcoming sister death.

For a time, living close to the excavation work for the Channel Tunnel – at first glance it looked like a bombed site – total levelling, seemingly all at random, like a do-it-yourself excavation! I’m sure, seeing it from up in the air would have revealed careful planning. Life is like that – we are too close to see the whole picture – like a fly walking across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel! This gives the impression that *reality* is simply what we see.

Some time ago, a competition was arranged between children from a primary school, and members of Mensa [*high IQ’s*]. Part of the exercise was assembling a jig-saw puzzle. Both teams had the same puzzle, which had a degree of difficulty. Some of the children soon got bored and started playing with the pieces – they noticed there was something on the other side of the pieces – the face of a well-known person. They quickly put the face together and turned it over.

Creation is like that. Full of oddly shaped pieces, which only make sense when aligned with other oddly shaped pieces. When properly assembled, they carry the face of Christ. To recognise Christ, consciously, is to see how creation fits together. All of these odd shaped pieces are not just the dead sparrows Jesus spoke about, as well as ourselves, there are earthquakes, famine and droughts, Tsunami, and out inhumanity to each other.

Franco Zeffirelli, intended his film – *Jesus of Nazareth* – to conclude on the hill of Calvary; until it was impressed upon him that such a film, without Easter Day, was pointless. Good Friday was not the last word God had to say about Jesus. Whose whole life, death and resurrection was to make us aware of how much we are loved! There are no optimum settings for love – just a desire to be with someone so totally different who opens us up to the ever newness of love. If there is any sense of *more of the same*, whatever it is, it won’t be wrong, but it is not the always new of love!

The problem with evil is that it is not a problem. If it were a problem, it could be solved! Who could ever make sense of a free and deliberate choice for evil over good? Yet it is always happening.

For just as death came by means of a man, in the same way the rising from death comes by means of a man; so also by man came Resurrection from the dead – 1Cor.15.21. All instances of tyrannical regimes being overthrown, offer evidence of the survival of good over evil: where sin abounds, grace is more abundant – Rom.5.20. On Calvary, evil performed its swan song! Such is the passivity of evil in the presence of undisguised love, to be totally and irrevocably impotent.

Jesus lived his death so fully, that it became no longer the ultimate disintegration, but the peak expression of complete communion. All the darkness in the world is unable to extinguish the light of a single candle.

There is no place in Christian living for negativity. We are graced with ability to know a relationship with God, with ourselves, with each other and with planet Earth. Without God, there is no salvation; equally, and salvation can only happen with our cooperation. The Spirit who achieves this, in and through us, we receive in Baptism; though we still have to live by that gifted energy. It is the power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, so that we too could enjoy eternal dying into new living.

What would I do if I had God's wisdom? This lets us know what the *almighty* in Almighty God means. *He did not count equality with God as something to cling onto; he emptied himself becoming servant – Phil.2.6. Paul is reassuring in telling us that poverty of itself, like obedience and celibacy – of themselves, carry no virtue. Their value comes with: He became poor, so that we might be enriched – 2Cor.8.9. How sad to see means downgraded into ends!*

Chapter 16

Precisely because you remember...

We frequently speak of the poverty of God, and express it liturgically – especially the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption – but do we realise what we are doing?

Logic appreciates moving from less to more, in terms of perfection from good to better; this the very stuff of fable and legend. But, reversing the movement doesn't work – moving from wholeness to not yet, from knowing to maybe. Revelation makes it clear that creation is intended by God to be an expression of God, outside the Godhead. In the one God is a Trinity of relationships, characterised by freedom.

Jesus didn't come to die for us, but to love us, and convince us of being loved just because who we are, no matter the cost. We are neither mass-produced nor made in a hurry. Whatever is true about Jesus says something about us – because of the bond of love. Familiarity with God is very much alive, because God wants us to be familiar – as Jesus is by nature, we by gift [*grace*]. As Jesus expressed it: *know where I come from and where I am going – Jn.8.14 – and so can you if you stay with me! Francis did not so much pray – as become a prayer – yes, please!*

The *Our Father* would have us realise this – it begins with petitions helping us focus on God – the petitions in the second half, having consciously put ourselves in God's presence, give us confidence to talk about ourselves. We hallow God's name, that we really do prefer his will for us, than meandering for ourselves.

Starting with the words *Our Father*, is not to catch God's attention – it is a profound act of faith, that we believe the Father is *ours*; not in general, but uniquely personal, yet making us one; realising that whatever we ask is already present, before ever it occurred to us to ask. This is what seems like *no one at home* – in fact, something better than we had in mind, if we believe! As already remarked, to make God smile – tell him your plans!

What this feels like we hear of from the Prodigal Son – who had squandered his inheritance, who had a plan [!] to save him embarrassment going back home. He would apologise, and be servant in the house [*which his big brother would expect him to do*]. Notice – he is still the central figure! Before he gets home his father meets him, not by chance, his father is out waiting every day. Then comes reality – all that was needed of him was to return home, and let his father be his father.

Is it any wonder Jesus asks us to become as children, not infants, but to let ourselves be cherished simply because of who we are. A child who is cherished, has no worry about tomorrow – mom and dad are here, even though they may not know where the next meal is coming from, I'm in safe hands. This why *thy will be done* stands out – we are God's will, which for us is simply to believe it. For me, to stress *will* rather than *thy*, suggests not yet belonging.

One of Jesus' prayers – *Father, the world does not know you...* Jn.17.25 – tells us that to embrace the Fatherhood of God as life's purpose, also evangelises the world, ridding it of ignorance of Abba, through relationships. *Give us today our daily bread...* we must first receive this loving paternal relationship before we can share it. As we gather to *break bread, receive body-given, blood poured-out*, to become what we receive to be of service to others. As Sacrament, the Eucharist is given to the Church, intended for the world.

Forgive us... as we forgive... does this mean *don't forgive if we don't*? Forgiveness is not something we do; it is who we are for each other. As with the Eucharist, it must first be received from God before we become this. Forgiveness obliges us never to withhold our real presence from others, no matter what the circumstances. God does not forgive with terms and conditions.

I cannot *decide* to forgive as from myself. It is something which has happened to me, it is given – at times causing reluctance to accept! A reminder that *feeling good* about the sinner is not integral to forgiveness – it might be present, it might not.

Forgiveness is the context of God's justice. To be open to God is realising I am loved, I am forgiven, and I am being gently challenged [*never ordered*] to become who I am for God, a forgiven sinner, back home.

It is trite to insist *to be Christian you have to forgive*. What about those who simply can't forgive? We are aware that *meanness* destroys mutuality, plunders grace. Made in God's image, means that just as God creates out of love, so should our own creativity be offered. S Francis wrote to those responsible for the well-being of the brothers [*everyone!*] *be as a close friend... able to be stormed by all... will not commit the foul sin of favouritism... and in no way bring own the fabric of justice in order to retain status* – 2Cel.185.

We need to forego *abstract* living. There is no such tangible reality as fidelity, only faithful people, who life in gratitude. When we find others wanting to share our well-being, by desiring our company – we become more faithful ourselves – *taste and see that the Lord is good* – Ps.34.9. – is more than a good idea!

Generosity requires authentic self-awareness, that our origin, our flourishing and destiny, is contained in God's enfleshed Word, Jesus the Christ. Francis' given self-awareness was in Jesus calling him *friar*, telling him that for his world and his God were to come together, the meeting place would be him; we would simply be called brother, but everything about him would share that fraternity – *the world is my cloister, where my sisters and brothers live* – He reminded his brothers: *you have conceived him by Word and Sacrament, bring him to birth by the way you live* – 1Let.Fid.

There are always people who follow that feeling from within themselves, to become real tangible expressions of the values they cherish. Think of the lone student standing alone in Tiananmen Square facing the tanks, forbidding injustice to go any further. It is in such hearts that the urge for word to become flesh becomes ever more likely, and

the idea of the lion and the lamb - Is.6. - lying down together doesn't seem too fanciful!

Deut.5.15 counsels Israel to *remember* the slavery and suffering they endured, the hardships and hard knocks, what these felt like, and never knowingly inflict such experiences on others. This was made flesh in Jesus, and leaves no room for the ifs and buts of excuse.

Think of Des Wilson who lost his nurse daughter in the Enniskillen bomb blast, saying he forgave the perpetrators. Such value persuades us that we don't have to forget in order to forgive; indeed, we should remember, so as never to do this to others. To urge *forgive and forget* can be crass insensitivity. But gifted Grace, respecting indelible memories, allows very real debts to be cancelled.

Honestly-living folk feel the urge to keep silent in the face of such challenges. We are well aware of wanting others to feel what we have felt because of them, at best to make them more sensitive, more often – if I have to suffer, so should you!

When Peter saw Jesus walking on the storm-tossed lake – without realising what he was saying, shouted *tell me to come...* Jesus, probably with a smile, invited him - *come!* – Mt.14.29. To his credit, Peter tried, soon realising that people don't usually walk on water – cries out *Lord, save me!* as he began to sink. Did Jesus let him get a good mouthful of water to teach him to trust? The Gospel says Jesus reached out *instantly!*

This isn't too far away from our obsession to canonise the negative – insisting it is good to make things tough and bleak, in the name of goodness. How long will hearts remain hard, how long will it take us to realise that goodness is itself diffusive, that much more goodness comes from good than from any other source?

Jesus allows us access to God from the inside, a new reality - *God is nothing else but love? Only God is good* – Mk.10.18. Within such living there will never be known solitaries, isolated people. Communion is through difference respected, unity in diversity – the lover, the loved, the shared love – like Father, Son and Spirit.

Made in the image of God, we carry God's DNA. We experience desire for love, to be loved, the environment for this to happen. Jesus is the *beloved of Abba*, with the mission to make what is his by nature, ours through Grace. Whether we are aware of it or not – religious or otherwise.

Goodness has much to tell us, which is why it is always self-communicating, passing easily and fluently, from one to another one. Wherever there is goodness there will always be someone and someone else, intimately connected. Friar Alexander of Hales wrote: *It is goodness in God which is responsible for the plurality of persons.*

Goodness is proper to both nature and will. Goodness of nature eternally begets the Word; goodness of will is the intimate mutuality of such belonging – the Holy Spirit. Something to keep in mind, that when we speak – often too glibly – of God's will. Love requires fecundity of nature and liberality of affection. Goodness is Godness, the infinity of self-giving.

This is no plea for libertarianism, but for a healthy awareness of the need for personal discipline – *the art of the disciple*. This art is the fruit of something prior to it, which, when it happens, makes us take steps to allow the experience to deepen. Certainly, just making things tough doesn't mean making them good!

What do we mean by *no pain, no gain*? To seek to remove pain as much as possible indiscriminately, would reduce our ability to experience abundance. Some would argue that very existence of pain precludes belief in God, who is nothing else but love – how could a loving God allow this?

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / the way to dusty death / Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That frets his hour upon the stage / and then is heard no more: it is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury /

signifying nothing.
Macbeth

A believer in Jesus Christ sees no more virtue in suffering than does any other person, but knows because of the pain and the dying, through to the rising of Jesus, life and meaningless death are full of purpose. A friend had been confined to a wheel chair, crippled with arthritis, totally dependent. She went on pilgrimage to Lourdes many times – then came a time when she called to tell me she had been cured. When I saw her, there appeared to be no change, still confined to a wheel chair. She smiled and said: its true I'm healed – my situation is no longer a problem for me! Resentment and frustration are gone – I am content with myself, just as I am.

The now of life is so that we can know God, when we accept ourselves exactly as we are. Something easy to achieve when all is well – but requires more effort when life is less so. It is cooperating with Grace which lets us, not just to be content with our lot, but to recover a positive enthusiasm for life, without having to deny we would prefer to have things differently – *If you would be perfect, take up your cross daily* - Mt.16.24.

The cross tells us there is never a right time to die; death brings with it a disruption capable of disrupting the greatest of festivities. The fact many other families are bereaved, does nothing to lessen the grief. Jesus' death was not a private affair. Through dying, he is in solidarity with all following this path, sooner or later. Likewise, Resurrection, belongs to any who also die.

He is both the healing of what has happened, and the hope of what is coming; both are able to be experienced in the *now* of every life. There is some suffering that isn't the product of human malpractice, natural disasters of earthquake and famine... For such tragedies, there can be no explanations that will satisfy. But an attitude is possible, when meaningless death, the deepest of all absurdities, is no longer so, since Jesus who lived right through unjust suffering and merciless death, is alive with new life. Death is not the end – it is the end of the beginning!

Paul tells us we have already died and risen, in Christ. Do we feel reassured? See how we celebrate this in the Paschal Mystery. All too often, Easter comes and goes, meaning little more than the end of Lent. Even liturgical texts speak of Ordinary time back again.

Holiness, to which Jesus invites us – *be holy, as is the Father* – Mt.5.48 – is best described as ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well. Nothing is more ordinary than we will die; for believers in Jesus, it is the prelude to eternal life. We tend to be not just in mind-fix, but also in a heart-fix, which asks us to celebrate Easter with other anniversaries – but just a little bit more so.

It is more than simply remembering something that happened more than 2,000 years ago! Easter is permanently contemporary, what happens to Jesus tells us we celebrate Easter much more than once a year. Is this evident for all to see?

Every learning process is to bring change. Too often we let the catechetical process take-off, without evangelisation. Chesterton remarked that any word that does not impel to action is an evil word! Be that as it may, what does our process of growing, of becoming more – what does *conversion* feel like?

We suffer from moral blockages – where is the flesh and blood evidence of our belief in one God, Three Persons? Where is the evidence that we believe we are all equal, but not the same? That unity in love comes from diversity in persons?

We gather in community to hear the Word and break bread – where is the evidence that we become body and blood-given in service? Have we accepted John's test – 1Jn.3.14 – *We know we have passed from death to life, because we love each other?*

We believe in Jesus the Christ, not in Christianity – which is the *evidence* of our believing. *You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror* – Jas.2.19.

Believers in Jesus, the Christ, are graced as children of God and: *No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.* – 1Jn.3.9. The world-to-come is the gathering together, making whole [*holy*] of what began with creation, to be handed back, now complete, to its one origin – Abba, Father.

On that day holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar.
Zech.14.20.

We have bartered, not so much God's Word, as God's meaning of God's Word. Taking it upon ourselves to decide who is in, who is out with our exclusions – when the Word clearly says: *Come to me all who labour and are overburdened [both by life and by institutions]* – Mt.11.28. *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst* – Jn.6.38. Everyone has been offered abundant life – our systems, through exclusions, make this a non-starter for so many. Is there not true wisdom in:

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.
Lk.10.21.

No one saw the Resurrection happen – yet Jesus is risen. The Gospel does not present the empty tomb as evidence of it. The only evidence is the real presence of Jesus-risen, amongst his friends. Not as one back from the dead – but as one who has done something by dying – one who has lived death into new living. Our world is littered with evidence of decay and corruption of things once good. Surrounded, as we are, with seemingly built-in obsolescence – where is the evidence of the Resurrection today?

For the believer, as for the lover, it is willingness to take, not just God's Word, but God's meaning – not anyone else's. Both Peter and Thomas lead the way for us – Peter's *I haven't a clue what you are talking about – but if you say it* – Jn.6.60. Jesus told us: *where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them* – Mt.18.20. Good Friday was not the last day the Father had something to say about Jesus!

Chapter 17

Credo... I pledge my heart!

Credo says it all. Not the casual and safe *I believe* – it literally means *I pledge my heart*. Something not best described by adherence to doctrine, nor by impeccable observance of precept. I do not pledge my heart to the truths of faith – which I believe – but to becoming a *truthful believer* in Jesus Christ, sent by the Father, and to try to be as wholeheartedly committed to him as he is committed to me! Which means letting my words of commitment become flesh; which Paul calls *putting-on Christ* – Gal.3.27.

The mind has an important part to play, sifting through experiences, ordering priorities. Highlighting what needs to happen if we are serious about *Credo*; and the very real need for discipline – not the rigours of Lent, but its real meaning – *the art of the disciple*.

The majority of our daily decision making are within a personal, rather than a strictly intellectual context. There is objective reality, which we tend to live within, using our subjective experiences of it. Decisions will be influenced by felt needs, not subject to general norms or principles. See our tendency to react more readily to story than to principled exhortations.

We often speak of faith as if it were a reality objectively distinct from ourselves – *the faith, be it losing it or honouring it*. Faith is a reality of an entirely different order, belonging more readily to where love belongs. There is an intellectual dimension to

faith, but there is no such thing as *the faith*, as there is no such thing as *the love*. There are simply *faith-full* persons. We slip too easily into abstractions – *the family, the Church, the community...* while these have appropriate connotations, they represent the different ways of belonging, yet we can belong to any or all of them at the abstract level, without any tangible belonging.

Artificial differences separate us – all of us have some form of apartheid we are ashamed to own. The nimby factor is very much alive; we have not just *keep your distance* attitudes, but sanitised closeness [*not unlike our pandemic experiences*]. Community experiences have some inane [*safe*] conversations, with laughter loud enough to have a hollow ring. There is genuine human autonomy – it is *not the sameness* – which, when respected, shows something of God, unique to the individual, yet meant for sharing.

Sharing how God loves me, and challenges me to live my life as God sees it, not as I see it – a beloved of Abba. This is not easy if I'm accustomed to *I'm not worthy*. Worthy or not, God loves me; and when I slowly venture to believe this – unworthiness [*though true*] ceases to be an issue, though doesn't disappear; I've moved from being a sinner, to a forgiven sinner. *Forgiven* is the key word, because it can become my entitlement to Jesus, who says I've come for sinners! – Lk.5.32.

To allow myself to be forgiven, means accepting that I need forgiveness, because of my isolated existing and not *living*. Living in a world which embraces hedonism as life, there is the tendency and the opportunity for *as long as it feels good it is good*. The Gospel tells us that the essence of life is to live with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, without these I'm not even half-alive.

We are made with an ingrained bias, one which we only realise when we try to be genuinely, fully alive – the deeply felt need to belong truthfully – to be accepted as we are – until we hear what God has said-into-us *love your neighbour as whole heartedly as you can* – Mt.19.19. *I will lead you into the desert and speak to your heart* – Hos.2.14. Stop lying! – 1Jn.14.20.

Jesus gave us a clue as to what the world lived-in by faith people would look like. He said you will always have the poor with you – Mt.26.11. – a challenge and an answer, *as often as you do this to the least... you do it to me* – Mt.25.40. It works both ways – as often as you ignore, or despise... you do it to me. *Hear the cry of the poor* – Prov.21.13 and find out where we are!

To bring peace with justice means acting justly, loving tenderly, walking humbly with God – Mic.6.8. This starts with a challenge – am I as ought to be - as I have promised to be? We live by choices made, for which there are always responsibilities, accepted or not. Non-acceptance has me always looking for someone to blame when things go wrong. All that a brim full life asks is that we speak the language of life revealed, literally in Jesus – *and the Word was made flesh* – Jn.1.14. What would happen if my words are enfleshed?

Incarnation is relationship language – where there is no place for preference or undue self-interest – *Be compassionate* – Lk.6.36 – is not in any way conditional. Every single person has at least one talent, unique to them: to make God present as no one else can – by the way we are present! Creation is so fashioned as to be the ideal place for service ministry; surrounded by so much giftedness in nature itself – the God-given opportunity for gratitude, edging us into personal creativity.

The quality of mercy is not strained. Upon place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesses him that gives and him that takes – Merchant of Venice. Likewise, our stewardship is to be exercised graciously [*appropriate response to Grace*] otherwise, no matter how sincerely done, we are simply restoring Babel, with *I did it my way!* If there isn't good news for everyone, then we are simply widening the chasm between the haves and have nots.

Neither is it enough simply to restate: *we are all equal under God*. Scripture tells us we exist by Divine intent of mutual interdependence, with countless opportunities to create fascination for each other. This always requires faith, not just to trust, but because another's well-being seems to matter to us. Because a world of so many *others* creates opportunities to get to know the Supreme Other – where we come from and why.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus could do nothing where no one believed in him – Jn.5. Indeed, we have all experienced the clammy impotence lack of trust imposes with dishonest good manners. However, it takes only a single believer to change – an ancient prayer says of Jesus' Mother: *blessed is she who believed – even on Holy Saturday!*

Science is to be welcomed and applauded for the ways it makes life ever more genial: especially the speed with which vaccines are devised, when life is under very real threat.; and realise that here too we can detect Grace of God. We speak, rightly, of the laws of nature, but remember that we didn't invent them – they are ever-present, waiting for skill-graced persons to discover them for us. If we disregard the laws of nature, they wouldn't go away, as we are finding out from our planet abuse.

This is equally true of our relating; it is the *natural* way of coping with the unpredictable – how many scientific discoveries have happened unexpectedly? Sadly, such God-given grounds for trust are being eroded, by the popularity of our compromising with truth. How much is the old adage missed: *tell the truth and shame the devil?* John – 1Jn.4.11 - tells us to test the spirit in us – as does Paul – 1Cor.12.10 – to see if it confesses the Lordship of Jesus, if embracing it produces the fruit he produced – when hungry people are fed, and poor people are surprised.

Where trust is missing, we are exposed to the caprice of whatever catches the fancy of others. Loyalty only flourishes where there is trust well-founded: *when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me* – 1Cor.11.24. Trust is to faith what oxygen is to life. It outreaches finite and limited living – daring to hope in things unseen but longed for, which our inner being outrageously demands as truly both eternal and possible.

We feel innately betrayed when structures imposed to foster hope fail us. Not because they were misguided, but were not free enough be true [*being more to do with good order than with genuinely good living*]. Whenever system is other motivated than for abundant living, and descends to meagre self-preservation, without our consent – we are inevitably left wanting.

The Old Testament says people of God are hearers of the Word: *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path* – Ps.119.105. When the Word of God is revered by Institution and structure, lives will flourish in freedom and creativity – without it, we become no more than timid keepers of rules. When Jesus appeared among us, the very Law that was given, precisely to ensure the primacy of hearing the Word, was used to silence him, on Calvary. This is the way unredeemed humankind still treats God's Word: *whenever you do this even to the least of my brethren, you do it to me* – Mt.25.40.

There is a way, the only way, to reverse the erosion of credibility – commitment to words spoken. We have trivialised commitment by disregarding words of promise, and even always intended to do so. It is a sick society that has to warn children- *you can't believe everything you hear*, which has to be done for their protection. The problem isn't the credulity of the child, but with the mendacity of the speaker.

We earnestly seek commitment through our innate longing for value [*not valuables*]. One person committing self to another, acknowledges and celebrates both our God-given origin and our destiny. Wherever God is involved, the *experiencing* of gift-giving is never just benevolence, but vibrant evidence of the esteem and affection with which the recipient is held by God. A reality where coercion has no place, just the attractiveness of one to the other.

To be a committed person is not to engage in *Trivial Pursuits*. Commitment only belongs between someone and someone else. It is devalued and out of place when merely requested for *The Cause* or *The Flag!* Only a living, free and willing person can make and to receive commitment. This has to be, since only *person* is capable of the intimacy which gives value. It is not just a declaration of how one intends to live, but a pledge to seek the integrity which alone allows God to be present – the source and benefactor of all intimacy.

We are gifted with a life that requires eternity for its completion, and every honest commitment brings us nearer to this promise. We pass through a variety of experiences of loving and being loved, and from them we know what Jesus meant: *to all who believed in him he gave power to know God as Father* – Jn.1.17. We feel affirmed and enabled with an enthusiasm for more.

Many experience life as an endurance, to be *got through* as best we can. To experience desire to be with, however, is the fruit of genuine love – how Eliot describes it:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Experience reminds us that our relationships are fragile and even ambiguous, leaving us unclear about our virtue and suspicious of our vice. This is where commitment helps by bringing everything out into the open, eager to share elation, challenged to uncover what we hide. Commitment lets us cope with our unpredictability. Paul asks – *why do I do what I would rather not do? Who can rescue me?* and answers – *thanks be to God, Christ Jesus.* - Rom.7.25.

Thanks be to God, Christ Jesus – we can say this, because of Baptism – but do we? Accepting baptism is accepting to live differently: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me* – Gal.2.20. This call is for everyone – what is unique is the manner of it. What it looks like – ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. 1Cor.13.1-7.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

[a] Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it^[b] to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Rom.12.14-21

This life we are offered is our own life – redeemed. We *can* live as Jesus lived – simple, uncomplicated, when yes means yes and no means no. Whether we do depends on my willingness to be led, not to plough my own furrow – to be led, as Jesus was – even into the desert! Ezek. spells it out: *I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them for ever* – 37-26.

Life is not so much about getting safely from A to Z, as about enjoying the journey. The resilience of life is strong enough to sustain this. Our natural indigence, our unquestioned need for ongoing salvation, locates our weakness within the stronghold of love – which transforms it into strength. My weakness, my sin, my brokenness is my personal entitlement to Christ. *I have come for sinners* – Lk.5.32.

I have no trouble identifying myself as sinner – *how long have you got?* This how I see me – but do I ever pause to ask *How does God see me?* What I am doing to my life is up to me – what I cannot do, is change how God sees me! I exist because God desires my company, desires it so much as to stay with me even in my sin – *behold, I stand at the door and knock* – Rev.3.20. As Holman Hunt's portrait shows – there's no handle on the outside of the door – but there is on the inside!

Learn, as did the Prodigal, all that was required of him was to return home and let his father be his Dad. This is simple – but not easy! Peter had problems too, but living in faith was able to tell us: *do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise* – 2Pet.3.8-9.

Love [*God*] loves the lovely – and only creates what is lovely. But, Love created me... so I am... can I finish this without hesitation? No as I see it, yes as it really is [*as God sees*]. This is why the inherent sacramentality of Creation is patiently waiting – for those given the task for naming this for God [Genesis 2.20] to waken to the call – to set it free to reveal its loveliness, by the way we decide to live in it.

Our world doesn't like suffering – understandably; but has become proficient in devising ways to cause it! Our wonderful world designed the Cross; designed weapons to destroy parts of creation. When love gets a hearing, energies like nuclear power can be used to serve life – not destroy it.

To follow Christ is not to mimic Christ! Like him, we are not asked to go looking for crosses, simply seek to celebrate and enhance goodness wherever it is – it isn't confined to religion, but available to wherever human life belongs: *Lord, grant us the serenity to accept what we cannot change; courage to change what we can; and the wisdom to know the difference.*

We are moved – sometimes to action – by the courage of so many whose handicaps, more visible than ours, doesn't prevent them living full and rewarding lives. The vast majority of us, however, have managed to compromise even death. Death was entrusted to us, with the awesome task of imprinting the seal of eternity on values we treasured during our lifetime – the prelude to new beginning. We have managed to make death an all-encompassing absurdity. S Francis was jolted out of this when he

read: *no one can see the face of God and live – Ex.33.20; If death allows me to see the face of God – welcome sister death.*

Made by the Word of God, we are the sound of God's voice; and are ever attracted by any evidence of this sound. The result of willingness to listen and to heed, is that we too can *let our life happen according to the Word – Lk.1.38*; what this feels like is nurturing our deep desire for living intimately - *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come – Jn.16.13.*

This telling will be our being able to see in everyday living, opportunities for care and compassion – through joy at forgiving and being forgiven. Chaos will be challenged into order by the attractiveness of goodness., urging us to make flesh, everything that ought to be. *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love – Eph.1.4.*

Doubts, confusing anxiety, even desperation become the raw material of prayer, not because they are wrong, but because they hinder our getting intimately closer to God. We do not ask for miracle, nor the chance to start all over again - just for the confidence that this life, the only one we have, is tailor-made for us. We have the life – we have the means – Lord, help us bring them together!

Our doubting is not so much a crisis of faith, as of conviction! About something we possess with our mind and strength, but not yet with all our heart! What we know and what we long for are not yet in sync; we drift! We need to pause, and let it come slowly to us that the discrepancy is not as great as we feared it might be.

We need to be with each other frequently to celebrate – celebration doesn't have to have an occasion. It has that in its own right – as the vital means for *belonging* to flourish. Celebration clears away routine, treating each other as special – we are made in the image of the God of surprise! While it isn't possible to find one companion with all ten of life's qualities, it is much easier to find ten, with one each! Which is probably why there are so many of us around!