

It Seems to Me.

Who are you, Lord, and who am I? To be able to say in words - it seems to me - is one thing; a very different thing to say - it seems to me - in words made flesh. The one can be little more than a modest beginning of words in communication, while the other says something about how I am actually intent on trying to become such a communion, as a relationship.

So, *it seems to me* that my life is meant to be living proof that I believe: *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10 that I might enjoy my life by living it in such a way that enables and encourages you to do the same. My life is not so much for me as I see it, but for you as you need it. Why does this matter to me? Because my living needs a focal point, I need purpose; my life is telling me *that living is for something*.

I believe I was created deliberately and intentionally, that I am not the product of random happening, that there is a meaning for me. My life is a series of present moments - everything happens now. I need to start with the place of now in my value system. St. Bonaventure, writing about illumination, reminds us that illumination is not just a question of light, as in a beacon calling me onwards, but also and I believe more importantly, as warmth, as fire in the grate.

I am not attracted by the light that is outside me, but warmed forward from an energy within myself - not so much seeking light as becoming light. It is more a question of attitude than of *what I have done and what I have failed to do*. What does being alive actually feel like, and what happens when I feel more, or less, alive?

Margery Williams ask in her book - *The Velveteen Rabbit* - when two animals were in conversation - what is real? Answered with such feelings as: *you are real when all your hair has been loved off - people who are real don't have sharp edges or break easily... Real is not the same for everybody, not even the same for me at different times and moods*. Whether a believer or a healthy agnostic, real is worked out for me through the shape of my life, how I respect and value it at any given time.

We have the recorded living of many who have lived before us, who have left us the pluses and minuses of their own experiences. Indeed, the Scriptures are shot-through with such stories, people excited enough by life, even those who cry out life is surely more than this, waiting to be prompted, lured into doing something about it. I need constantly, to ask myself why they did what they did, rather than what did they do.

Even a cursory glance at Scripture will show how much of it is given over to story-telling rather than to other literary forms. The stories are about ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well [*a working description of holiness?*], people searching for meaning, for a life with dignity. This culminates in the paradox of *Jesus crucified* proclaiming that *he has brought life in abundance*.

No matter what the price for such abundance, it is clearly worthwhile: *whoever loses life will find it... greater love than this there is not, than you give your life for another* – Jn. 13.15. But primarily, and above all else, such living actually *lets me die into eternal life*, as the Resurrection clearly shows. This makes God's promise really fulfilled, showing us God is nothing else but love. The two belong together: life is abundant because life is love.

Take a lead from St. John, reminding us that what matters is not our love for God but God's love for us: my life is eminently worthwhile *because I am loved into existence*, cherished and desired by God. So astonishingly true is this as to show me that my sin, my very real sinfulness, is sin not because it is an offence against God, but because it denigrates and abuses what God loves and cherishes totally and eternally – me!

When I try to reach into this mystery, I need to be careful not to become overly concerned [*detained?*] by disciplines and exercises, as if practice actually does make perfect, that I can become more spiritual the apprenticeship way - keep at it and it will come good. It is not my exercises and disciplines that make me spiritual, but my spirituality that gives colour, shape and value to my exercises - faith, like love, always needs expression. It is not about what I am doing - but being who I am - a beloved of Abba, through **the** beloved giving to Abba the Spirit inspired life into and through death: *Into your hands I commend my Spirit [for Abba to give to all willing to receive]*.

Something to be equally aware of, is a kind of unhealthy Gnosticism, a mentality that proclaims either in word or deed - *I know or you don't* - placing undue reliance on the mastering of expertise [*knowing who said what and when about the spiritual life*]. Such elitism is abhorred by the Gospel, where there is the universally inclusive call, which must be universally possible.

Spirituality should not be seen as an optional extra, like a hobby or an added interest in life. We are religious by nature, and when human nature is at its best - in freedom, peace and harmony - it is open to its intended purpose, intimacy with the Transcendent. However, this religious atmosphere tends to be anaesthetised and deprived of its vigour, when we feel we have to switch to *the holy mode*, and consciously turn our attention to religious issues.

Followers of the way of Saints Francis and Clare are not comfortable with *rescue language* when we speak and read of how God is with us in Jesus, the Word made flesh. As the hymn proclaims it - *ransomed, healed, restored*; and crucially when the splendour and wonder of the Incarnation is reduced to: *O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam*. Our life with God is God inviting us to intimacy, to know God as Abba, through Jesus as friar, through the free giving of the Spirit, the very love-life of God.

It is not so much a question of having something done for us, something we cannot do for ourselves, like the very real need we occasionally have for the various rescue services for our health and well-being. To see our spiritual living as a graced NHS - is to miss out on a vital and crucial element of my everyday living.

Stay with the analogy. When I am asked - how are you - prescinding from this simply being a polite - *how do you do* - how do I know how I am? What does it mean to be well, to be in good health? As with my religious sense, that it isn't something added-on to me or done for me by an agency other than me; so my state of health is the harmony within me of everything that belongs to me as *this* human being and not *that one*.

This is why Jesus speaks of such living experience as needing to be one of abundance, that I am brim-full to overflowing, not trying to get by on a meagre survival kit; but full to running over with real well-being, an intensity of feeling zest for life, something welling-up from within me, and not an acquisition tacked on to me.

It follows that just as no one can give me health, no more than they can provide me with happiness and love, so my spiritual self becomes aware of my life taking a specific shape which, when recognised and accepted, uncovers this abundance, aware of being loved, as it deepens and excites me into desiring it to become more and deeper: *with us in mind, God promises something more*: Heb.11.40.

To remind ourselves: Jesus told us that he has come to bring life in abundance. But this bringing is not from beyond me; rather is it uncovered within me, the way I discover God's attraction to me through Jesus' very real presence. I am beginning to feel the goodness God sees in me - *and God saw that I was good*. - Genesis 1.31. Remembering that there is no beginning [*or ending*] in God - that God never began to love me - God loves me, brings a sense of well-being that my future is assured in God. It also causes a sense of wonder. God

never began to love me, but I had a beginning. Whilst there never will be a time when I do not exist, there was a time when I didn't exist. So what was God loving before I existed? What is this goodness that God sees in me?

I exist always *in the heart of God*, an existence that finds incarnation in time. My life is given to me, to enjoy and to mature - to mature in such manner that I can discover the face I had before I was born [*what God was seeing in loving me*] precisely by the way I live relationships, and see love reflected back to me, by the shape of my life. For me, this confronts me as a challenge - *The Rule and Life of the Friars Minor is to live the Gospel...*

In as much as I strive to let my life happen according to the Word, Luke.1.38 - to that extent will I discover who I can be in trying to be honest and integrated in the now of life? This will happen through the way I am looked at by those whom Love sends to me - in family, fraternity, friendship, compassion and so many intimacies. This persuades me that Someone is both loving me in this way, and is now able to love others through my love.

How can I really relish this abundance? The Letter to the Hebrews can help - *With us in mind God promised something more* - 11.40. Let Manley Hopkins interpret this with words from the Kingfisher - *Crying, what I do is me; for this I came, to be myself...* and again elsewhere - *Acts in God's eyes what in God's eyes he is, Christ.*

We are called to be Christ-like. Not mimics of Christ, not trying literally to do the things he did, or use the words he used, but *to be someone*. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray they had been with him when he prayed. They didn't hear him say anything or do anything, *they saw him being someone, the beloved of Abba*. The two instances in the Gospel that identify Jesus for us are at his baptism in the Jordan and on Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration - this is my Son, the beloved... Mt.3.17; 17.5.

Jesus' mission, his purpose in life, is identical with himself. He has come to make the Father's love real for all [*yes, all*] that God has created. This he does not by talking about it, not by giving us doctrines, but *by being himself for us*, his Father's Son, the Beloved. *To all who believe him*, says St. John in the first Chapter of the Gospel, *he gave power to know God as Father.* - 1.12.

We know it is the Spirit who enables us to cry out Abba, Father - Romans 2.15. This is the enabling power Jesus has brought, the very love life of God that enables him to receive the total self-emptying love of God, and to respond totally, is now ours. [*give yourself totally to him who gives himself to you - totally.* S Francis] What he is by nature, the beloved of Abba, we are called to become by Grace through our response to it.

To insist that I am individual [*which I am*], and therefore independent, can have serious consequences, and consequences that are not always helpful; such as *the save your soul mentality* as the purpose of my life. I belong to the world, the world to the Cosmos etc... And before ever looking at myself as individual, I would do well to focus on what is real, not what I make of it [*it seems to me*], but what is reality?

Receiving God's word is not enough, *I need also to receive God's meaning of God's Word*, the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, *in whom all live and move and have their being* - 1Cor.8.6. Reality is that everything is held together by a complex network of belonging, in relationships.

Such relationships allow the earth to be what it is, and as the Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us: that we too come from elsewhere, we come from the dust of the earth and will return to it; the dust that began as star-dust that spun-out aeons ago; *the dust of the earth that was to become the body of God* [Bonaventure]. Science and its allied disciplines are asking the right questions as to how it all started, was it a big bang? This is theirs to probe. Where

Science along with the rest of us must keep respectful silence is the question of why. For this we need, and we have Revelation.

However our world began, it has continued to evolve as a seemingly limitless cauldron of creativity. Revelation helps us see that God did not create a perfect world from the start, which we spoiled to such an extent that God *had to get a man in!* God created a world able to be made perfect by the way it is lived-in. We are invited to become co-creators. We made a mess of this – Jesus, the Word of God, came to be with us; [*like us in everything but sin*], to live in our world as God intended, facing the problems we created, even to death – but did not remain dead.

So, what then is the reason for the Incarnation, why did the Word become flesh? We read in the Book of Genesis [*a not insignificant title*] that God gave us the task of naming creation, and allowing it to become what God intended. With the hindsight of our track record, we could well ask did God back a loser? Our answer would have to be yes to this, if God had not intended *always* to become part of Creation. The *always* is significant. Before ever there is sin, St. Paul tells us, i.e. *before the foundation of the world we are destined to be one with God in Christ*. - Eph.1.4. Christ is not an afterthought, *and certainly not a happy fault*.

Creation happens [*it is ongoing*] with Christ in mind, it is to become the specifically designed location for the Word to become flesh, just as the creation of humankind is how God always intended this to happen, *the first-born of many...* Rom.8.29.

A sin-centred spirituality will always struggle to make the wonder and splendour of this Mystery evident. As one author wrote: to see the greatest masterpiece of God, the Incarnation, simply as a remedy for sin, is to build the Taj Mahal to repair a hole in the road, only infinitely more so. [*an addendum: God asks us to name creation for God - how many lists of names would we need to name all creation? St. Francis used only two names – sister and brother, for the whole creation*]

But to return to the point, simply to concentrate on my individuality, is to ignore the wonder of the reality. If I would know what it really means to be human, I need to ask questions like: what kind of God would be responsible for all this? Somewhere, in the heart of discovering what it is all about, lies the answer to what I am all about. When I made my entrance into this world, individual though I am, I already belonged as brother to the rest of the Creator's gift.

Is all this just to allow me to be? Or is there not already in place, waiting to be discovered, *a necessary belonging between God - Creation - and me?* It is interesting to recall that when Jesus reacted to those who questioned his authority to do and say what he did and said, he simply said: *I know where I come from, and I know where I am going* - John 8.14. This in turn links in with the promise - *to all who believe he gave power to know God as Father* - John 1.12. To know where we are from and where we are going; the question that has haunted mankind. One has only to see the fortunes made by creators of horoscopes and the like, to realise this.

I need to keep in mind that my reaction or response to what I discover reality to be, will be very much influenced, if not conditioned, by my own very real experience of living my life. How I take all this in will greatly influence how I tend to see and talk about God; just as how I perceive God will equally impact on how I live and love and relate. This is right and proper, but needs guidance.

I need, for example, to hear how creation announces itself to me, and informs me about the awesomeness and wonder of the Creator God; alongside this the equally real announcing of God-with-us as a helpless child clinging to a human breast. God comes to us by giving us someone to love, and because this coming is as a human like us, God is with us in everyone

needing love: this finds resonance in Jesus insisting that the second commandment is like the first: Love God and love your neighbour - Mt.22.39.

How much we miss, how deprived we become, if we insist on seeing our recorded origins as the sorry tale of sin and failure, betrayal and corruption, alienation and death, a curse that infects us still, so much so that all we can do is cry-out for help. Ask a very important question: with regard to God, am I in a situation of weakness or of strength? Traditionally, we have meandered down the path of weakness, seeing our life as *mourning and weeping in a valley of tears*, where my bodily existence will seriously contaminate my soul if not kept in check.

There certainly is a reality here. Original Sin is very real. I am a sinner; I do betray the trust placed in me, there is more than enough evidence to justify my position of weakness, as well as my inability to do anything about it, as the clammy hand of death so often insists by its unwelcome intrusion. A spirituality based solely on this must focus on the need to discipline our waywardness, punishing deliberate sinfulness with the threat of unpleasant consequences. Life as we know it is to be tamed, denied and ultimately left behind. Yet the story of the Fall is neither the opening nor the focal point of the Book of Genesis.

The book starts with God's consistent affirmation of creation, God knew what he was doing, and saw that it was very good. God's invitation to Adam and Eve is an invitation to enjoy life in a garden of delight, where the earth sustains life into an abundance of good things. Before ever we have original sin we have original grace. Life began in a relationship with God, a life of mutual compatibility. God is walking with them in the evening coolness. To be fully human is to be equally of God and of the earth at the same time.

This harmony was ruptured by opting freely for sin, and dire though this has been in its consequences, it is still a sub-plot to something far greater. This tells us that sin never was, never can be, the reason for the Incarnation, though it has much to do with the mode of it, reflected in the promise of the return to harmony and joyful creativity of human living. Our living is not best described as a war against sin. We should take our lead from Scripture, which homes in on so many stories of ordinary folk struggling for goodness, and never sees our purpose rising out of an original curse.

God saw that it was good - everything in Creation is God-related and thereby God-revealing, a reality that cannot be destroyed; neglected and defaced, yes; but never destroyed. I have much to regret in my life, a past littered in mediocrity and sin, and yet my past is probably the safest and most assured aspect of me. My past is in God's hands, God who is total forgiveness. I do not have to recall *what I have done and what I have failed to do*. These are simply fruits of something much deeper. I need to own the fact that I am no longer a sinner, but a forgiven sinner. I needed to be forgiven, and I need to allow myself to be forgiven. Thus the proper perspective for repentance is that it is not something God demands of me, but something I demand of myself; I have sinned, hurt, betrayed - I need to recover my self-respect - to repent.

I can do this more readily the more I accept God's unconditional love for me: God loves me, always loves me, and loves me exactly as I am. Owning this freely warms away the chill of my unworthiness by letting me taste something of the abundance God desires for me, the reason why I was loved into being.

The terror of the gift of personal freedom is that I may choose rightly or wrongly - yet the affirmation rests in the fact that I must choose honestly - and this allows for and accommodates mistakes as learning curves, provided I do learn! I may not be right but will not be wrong if I choose honestly, since honesty is not a static reality, it is a way of life and

that means once honesty faces truth [*like Paul at Damascus; Francis meeting the leper*] there is no other option but to change [convert].

Love cannot be demanded of me as a price for anything, love is only real and genuine when it is spontaneous in its freedom. God never gives up on me since I always have the freedom to say yes. Indeed, as St. Paul tells us, this is who Jesus is - God's yes to all that has been created: *In God there is no yes and no - only yes*. This is not simply abstract affirmation, but a yell of YES. - [cf. *2Cor.1.19*] as when one suddenly is surprised by unexpected goodness. God's yes is for everyone to hear - for his Word is made flesh: *there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who freely repents* - Lk.15.7. who freely chooses love].

This is why the primary concern that religion should have for me is a genuinely active seeking after value, values that shape life and lend purpose to my striving. Life is never still-life, never simply an idea. We inhabit all kinds of relationships that can steadily shape and reshape life, something we do by the responsible use of free choice. Every choice is chosen from within a series of possible alternatives. My choosing this rather than that depends on my way of living a value life.

Values are not all of equal importance; there is a hierarchy within me. Though I have no conscious awareness of actually setting-up such a hierarchy, as well as being instilled through culture and family background, religion has a major part to play in this. So much so as to lead me in a sure meander until awareness dawns that there really is one value above all the others, and towards whose attainment the others are aligned, referred to in the Gospel - *the pearl of great price*. - Mt.13.46.

In today's world it is essential to know the difference between value and valuables, since one is life-giving, the other life-diminishing. Valuables - *money, property, status, power...* are all external to me, they are treasured because they add comfort, security, influence to our inner experiencing of life; whereas value is that internal quality, involvement and passion engendered as an inner experience. The danger with valuables is that they can be seen and sought after for themselves, as if they actually cause passionate living. Whereas it is *how I experience myself* that will focus me on the values I believe I need.

It is when life suddenly intrudes with serious questions that we see what our needs are, in sharp contrast to so many wants. When I am told of terminal illness, family bereavement, natural and man-made disasters, I discover then that I really hold myself together by *my inner resources* and not by external add-ons. My relationships, the presence of others simply wanting to be there for me... all prove to be special at such times.

It becomes clearer when we appreciate that striving after value means first and foremost striving after self-value, engendered and nurtured through relationships to the world beyond ourselves. The first important impact love makes is within the lover, actually experiencing the reality of my experience of myself is different because of your presence, leading to what the Gospel mysteriously calls *losing my life in order to find it*, - Mt.10.39, and this most patently when the experience is mutual. We desire instinctively to live as abundantly as possible, corresponding with what Jesus declared to be the purpose of the Incarnation - *I have come that you may have life in abundance* - Jn.10.10.

Abundance is possible through treasuring *the pearl of great value* - Mt.13.46, whatever form or shape that takes: e.g. in the presence of the lover - *you are my heart's delight*. Many feel obliged, almost by a kind of protocol, to name their pearl as God, as if we have to forsake all else in favour of a direct, one-to-one with God.

How does God come to me? Change one word and the answer jumps out at us. Since God is Love, ask how does love come to me? It is through so many loves gifted to us throughout life, and the gifting of our loving to others that we gradually become more comfortable and

familiar with Love itself; just as beautiful things lead us to beauty, and living truthfully leads us to Truth - *I am the way, the truth and the life.* – Jn.14.6.

For the few, there is the direct route, when God alone is perceived and desired as the one longed for heartily; for the rest of us, God has provided the scenic route, by sending us loves with a variety of faces, leading us home, together. What gives purpose, then, to how we choose values?

Scripture urges us not to invest ourselves in objects, possessions that can be here today and gone tomorrow [*there's nothing wrong in this, but finite resources can never satisfy an infinite thirst*]. We need life enriching relationships which, because they are secured by love, always have *something more* about them, underwritten as they are by love that is *unchangingly always new* - Jas.1.17. This is the promised abundance, that life be enjoyed to the full, without any no go areas.

How am I shaped by my relationships? It is realising that I am gifted to myself as one able to live for this very purpose. My life is not to follow a spiritual obstacle course, littered with do's and don'ts. Value is not determined by making bad choices, or by failing to make good ones. What matters is the passion of my searching, what is it that I truly long for *with all my heart*, ardently enough for it to become my life's goal?

I need to attend to the honesty of my choosing. Provided I am honest in what I am about, in my choosing I may not be right, but I will not be wrong. As we have seen, honesty is a way of life, *the way of life*. Honesty will eventually encounter truth, which will show me if I am heading the wrong way, and for honesty to prevail and endure, I must turn round [*be converted*] onto another road or even the narrow path that is being shown to me.

This also gives me a clue as to why we should attach great importance to fidelity, to being faithful [*full of faith*]. Fidelity, like commitment, is not to something outside me, like a flag or a cause etc. First and foremost, fidelity is to my integrity, that I really do want honesty to be my quality of life. It is my struggle to be faithful to my word that makes me complete, genuine, whole [*holy*], *able to be holy as the Father is holy* - Lk.6.36, in that *my word too* is becoming flesh. All the while there is no coercion in this, simply that alluring *come and see* that the Word offers to everyone who asks - I dare you to try it.

All this because faith is revealing to me what love is really all about, and why I find it captivating. With genuine relationships, being with others who share the same value, though never the same experiences, I know that wholeness, completeness is, albeit fleetingly as yet, making its attractiveness felt. I am beginning to believe more deeply in a love that is both big enough and small enough to embrace every aspect of me being me. I am getting closer and closer to being able to shout with conviction - not I believe in God, but *God believes in me*.

Love loves the lovely, and this love is for me, just as I am, because in God's eyes I am truly lovely - *and God saw that it was very good* - Gen.1.31. To believe Jesus when he says he has come that I may have abundant life, urges me to look for evidence of it. Scripture insists that the acceptable time is now; no suggestion of be patient, and all will be well tomorrow; *now, is the acceptable time* -2Cor.6.2. Wholeness [holiness] is not a reward for a life of being good, but evidence of life being enjoyed.

Genesis reveals God calling us into being within a creation best suited to this purpose, and in an orderly fashion - with each development affirmed personally by God - and God saw that it was good. Isn't it really sad that not only do I not appreciate what made God speak in such wonder, but I actually abuse the gift of creation by neglecting the stewardship creation requires from me, if it is to be able to praise God by being itself, and this by the way I am living in it?

Our stewardship, if honestly accepted, needs us to struggle mightily, if all creation and each individual part is to attain to its own innate goodness and so praise God. This thirst for goodness is God's gift for us to share the goodness that God is, not just to enjoy, but to pursue, to seek out, to uncover so that, as blessed Julian says, all will be well, and all creation learn to be itself, an expression of the presence of God.

Once we become immersed in such graciousness, we begin to see something of the obscenity that preludes so much abuse. Not least, for example, seeing the vandalism of pouring toxins into streams of sister water, and then allowing them to choke her to death, simply because such behaviour is seen as convenient to our own immediate purposes; of fashioning parts of creation to destroy parts of creation – fratricide!

The Old Testament stories emphasise the lengths to which ordinary folk will go in order to live honestly in pursuit of genuine living, and what happens when convenient dishonesty is allowed free sway. Paradoxically, the outcome of both paths is the return to, and the ongoing pursuit of ordinary folk doing ordinary things extraordinarily well, for no other reason than life itself calling out to be respected and enjoyed only in this way. Whatever this involves, it is to happen now. Choices are made to motivate us towards the reality: whatever it is that God is asking, it directly involves how we relate to each other here and now, within a creation specifically designed to host such living.

In the New Testament the focus is on just how intent God is about all this happening. Whereas in Genesis God comes [*and presumably goes*] to walk with them in the cool of evening, now we have the incredible [?]: God with us, never to leave. God with skin. Not *humanity* but flesh and blood reality, given to us as someone to love, a helpless baby clinging to a human breast. Because it is flesh and blood like ours. From then onwards, anyone needing to be loved, cared for, visited or helped in any way, is a request: *as often as you did it to these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me.* - Mt.25.40.

How did we ever develop that hideous concept of fuga mundi [*flight from the world*], a determination to see and use planet earth as little more than the departure lounge at Heathrow airport. Our purpose in life was to get away from this world into another, called heaven; all the while overlooking the truth that God is with us here and now, never to leave, waiting to be found by ordinary folk in their honest pursuit of everyday things.

St Augustine wrote that God is with us always, and that *no one is younger than God*. God always retains that fresh vigour of youth, the vitality and playfulness of one who is always ready to begin anew. We believe that God is eternal, and so is often represented as one bearded and immensely old. Yet, as we saw with love, God never began to love us, there is no beginning in God, and now by the same token, no ageing.

Being a child of God means more than having God as one's Father. It means sharing in the eternal youthfulness of the child whose birth we celebrate every year. No pretending to look young, hiding the wrinkles, dying one's hair, or fleeing from the signs of age. We do age and must not fear it. We must not be mutton dressed up as *the Lamb of God*.

It means that we can shed the temptations often in us as we grow older, of thinking that nothing new can be dared, that safety-first is better than taking a risk, of fatalism and cynicism. We can let God renew hope in our hearts. Humanity has a tomorrow precisely because of what it is today - life shared with God, who has come to share life with us. It is for the Church to embody a future in which all can enjoy the youthful company of God. That our own young do not become consumers in the market place, beguiled by designer labels, or as sexual objects to be used. That we all share those perennial qualities of youth, the capacity for play, for experiment, and for daring to enjoy life to the full.

In the Incarnation we celebrate the weakness of God. God comes not as a conquering warrior, but as a tiny, helpless baby. He who is the light comes in the midst of darkness. He whose body and blood are the true food of every man and woman sleeps in a manger, a feeding trough. This is the good news. It is not the simply joy and relief that accompanies the safe delivery of any human baby, but the joy which is a fruit of the Spirit.

Throughout history God has spoken through creation, through cosmic events and human history, through earthquakes, wind and fire and through liberating his people from Egypt and from Babylon. But this story of salvation, in the end, is a story of Immanuel, of God-with-us, God living, enjoying a human life.

Parents wonder what the future holds for their children, and it must have been the same for Mary and Joseph. But thanks to the coming of Jesus as a helpless baby, there really is a future. We rejoice because life has a meaning. Jesus is not the culmination of salvation history but its new beginning. It is the knowledge that we inhabit not just history but the history of our redemption. We experience joy not only because Christ came in weakness and simplicity at Bethlehem, but also because he will come again in glory.

This birth is only the beginning of the story. The rest of the story will unfold quickly: already present in this narrative of birth, along with angels and shepherds, are persecution and death. Even at the birth of Christ we are conscious of his suffering, death and resurrection. The massacre of the Holy Innocents reminds us that Christ was born into a world of darkness, and that darkness is very dark indeed. This new-born baby, who has not even learned to walk, will also have to learn to die.

Christianity lives within the wonder first sketched out by the prophet Isaiah. On the one hand there is the Thrice-Holy Divine Mystery beyond and among all creatures, all finitude, all time and space. And on the other hand, this governing and creating divinity redeems us as one of our own kind, as our own flesh and blood. This child is born to deal with evil and sin and love gone wrong.

Humanly speaking, he will fail and be buried under the weight of it, their victim in the bloodthirsty history of humanity. But the whole life ahead of this child will be one of recreating our humanity from within our own history. In the stories that will be told about him, we shall find him restoring and healing, guiding and welcoming, forgiving and recreating the lives of those whom he meets. So much so, that they will share in his Holy Spirit and become his co-workers in the mission. Maybe we should be singing equally rapturously, *Glory to God in the lowest and on earth peace to all of good will.*

As we try to risk this new human way, must we not also come to a new understanding of the divine? To say that this Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us is to say that God has translated his own character into a language accessible to us - *a lived human life* - Jesus from Nazareth. Here the Eternal Mystery is showing itself at its most characteristic, though in a human form. *To have seen me, is to have seen the Father* - Jn.14:9.

Jesus shows us God's way of being human and invites us, from his Bethlehem poverty, to follow his way. His honest everyday living embraces the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our own time; and as those sharing this new humanity, we now provide the hands and feet, the hearts and minds that allow Jesus access to the joys and brokenness of our own times. He didn't show us how to escape from our body living, but how to explore it to the full. My body is a temple of the Spirit. So much so that we should reverse the Scriptures when they have us proclaim: *How lovely is your dwelling...* Ps.84.1 about God, and understand it as God speaking about us.

But this new way of being a human being is truly and radically new. We are accustomed to read the life of Jesus, and see in his agony and death an ultimate victory. He broke down and

wept in terror - in the garden; his standing as a spiritual leader was gone - his disciples ran away from him; he was a failure. And that is how he shows us what it means to be God in human terms. In fact, Jesus was a failure, humanly speaking, and he reprimanded Peter for getting in the way of this - *get behind me Satan*. - Mt.16.23.

This is not to say that Jesus set out to be failure, but recognising the truth that humankind opted for the ways of sin rather than the ways of Grace. He is not saying there is no value in anything - he is revealing a love that goes deeper than any form of human loving. If I can face the fact that I'm going to fail - recognise what death means and its impact - then I will be in touch with life way beyond anything we normally mean by life.

This is why we see the suffering of Jesus as Baptism, a new life, as well as the surrendering of the old one. God really is to be found in the failure of the cross. Not the kind of failure that we can call a success - Jesus died of being human. What is outstanding about Jesus is not that he is more than human, no superman, but someone *more intensely* human than we ever dare be. Our faith says: *like us in all, save sin* - Heb.4.15 not like us in self-deception.

He shows us God, simply by showing the reality of being human. Being really human is nothing like what humanists would have us believe. Being really human means being in the kind of muddle and mess that Jesus was in; and this is where God is. The only place where God is to be found on earth. There is no place to find God except in being self, and no way to find being self except in Jesus... helpless and humiliated on the cross.

The cross - not just a memory - we preach Christ crucified. Not just a course of instruction about Jesus to learn about God. There is no set-in stone ordnance survey map of how to get to God. God is in humankind, anywhere at any time. Preaching the Gospel is not trying to explain God - but opens us up to the filtering through of the divinity in the most unlikely places - that moment when I want to push the needy one way in irritation etc... The Gospel is meant to make us ready to see such moments... *as often as did it to these the least...* Mt.25.40. This is what eternal life is about - the life that pain, suffering and dying can never touch.

The *way of love* has to fail in a world opting for death, because to live lovingly is to encourage the world to despise, reject, hate and kill you. This evil is inbuilt in our world. Original Sin is not something our first parents did and for which we are picking up the tab.

Original sin happens to each one of us by our being born into a distorted and dislocated world. It is not a sin we have committed, but an environment which is always leading away from kingdom values, to such an extent that when love actually arrived, we had to kill him.

Is this saying the Jesus' life and death have no value? Far from it. Read Romans 5.17 -

if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ. In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all.

For just as through the disobedience of one person many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one, the many will be made righteous. The law entered-in so that transgression might increase but, where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through justification for eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus' unswerving love for Abba, and his fidelity to his given word - *to be a fully alive human being* - was responsible for his execution. By the same token it brought about the overthrowing of death and its cohorts. We do well to remember that our salvation is not so much through the divinity of Jesus, as the total integrity of a genuinely human being.

Whereas in the past the whole race said no to the invitation freely offered to live this way, Jesus said *yes*; indeed, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians [2Cor.1.20.] Jesus is God's *yes* to all that is created.

In the world is still out there, pursuing ways that are anti-good, salvation is assured. For the *Yes of God* is alive and active, with us as promised, exactly where we are, saying *yes* to me even in my personal sin, until it gets through to me and persuades me to come home. Because of the way he lived, death has no power over him, whatever the appearances; the days of death-dealing are numbered. Death is non-living, Jesus is Risen, inviting anyone who believes him to come and be with him.

My life is given to me, in accepting the gift I have choices to make, and in my choosing I need to remember that there is much more to me than my thinking self. Thinking is crucial for integrated living, and all of our thinking, all of it, is influenced by emotion. It is never possible for me to be totally objective and neutral. This is by no means to descry the value of thinking things through, simply the challenge to be aware of where my thinking this way or that way is coming from. I am already influenced. It is by living properly through my body that I meet the world beyond me in its many manifestations.

Accepting the Gospel as my priority in living, and making choices, tells me that the Incarnation - the Word was made flesh - is not just something that happened to Jesus. It is required of everyone who says *yes* to his way. We too need the courageous humility of Mary, his mother, who simply said - *let my life happen according to the Word*. Our given words of commitment will mean nothing unless and until we seek to let them become flesh by the ways we choose to live. To stand in the presence of God, Jesus simply stood in his own world, and made the Father known by being himself, his Father's Son.

When St. Francis wrote to all the faithful, he focussed on what it means for us to be Christ-like, for what Jesus is by nature we are by Grace, we too are called to make the Father known by being truly ourselves, adopted children of Abba - *you are all mothers of the Lord [male and female] for you have conceived him through Word and Sacrament, so, now bring him to birth by the way you live*. We find this echoed in many places and expressions, perhaps none more so than in the poetry of Hopkins - *for this I came, to be myself*.

When Jesus talked about this in his stories, he drew on some unlikely characters to portray such lofty values: a king, a farmer, a fisherman, an unjust servant... A reminder that the main characters in the parables do not represent God, if they did God makes some very strange choices. The characters simply set-out the daily living that is common to all, and it is in these very ordinary relationships that the presence of God can be detected: a farmer concerned about his crops, a father responding to his children, a response to an importuning caller in the middle of the night, two sons who see their father in different ways...

The import of the parables is the sheer ordinariness that is tailor-made to find God-with-us. No matter what the characters seem to be like - beneath the surface we detect signs of care, compassion, sensitivity. The invitation is not to become remarkable people, but to become *remarkably ordinary*, doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

The Gospel is full of incidents that underline the impact Grace makes on everyday living. Take the Annunciation, where Mary is asked to accept to become Mother of God. She surely has more than enough on her mind now, but she heard something else too, that her cousin, who is elderly, is also pregnant and so will need help.

The Gospel simply tells us that immediately after the happening of the Annunciation, she set out - not to make a 30-day Retreat - but to be with her cousin. This is the infallible hallmark of Grace - heightened sensitivity to the needs of others. Indeed, as St. Bonaventure urges us:

wherever you see good, celebrate it; wherever it is broken, repair it; wherever it is missing, bring it with you. Bring what with me?

What I bring to others is not work or task, simply myself trying to become more and more what I myself have already been given; trying to live my life no longer as I want it, but as you need it; which is who God is for me in the Word made flesh. For this I need not just the hands to reach out, but the sensitivity to notice in advance where such outreach is needed and this is the fruit of saying yes to Grace.

It is the given ability to do very ordinary things with fidelity, trustworthiness, reliability and zeal. The purpose of life's journey is to travel well and enjoy the company along the way. No matter how humble my estate, I have the God-given right to enjoy passion, fun and companionship; a right that carries responsibility, realising that for others to enjoy the same rights, I must play my part in enabling this. Life really is all about good relating.

Jesus invited the first disciples to *come and see*. We have no record of what they saw, or how long they stayed, where they ended-up doesn't seem to be so important. Yet in their following they were also selfish, showing on occasions, lapses in sensitivity, indulging in petty quarrels among themselves, even turning tail and running away from him.

This was the mix Jesus deliberately chose to spread Good News. The message is not that they were heroic, but in agreeing to follow him they were better than they would have otherwise been, in that they gradually grew into *a zest for life through being with him*, a zeal that was to lead them to die for him as he had done for them.

What is this Life for?

This is where *it seems to me* becomes most relevant. Have you ever tried to describe colour to one unsighted from birth? The nearest I was ever able to come to making any headway was to ask about dreams, what were they like?

I take it that the reason Jesus says, more than once, for those with eyes, let them see... is because we are all unsighted as to what God actually sees. I can see the sky, the trees, clouds and rain, and so can you, and what we see is that each of these has a specific kind or shape of being, in that the sky will never be a tree, nor a tree the rain. It might seem an obvious thing to say, yet we say that each has existence or being - so what is this one being that has so many shapes? We actually talk about the material universe. How come there is so much different material around - yet it is all material?

The philosophers, especially those in the medieval tradition, tell us that what makes the one material different is the infinite variety of shapes that inform the material. The treeness of the tree, the rainness of the rain... A good way of situating this is to remember what the answer is to the question: what is it?

I am told that the material that makes up my body renews itself gradually every seven years or so; another way of saying wood rots, metal rusts, even mountains decay. The old saying sums it up: I have had this one hammer all my life, it has only ever had two new handles and one new head. In other words, when enough change takes place I cease to be me, I die.

It is my body that dies, through all the changes that have happened to me from cradle to grave, I remain constant, even after death. Presumably, without this particular shape that is me, the stuff that made up my body could have welcomed and housed another shape entirely? Though my shape/soul is uniquely and eternally mine. As already noted earlier, though there was a time when I didn't exist - before I was born - equally, since there is no beginning or ending in God, God never began to love me, I am in the eternal love that is God.

One unfortunate and inherited characteristic from the world of Greek thinking has been that very convenient dualism that allowed us to sort and separate: we speak of up and down, in and out, alive and dead... It did us no favours when it severed us from our Scripture roots when talking about ourselves as persons: body and soul. As if we are made up of two parts - one permanent the other not, with the inevitable downgrading of the impermanent as meaning less important: the body came to be seen as a kind of prison for the soul, and life was to be sure to break-out of this jail.

Why not let St. Paul explode this by listening to him speak of us as body, soul *and spirit*? Scripture insists that not only are we one and whole, but our faith is in the Mystery of the Resurrection of the body. No wonder we are confused when prompted to save our souls yet within this belief in the Resurrection of the body.

We even allowed such thinking to distort our vision of the wonders of creation as a whole, seeing all of it from the selfish *it's all there to help me save my soul*. There to be used, even abused, if that helps me in some way. God gave us a task, recorded in Genesis, that we should name Creation for God, in such fashion that Creation too could be let to praise God, by the ways we live in it.

The *let* is the God-like quality proper to Creation from its very beginning - and God said, *let there be light*... In accepting the naming task, we undertook to let Creation be as God intended, what Jesus would call the Kingdom.

We have already seen how this seemed to go awry through our infidelity and selfishness, yet God's plan is never thwarted, since God always intended to be part of Creation, and through his personal fidelity to his Word, world loyalty is now assured, and the naming has already happened. God continues to marvel at Creation as when it all began, seeing it as good, before ever we appear.

Prompted by St. Francis' intuitive awareness of all this, St. Bonaventure reminds us of the holiness of even the very dust of the earth, which was to become the body of God. The trauma of our birthing experience, if nothing else, impresses upon us that we are individual, that I am not part of my mother, I am separate and independent of the rest of the human race... This latter, of course, is fiction. Though truly independent, I am made specifically to become interdependent. A unique, unrepeatable individual who needs to belong, through the God-like gift of relationships.

Life presents us with a variety of ways of coming together, starting with family and friends, on through social and institutional belonging, all the while advancing in self-awareness. Whilst this is good and necessary, it can serve us ill if it is not securely founded.

There is more than enough evidence telling me that whatever goodness is, it is outside me: a good baby doesn't cry during the night, a good student does homework, a good employee is always on time... Where is the experience necessary to counter-balance this, that tells me I am good simply because I'm me, that God brought me into being because God delights in me, that I am uniquely loved by God, with the potential to make God present by the way I am present as no one else ever can be?

This is the place of the love that cherishes me in family, in friends in all those many surprises that tell me I'm special.

That we haven't yet got this right, that the joy and happiness that sits well with enjoying belonging is nowhere near as commonplace as it ought, is hinted at by the prominence of *mourning and weeping in a valley of tears*. Indeed, there is more than enough in life to bring heartbreak and tears, but there is infinitely more goodness to gladden the heart - even to be

able to realise that God didn't put thorns on roses, but roses on thorns. We are not destined to forsake the only world we know, the world so loved by God as to send the Son.

What a joy it always is to be encouraged to be ourselves, that the self that we are is ever welcome, the uniqueness we bring simply by enjoying the freedom in being wanted, instead of being continually nagged and harassed in being told what we can't or mustn't do. Leaving us with the feeling that whatever we have to offer, isn't relevant at best, and at times unwanted.

I may be good enough for God to invent me - yet seemingly to be passed-over. This is a serious matter, since the spiritual questing of my life is crucial for my travelling well. How sad to find it so often reduced to a series of prohibitions. Where is the Good News calling me to experience life abundantly? Thank God for the resilience of human life when body, soul and spirit live in the harmony of unity, when the complexity of feelings and emotions proper to full bodily living are integrated to allow us to become ever more real.

Why do I strive for this? Why is it important? I choose all kinds of things and for all kinds of reasons, but what is it that gives a shape or pattern to my choosing, where am I actually going? It is reasonably easy to choose between good and bad, but how do I choose between good and good? Is there an ultimate purpose in me that lures me into one way rather than another, one choice on which all my other choosing is focussed, maybe even subconsciously?

I was brought up within *a save your soul environment*. So, I ask the same question in another form: what am I being saved from and what will my soul be doing once it is saved? Words are important. What does saving conjure up? Whatever it means, our expectation is that the end result will be an experience of complete fulfilment.

The Good News resounding through the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, is that this fulfilment is not reserved as a reward for those who first live a good life and then move on to receive a reward; but that the fulfilment starts now - *now is the acceptable time*, as Scripture says. Here, in the ordinary of everyday I actually learn about *love that never has an ending*, through the many earthly and flesh loves that surprise me so often in my living; and that lure me away from my self-centred living, to enjoy more and more what St. Paul calls being the body of Christ, where I actually discover the richness, integrity and joy of genuinely living my life, not as I want it, but as you need it.

Am I being told that what I focus on as heaven, is not something totally different from how I am genuinely enjoying trying to live the abundant life now? It seems that what is to come is not so much other and different, as more and deeper and unchangingly always new. Not the abolition of life as we know it, for something bigger and better, but the total fulfilment and perfection of the goodness fleetingly tasted even now. *I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance* is Jesus' promise.

Not so much the best there is - this seems ominously static, inevitably suited to boredom that comes with more of the same. The Letter to the Hebrews brings much encouragement with its cryptic *with us in mind God promised something more* - 11. 40. Again, not something bigger and better, but that healthy not settling for the status quo, there is inbuilt in us the desire for something more, a desire only to be matched by the goodness that is unchangingly always new. When Scripture speaks of God in this way it sometimes causes puzzlement.

How can God be unchanging, yet always new? Simply get the syntax right and see what happens: God is *unchangingly* always new.

What is promised is an experience of goodness and love that is unchangingly always new, so much so that we can never get used to it, the experience is ever fresh and surprisingly new. Nowhere does Jesus say he has come to save my soul, but to save me and free me into

abundant life, and the means to begin this is my life. I am gifted with life, not that I may die, but that I may have more life. But the purpose of the gift, the ability to enjoy it at its best, remains in the gift of the Giver.

I need not just God's gift of my life, but God's meaning for this gift. This is given to us so that I can truly and eventually say - *I live now not I but Christ lives in me.* - Gal.2.20. What is this gift? It is the ability to listen attentively to - to obey. We are made to relate, and to relate at the highest possible level, to commune. I have an idea of who I am, a word that sums me up. I can pass this word on to another, able to accept what I say to such an extent that this word can become a bond between us - given to you without ever leaving me. If the bond is real, it will mean not only do you hear what I say but you also accept it as what I am saying.

This is crucial. You may not agree with what I am saying, but it is important to me that you accept my saying it. If I were to say everyone hates me, you probably would not agree, and might be tempted to say that's not true. It may well be untrue, but that is not the immediate issue. If you are really listening to me the appropriate answer is along the lines of I accept that is what you see, but it isn't what I see. Now we have the beginning of communication.

This ability to communicate self in this way is a fruit of our being made in the image of God. God knows who God is, there is an Eternal Word in God, a Word that is eternally communicated and received as it is spoken, to such a degree as to constitute the Person who is the life of God, the Holy Spirit, who as the author of Romans says, it has been poured into our hearts. -.5.5. This Eternal Word God has spoken into Creation - the Word was made flesh - precisely for it to become the bond between us, when it is accepted as it is spoken. We come to know God as Abba and ourselves as the beloved of Abba through receiving the Word *as it is spoken* - no editing or interpreting - to the Father, through the Son by the love who is the Spirit.

The essential element of our life with God, our praying, is that we first listen, in order to receive [hear], so as to become what we first receive. Thomas of Celano, St. Francis' biographer, writes of him: *he did not so much pray as become, himself, a prayer.*

When we quieten life down in order to listen, what will we hear? We will hear the words that sum up the whole reason and purpose behind Creation, for God to say to each and every one of us - *I love you.* In those three words, words we also use ourselves in our relating, what is being said is: this is who I am, for you. To say I love you, like praying, is not so much doing something as being someone.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, they meant, as we have seen you pray. Jesus, at prayer was not saying anything, simply being himself the beloved of Abba, *the prayer of obedience is hearing what God is saying and trying to become what I am hearing.*

Scripture says: *I will listen to what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* - Ps.85.8. I will hear *I love you...* this is who I am for you. And the this is Jesus, the Word made flesh. *Jesus is what God would be in all of us.* All kinds of thoughts come rushing in - I am not worthy of this... But God says I am, so who do I believe? I am overjoyed to accept the truth that God loves me - thrilled to realise God will never stop loving me - but the problem area comes when I realise what love really does mean - *God loves me exactly as I am.*

No - *I love you if you stop... when you start...* no ifs no provided you... just me as I am, a returned prodigal [*or not yet returned*]. This is not easy, because I do not love me as I am at times, and others have shown me they do not love me as I am.

Other than me has been deciding my reactions. I need to do this first to be aware of what is going on... how I am is the tremendous optimism that inspired St. Francis to gaze upon the

Cross in wonder: not saying this is what my sin has done [*undoubtedly true*] but instead of listening to himself he listened to God and heard him through the Cross, saying *you will be lost over my dead body*. That is how much I matter to God - exactly as I am. And because love is never passive, very much alive and active, in accepting God's love for me as I am I begin to become more myself, and more I am - that God-like quality by which God identifies himself in the Old Testament - *I am*.

What kind of response do I make to this? I know how to respond to my family and friends when they make a fuss over me, and give me presents. I am grateful and want to express my thanks. Never would I dream of offending them by asking - *how much do I owe you?* Why do we not afford God the same treatment? Why do I have to owe something, *keep the commands, go to Church, say my prayers...* Why can I not accept God's love, forgiveness, compassion in the freedom God enjoys in giving?

Because there is unworthiness, because there is sin and selfishness, they are real and require an attitude from me. But they must never be allowed to curtail, limit or in any way edit the totality of God's gifted love to me, just as I am. God does not demand from me. There is no coercive power in God. Equally, does God recognise that I have a need in myself to do something about this - not because it is expected or demanded of me - but because I demand it of myself.

Once again, we have no difficulty with this in our everyday relating when we know we have hurt someone, and at the same time realise we are forgiven. We say *I'll make it up to you...* only to hear, there's no need. To which we spontaneously reply - *yes there is, I need to...* I like to visualise the beautiful doctrine of Purgatory like that. Just as an encounter like the one described allows me in this way to recover my self-respect so too with Purgatory.

The Catechism says it all, if we care to unpack it. Purgatory *where souls suffer for a time on account of their sin*. The suffering is neither imposed nor demanded by God, but from within myself when, finally, through my death I come face to face with God and realise at last and fully, that it is true, God loves me and always will, exactly as I am. I will realise my own lacklustre response to this, all my presumptions and neglect of love, my own shabbiness. So much so that I will welcome the chance to withdraw for a while, to be with myself in order to recover my self-respect, only to return red-eyed but smiling simply to say thank-you; gratitude, the only appropriate response to grace. What is clear from the revelation brought in the Incarnation, is the impact of Christ's avowed reason in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel for being with us, *to set us free from fear*.

Both. Francis and Clare, saw that the reason and purpose of life has been revealed to us. We don't need God or religion to discover that some relationships are more geared to happiness than others, nor for discovering the healthy diet and hygiene habits. But to know that our destiny is not simply to become fully human, but divine-human - *we need to be told* - revelation.

This change from being simply human is not something we can work at, get to know, and realise it is freely given - gift - the original Christmas present. God is nothing else but love - and it is the eternal desire of God to share this life beyond the Trinity. I am saying that everything revolves around that desire - that this world, creation, is the intended setting for this to happen, and that part of creation able to receive and respond to this invitation - or to refuse - is humankind.

Jesus is this eternal desire of God, total love, made flesh. He is the one who in his divinity brings this invitation to us, and in his humanity is the total acceptance. Jesus is the yes of God to creation, and the yes of creation to God - as St. Paul tells us - 2Cor.1.20. Life moves from immature childhood into troublesome adolescence, on into adulthood, and then our faith

tells us, on further *into mature childhood* - *unless you become as children you will not enter the kingdom.* - Mt.18.3.

Nature and nurture can leave me with a faulty image of myself. As we have seen, birth - discovering for the first time that I am a separate individual - is harrowing and frightening. So too is the kind of nurture culture recommends. Whatever goodness is, it seems to be outside me, in my living up to the expectations of others - i.e. unless there is the necessary balance in place, called family, friendship and a whole variety of intimacies that let me know in so many wonderful ways that I am good simply because I'm me.

There is a wounded child in all of us - a child whose hopes, dreams and expectations have always been a guiding light. The child knows instinctively where it is from, and reaches out in trust to where it knows love and security are. This is what Jesus is referring to with: *unless you become as little children...*

The immature child instinctively wants to believe, to trust, to accept - mature childhood is freely choosing to live by such faith, well-founded, rather than by rational logic. There is something eternal about childhood. It isn't something we live through for 12 years or so and then leave behind. A new-born baby brings something new about God into our world, simply in being itself - able to be aware, to gaze, trust to enjoy.

This innocence tends to be lost - even stolen - during life, though it is never entirely missing. It holds my spiritual DNA, how I can be with God as nobody else ever can, and in as much as I have access to this, it shapes all my relationships, making me uniquely me.

The child does not *acquire* adulthood. Maturation is an unfolding of something already present - as the oak in the acorn. We don't lose our childhood, but at some stage re-discover it; when I can name it and welcome it. Human growth is not moving away from childhood values, but into a shape of life that allows them to flourish fully.

We are in a culture guilty of the neglect and abuse of children; a culture unaware that when God became fully present in Jesus, that the physical presence in which God chose to be with us is as a helpless baby clinging to a human breast - someone needing love, is how God comes to us. Jesus is the origin of all life [*the way, truth and life*], this presence of God is there wherever love is in need. God came into creation, *deliberately, giving us someone to love*, someone needing care - as St. John wrote: *what we have seen, touched and held in our hands... and again as often as you did it to these the least, you did it to me.*

We all began life like that - and we continue life like that - whether we own it or not. The child is not ego-driven, but drawn forward by wonder, attracted by transparency and fun. Part of our maturation is not simply to recognise our common need for this, but to accept the responsibility for allowing it to happen by incarnating such values. How we live everyday should allow us to qualify for what Henri Nouwen described as being at home: *home is where I am loved by people who don't have to be impressed by me.*

I believe in that child within me; I believe that God is born anew in every birth; I also believe this child is damaged, and the evidence for this is my own hesitancy, fearfulness in my loving and relating - or my inability to relate sensitively. I believe my salvation rests with setting my inner child free to flourish. To do this I believe that *I need to grow younger as I grow older.* Augustine got it so right when he tells us that *no one is younger than God.*

The first necessary step is to recover the giftedness the child has to gaze. A baby doesn't watch or look, it simply gazes - i.e. open to whatever is there. In wide-eyed wonder the infant accepts, uncritically. This is the perfect answer to the God who delights in total giving. What was thus instinctive in me as a baby, now misplaced along the way, I need to recover so that gazing becomes the directly willed purpose of my life, the gazing that means welcome.

I need to be more aware of *the now* of my life... notice what is going on in my head, in my body, let them talk to me - my body cannot lie. I can lie, but my body cannot, I might ignore the signs whether through being too busy, or through fear... I need to let it talk to me and tell me what is what. Only then will I start to realise that something limited by the need to make comparisons - what if...

What is the anxiety that robs me of being in charge of me? The miracle of life is not to be able to walk on water, but to walk responsibly on sister mother earth. Why do I miss so much of reality? Why am I reluctant to live more in the now; instead of worrying about tomorrow, or being annoyed about yesterday?

No one can harm me if I live the now of life fully... the place to meet God, who describes self as I AM. Learn from the infant I have somehow left behind - born to trust, ready to trust, able to be free because trust is well-founded in the tangible love of parents and offspring.

This is not only a passive experience. One of the most precious gifts a child gives to the adult is to accept the adult as they are. A truly God-like quality. Tired people work hard at being good - and strive even harder to be better. *I cannot be good*, I am overtaken by goodness all around me, gently inviting me to trust, and realise that I am also a part of this universal goodness; most especially that fidelity to now, opens up into a life without ending - since God is I AM.

St. Francis saw so much goodness all around him, because he went looking for it. Why has the whole world seemingly gone after him? He is no orator, no miracle-worker, not particularly handsome. Because his shape of life, which so many find attractive, also leaves you with the conviction - *I can do that*. I can indeed. But do I? What am I looking for when I gaze? Nothing. Simply gazing without intent, letting what is real come into me without filtering. To gaze is to allow all to come to me - a very different experience from looking/watching.

But everything seen is by no means always positive; so, how can I absorb the negative in a healing way? Certainly not by a stoical grin and bear it rationalising of feelings. I need to sit with whatever is this very real feeling in a neutral and non-judgmental way - to try to savour and experience it as it is. When the negatives come leaping at me from within the experience, I don't have to let them in.

This is by no means comfortable, but it does give life a chance to be my teacher - to turn away from the pain too quickly could remove me from the birth pangs of something new and never seen before. What St. Francis learned from the Incarnation was *to see how opposites can be reconciled* - looking at Christ hanging between good and bad on Calvary, the father and sons [*Prodigal*], the good of my dreams and the pain of now.

No one promised me that my life would be sunshine and roses all the time, or that it would be fair. And I am counselled by the Gospel that so precious are the good things of life that I should refrain from spending time uprooting the weeds lest I damage the good and tender shoots. It isn't easy to live like that, to have to live with feelings of being irrelevant, of being abused, taken for granted, over-looked yet again...

There is no virtue in grinning and bearing it. Resisting the fight/flight syndrome, and staying with it in a neutral way helps me dismantle my own false self. In Deuteronomy we are counselled - *precisely because you know from experience what it feels like... never knowingly do this to anyone else*. Pain like this is simply the other side of what love is all about.

At the end of it all, it is me, exactly as I am, who God loves - to walk away from now, for whatever reason, is to be other than myself, to remove myself from feeling the warmth of God's love. Running away from fear is fear, just as running from pain is painful. Life is not

about achieving happiness now, or how to get rid of pain - it is about living all of it to the full, relishing it so much as to absorb the hurt instead of redistributing it.

Why did the Prodigal leave home? He isn't the first youngster to leave home recorded in the Gospel - we know why Jesus left home [*as a child*] - *to be about my Father's business*. By contrast, this young man wants to get away from his father. He wanted his share of the family fortune and he wanted it now. The law stated that he is entitled to his share on his father's death - his sin is treating his father as though he were already dead.

In telling this parable Jesus identifies for us what is the real root of sin. We are accustomed to using laundry lists of sins - *stealing, lying, abusing, fornication, adultery...* these are not so much sins as the consequences of sin - why did I do all these things? Here is an answer to that question - he values the things he gets from his father more than he values his father - over the warmth, companionship and belonging - the gifts over the giver. It is right to enjoy and value gifts - here it is a question of how he does it - treating his father as though he is already dead.

Sin is not wanting bad things but wanting smaller instead of greater - and his consequent weariness and self-disgust are the consequences. He opts to live in a different kind of community - his home is the community where belonging is the powerful cement - where people don't have to be impressed by me to love me. He chooses self-interest over self-giving... doing his own thing over being there for others. He opts to live where everything is either owed or forbidden. It is refusing to live his life as others need it, not just as he sees it.

Eventually, he experiences the effects of choosing something too small - depressed, can't cope. His sin is not squandering and wasting his inheritance, *his sin is leaving home for the wrong reason*. He finds an employer who uses him to feed pigs - who values the pigs over him [*they get good food he gets scraps*].

His conversion is very instructive: he makes up his mind to eat humble pie, to go home and live as a servant - *and be better off than this*. Indeed, his motivation is still self-centred. Here we have the paradox; we are told that Jesus came to serve, not to be served - and yet here, we see that serving is not enough. His father will have none of it, he belongs as an adult child, a child of the home no matter how young or old.

The message: there is no way to build a human society - be it parish, village, church or state - unless it is more than human. It is never enough to be obedient to what is reasonable in relating [*service*]. Forgiveness is not just the healing of our weakness, it is, literally experiencing being welcomed home... for no other reason than I am me. This is the eternal childhood - experiencing being where I belong. When his older brother hears all this he is angry, to put it mildly. For him, feasting and celebrating have to be earned - life is a meritocracy. He too is guilty of the same sin - valuing the gifts more than the giver.

The total self-giving of our God [*that helpless child*] is both the source of virtue and the guarantee of forgiveness - St. Francis said: *there is no one whatsoever who will not receive your forgiveness if only he will look you in the eye*. We make merry and rejoice at times like Christmas and special family days, not because we are particularly virtuous, not because we are sinners - forgiven sinners - we were lost and could not cope, but we have been found - welcomed home. *Simply to live is to be holy*, and to be aware of this enough to intend it, is pure adoration. Not a special awareness about a special happening, but any awareness about any part of creation is an invitation to true *worship* [*worship*].

As I began my life as one with my mother in the womb - and moved-on to receive the gift of knowing me to be separate at birth - equal but not the same - as are the Persons of the Trinity. Though I am born in moving away from the original intimacy of the womb in order to become that intimacy... just so, my life is God's waiting time... waiting for as long as it takes,

for me who was created without my consent, to say yes please to becoming part of full living - and to come home with my consent.

God is nowhere else than now. Like the infant child, I need to relish my now - to be where God is waiting for me - me living my life to the full. And so we move - from the womb to infancy, from infancy to childhood, onto adolescence and adulthood - and then, please God, onto *mature* childhood - able to receive all by letting all be itself, and it all happens in the NOW of my life - *unless you become as little children* - Mt.18.3. you will not know the Kingdom. And all we have to do is to believe enough for it to become the focus of life: when God came into our world as a baby; it's as if the angels message was so astoundingly profound: *Don't be afraid, its only me, and I love you.*

As the Gospel begins - so does it end, and we do well to listen to what is being said. It is tempting and even salutary at times to indulge in the warm feelings of the Christmas story, but contained there is the full message, to be spelled out so clearly through the vision of the Transfiguration and elsewhere. *He came to his own, and his own would not receive him.* Perhaps we should say his own could not receive him as he is, and since he cannot be other than who he is, he was rejected.

Jesus tells us that to be a follower we must deny ourselves. He's talking about much more than the kind of self-control or restraint we try to exercise during Lent. He is asking us to see that reliance on human goodness on its own is not enough to win through. He is not saying there is no value there - he is revealing and making present for all of us, a love that goes deeper than any form of human loving. If I can face the fact that I'm going to fail - recognise what death means and its impact - then I will be in touch with life beyond anything we normally mean by life.

But why presume that we will fail? Being really human means, because of the option we made not to obey, not to follow, we are left in the kind of muddle and mess that Jesus was in. This is what God can only be like in our distorted world because of sin. He didn't stand a chance to be fully human in our environment.

Love has to fail in a world opting for death, because to live so that others may enjoy the freedom necessary to live well, actually encourages the world to despise, reject, hate and kill you. Original Sin is not something our first parents did and we are picking up the tab. Original sin happens to each one of us by our being born like Jesus, into a distorted and dislocated world, whose priorities are very different. So much so, that when love actually arrived in person, we had to kill him. As St. Paul writes: *he was made sin for us.* - 2Cor.5.21, even though totally sinless.

The Good News is: It doesn't have to be like that - Jesus shows that genuinely good human living is tailor-made to receive the Love that is God - the love that will suffer wherever there is evil, even though death will never succeed, he died, but did not remain dead; as the Resurrection shows. To receive what he offers us, means letting go of our self-sufficiency - deny self - quite literally in order to live by that passionate way which actually changes me - from living my life as I want it - to living it as you need it.

The world will only be changed into a world welcoming Love by the way it is lived-in by anyone accepting his way of being a human being. This is what Baptism is all about. Our faith rests firmly within the Resurrection, Jesus is Risen, as he promised. But where is the evidence of it today? There is more than enough pain and heartache to justify scepticism. We have suffered unfairly and caused others to suffer unfairly - we have been sinned against, but we are also sinners.

In no way does Jesus compromise with evil. He always sought to remove evil, as must anyone who follows. For a start: *wherever you see goodness, celebrate it; wherever you see*

goodness damaged, repair it; wherever you see goodness is missing, bring it with you - is how St. Bonaventure pictures the life of the Risen Christ in his Body [Church] today. To make the Lord of eternity present in today's world, is to live within it abundantly, just as it is; to set free all who long for such abundance from whatever impedes them from doing so. It means being real.

How can we all, who come from so many diverse cultures and histories, make sure we appreciate what is real, all the while being essentially different, yet not divided? How can we ensure that we value each person as a subject, never an object? That we cherish the primacy of persons over things? We begin by making sure that *systems, rules and the like, always serve life*, not the other way round. Structures are crucial and necessary, but always in the service of something higher.

Scaffolding is necessary to build a house; and its purpose is to allow what is being shaped within it to become free standing, able to stand on its own without needing the scaffolding. So too, I needed the scaffolding of my parents' guidance, and good schooling, to teach me the basic laws of love, affection, courtesy and good manners. Hopefully, by now I have interiorised these values, made them my own, part of my own living instinct.

Within the vastness of Creation, so many millions of different parts, there is a grouping that is different, unlike the rest of creation. This grouping is able to be self-aware; can appreciate what is more than itself; is able to wonder, to foster, to create and recreate. It is that part of creation made able to receive awareness of what Creation is, where it is from and where it is going; all the time aware of the invitation to become freely a living enthusiast for what reality is all about. Genesis says it: *whatever name the man called it, that is the name by which it is known* - 2.19. Our-God given task is to name Creation for God in such fashion that it can become what God intended.

As we have seen, to be Christ-like is to be oneself, as Christ made Abba known by being himself, his Father's Son, so we, as adopted children of Abba are called to a) to make Abba known precisely by being who we are meant to be: *God is praised when we are fully alive* [St. Irenaeus].; and b) to enable the rest of Creation to do likewise, to be itself precisely by the way it is lived-in with this specific purpose. We are to embrace God's creative words as our *modus vivendi* - let it be. This to the extent that the very dust of this earth becomes the body of God.

Seeing Things Differently

We have been gifted with not just God's Word, but and crucially with God's meaning of God's Word. *The Word was made flesh. I am with you always* - Matt. 28.20. We have this unique authority of Christ with us, through the task and authority he gave to Peter and those who were to succeed him. Sadly, the way the world has drifted has ensured that God simply becomes one thing among so many others, and not nearly as important as most of them.

Power has become god, even the abuse of power. Life revolves around who has the power, and how much power. This way of arranging life became so dominant that, in polite circles, a place had to be found for God.

As God is God, then the obvious title is Almighty. The most powerful of all. This is something of a back-handed compliment. Referring to God as almighty has caused much resentment and deliberate walking away from God. How can God be almighty and let such horrible things happen? How can God be all loving and allow so much innocent suffering? Situating God within such a setting makes God unreal to so many, and even unreal to God. Jesus insists - *I have come to serve, not to be served.* - Matt. 20.28. St. Francis' insight into almighty God is: *a helpless child clinging to a human breast.*

Suffering is truly a mystery, not a problem. Problems can be solved. But if we understand that the only power there is in God is persuasive, never coercive, and that instead of sitting back and not giving us any answers to the mystery of suffering, God comes and joins us where we are, in the thick of injustice, terror and death. Then we have a chance to realise that nothing whatsoever, be it terror, injustice, even the most ignominious of deaths can in any way at all frustrate God's plan - *and that all manner of things shall be well* - Julian of Norwich.

We were told that God is so great as to have no needs, God doesn't need anything - not even me. The infinity of God allows for no limitation. God is so full that nothing can be added, so self-contained that nothing can be taken away... not only does God not need me, God does not need my virtue, my goodness, my prayer.

If all this is true, and philosophy insists it is, then I can give God nothing, do nothing for God. Is this true - all our striving, struggling, all our efforts to be genuine, mean nothing? Why is this so unpalatable? Why does my instinct prompt me to say no?

First of all, because when I pray I know I mean it, I believe my prayer has value, that it does mean something to God. I don't need Theology to tell me, I have Scripture. Theology can help me. Scripture reveals, long before any theology, that we do matter to God... we make a difference. My crying-out in anguished prayer is not to an Uncaused Cause, not to a Supreme Being. There is something real in us that corresponds to, and associates with the words of Genesis - *and God saw that it was good*.

Once I liberate my heart from the dictatorship of my head I will find no cause to doubt my own self-worth, something that is always prompting me to do what St. James says: *I will show you my faith through my good works* - Jas.2.17-18 compelling an enthusiasm for commitment. It refuses to accept saying I love you doesn't mean anything. It helps a great deal, for example, to learn from what our repenting actually means. God's forgiveness is not God changing his mind, but God changing my mind.

Repentance is forgiveness, actually experiencing forgiveness produces repentance. Going to confession is not pleading to be forgiven, rather is it coming to celebrate forgiveness, thanking God for letting me experience being forgiven and allowing me to live freely with the truth of my life, as happens e.g. when a relationship between two people begins to get serious, enough for one or both to say - *Look, there is something you should know about me...* [confession]. I confess because I know I have no need to hide, I believe now my nakedness is more than acceptable. I repent/confess because I know I am forgiven. It is as if there is Someone within me, loving me, just as I am, and wanting to inhabit my loving to reach out to others.

Scripture is full of stories of God who cares, cares passionately. Far from being a world regretted by God, our sister, mother Earth is there to provide what God speaks of as *how lovely is your dwelling place* - that is God speaking about you - and me. We inherit our religious language, and it seems that whilst we have the happy experience of colloquial exchanges with each other, we rule God out of this, reserving Scripture talk solely for Sundays and prayer times.

Once again we seem to think we know better, by ignoring the lead from Scripture. Scripture claims to be relevant for all aspects of living, and says it succinctly through the words of St. John: *God is love*. - 1John 4.8. We've heard this, used it even at times found it tedious, *not again!!*

Maybe this is because we are somewhat agnostic about it being literally true. God is Love is a straightforward, literal assertion. We need to come to terms with this before anything else. God is nothing else but total, self-emptying love.

There is nothing coercive in God, only persuasive, so much so that we can say our life-span, our actual, daily living, is God's waiting time. Waiting for us to believe it, and come home. Because if this is so of our origin, what does this say of all that owns its origin from there? God is love, God only creates lovely things, but God created me, therefore...?

This seemingly random mix of things called Creation is, in some way, *imago Dei* - in the image of God, albeit variously as St. Bonaventure alludes to inanimate creation as vestiges and ourselves as footprints. We are that part of the one Creation gifted with the ability to receive what Creation is for [*intellect*] and, more importantly, with the ability freely to choose to foster and promote and accept the invitation to collaborate in bringing it about. So that all Creation can praise God because we let it be itself.

What does I'm in love, say? It means that I know that I belong simply because I'm me: *this is who I am because of you*. Relationships are the raw material for fashioning who we are discovering ourselves to be. It is discovering that because I am from God, who is Love, like God I am social - there is the lover, the beloved, the mutuality of this loving. We have this Trinitarian shape in that we all need to love, to be loved and be in an environment in which both can happen simultaneously.

I learn from this that relating is not something I decide to do, to relate takes more than me. To affirm that God is love is affirming the two-way reality - love goes out to be welcomed and returned as thank-you. It is neither partially given nor partially received - everything that is God goes out from God as totally free gift, *and in the Word*, is totally received and returned in gratitude.

To love is to be interested-in, to be involved-with; it happens because our very being calls for it as we experience its presence actually widening and deepening our awareness of being more fully alive, I'm enjoying life more than ever before. So, if this is God, who am I? Can I ever be satisfied with: *a rational animal; body, soul and spirit...* this excites us not one little bit.

What matters to me are values and experiences like falling in love, crying-out in pain, being justifiably angry with injustice, forgiving in hurt, grieving through death. I know that when I'm caught up in any of these I really do feel it - it is never an abstract idea. I mean it when say I am happy, hurt, angry, distressed... Even in the depth of a negative experience, what wells up within me is a genuine *I'm worth more than this*.

I can be someone who really does make an effort to live, it is important for me to do so. I need to matter to someone, I want to have someone matter to me. Though a unique and unrepeatable individual, to be even more myself, I must belong. This is something more than having a relationship, it concerns how I feel about myself and all that is not me, I am not detached in my relationships, nor can I be; I am influenced by my feelings. I value my world through my experiencing. To be related is to be experiencing.

That being said, we still live our reality more by rationality than by our feelings. This certainly has benefits, but in terms of living by value rather than by expediency, this is a serious lacuna, effectively cutting us off from the reality of the rest of creation. More and more we are being urged [*as St. Bonaventure did long ago*] to accept that there is an experiential link through all reality.

For us, liking, disliking, loving, hating etc... have two main impacts. They are obviously ways in which we express how reality impacts on us - but we are also blessed with the ability to remember, and with the passing of time an attitude is formed that effectively impedes our objectivity: because I had an unfortunate experience with a particular kind of food, I now avoid that food. So, how do I allow for this in terms of relating, when so much of what I am proposing for myself comes more out of how I have felt my life than thought it; and that I am

meeting the same in others too? Though we speak about being reasonable, and trying to be logical, we actually feel our way through life.

My world is really my experiencing what is out there, objectively there is a world out there, but I am conditioned by how I feel it. This has more to do with the quality and intensity of living than with rational arrangements, even though these latter tend to set the tone for public life. The reality is, I belong in the world through my body and my body is designed to be at home there. The best of my thinking, be it profoundly abstract or deeply spiritual, happens through my body. So much so that I arrive at Kingdom values, not by thinking my way into new patterns living, but living my way into new ways of thinking. My body is not just in the world; it actually is the world for me.

Such is the purpose behind the insistence: *The Word was made flesh* - John 1. The Word did not become humanity, but flesh. As do we, Jesus in his flesh and blood reality took in the world as part of himself precisely by the way he lived in it; the world becomes the body of God in this way, and in as much as we strive honestly to do the same, life in the world becomes, for us, life in God.

Jesus tells us that he has come that we have life in abundance, and that life does not simply mean getting from here to there, but actually enjoying the journey along with all our fellow travellers, by getting involved in appropriate ways, ranging from the casual everyday encounters to the unique and special intimacies. It was this revealing that made St. Francis exclaim: *this is what I long for with all my heart*. When he became aware that *Jesus is God's ecstatic yes to all creation* [cf. 2Corinthians 2.19].

How did we get it so wrong, as to label the body in every way inferior, a hindrance to life in the spirit, a prison we must break out of? At least we were consistent: in denying the body we had to look suspiciously at all aspects of passionate involvement and intimacies. This is tantamount to making the Incarnation irrelevant, and to misconstrue the Resurrection. The abundant life Jesus speaks of is the only life we know: flesh and blood living, sensual, feeling and loving - and of course, intelligent.

Holiness is wholeness: ordinary folk, doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. Integrated living is focussed on the profound need for commitment to be to the fore, and this happens through reflection and choosing following on our experiencing life through belonging.

It is tempting to say: *it's like...* but *God cannot be like*. Throughout Scripture, from prophets to saints, they all speak of God in terms of human relating. Even the pattern of our praying is shaped as one person talking to another. God is presented as one who is desiring, pleading, forgiving...

Interesting to note a hint of *not yet* about this. If God is desiring my salvation, then it hasn't yet happened; just as the act of creating puts God into a relationship that was not there before creation began. The implication is that if God wills something, that something presumably makes a difference to God.

The two accounts we have of Creation both suggest something personal and intimate - indeed it is the prelude to what is at the heart of God's total loving, all leading towards the Word becoming flesh the presence of God in creation in Jesus. If we could speak of God's experience it would have to be: loving the Word.

Everything happens with Christ in mind, the world is there as the appropriate setting for the Incarnation to happen, and life in the world was intended to allow Christ to feel at home here. But we know that we chose other paths, other ways, and though he willingly and trustingly came to his own, a helpless child clinging to a human breast, his own gave him no welcome.

We pray to God who knows what pain feels like, lived our life and died our death, because God is love, this love that is God is Jesus, the Christ.

What Does Real Life Feel Like and How Will I Know It?

A question child often asks: what was God doing before Creation happened? This question is only problematic because for us, reality is out there, and we engage with it through our relationships. The question to ask first is: is this the only way to experience reality? Time is a human invention. There is no time in God.

Maybe there is an even more basic question: is it possible to experience without bodily existence? Are we trapped in a doing mode as regards reality - does God have to be doing anything? What about those activities that are not for anything other the activity itself - *love, faith and the like*? To ask what life is for, is also to ask why am I a person who experiences - what is significant about the ability to experience rather than not?

The only valid answer to: what is love for, can only be *for more love*. Love is not a means to achieve something else, love is an end realised. Ask a lover what difference love makes and the answer can only be - *look at me, I'm real at last*. Love is the desire to be the self I am discovering myself to be because of being with this other.

I was always puzzled by being told that God is total love - and that this love is a totally *disinterested* [*not uninterested*] love. Our experience of love cannot say that - we love because we like it, it does something for us, it certainly is not disinterested. Yet we are made in the image of God who, so we are told, loves with a disinterested love. There's nothing in it for God. When I reach out to another I am reached myself, I feel the reality of something refreshingly new and genuinely good.

Is this what I am longing for, and how would I know? Coming to terms with my experiencing is how I begin to sort myself through so many feelings, calling on my mind to enlighten me, and my will, eventually to help me sustain myself within the choices I make. It has been said, sadly more than once, that during the ceremony of religious consecration you will hear *x handing over his/her will to me*, the lawful superior. Hopefully, this doesn't happen. The candidate for profession is not handing his/her will over, but handing over him/herself. And to be able to honour that freely chosen vocation will certainly need the help of will-power to do so come what may.

To have chosen freely will always carry signs of choice well made. As Scripture says: *I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* - Ps.85.8. To choose for good may not always be to choose to one's advantage, but it will result in the peace of soul and harmony of heart that having the humility and courage to honour truth always brings. It is as if I am actually feeling why God created me: *but speaking truth in love, we may grow up in all things into him, who is the head, even Christ* - Eph.4.4.

To be Christ-like is to be myself in spirit and in truth - Eph.4.15. This is not too far removed from the way I choose food from a menu, in that, more usually, I opt for what I like to taste rather than seeking out nutritional content; as I enjoy the feeling of sunshine on my back, or the company of special people... *I feel this*. Heaven is not a prize for keeping going through this valley of tears until death sets me free.

The two commandments, that Jesus brought together, love of God and love of neighbour, both require my total involvement. No one can do this for me. It is a sad commentary on our ways to find ourselves hiding behind the giving of presents. I can't be bothered going, send a present. A present is meant to represent my willingness to be present, not an excuse for my absence.

So with God and me, I don't love naturally because I want to love supernaturally. The word used by the Gospel to describe the truth that though my life began, it will not end, is Resurrection - Resurrection of the body. This is why all the appearances of Jesus after Good Friday have a strong emphasis on his bodily presence. They knew him as before, only now it was so different. He wasn't confined within the spatio-temporal limitations any more. Otherwise they speak with him, he eats with them... enough for John to explain: What we have seen, what we have touched, what we have held in our hands, this is what we preach. - 1Jn.1.1.

I need to realise that I have only the one self, that the self I am fashioning now is all that is available for shaping into eternal life with God, when I too, just as I am, will be freed from the confines of space and time, [*why what was God doing before creation is a non-question*] when death and its companions can reach me no more.

As Jesus was recognisable, even by the five wounds, no doubt we too will be recognisable by life's scarring, evidence of my real efforts to try to live a good life, and that I have enjoyed the journey. The intrusion of sin is the disfiguring possessiveness that focuses solely on me and what I want. The abiding Good News is that there is nothing whatsoever I can do either to stop God loving me, or to cause God's plans to be abandoned or thwarted. Nothing is more certain, I am going to God. How I experience this - a welcome or otherwise, is up to me.

How I will experience being with God is in my own hands - it will be my heaven or my hell. Hell is to be surrounded by eternal love, to be desired solely because I am me, to be uniquely cherished - as also is heaven. This is well illustrated by the story of the chopsticks. Asked to be shown heaven and hell, the enquirer was shown a banquet with every possible kind of food and nobody excluded. Each person had chopsticks 1 metre long. Many were angry, because they couldn't manipulate them to feed themselves, whereas others were enjoying feeding each other. Both heaven and hell is the way I will experience eternal love.

In effect, the Resurrection is the symphony, with the overture this present life. Truly said, in my end is my beginning. The sin of the world is wherever the overture veers into discord, abandons its God-given theme, becomes narrow, starved, ugly to see and strident to hear. The harmony and grandeur of my overture is my intensity to be involved, enough for me to want it to be heard that this is what I long for with all my heart. The Beatitudes are most persuasive that such living is for now - now is the acceptable time. - cf. 2Cor.6.2.

We need a drastic rearrangement of how we see God's involvement. God is not the reward for being good. God is love, and everything made by God is a communication of love. Creation is the way God communicates love beyond the Godhead.

God gives me to myself in love, so that awakening to who I am through the Grace and awareness of God's presence, I become aware of the Someone within me, loving me for being me, and desiring to love others through my love. I am specifically designed to be loved and to fall in love. All this through realising, as did St. Augustine, that God cannot be used, only enjoyed.

Growth in genuine humility comes about through realising that in God's eyes, my sinfulness and my selfishness seem to make me even more desirable; desirable enough for God to come and be with me like this: *I have come for sinners* - Mt.9.13. It truly is the heart of humility to realise that because God is nothing else but love, my sin, in the mysterious way of love, is somehow attractive to God. How else do we understand the cross?

My healing is not something added-on to me as a consequence of my responding to love - my healing *is the experiencing of love, personally*. Love loves the lovely, and loveliness cannot be begged, borrowed or stolen. Loveliness is proper to the actual becoming in love of each

individual, since this reaching out is towards Loveliness itself, and makes us able to become gradually what we are already receiving.

There is no reward for loving God. And yet, how often are we reminded if not cajoled of our solemn obligation to God - threatened by commands, circumscribed by laws, held in thrall by judgements - what has happened to the Grace of our life? Where is the gratuity that love requires?

This brings us, inevitably, to the question. What do I owe God? It depends where I am coming from. If I am seeing myself as one in receipt of everything that constitutes me and my living - then indeed I owe everything to God. Ask the same question of God; ask for God's intention in creating me, and what then? I exist because God summons me out of love, calls me into being because I am desired as me, I am the apple of God's eye.

I wouldn't dream of asking the giver of my birthday present - how much do I owe you? Why can I not offer the same courtesy to God? My life is gifted to me - and the proper response to Grace is gratitude; and gratitude means inhabiting the gift as something cherished, valued and respected. It means living my life according to the vision another has of it - the reason why I exist is not given to me before I set out on my life's journey. It gradually reveals itself to me as I set out to live to the full the gift of self that I have been given.

It is to accept, on the one hand, that I am a unique and unrepeatable potential to make God present in creation by the way I am present; and on the other hand, I cannot achieve such a vocation on my own, I already belong as from our common origin in God, life is to incarnate this by the way I live my belonging in the world where I am at home, and with those whom God has given me. St Francis saw it clearly as: *The Lord gave me brethren.*

Everything of God is freely given, gifts to be enjoyed - *I have come that you may enjoy life* - John 10.10. There can be no such thing as a shadow of debt when we are viewed by God. Indeed, there can be and ought to be a consciousness of being graced in so many ways, enough for us to say in all humility - *I believe I owe nothing, I know I owe everything - let my believing so inform my knowing as to make my gratitude a response in love as I accept everything from you, Lord.* This truly is what it means to be holy and humble of heart.

Reflecting on the wonder of such love helps me see just how true it is when good people say: I am not worthy. No false modesty here. It is realising the total giftedness myself from God, through me being myself, and the all too obvious lack-lustre response from me in return. How intensely must such people experience the sheer gratuity of love to be able say so truthfully?

St. Paul is not renowned for his softness of touch, I'm sure unfairly, since it is secured in the very heart of his faith. He was overwhelmed by the sheer giftedness of himself and all creation, and how the blending of both gave him intimate access to God. The only sure response has to be thank-you, and evidence of sincerity is the way the gift is received to be enjoyed. My life's purpose is within the generosity of the Giver, and I need to hear its purpose in order to enjoy the gift. The way into this is life itself, to let it be in the context of goodness and honest endeavour, so that through the way I live, I discover more and more *why I live.*

We have the Word to guide us, the Sacraments to strengthen us the companionship of the Church to affirm us through the choices we make so that I might *act, justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God* - Micah 6.8. in gratitude and celebration.

In a world of so much random choosing, why was I born, and not another. For a change I need to ask why me in wonder, rather than anger. Gratitude and celebration belong together. Celebrations take various forms, some follow a ritual pattern - like the traditional Christmas Dinner, or a wedding reception; some are spontaneous, since celebration is its own

justification and never requires there to be a specific reason. So how do I celebrate the gift of my life? Is a birthday party enough? Clearly not, since there is so much more to celebrate.

We have the misfortune to experience a blurring of the edges about some celebrations, when we try to combine something we have to do [*by obligation*] with something we want to do [*simply for its own sake*].

Fulfilling obligations does not belong in celebration. This is why it is important not to confuse Sacramental celebration within rituals divorced from everyday living, since each one is simply a highlighting of something very ordinary, in the proper and valued sense of that word. Baptism - the fragile gift of new life, coming together to break bread so that we can share being with Christ *really, truly and substantially* with us in our Eucharist. Coming together persuaded of God's love for us in Reconciliation, aware that our sinfulness and failings neither cut us off nor cast us out.

St. Irenaeus' inspired words should be as a clarion call for the quality of our celebrations: *God is praised when we are fully alive*, whether it be from the richness of passion or through to the tragedy of suffering, and all stages in between. Wherever love is the determining factor there has to be something that is out of my control. All of us feel insecure about losing control over our lives, and it is this that lends piquancy and excitement to falling in love. I didn't plan it, it is happening, and the more it happens the more I want it to do so. And I discover it cannot be managed or manipulated through the challenge to risk letting myself go with it. I did not intend this, but I am realising it is far more precious than anything I could have planned for myself, but am I willing to let go of my need to be in charge?

If I prefer the security of the tried and tested to this unknown, I might well be safe, but perhaps not free. I imagine it must be akin to dying, since I am not being asked just to see things differently from the security of my own patch, but actually to live my life differently, with another at the centre of it, without any guarantee of success. That this is so, becomes apparent in the anguish and pain of bereavement, when I realise that not just part of my life is gone, but all of it.

It is only when I venture into the arena of the unknown and the unpredictable that surprises can happen - [*the way Gerard Hughes refers to God. - The God of Surprises.*] This is very much in line with the way Jesus behaved with people who wanted to be with him. They asked him the *what and wherefore*, but he simply invited - come and see, risk it. Simply feeding their appetite for the promised *something more* referred to in Hebrews - 11.40 not the flickering beacon way beyond us, but the fire in the grate deep within.

It was this constant smouldering that warmed Jesus towards Calvary, when all else would scream. Jesus did not come to die, certainly not to suffer, but to show, in himself the totality of God's love for everything created. This could be a pleasant task on sunshine days, but the task remains equally the same when the storm clouds burst, and Palm Sunday turns into Good Friday: *Father, forgive them...* Lk.23.34. The Father did not send Jesus to die, but to love and not to count the cost. *To show that eternal life for everyone is really worth dying for.*

So, what would this eternal life feel like? Focus on how the centrality of the Resurrection highlights the all-inclusive quality of such living. We start from where we are: this mortal flesh, the dust of this earth is where God is. Every aspect of what living means is our feeding off the life of God; to live by God's life is not to let-go of how we live normally for something more spiritual.

Certainly this world is in a mess, we hear about it and see it every day: there are plenty of good things happening for many, but many, many more know only a life underwritten by fear, threatened by aggression, a constant struggle to survive. Hungry people don't have the luxury of meal times; they have to eat when they can. We have our planning, our insights, we

also have our unrepented sinfulness that tends to evaluate in terms of self-first; along with this there is the seeming randomness of an evolving world.

Henry Ford is reputed to have said: life is just one damn thing after another. Of course, there is obvious truth here. Days following days are given us, and whilst we have some say in where they go, what about where they come from, and what has changed in me since I received my first day? I am still the same receiver, even though I have tried to enter into the process of *becoming more*, by the way I have lived my many days. But what has this process of becoming done to me?

As I come to realise that there are now far more days behind me than in front of me, it is a timely question to face. My life has shown me that there is Someone within me desiring me, cherishing me, loving me; and this has led me to struggle hard with appreciating the very real difference between genuine self-worth, and full-blown selfishness. The difference being that in this latter it is my fearful insistence on me being first that rides roughshod over all else; whereas genuine self-worth is gifted to me in experiencing a gratuitous love that is there for me, just as I am.

There is more: where love is real there is always task or mission. Goodness spreads itself. Allow it access and the rest will follow. Perhaps we miss out on this in so much of our planning. This is by no means advocating sitting back and let things happen. Rather is it because we let things happen through the spirit of Goodness that we will find ourselves constantly challenged to incarnate this truth, no matter what. I am not simply experiencing being loved by Someone within me, I am aware that this love wants to reach out to others and to the world of others, through my loving and my willingness to let it be as goodness desires.

Many ask: why did St. Francis see so much goodness in the world? Because of what was happening within himself he went looking for it, expecting to find it, and because it really is there, he celebrated it. The manner of his doing so, is in no way out of our reach.

What is attractive about being with the values of Francis is the very real and growing conviction - *I could do that*. Which is precisely what he learned from gazing on Christ crucified. This lent a shape to his life which he was to describe *as being brother*. Made able, through Grace, to accept Jesus as his friar/brother and so come to know God as Abba and himself a beloved of Abba.

Life doesn't require an Ordnance Survey map before we set out to live, day-by-day. Life is risk, asking me to be willing to find out where, why and how by actually stepping out and living - *come and see*. This stepping-out, far from being foolhardy, is motivated by that inner need, not just to know that good is preferable to its opposite but also to feel the need to let this become my flesh and blood.

I am being asked by my very being to let what is good become flesh through my prayerful discerning and responsible choosing. Becoming more and more aware that belonging through genuine relationships is vital, and that exclusions, for whatever reason, lead to disintegration.

When such promptings open me to the giftedness of faith, I discover the wonderful provision Jesus Christ has made for those who wish to *follow his way, truth and life*. How the Church is the Body of Christ, incarnating these values as a real community experience. That the Church is here to enlighten through its commitment to the Word, to nourish through the vibrancy of a Sacramental life, wherein we are first able to receive for ourselves what we will be asked to share with others; and then allow this love within to reach others through our loving and reaching out.

God has no hands or feet but ours to let his yearning to be for all others become real. For this I grow in appreciating the real challenge that my life is *not meant to be for me as I see it, but for you as you need it*. It is by living within the community called Church which incarnates this, that we too become recipients of needing other lives to help us live: *Give us this day our daily bread*.

To live the Gospel as Church challenges us to be as adventurous as Jesus was in finding ways to make life more *an experience* of abundance for everyone. This is to live no longer by the promptings of self, but to succumb willingly and eagerly to that warmth growing within us; that can never be satisfied by staying at home, radiation requires incarnation if it is to fan out. Simply selecting what ought to be can perhaps miss out on the need to realise that whilst Gospel living is simple, simple does not mean easy. Simple means uncomplicated - it is the simple truth that the most direct way up the mountain is to go straight up, but it is far from being the easier or scenic way.

Uncertainty, doubts, the need for responsible choosing are going to be my constant travelling companions. In its infant state this sought and found refuge in the ability to trust others to do all this for me. This is good and desirable, provided it moves towards allowing me to stand on my own two feet. Not by any means to rid myself of guidance and direction, but to take on the responsibility of choosing my guides - both individuals and Church - for myself.

Whilst it is truly foolish to discard the wisdom of the ages because it isn't mod, we need to bear in mind that what is now our past was once someone's exciting future, and that in fact I betray what is to come after me if I simply pass this on [*simply content to repeat the past*] without clothing it with how that future became my present, this is the gift I owe to tomorrow. That I am aware that I am being loved, and that others are able to be loved through my loving if I am willing to let this be.

For this to be real it is going to mean a readiness to step away from the inevitable rigidity of established ways, *to hear the cries of the poor* at distances far removed from the beaten track. St. Francis became more and more aware of this the more he realised that Jesus' Passion is by no means confined to the last three days of Holy Week. *I have come to bring fire... and desire it was already ablaze* - Lk.12.49.

His first and undoubted passion is for life - life in abundance. Hear it in his plaintive cry in his anguish for real people - *Jerusalem, if only... I would have gathered your children as a hen her chickens* - Mt.23.37, as well as for individuals - *if you want to you can heal me, of course I want to* - Mk.1.40. This was to create such an impression on St. Paul that he wrote about it to the Church in Corinth, in which letter, as we have seen, *he refers to Jesus as the of God all creation* - 2Cor.1.19.

Sadly, the accepted logic of our human/God relationship is based on our weakness, our helplessness, our total need - which is certainly true. As if to suggest that the more we persuade ourselves of our unworthiness, the more disposed we become to receive Grace. This has caused many scars. And it flies in the face of our experience; every experience of love brings with it *a sense of worthwhileness*, the more intense the experience the more free do we become.

Our faith persuades us that God loves us, each one uniquely and in a way unrepeatable elsewhere. This love is total, the all of God, and there is nothing we can do to stop it, though we can and do abuse it and ignore it. With regard to God, we are in a position of strength, not weakness. It is God, having to be content with my attempts at loving in return, who has drawn the short straw. God finds me lovable enough to bring me into being, and to affirm this with his ecstatic yes - Jesus.

There is a good reminder in reflecting that in giving birth, not just a baby is born, but a mother too. The child creates the parent. And Scripture tells me that whilst God is Abba, Father, God cannot be my father unless, like the Prodigal, I return home and let it happen, so that I too can *cry out Abba, Father through the Spirit poured into me* - Rom.5.5. Parent is not a one directional relationship, parent on its own makes no sense, there has to be a child. And we are told this is so important that *unless we become as little children we will never know the Kingdom* - Mt.18.3, the parenting of God. What is it that the child has that his hidden from the adult? - Mk.10.14.

Such is the brokenness and absurdity of our world that we have to deprive our children of the capacity for faith. A child is ready to believe everything it hears. But such is the evil abroad in our world that we have to warn children that they can't believe everything they hear. This has even been referred to as saving children from their naivety, when all the while it is the mendacity of the adult, the intention to deceive that is the issue.

A child is ready for faith, and until we have in place the trust and honesty that such faith demands we will not know what it means to be *of the kingdom*. We had it once. We trusted the love of our parents and family, with a trust that was well-placed. But as we grew-up, so called, we had to abandon such carefree living, and become humanly impoverished for our own so-called safety's sake.

Prayer [to be actively involved with all this]

It is to be open to real of God with the real me. I have always struggled with formal presentations and recommended praxes of prayer - though undoubtedly they are of great value. *Saying prayers* doesn't help me either; it seems to cause more questions than provide answers. Much of this is due to my not being a methodical person by instinct - as with most things, this has both a downside and an upside. On the positive side it has helped me discover an experience of prayer that is *immediate, relevant and attractive*, and can be around all the time [*pray always?*].

But first - why is prayer important? Why do we expect some kind of praying if we attend religious celebrations? Whatever praying means, the consensus seems to be that we do it badly. Maybe because we tend to overlook what is essential. Do I need to pray every day? Am I doing something when I pray? I do lots of things, and these things lead to other things - I have my breakfast, then I need to wash-up and clear away... To get to work I need to be in time for the bus...

That is how life works, doing something for something else. If I attach prayer onto this way of doing I have a problem. Prayer, like its companions - *love and celebration* - is not for anything other than itself. When the apostles saw Jesus pray they didn't see him do anything, *he was simply enjoying being someone*, being himself, *the beloved of Abba*. The initial experience in prayer is being there for another, it is opening to receive.

To jump into contemporary parlance, is prayer my own, personal Google, my search engine? Where I feed in the questions and wait for the answers? To answer - why do I pray? - try asking why do I say I love you? Does it help? Worth noting that whenever I say *I love you* in its proper context, though it is said many times, I never repeat myself, because love is alive and active, never the same one moment to the next.

Many seem to imagine that the more a couple grow in intimacy, the more they become like each other. Not so: I love you affirms the difference we make, asking each other always to go on being different, an ongoing experience of the freshness of always new.

From deep inside, the lover experiences the growing need to express what is happening because of the other. In fact, I love you means *this is me because of you, and I am enjoying it enough to share it*. It is not doing anything; it is being someone new.

Yet St. Paul does speak of doing when he talks of *doing the truth in love* - Eph.4.15; which is simply another way of expressing the same idea. I love you is not meant to produce results; this is not to say that nothing happens, it is simply me trying to express how I am experiencing myself here and now - in the same way we hear God identify who God is with *I am who I am - for you*. - Ex.3.14.

Love is only known lovingly, it has no other purpose than itself, literally being in love. I am trying to express what is happening to my real self, the self that matters, because of this belonging. But why not keep quiet about it? I probably have done so for some time, but now it demands something of me, it demands to be heard.... *if I tell them to be silent the very stones will cry out* - Lk.19.40.

I am experiencing being human at its very best - *greater love than this there is not* - Jn.15.13. Loving that is not continually seeking new ways of expression, and is impeded from doing so, will shrivel and die; and any attempt at rekindling by simply using right-sounding words, which no longer carry the necessary and pre-existing relationship, will sound artificial and unworthy. *I love you* cannot be said to order; the words happen when I find that I can do no other than seek to express it in some form. This is who I am now, and I need to express it.

I believe prayer belongs within this context. The essence of all prayer is *to hear God say to me I love you - this is who I am for you* - and the *this* is God's eternal Word, Jesus the Christ, here for me, just as I am. This experience is urged upon us throughout Scripture e.g. - *be still and know that I am God* - Ps.45.11. How staggering is the full truth of this, brought to us through the Word made flesh - *be still and know that I am God in love with you*.

To see any form of prayer by-passing this is to be misled. *I love you* can be spoken in a variety of contexts - to seduce, to deceive, to get; it can be simply sentiment, used in poetry or song, it can even be used about things - I love the sunrise; I love Turkish Delight. But it is only properly used in one context, to express being in love. Why else does St. John tell us *God is love* - 1Jn.4.8; to be echoed by St. Augustine - *God cannot be used, only be enjoyed?*

Prayer belongs within living faith; to live in love can only happen in faith. It is to take the other at his/her word. Indeed, it is to intend to live my life according to the vision another has of it - *I love you would have me believe that I am lovely*, since love loves the lovely. The more insistent such affirmation is, the more eager I am to become more than I am. One of St. Francis' insights, revealed to him through Grace, is the realisation that so many opposites exist in this world precisely so that they can be reconciled. As it is in the Trinity, is now and will be forever.

We are accustomed to hear *how can Mary be virgin and mother?* Because of the opposites within the Trinity where the Father is total giving and the Spirit is total receiving, and the Word, the Second Person, is the actual gift of self from the Father, and the receiving and responding to this same gift - the Word - in the Spirit, God's love life. Just as the Word is the convergence of opposites in the Trinity, so too in creation, all shall be one in him, the Word made flesh. All can be reconciled in Christ Jesus, the Lord.

With his words - *what matters is not our love for God but God's love for us* - 1Jn.4.10, John reminds us that we need to be still and hear this from God - *I love you - this is who I am for you* - everything about Jesus Christ proclaims how much God loves me. If God and myself had to rely *on my loving* to sustain our intimacy it simply couldn't happen, but there are no worries here because it is God's total, eternal, self-emptying love for me that is there to

sustain us, if I am prepared to stop, listen and believe. I need to pray often - *Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief* - Mk.9.24.

It isn't helpful to be told, when I express concern about the poor quality of my faith, if you have doubts, pray about it. As if the appropriate flow is through prayer to faith - the cause and effect syndrome raises its head again, presuming that prayer is meant to achieve something. It is because I believe that I pray. How do prayer and faith fit together?

Prayer plays the same role as saying I love you - it is because I have faith, no matter how fragile, that I pray, no matter how badly. To pray is *to be faithful*, it does not create it, no more than the saying - I love you can create a relationship. We know we are caught up in loving; our whole self is involved in expressing this. Faith also calls for similar involvement of self. When, from within myself I am caught up in an experience that will not be denied, I am prompted to articulate love/prayer.

What makes love real, exciting and fresh is the reality of the life that gives rise to it - I first live my love into myself so that it can burst forth towards the other. As the child can be totally free to play and dream and build castles in the air, because it is secure in the love surrounding it; as Jesus at prayer was being himself the beloved of Abba, not doing anything, simply enjoying being loved and responding to it - so too is prayer, *to say yes please, to love offered freely and unconditionally and to risk responding as best I can*.

I am all too aware that I am mortal, I am within limits, yet I am destined for immortality and I have an instinct for this to be real, I reach out for it - I pray. I am searching for value, purpose in life, and of a kind not limited but lasting. I am trying to be my searching, seeking, desiring self, aware of being with the one who is not just totally desirable, but this supreme Other actually enjoys me as one desirable enough for me to be created.

We pray best when we are deeply moved - by elation or tragedy. In the everyday living of my life there are times when I need not just to feel gratitude or anger, but to give it some form of expression. Living in faith means appreciating that this everyday living and experiencing life, even when surrounded by unwelcome limitations and by death itself, *is made for something more* - Heb.11.40, not for diminishment and extinction. Faith makes life fully liveable. But is there anyone there to hear me? How do I know I'm not talking to myself or whistling in the dark?

When I need to express my feelings, positive or negative, is there any point or purpose in doing so? Why is it obviously so important to make the effort - the scream of frustration, the ardour of gratitude? Do I really matter to anyone who can address this for me? *Faith is the assurance of the existence of such unseen things* - Heb.11.1. Faith tells me I am loved exactly as I am, uniquely and eternally with the freshness of being always new - Jas.1.17. Experience. God has no beginning or ending, and so all that belongs to God knows neither start nor finish.

God never began to love me; I am loved eternally in God. It is this conviction proper to faith that assures me *of my forever*. Prayer flows out from this, in gratitude at the sheer wonder and gratuity of it, is puzzlement and even anger, when hurtful and even evil things seem to be allowed to happen to me. There is an appropriate correspondence between the intensity of my faith and the value of my prayer: even though my faith is the minute size of a mustard seed - Mt.17.20. Faith dignifies belief through incarnation, my word becoming flesh, and prayer *allows my total involvement* in all of this.

Prayer is not asking that things be put right, but entrusting myself to a welcoming environment, one though it escapes any immediate understanding, yet does it fuel my longing. I know that I am loved; and it is the sure conviction of this that lends urgency to my

praying, even when I too feel compelled to complain - my God, why...? - Mk.15.34. I need to move away from using prayer to further my own good.

My difficulty in prayer has more to do with infidelity, an absence of flesh and blood evidence of the reality of the words I am using. As my everyday living is neither in the abstract nor confined to formulae or theory, neither should my prayer be so unreal. It has to express my trust in God, in Creation, in everything in God's hands where all will be well. Just as saying I love you is handing myself over to another, so prayer is entrusting myself to Abba, who assures me I am lovely, *and lets me experience this* even here and now through so many other loves and good things.

The effectiveness [*fecundity*] of prayer is to move from one who prays to one who is becoming prayer. Both the lover and the pray-er are conspicuous through their enhanced quality of life. The promised abundance - Jn.6.40. - is not the resolving of conflict or the removal of pain, but the very real assurance of being safe and free, even walking up Calvary Hill. There is no promise that prayer will solve anything simply the assurance that no matter what, I will be well, I might even suffer and die, but I will be well. If prayer is an act of trust, of love; what is it that lovers actually do?

In love...

Genuinely human living is the doing of ordinary things, by ordinary folk, extraordinarily well: hoping, trusting, enjoying, sharing, caring... We do the ordinary things of life: trusting, making love... without having to find a handbook to tell us how. Indeed, I could give a powerfully cogent and practical explanation of why I love my lover, without any reference on my part to God; likewise, can I make and honour commitments and promises without invoking the deity, and allow these to become the anchor of my life.

Faith and love are the same reality viewed from different angles: my faith is the incarnating of my love when as the lover is compelled to express love, the believer to articulate faith in prayer. I don't say I love you in order to fall in love, no more than I pray to get faith. To separate actions appropriate to I love you from the living relationship this refers to, is rightly termed prostitution; so too, similar violence is inflicted through the separating of prayer and living faith.

Lovers delight in being-with each other, presence is all important. Ingenuity comes to play in devising various ways of surprising each other with both presence and presents. Actions, intimacies, communications are focussed on the enhancement of real presence, enough for life and reality to be seen no longer in the context of I see, *but we enjoy*. This is why Jesus uses the symbolism of yeast, so tiny yet so dynamic and all-pervading in its impact: i.e. to make abundance out of what is ordinary.

So what do believers do? They can do nothing other than enjoy enhanced and deepening belonging so as to appreciate life according to the vision another has of it, that other who has my well-being totally in mind. The reality of liturgy, sacraments, prayer is equally compelling for lovers as well as for believers. So, is there any single activity that can be said to contain the essence of loving/praying?

No, no single, isolated gesture - simply a new *forma vitae*, a new shape to life - living differently. I experience the need in both prayer and affective living to come clean, to uncover myself, to come out of hiding through the gift of realising that intensity of relevance is coterminous with *me inhabiting me as I am*. Just as love requires honesty, so does prayer flourish through integrity. The Old Testament says God is *I Am* - Ex.3.14, total exposure in wide open integrity. St. Paul uses love's language - *I live now not I but Christ lives in me* - Gal.2.20. Prayer is moving gently into that warmth of awareness of someone desiring me just

as I am, not making God aware of me, but me waking up to this real presence, all because of me.

What does Almighty God mean? For many years I've had an instinctive aversion to *Almighty God* as a way of addressing God. I probably couldn't say why, other than it was just unreal for me. I believed in God, Creator and Redeemer, who made and sustains all things, yet almighty has never said that for me. Certainly, my daily living has not always reflected this: I have prayed *to get* - to get things changed, I have missed out on intimacy by simply *using* prayer. But since prayer is presence, where does petition fit. After all, the Our Father is full of petition?

Before looking at this, I want to reflect briefly on how God answers prayer. There is nothing other than love in God, and we need to try to reflect on how genuine love actually works. For a start, God is forever in the situation of giving far more to us in love than he receives from us; yet love is complete in God who is Father, Son and Spirit - *Lover, Beloved in the Mutuality of both*.

Even in our own experiences of love we do appreciate that love should *not be used* for anything. Love is for loving and is only known lovingly. So, back to my question, what is the reality of almighty for God who is only love? *The almighty has done marvellous things for me* - Lk.1.49. Yet, is it true to say what God fails to do through love is accomplished by resorting to power - carrot and stick? It is clear that there is nothing inherently amiss in using power to achieve; this is the very stuff of our everyday living - even when riding a bicycle. It is simply the ability to achieve a result, to make a difference.

But *when power is used against another*, without the other's agreement, as with the stronger over the weaker, it is working against freedom. The powerful energy of the jet engine is used for the benefit of travellers, not so the powerful energy of a nuclear weapon. This is the way dictators operate, instilling fear through threat of power used against the free choice of individuals. Such coercion is bullying, though it could be used to restrain the wrongdoer for the benefit of community.

Power in Church and State? Leadership and Authority are not inter-changeable terms. It is possible for someone in a leadership role to make plans and move actively towards their realisation. In its crudest form such leadership *stems from simply having power* - promoted to CEO, elected as leader. If the power is such as to allow the new leader to dispose of opposition, the leadership might be effective in the short term. But this is not Christian leadership.

Alternative leadership asks that leaders set directions and implement them only after taking into account the sensitivities of others, seeking for consensus. Leaders of this kind are disciplined enough to be detached from simply getting their own way, a type of leadership highlighted by humility and patience, whose main arsenal is persuasion and not coercion. Such a leader is convinced of the need to delegate and to trust, without the need to interfere.

What about charismatic leadership? What distinguishes this leader is that it is not conviction leadership. The charismatic leader relies on personal magnetism, strengths which have often been the way of founders of Religious Institutes. But it obviously has drawbacks because it is so personal, and often tends to have things out of proportion.

The ability to inspire is often offset by an inability to organise or plan. An organisation cannot rely on charismatic leadership for survival. Such leaders are rare; there is no way of guaranteeing a regular supply. There are many people who have an ability to dominate or influence whatever group they appear in [*for good or ill*], though, unlike charismatics, not because of personal gifts. Leadership can issue from a streak of menace and even bullying.

When properly harnessed the powers of the born leader can be a considerable asset. Head-teachers have often successfully placed gang-leaders in positions of responsibility, converting a capacity for mischief into an asset. Whatever the value of natural leaders, most Institutions have more places to fill than natural leaders available. Prophets and heretics are cut from similar cloth, and it is only with hindsight we discover which is which.

To inspire effectively, to lead and to challenge creatively, the Church needs to be relevant to each successive age. This is where mismatch most often happens - in the way communication is issued and the way it is received. The issue is not the nature of the church, or the source of its authority, or even the message it claims to teach, but does what is actually happening to engage attention, command respect?

It is all too common to label persons disobedient and disloyal when what is at fault is the manner of the communication and not its content. There is no point in repeating *Father knows best*, in a situation in which such terminology is alien.

Can people be motivated by this old hierarchical system? Dependence on permissions reduces drive and initiative; degrees of independence certainly do the opposite. Availability of information, open communication and consultation, sharing in the decision-making, all contribute to the building up of joint enterprises, and a sense of belonging.

This is problematic for traditional managers who are asked to manage more by consent than by edict from on high. It is becoming more and more unthinkable for people to contribute to any form of collective action without being able to influence goals or choices. Authority is meant to generate trust not tension, and for this to happen *feelings must accompany functions*.

The command and obey principle is still alive and doing well in the Church: God tells the pope, the pope tells the bishops, the bishops tell the priests... Apart from flying in the face of Vatican II, which insisted on the diffusion of authority through the local churches and each member thereof, it is also a lazy and inefficient *modus operandi*.

The Council was not seeking to give in to liberalism. It was rejecting directly and deliberately an outmoded secular model, that of Roman Imperial Government, for a model more in keeping with Scripture. Far from promoting unquestioning subjection of the led to the leaders, it promotes the need for mutual understanding of hearts and minds, mutual and unprejudiced searching for the will of God.

The selection of leaders and the understanding of their role is of equal importance. *The Church is not a democracy* - is a mindless slogan. No question, the truths of faith are a gift of revelation, not made by consensus. But this in no way argues for a crude and authoritarian ecclesiastical organisation. The leader is not chosen as an over-lord, but as the first servant of the brethren.

At times it is hard to understand a ministry of service when couched in continual rebuke and fault-finding. We all want leaders to be special. But above all else we need them to be human. We need them to be gently strong and reassuring. The church is essentially a lay church. A Religious Institute belongs to its members. In the image of the crucified Christ, Christian leaders are already compromised in accepting power; when, in fact, they need us more than we need them.

Examples of abuse of Power are, unfortunately, numerous. We all too often hear of a pastor who treats his people abominably, imposing his will either through arrogance or fear. One Priest declined to kneel to wash the feet of parishioners on Maundy Thursday [*he agreed to stand.*] with the comment *I'm the parish priest!*

To be called before a Roman Congregation to give an account of stewardship is no happy event. Religious Life abounds with horror stories of autocratic superiors who oppressed and, at times, terrorised through their own whims and arbitrary decisions. It is sad that so many appear to believe that quasi-infallibility seems to come with election to office. I become an expert builder, financier, theologian, human developer... Tempting as it might be to catalogue abuses, it is pointless. We should really be asking why does it happen in the first place.

We experience community not as a world-wide Church, or international Institute, but as a local community; the place where we actually live. Under an authoritarian papacy e.g. many parishes and communities will run on similar lines - exaggerated centralisation. This can happen because the acceptance of this power tends to be uncritical. We ought to be able to take for granted that the exercise of power is concerned primarily with mission, making God's love known and available, and only secondarily with maintenance.

It is *totally* concerned with mediating a living experience of the love of God - and, straightaway, how people actually feel is crucial to this. The reason for structures and processes is so that the love of God may be ever more freely and widely accessible in its genuine form. In this, Christian leadership will find no echo in the exercise of political power all around it.

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them and their great men make their power felt. It must not be like this with you; whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many...
Mk.10.42. Mt.20.25.

In the Church the experience has been that power has been in the hands of self-perpetuating elite.

Goodness has been interpreted as the quality of those who accept this and live with it. This encourages childishness in the majority and a dangerously immature attitude among those who exercise power. Within such an environment it is difficult to see how any Christian does not have a Power problem. Abuse of Power, therefore, stems both from those who exercise it like this and from those who accept it like that.

Like what? The Rule and Constitutions of Religious Institutes is one model of Power. They contain the essence and the *modus vivendi*. In such cases power is to be entrusted only to those who will exercise it for the common good. But there is a theological model too. Abuse of Power can often be traced back to a theology of Church and kingdom which is decidedly outdated and inappropriate, with Vatican II; calling for ministerial collegiality - something which is yet to happen.

Such abuse of Power becomes difficult where there is a priority given to the contemplative centre, simply because this is the surest way to enhance respect and reverence for the other. Without the contemplative centre being a priority in the leader, the experience of that power by others cannot be as in the manner of Christ. *I have called you friends... since the Father has told me all about you...* cf. Jn.15.15.

It is characteristic of a person with low self-esteem to be nervous in allowing others scope and freedom for creativity. Because such a person always comes off second best when comparing self with others and it becomes almost compulsive to keep others down to my own level.

The urge is to exercise excessive control, insisting on a single right [*my*] way of doing things; fearfully needing to know everything that is going on; more ready to criticise than to

encourage. All these ways abuse power and effectively stifle creativity, joy and spontaneity. The acid test - is the group happier to see me arrive or leave?

One fear which most people would be ashamed to own, yet which is more common than we realise, is fear of loss of status. It afflicts clergy and religious particularly, and is one of the main reasons for slow movement towards renewal and development. We have lost sight of the fact that power in the Christian community means service - *other people first*, rather than power and command. Sadly, for many people their sense of self and identity is bound up with status.

When such a person is in Power, the assuming of wider responsibility by others, without my consent, is seen as invasion of my rights rather than a use of initiative. This results in dictatorial behaviour. When fear dominates within a group, the exercise of power is more likely to pass to those who inspire fear and effectively foster dis-ease.

The theology of Obedience has its origin in the Word of God, and recognises fully the dignity of personal freedom and co-responsibility. It excludes from the outset any and every notion that one in power has an exclusive hot-line to God. Power exists through the previous consent of others and addresses itself directly to freedom, not subservience. Power is subservient to the Word of God and is committed to the discernment of its message. It is something entirely other than the power of coercion. Power discerns, coordinates and persuades. Its sole purpose is to ensure the unity of community *by safeguarding its diversity*.

We have been weaned through a scientific age in which there has been an ongoing economic explosion of global dimensions, promoted almost entirely through the acceptance of systematic coercive power; and this has impacted equally and unfortunately on the Church as well as the State, where *the freedom of the children of God* [Rom.8.21] came to mean freedom to do what we were told. Based on the assumption that a certain amount of power is needed for the common good.

It is not that coercive power has not done any good, but that all coercive power, no matter how well-intentioned, by definition, sins against human freedom. It treats subjects as objects, seeking to justify the means by the end, diminishing the sacredness of the individual; and, when pushed to its limits, almighty God came to mean for many, God the all-powerful, the supreme bully.

Is my relationship to God resting on weakness? Is it founded on my unquestioned helplessness, is God the one who makes up for my many deficiencies, who has the power to supply for my weakness? God causes me to love with everything I'm capable of, and this cause is my growing awareness that I am loved, personally, uniquely and infinitely - just because I am me.

This love is real and tangible, it sends me opportunities to appreciate its presence through so much goodness that populates my living, and not only this, but in as much as I risk accepting this offer, I can let God reach others through my loving - *truly Love God and love your neighbour* - belong together. If it is true, that we are loved totally and gratuitously, without exclusions or exceptions, then why is worship so important? Surely there is much more to this than my inadequacies compelling me to recognise power?

Let the principle of growth instruct us here. Growth is real whenever and wherever there has been a conscious effort to act responsibly, to be genuinely creative, making decisions through pro-action rather than always by re-action; when my humanness asserts itself independently of so many restraints. When I respond from my freedom to choose, I feel nothing of the diminishment the imposition of another's will upon me would cause.

What does power really mean? How does power sit between one person and another? How do I, a free human being, influence you, a free human being, to enjoy freedom? The answer must be through the respect conveyed to you in the doing, in such a way that value becomes your experience precisely through you simply being yourself - which verily is the way God loves us. I suppose a useful word to describe this would be persuasion - never coercion.

Persuasion and coercion, however, do have something in common, in that they produce an effect. But there the likeness ends: persuasion relies on the inherent attractiveness of goodness - enticing, luring, tempting. Whereas coercion seeks to produce the end irrespective of our consent. Freedom is something that can only be where freedom of choice is respected and valued. To relate in this way and to be related-to, to be affirmed in making decisions from strength and not from weakness, with our sense of self-worth enhanced.

However, there are times when blind obedience is most opportune. One would hope, for example, that when there is an emergency situation, like a fire, everyone will promptly obey the wisdom of those whose responsibility is to guide us to safety. Yet, here too this rests on presumed value and well-being at the heart of such behaviour. Accepting responsibilities and making free choices doesn't automatically ensure that such will be easy. It is more of an indication of how much I am willing to endure, and to invest myself in attaining desired freedom.

Why should I undergo hardship and even pain? Because in the light of genuine discernment, to do otherwise would inhibit me from being myself. Love requires there to be no compulsion, no coercion; simply to be attracted by the goodness itself. I choose well in search of love when I discover the real value in living my life as you need it and not as I see it.

Is this no more than romantic idealism, with violins playing softly in the background? I need only have a look around and notice such things as the lengths to which, for example, parents will go for the benefit of their children; how the adult child will sacrifice so much for an indigent parent; friends of the Hospice movement; volunteers for help overseas; Save the Children... are these the actions of simply soft romantics, or just ordinary folk who ordinary things, extraordinarily well - what holiness really means?

Jesus invited the disciples to come and see, no force used; simply if you are interested come and have a look. When our inner self is nudged sufficiently for us to take notice, and where the newfound interest finds itself challenged to do something about it, we would probably be missing out on something special if we did not discern what is happening, and then act on it. The Rich Young man was certainly prompted to ask questions of Jesus, but saw fit to decline the invitation he received to do something about it. The text doesn't simply say he went away. But he went away - sad!

God is nothing other than love, with no coercive power; not the reward of me behaving myself. God is not law and order. All easy to say, yet in everyday living there is a timidity in me, a fearfulness. The world says proper ordering calls for love backed-up by force, so that when love doesn't produce, power steps in send for the Cavalry. I know God is love, I know I am made in this image - but I am many other things besides love: *insecure, weak, selfish, and I too resort to all kinds of abusive power to get my own way.*

Whereas, to postulate in any way whatsoever the presence of coercive power in God is to deny God's existence. In a world that wrecks the beautiful, spoils the happy, destroys peace - to say that God's coercion is needed, is to say that God cannot trust his own love - Jesus Christ - to be enough. Vulnerability is love's perennial partner. The Cross is eloquent - the one thing love cannot do in the face of coercive violence is to become coercive and violent.

The Cross is not saying that God's patience is inexhaustible, that God will not resort to coercion, but that God cannot coerce. Jesus shows how survival by violence is worse than death. As St. Paul reminds us - Rom.8.38 - *nothing can separate us from the love of God.*

There is no power whatsoever, no force or persecution, no violence that can deprive us of God's love. Yes, he died, nailed to a cross, mocked and abandoned - yet is he alive, risen from the dead, not to claim revenge, not to blame, but to carry-on loving no longer impeded by death and its minions.

There is a beautiful cameo piece in the Gospel that sums this up. *The stranger of the shore:* John 21.7 - after Good Friday the disciples having gone back to their fishing are coming ashore - they see the Lord waiting there. No doubt guilt and shame at abandoning him so disgracefully is uppermost - but what does he say to them?

No blame, no inquest, no pointing the finger, no asking where were you on Friday afternoon? Simply: *have you had breakfast?* How sad that we too have trawled the Gospels, reducing them to sets of commands, the observing of which would seal our eternal destiny.

My eternal well-being becomes the motivation [*I've got to think of my health.*]. If I need commands - listen to: *A new command, I give you...* John 13.34. - love as you are loved... But how can something inherently free, and graciously gifted as is love, be commanded? This command is in line with Jesus' come and see - John 1.39 - invitation to those curious about him. This New Command has more to do with I dare you to... rather than I order you; as with *take and eat...* I dare you risk letting yourself be loved into a new way of being a human being.

Is the promise big enough for me to accept the dare? Realising that whilst there are times when God is not big enough for me [*my sinfulness*] there never will be times when I am not big enough for God. Love can never work against my well-being. Jesus let his executioners do what they willed until they were prompted from within: *truly, this was the Son of God* - Mark 15.39.

We are familiar with the accepted saying: it's God's will. God's will can do only one thing: desire me to become aware how much I am loved. All I will find of God this side of the grave is this earth, this neighbour - all these gifts, so that through my new attitude I can even now know something of God's love for me, if only I can find the courage to taste and see, to risk-it. To risk realising that I am here not simply to get to there, but to enjoy the journey: *I have come that you may have abundant life* - John 10.10. Such abundance is not a reward for being good, but is the actual experience of being alive in this way.

There isn't an abstract version of the perfect me in God's mind, one that I will ultimately be judged against; only desire in God that I become fully alive with abundant enjoyment of life, knowing that I am loved simply because I am me *able freely to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God* - Mic.6.8.

Petition

When prayer is referred to it is most likely Prayer of Petition, when we ask someone to pray for us, or for this or that intention; it is one of the usual 4 categories of Prayer - Adoration, Thanksgiving, Repentance and Petition. If God does not have coercive power, some would say why pray? When I petition God, am I asking for God to intervene, to produce an effect that would not normally have happened, perhaps even change the course of someone's life - when asking for the Grace of conversion for that person?

If God could do this *on demand*, then God could do it whenever, demand or not, which flies against the necessary freedom that belongs to holding someone in love. For God, who is nothing else but love, the only power is persuasion. So, what is intended by prayer of

Petition, a form of Prayer that Jesus recommends: ask and you will receive...Jn.16.26 whatever to ask in my name... Jn.14.13. The Our Father is full of petition.

Prayer cannot be separated-out from the rest of life and can only be properly appreciated within that wider context. I should try to see the worship of prayer as *worship*, attempting to bring my fragmented life into the integrity of the presence of God, who loves me just as I am. As we have already seen, this is what I first hear when I listen to what God has to say - *I love you - this is who I am for you* - this is Jesus, God's love made flesh for me - this is who I can become for God, a beloved of Abba, in which true worship is freely and humbly taking God at his Word, Jesus the Christ.

To God, who is only love, nothing is owed, because everything is gift. Indeed, I could ask: can I do anything for God? Does God actually benefit from my prayer and worship? How can I possibly make a difference to God? God does not love out of need, love is not something God does, there is no distinction in God between what God does and who God is. God simply is love. Lovers do not do anything for each other, their being [*literally*] in love enlarges and enriches life together by making the two no longer two but one. Love is all about real, fully alive harmony in real presence.

The appropriate response to the graciousness of love is to celebrate it, to embrace it, live it to the full, and become it as presence for others. No debts to pay, no return to be made for gracious love other than to welcome it, receive it, become it so that others may also know it, each in one's own unique way - precisely the reason why God made us so different, that we may be one.

The first movement in prayer is to allow ever present graciousness to prompt response in thanksgiving. Prayer, like love and celebration, has no other purpose than to be fully itself. So, what self do I bring to prayer? One that *already is* through a whole host of relationships. I bring this self with me, it is who I am, and it is my desire to become not so much praying as becoming, myself, a prayer.

Prayer is not about self-improvement - *if you want to make God smile, tell him your plans* - nor to get or achieve. Prayer is first and foremost about *how much I am prepared to receive*, since the all of God is on offer. Yet, I do need to ask. We learn a lot from rituals that are steeped in tradition. Many, who simply take for example a superficial look at something like a rain dance, would simply see people doing something to get rain and might even ascribe the word superstition to such activity. What is actually at the heart of the rain dance is not a performance to get rain, but to honour the god who makes rain, celebrating the rain-making god.

Let's face it, we have had the same issue with Sacramental life, seeing the Sacraments as causing Grace, instead of appreciating them as a celebration of the giftedness of God. They celebrate what our Gracious God is doing - no human activity can cause God to give Grace, such would be a contradiction.

At the heart of our Eucharist, for example, is the simple involvement in sharing a meal. Something for which we gather to celebrate birthdays, feast days, high days and holy days. The purpose of such gatherings is not *to cause* sharing, but to *celebrate* it. This is why the Eucharist can never be used as a means to an end - as many would advocate through shared communion. The best we can do to celebrate truly, is to do what is spontaneous, to bring a gift - *but I being poor have only my dreams, I place my dreams under your feet; tread softly for you walk upon my dreams* - Yeats.

It is this truth that is at the heart of genuine liturgical praxis - reflecting on what we are about [*prayer*], and then creating the appropriate environment for this to happen [*mission*].

When we sit at table to share and we pass food to each other, we are sharing a gift that is life-giving, even though the food is external to us, what is handed to me is life-sustaining.

Here we have the meaning of Eucharistic symbolism - we share the same food, Jesus Christ, so as to live - *no longer I but Christ lives in me* - Gal.2.20; and all this through the vivacious presence of the Spirit, whose precise mission is to make of many one - Eph.4.4.

In the real presence of life-giving itself, this awesome Mystery, all we can do *is be still, know and celebrate* - Ps.45.11. - this Gracious gift precisely by taking, sharing and eating of the God who is life-giving, always is and always will be. Life is fashioned through the quality of our relationships, and the Eucharist celebrates the life-giving love of God, freely given to all who, at his invitation, take and eat.

We do not cause life, we celebrate our welcome, to be at home sharing the life of God, who is totally self-giving - as St. Clare urges - *hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, give yourself totally to him who gives himself to you, totally*. We do not celebrate to get something; our Eucharist is simply celebrating being together.

The self we bring, to repeat, is shaped by our relationships. I bring myself concerned about the health of a friend, elated at the good fortune of a family gifted with new life. I am not neutral, I come as a person who is experiencing life, in sunshine and showers, *it is this concerned self* I bring to celebrate the Eucharist, this is me, this is my life, *this is my petition*. When you have had a particularly bad day, everything that could go wrong. When you get home, and are asked how was your day? You will leave nothing untold. But what is really happening in this telling? You are not expecting to have all things put right, whatever it is that happens, to know your pain is accepted is all that it takes - *here, let me give you a hug*; which, after all, is what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This lets you get up the next day and carry-on, loving acceptance of you as you are, really experienced, this starts the healing. A simple gesture like a hug does it all, by actually doing nothing.

There is a message here about our Prayer of Petition. What I bring to prayer is me, just as I am, *concerned about this, sad about that, an everyday mix of happy/sadness*, wanting to hear what kind of a day have you had. The rest is history.

God isn't making things right. It is moments like this that enlighten me about what is *Good* about the Good News. The Good News is not - don't worry, everything is all right, because it patently isn't. The Good News is that *everything is not all right, but that's all right*, because I am all right.

God cannot change the flow of life, but can change me and my attitude towards it. The intolerable and unbearable can be reversed when shared in the presence of being loved; very much like the fevered child, crying and unable to rest who, when picked up and gently held will gradually quieten and fall asleep peacefully.

It isn't accurate to say we grow strong through adversity; we only grow maturely in any aspect of life through love *expressed as belief in us*. To be deprived of this is to go on existing *in spite of* life instead of living because of life. I turn to God in petition, who welcomes me as I am, in my brokenness, my being incomplete and anxious.

This acceptance is infallible, and it is within this embrace [*of the Prodigal*] that I am persuaded, not just to go on being me, but to be more me than ever. It is my inadequate words of petition that prompt me to entrust myself to this graciousness that is holding me close, just as I am. Maybe even to discover that when God speaks of God as *I am who I am* - something is also being said about those made in the image of God.

My petitions arise out of my experience of living, they are aspects of me, this how I am - concerned [*or not.*] about this and that. I live in hope of abundant life, and I fear the impact

of my brokenness as a spoiler of hope. I need gradually to let go, denying nothing, and slowly begin to accept the reality of being loved simply because I am me.

This is the wonder of the real God, enabling me to give thanks for all of my life, the good, the not so good and the ugly. It means realising that if at this moment - now [*the acceptable time - Mk.1.15*] - I own Jesus as Lord, sent by the Father, I am where I am meant to be, and the way I have travelled is the only way I got here; so through the Graciousness of God's accepting love, I can see and rejoice in how God sees sin and sinner differently.

How sad to presume aridity and even failure in prayer because of the absence of any discernible difference or change. As with love, nothing changes other than *the quality of life* of the lover, which makes me praying, the prayer. Prayer persuades me that I am healed by assuring me that I am loved. God doesn't make external changes; God is simply *being there*, in the manner of real presence where I am now.

There are many ways to communicate, we can be ingenious in projecting ourselves: physically, rationally, emotionally as well as cognitively; in words and in silence, especially when there just aren't any words - like sharing bereavement, all of which sits well in the presence of love that is as anguished as I am, and actually is so because of me.

We are people of language, not just the ability to name things, but the more intensely shaping ways of promise and commitment too, when we freely and willingly take on responsibilities. Prayer is very much at home with this kind of language, when faith-living is encouraged and, at times, challenged into living my relationships fully, but differently.

This is because the emphasis is not on what is said, but in the determination *to become the words spoken*. Sincerity shows-through the desire for change. How often do we plead - *please, give me another chance?* Missing this dynamic can trap the taking of vows into being a once and forever event, on the day of marriage or consecration.

Far too much of myself is involved here for it to be so trivialised. The words are no more than a declaration of intent for today, tomorrow and every day. This is who I intend to become, with the help of these gifts from God. It is for the same reason that prayer should never be seen as a kind of spectator sport. There is no way I can simply hear Mass, go through the motions as by routine, as if prayer is simply a matter of saying my prayers.

Love/commitment calls for first person language. No one can do these things for us. And genuine communication presumes that the words spoken are intended to become, through the integrity of self-involvement, a flesh and blood reality. No external signs can tell us who is praying and who is not; yet we will always recognise the prayerful through a changed shape of life.

As with linguistic pursuits, so too with prayer there are suggested methods. They come from the generosity of those gone before us who have found certain practical ways helpful in pursuit of a prayerful life; but in no way do they offer a guarantee of success for me. Many appear to think that because prayer is so vital there has to be a right and formal way of going about meditation, contemplation, vocal prayer, prayer in common...

Every method of prayer is no more than that - a method. Following a method, of itself, does not necessarily mean that we are praying, no more than the five-finger exercises alone will make a pianist. Methods of prayer serve prayer, just as rules and constitutions and the like serve life - not the other way round. *Praying is being with*, it is real presence and *it is being someone for someone else*, as we saw with Jesus, whose prayer was being the beloved of Abba.

The heart of loving is spontaneity, not doing it by the book. The heart of prayer, which is being the one God uniquely loves, is spontaneous creativity. As with all relationships, it is the

intensity of familiarity that fosters real presence of someone to someone else. We are the product of relationships that precede us and nurture us. I am in debt for the air I breathe, and on through to the affection and intimacy that makes for the abundance in all kinds of living. It is of my very nature to belong.

Scripture has a noticeable priority in locating us socially in life. It is by the Grace of other than me that I am able to become ever more the self that is able to make God present - myself. This is why the command to love my neighbour is not a duty, but a privileged necessity, it helps fashion how I behave as an individual, a behaviour focussed on the social relevance of my daily life. This equally belongs to prayer.

When God speaks in the Old Testament, for example, the context is always social: *Because you were slaves... Ex.22.30. because you were oppressed... because you know what it means to suffer*, you must not knowingly inflict this on another.

Abundant life becomes impossible and is in fact denied wherever there is exclusion, victimisation, casting out: *because of the evil I had to suffer, so will make you suffer!* There have been attempts to try to make such behaviour respectable by adding the cosmetic of attempting to see, for example, loneliness, isolation and lack of affirmation as being good for the soul. Destructive experiences should be named as such in order for them to become a priority for removal.

How can I love with all my heart and soul, mind and strength when my daily experience of living with others tells me I am worthless? Whoever coined the obscenity that alienation and imposed suffering can be sanctifying [*offer it up.*]? My experience of the impediment of imposed suffering should help ensure that my life, the shape of my living with others, *does not impose* such experiences on them.

Faith challenges me always to live my life as others need it, and not just as I see it. This is surely what is included in the command to feed the hungry; to learn from my searching for the abundance how this actually happens.

Life together in this way is very much influenced by our vision and role models. In his book *Near Occasions of Grace*, Richard Rohr, ofm challenges us with a question about which Church do we live in. Is it *the Leviticus Church* - trying to resolve religious dilemmas with analysis and academic thinking... producing a faith that isn't real, that has no passion... endless theological distinctions... while the world goes on and asks what is the point?... we become overly concerned with laws, liturgies, structures, vestments, with what goes on inside the church building. But most being Church doesn't happen inside of the church.... *The Exodus Church* hears the cry of the poor, it is the Church on a journey, busy encountering history setting people free [*pp.109-110*]

Jesus' ministry did not take place in buildings. He was with people where they were, giving us the heart of our Church through a family meal, linked with a public execution. The Resurrection happened in a cemetery, the Pentecost-giving in an upper room; the forgiving and healing in highways and byways.

We respond best to people who have faces and feelings calling for involvement and relevance. Ignoring this led to the obscenity of *it is good for the people as a whole that one should die*. How can I possibly love my neighbour by condoning his being put to death? Moreover, where am I in my priorities should such a situation arise nearer to home?

Prayer is being someone for someone else, it calls for faith for me to accept that I too am beloved of Abba. Jesus is the only begotten Son; what he is by nature we are invited to become through Grace. This is recognised in the prayer Jesus taught us - *Our Father...* If this

is how Jesus put into words what the experience of prayer is, maybe we should take a closer look. At first glance it is full of petition.

Scholarship says the petitions are set out in order of priority, with God coming first. Hallowed... Thy Kingdom come... Thy will be done... followed by our requests - Give us... Move in closer: it is not listing needs, but setting-out the right order of relationships that are life-giving. Rather than providing us with words with which to address God, *there is an attitude* that encourages abundant living through familiar intimacy with God.

For those who have eyes, let them see... Mk.8.18. I believe the Our Father is Jesus telling us what we will see and hear. Able to see ourselves, not telling us anything new, but recommending a way to be at home amid so much graciousness.

What would it be like if I really did experience God as Abba, that all of us already belong., that right relationships are always familiar [*lit.*] and never hostile. This is the plan for the world, I am being challenged to help make it happen by letting go of my narrow, myopic vision through law, threat and punishment, and to acknowledge abundant grace - perhaps by living in the Exodus Church? What would it feel like if poverty really was history? I am not being told, nor am I telling God - *Thy Kingdom come* - I am being challenged to let it begin with me.

This means that my first religious task is not to do God's will, but to find out what it is. God is nothing else but love - *being love* is God's will, and my doing God's will is how I need to live, if God's love is to get into my world through me. Jesus didn't speak about power, structures and the like, he talked about sparrows and foxes and mustard seed.

Love cannot order, only entice, tempt and lure. Maybe it isn't my eyes but my heart that needs opening. How come I don't literally revel in the sheer abundant giftedness of creation - I badly need the heart-transplant, to allow the Donor to give me a heart of flesh - cf. Ezek.11.19. The Our Father doesn't confront me with why haven't you... but with *how about now?* It's beginning to sink in - *I am God's will.*

What if everyone did have daily bread? Bread is the fruit of a gracious earth, and it is for us to ensure that everyone has free access to it. Like every parent, I have no right to satisfy my hunger while children starve. Life itself is the greatest of the gifts, and the prayer tells us that whatever prevents a life being experienced totally as free gift is an obstacle to thy will be done.

This is what Jesus claims when he says he is the bread of life, the satisfying of so many hungers - be they for food and drink, friendship and belonging, taking away fear of every kind... The way he has chosen for this to happen is to invite us to come, and literally receive, this is my body given, my blood poured out for you, in such fashion that we not only receive, but are empowered to become what we receive for others. As Sacrament, the Eucharist is given to the Church, but is intended for all.

The Eucharist gets from the Church into the world through those invited to receive, becoming what they are receiving - body given blood poured out [*i.e. service*] - for others. It is because God is total gift that God is total giver; in as much as we are open to receive, to that extent will we be open to give. The abundance that we strive for becomes possible through the generosity of our vision.

Seek out the real passion for life in me, where is it, on what is it focussed? Look for my heart where my treasure is - if I dare. We fear that we might discover that our heart is tuned to everything other than God. Such a reality should never deter us, since whoever we are, whatever our interests, we cannot have our heart in the right place without a transplant, the taking away of the stony heart.

Am I willing to sign the consent forms for such radical surgery? I need to let my constant praying of Our Father... help convince me that I am not on my own. I'm not an orphan. Having the one Father gives me so many sisters and brothers for us to belong to each other as free gifts.

You did not choose me; I chose you - Jn.15.16. - as if God is saying - I chose you because I know you are big enough. How seriously I treat this has been the story of my life thus far. The heart of Gospel contemplation is to take time-out to relish the truth, hearing God say - I know you are enough for me - am I enough for you?

My sin tells me I am looking for more than God, and maybe other than God. Just as saying I love you doesn't make me a lover - rather to do I say I love you - because I am a lover. No more than I do not pray to get faith, I pray because I believe, no matter how tenuously - *Lord, help my unbelief* - Mk.9.24. As my actual loving prompts me to say so, likewise does my believing persuade me to pray [*even with the desperate - is there anyone else up there?*]. This tempting and luring [*faith*] into prayer is gift, as love is also; and we do not look to heaven for our loving. The Gospel encourages us - look around you, feel yourself surrounded by so much good.

Have you ever wondered why we don't all fall in love with the same people? Why do two friends, colleagues, who have virtually grown up together, shared so many common interests, why do they fall in love with very different people? This is where individual uniqueness belongs; and we see from within different realities. This is why Jesus stands totally against any notion that life/love can be engendered, fostered, enhanced or in any way enjoyed through mere ritual, cult or observance.

These are good gifts, but always to be kept in the right order - *structures must always serve the life*. The Kingdom of God is within you - not external to you - Lk.17.21. The Kingdom is not in the temple, or synagogue, not in the church or chapel - cannot be given to you by law or priestly ministry - *these must serve* what is uniquely given freely to each one. If you would discover God, why not be still and know? Ps.45.11.

When Jesus was challenged about saying such things, he doesn't fall back on God, or quote from the Old Testament, he indicates something within our real world - *Rain falls on just and unjust alike... for those who have eyes, let them see*. - Mt.5.45. See what? I've seen rain fall thousands of times. I need to look more closely and notice how the Giver of Gifts will never withhold them from me simply because of what I have done or failed to do.

It is of the essence of the universe to hold us and sustain us in being - it is naturally generous. What would happen if such graciousness was not simply offered to me, but as given opportunity to become for others what God is being for me? This is what Baptism does - empowers me to live like that, so what causes my ungracious selfish, possessiveness? Living within what is truly real, means knowing nothing about behaviour that marginalises or excludes. To be unloving and selfishly ungenerous is to be a misfit in creation.

Move away from seeing Faith as investment in some abstract idealism. Faith is real and present in faithful people; it is what faithful people do, it is who they are. They realise that God is met through responsibly living our relationships, through our stories gathering together our history, rather than through analysis. Commitment to our community living helps us grow, and allows character to emerge; something in decline in an age in which personality is replacing character, being seduced into saying life is being, not doing. Seemingly life today is all about simply being well known.

Being without doing is simply focussing on image - on me, and my image. Note the proliferation of chat shows in which a kind of psycho-babble substitutes for real learning and the owning of our social responsibilities. Whereas being, along with doing, lets me into the

real world, where life can be tough. Where we do not, and often should not, simply get our own way. Living with the focus solely on me and mine, on how I'm feeling, my hurts my needs [*really my wants*] are what matters, and what is me and mine should matter to you too.

In Gospel terms, such living is devoid of blessing, since it is decidedly unpoor - the Gospel tells us that it is the poor who are blessed. Not the economically embarrassed, nor the penury of not having enough for decent living - such evils all of us are committed to eradicate; but the poverty that requires freedom not to grab and grasp, not seeking to possess but desiring to give oneself totally. It is gradually to discover that fully alive living is actually the fruit of being blessed with the desire to live my life as you need it, and not simply as I see it. *The Kingdom of God is not about words, but about power* - 1Cor.4.20.

Sadly, work is no longer appreciated as vocational, being little more than the unfortunate way of putting bread on the table and a roof overhead. This brings with it two more casualties: when religion is viewed as therapeutic jargon sessions, and social responsibilities mean simply special interest groups.

I need to check which world I'm living in, by asking what does real mean for me. Do I really believe that living in faith means letting my life bring you a more abundant experience in living yours? Notice how it is the ordinary aspects of living that convey the reality of God - the farmer, the shepherd, the fisherman, the father... and many more invoked by Jesus is trying to get us to notice - *you who have eyes, let them see*.

Here we touch on a much neglected aspect of the giftedness of salvation. It has been referred to as the difference between easy grace and responsible grace: the one where I have all the rhetoric and emotion of the true way, but without the life to incarnate it. The other where grace calls for response in the manner of grace itself, i.e. self-giving without reserve. *Faith is real only in faithful people*, a gift on offer to anyone willing to receive it. We need to get through the abundance of superfluous wrappings to get a glimpse of what is real - like the tiny seed that can reveal God to me.

A faithful person wants to let his/her abundant living be the food to make other's lives more abundant. If I care to look the farmer, shepherd, fisherman, parent in bed with children... all show me something of God. How can I see, touch, taste, smell my faith?

First realise that the basis of faith is faithful living - i.e. make the Gospel *a real experience* for anyone who meets me. Remember we learn much more easily and readily from stories than from lectures and reading lists. Indeed, we can say we learn much more from stories than from listening to principles enunciated. We speak easily about having, losing faith as if we know what we are talking about. Yet there is neither love nor faith objectively out there, only loving and believing persons and God.

Nor is faith solely an activity of the intellect. Sadly, it came to be modelled on knowledge able to designate a body of truths, or a corpus of doctrine - faith as other than ordinary because it is seen to come from God. Faith does require the intellect, but this is not its primary quality. Jesus insists that faith has more to do with the heart than with the head. Neither faith, nor love, exists outside ourselves, even though we speak of them both as if they did. I can speak of a tree, a sunset, Africa, snow... because they are out there. To speak of faith as with love, is to speak of something in here.

Love/faith is first person language: I love/believe you. Something very real is happening in me; and I do have intellectual curiosity about the content. In this sense there are really no

holy words, things etc... only holy persons. No holy Rule, the Rule is holy when it is incarnated, as with the Gospel.

Where does forgiveness happen? I discover what it means not from a dictionary but through being associated with it happening to me directly, or even vicariously. Love and compassion require a community context where these realities are experienced. It is an atmosphere where words like hope, love, trust, respect, affirmation... can actually be felt and enjoyed. The content of faith is made up more of my experience of living day-to-day than what is in my mind and understanding alone. We, like the Church, believe far more than we understand, and I will be recognised as a believer not by what I say, but by your experience of me being present to you.

This is why the appropriate words for love/faith must carry more than sounds or information: I'm sorry requires an attitude of repentance, an outer expression of an inner reality that I am intent on this particular wrong being put right. Likewise, to believe requires my presence as a believer, my personal involvement with a reality outside me - the hurting other, the starving people and the wonderful creation. These are qualities proper to love, trust and respect. Faith language is involved language; sacramental of a way of living that is enjoyed enough to want to share it.

Faith is an active relationship to life, bringing to it warmth, colour, depth and attractiveness. Don't look for orthodoxy but for fruits: *faith is other person focussed*. Such fruits are not happiness in its customary meaning, but an increasingly intense experience of reality. All too often we have little say about where we are and what is expected of us, but we do have the only say as to how involved we are going to be. It is faith that assures me and allures me that such realities are worth my involvement. I turn up not because it's in my diary, but because it is in my heart.

How will I know that my life is worthwhile? A frequently asked question when for whatever reason life seems to have gone pear-shaped for me. Possibly because whilst I have given myself to this or that, have I actually involved myself. Self-involvement requires passion, more often recognised by its absence - my heart just isn't in it. No crime, no wrong-doing, but no real live involvement either.

Jesus' stories are about passion. Not one story focuses on doctrine [*and what do we do?*]. Who is my neighbour? Gives us the story of the Good Samaritan, a story that doesn't mention the word love, yet a story that leaves us in no doubt about it. Our problem is not a problem of strangers, but of passion.

The Parables don't describe a place or a state, or a condition. They simply set out differing ways of human behaviour. Some so ordinary that we don't even notice - sowing seed, caring for sheep. No lessons are being taught, just a reminder of the concern and passion which ordinary folk bring to ordinary things - ordinary folk, doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

When he was asked about membership of the Kingdom, Jesus' answer at first hearing seems disappointing. No heroism, no good behaviour certificates, no brownie points, no making sure we get it right, no tit-for-tat for getting it wrong, just plain and simple - give food to hungry people [*let hunger decide, not who or what the people are*], a warm pull-over to the shivering, drop-in on the lonely, comfort the frightened... that's all.

Such relationships are open to everybody. What we bring to them is passion for the other's well-being. This is what happens when we remember that the life of the Kingdom - love, peace and happiness - only exists when such things are actually happening. This is what being faithful means. This is the reason for the Parables.

I cannot actually see or hear God. I see myself, I see you, I see where we are and what is happening and being asked of us by everyday life - and Jesus says that is all we need! The nourishment of life *is our relating*, not doing what we are told. It is only in a one-to-one that I discover what *I'm sorry* really means. If I don't learn this from you, from a presence and awareness that prompts me to say it, then I cannot know how to say sorry to God. Until I learn from experience what I have done to you, I will have no idea what *I'm sorry* means.

This advises me that the first moment of forgiveness is self-forgiveness. How can I ask God to forgive what I am unwilling to forgive? This is why the world is the right and proper place for faith living. My life with you itself will teach me how to be faithful. No more pretence that we don't know where to find God. It is our gift *not to find but to be found* by God, surrounded as we are by hunger, pain, injustice, loneliness... I am as close to God as I am sensitive to all of this... as I am to the person I've ignored, victimised or hugged. St. John puts it starkly - *If I say I love God and yet despise my neighbour, I'm a liar. The truth is not in me.* [cf. 1Jn.4.20].

What did Jesus mean when he said - unless you lose your life you will never find it? - Mt.10.39. We are made in the image of God who is only love. This means that any relationship between me and anyone other-than-me contains the truth about my living. Am I loving or am I a liar? All this happens in that space where I struggle daily to be a genuine human being, and tells me - if I care to listen - who I really am.

Religious living means first, that I am able to be with my real self and not the *persona* which is my compromise between what my world finds acceptable and what God made possible in creating me. This is so often a place of conflict, if not the place of conflict, where my deep-down instinctive self feels repressed by what is expected of me by my society. See it exemplified in so many conversions - e.g. Francis, who inherited the accepted social convention to despise lepers, until his instinct, enlivened by grace, burst out and challenged him.

Equally, what is noteworthy about St. Francis is, that his way, unlike the ways customarily trod by people revered as holy, has his trademark of reconciling opposites, in that his personal discipleship/discipline became also a collective way - fraternity. To discover the Fatherhood of God through Brotherly relating to Christ - being brother/sister. He discovered that his alone self [*not lonely*] can only flourish through relating with others, and as each of these begins and flourishes it widens to be ever more inclusive into the realising that all creation already belongs.

This is a reminder that self-value remains abstract and unreal until it discovers how to live and move through creation as one who belongs. I cannot relate to creation *in general*, I need you and you, and this and that to show me that I too am wanted and needed. This is my coming home, at first instinctive rather than studied, then burgeoning into vibrant Trinitarian living making me alive and active with all that is not me - especially with the supreme not me, God.

This is not discovering that we as individuals need to protect, defend individuality as if it is an end in itself, rather than the means whereby we arrive at the discovery that I am me, because I need to be with you. How sad to see the growing of that malaise that would have me take care of number 1. I need to look to myself first!

Francis responds vigorously to this with *the Lord gave me brothers*. My well-being is in the hands of others just as their well-being is in my hands. All too often my complaint about being ignored by brothers begins to ring hollow when I start to realise that they can't get near me when I am wrapped up in caring for myself. My debt for my life is to find ways to express my gratitude for all those belongings and cherishings, as well as challenges that are

conspiring to tell me who I really am; *a living, breathing, loving reality, able to show something of God that remains unseen and unheard without me.*

This is where faith-living can be seen, touched, tasted, felt. I owe so many debts of gratitude - yet without creditors - through so many loves, my *being* is telling me about myself. All I can do is let this gratitude show through the ways I inhabit my being, that this mutuality is what Jesus calls the Kingdom. Keeping two feet firmly grounded, is to realise that this living is very much *as in a glass darkly* - 1Cor.13.12, no prior assurances or route maps. It is a way of living based entirely on trust, since where all is gift there has to be trust and desire to respond.

The challenge can be great, as can the risk. Like Peter in the Gospel when Jesus first says: *unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...* who can possibly make sense of this seeming cannibalism; so many turned away in disgust, and Jesus asks the disciples: are you going too? No explanations, just a challenge. Peter answers - I haven't a clue either what you are talking about, but if you say it....

It isn't necessary to understand what is said if you have trust in the one saying it - cf. Jn.6.54. The highest and greatest expression of mutual living is the freedom to live in faith, in the total trustworthiness of the other. This is what makes the future so worthy of our striving. Even though this sounds tough, even stepping out into total darkness, it is in fact instinctive in human nature to desire it. The now famous ad in the Times in the 1920's seeking volunteers for an expedition that could only promise hardship, difficulty, danger and no guarantee of a safe return, attracted literally hundreds of replies. [*cf. what was said on p.32*].

We pretend to fashion scientific rules and regulations; we speak of natural law... simply trying to get cosmic behaviour to fit behaviour we cannot control. The sun will rise and set, there will be sufficient oxygen and gravity to support life... So too with people, the initial contact has to be trust as the only way to cope with the unpredictable.

We learn to trust God by starting to trust ourselves and each other. Underpinning this behaviour pattern is a glimpse of that trust that bursts through the barriers of the finite; daring to hope that the value of striving *now* has something immortal within it, *where I am, you too will be...* Jn.13.36. Living like this is by naked faith and impudent hope, because it issues directly from the love that explains us.

Modern secularism has denuded life of value, bringing as an inevitable consequence a profound mistrust of Institution. This can have a positive element if it helps free us to choose from within our own strengths rather than through institutional coercion. On the minus side, it has encouraged mistrust, even a dislike and fear of commitment, arguing that long-term commitment sits ill with our changing and evolving human state. This has to happen if there is no place for trust/faith.

The intensity of experiencing *now* seems to rule against any permanent investment in a future. Commitment depends solidly on faith and trust because of love, opting for a value we intend here and now and to go on steadfastly pursuing no matter what... *in sickness and in health... for better for worse.* But why make a commitment at all?

Because this value seems important enough to me that to lose it, or any part of it, would mean losing something of myself. I cannot see myself being me without it. *Knowing experientially myself to be loved is the most compelling impetus in all this.* So real is it that I don't want to keep quiet about it. I want to share it. Something so enriching that I cannot see myself living purposefully without it.

Precisely because I do not know the make-up of my future, I pledge my heart to mutual fidelity in pursuit of *the something more* than a life in Grace always needs. Graced-living is

the most fulfilling of all human experiences because it is the opening of the person to creativity in freedom; it is to be willing and able to commit myself to another and to honour this till death do us part.

This is so compellingly real that I simply can't keep it to myself. I want others to share it - hence the gathering for weddings etc... it is an experience so enriching and ennobling that it is now a necessary part of my life.

We do not know the circumstances and conditions that wait for us tomorrow, and so we need to pledge ourselves to be faithful to what we are now discovering, together today. This has no other purpose than to serve the love itself. Love is for loving - *for richer for poorer, for better for worse...* we are both diminished without it. By choosing to live in faithfulness we are ensuring that we will not be deflected, no matter what comes our way; not by trying to anticipate and remove whatever would impede, but by kindling the fire to white heat intensity so that nothing whatever is capable of extinguishing it - not even death.

It is the loving, ever-fresh desire to be one with what sustains us in a fragmented world, and to this we do not commit lightly. Because of the passionate intensity of commitment, we pledge ourselves only to what we deem *to be worthy of me with all my heart*. This is what I long for with all my heart. It is this that shows how commitment belongs between persons, that *an object, an institution, an idea can never be big enough*. We do say we are committed to marriage, to the Church etc... yet commitment requires something involving heart-to-heart, mutual life enrichment, able to see who I am reflected in the face of the one who says to me, I love you. I can only pledge my living self to another living self, one able and passionately willing to invest self in such mutuality.

How can I possibly love my neighbour as myself, if the prime love in my life is for an object or an ideal? I discover myself as lovable for myself through experiencing being loved - *this is who I am because of you* - and I want others to be able to have this same, yet equally unique experience [*love of neighbour*]. Commitment is for persons. Commitment to marriage is to that structure within which person to person belonging is honoured and respected. Commitment to Church is no commitment if it is not commitment *to God and Jesus whom he has sent*, and to receive encouragement, support and sustenance in pursuit of this.

So too, there is nothing remotely life-enhancing through foregoing genital experiences. Celibacy only makes sense as *celibacy for the Kingdom*, for loving service of the brethren of the Lord. Celibacy, as with its companions Poverty and Chastity, only makes sense as a way of loving. Always a means, never an end. A means can never be sanctifying in itself, only through its necessary relatedness to the specific end - love of God and neighbour.

It is possible to be celibate without loving either God or neighbour, just as it is possible to love God and neighbour without being celibate. *Consecrated Celibacy* draws whatever value it has from the end it seeks to serve. If celibate living is not helping me become a more loving person [*the only criterion*] it remains no more than a discipline.

Only God, whom we do not see, and the neighbour we do see are worthy of the heart's pledge. To have it evaluated in terms of my relating to Church [*as institution*], to principle, rule or regulation solely, is to have it abused and degraded - e.g. using authority as a way of treating others as objects and not subjects. *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...* [*Deut.6.5. & Mt. Mk.*] is not obedience to law or rule, nor subservience to institution. Simply faithful, sensitive concern for the hungry, the poor and powerless, the oppressed and excluded, is our life.

I am no closer to God than I am to the person I have by-passed on the other side. We look to the sincerity of our striving rather than achieving or succeeding. Life is more about how much

we are prepared to receive rather than achieve - for it is in friendship that I receive the challenge to transcend myself for the other, the quality that locates me in likeness to God.

The only evidence for the validity and integrity of living is the fruits it produces - by which we are known. It is a sobering thought to remember that there are always fruits in every life - whether sweet or sour depends on priorities. We live within two specific assertions: God is nothing else but love. And, God's only desire is that everyone and everything should share this. God only creates lovely things - but God created me and you, and all this... *Lord that I may see.*

Life's purpose is for us to enjoy it. *I have come to bring life in abundance...* Jn.10.10. That we may live well, in such fashion that our enjoyment of living has, as its priority, the setting free of others and the creating of an environment in which others can do likewise [*love God & neighbour*] - such an environment Jesus called Kingdom, because in experiencing the presence of God in and around everyone, everywhere we are tempted to highlight it and welcome it, to offer hospitality and friendship as being the only way to make it real and relevant. The impact of such grace doesn't change my world, but it does change me, and my attitude towards it [*thorns on roses or roses on thorns?*].

We seldom get beneath surface realities, and tend to have a weather eye to things that qualify as self-interest, looking after number one; a scenario within which kingdom values cannot breathe. To live the Gospel life - *to feed, clothe, comfort and never turn from my own kin* requires an atmosphere in which this cry of the poor can really be heard and heeded. Then will I see and hear what I have never seen or heard before; and all because I have removed the blinkers that have me see only me and mine.

Let St. Clare bring this home by sharing her *privilege of poverty* with us. Nothing to do with having nothing, but everything to do with not having *mine* anywhere in my life. Everywhere I live *a mine* in life I create exclusion zones. It's my room, my car, my time, my life... attitudes that rule out kingdom living. Such self-interest prevents me from recognising where the need for love is missing, deafening me to the cry of the poor. *Wherever you find love - celebrate with it. Wherever you find love damaged - repair it. Wherever you find love missing, bring it with you.*

Whatever God's will contains, it is only going to flourish as flesh and blood through cooperation. God cannot reach the poor without my feet, nor lift them up without my hands, and can only let them feel cherished through my heart. Something unlikely to happen when my interest is only me and mine. *Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that you can give yourselves totally to him who gives himself for you, totally - [Francis & Clare].* The struggle for life in love, for peace through justice is as arduous for God as it is for us: *if today the Spirit would speak, harden not your hearts - Heb.4.7.*

God's reality is a living passion for everything that is. This world does not have to be made holy by our consecrating or blessing it, or sprinkling it with holy water. This world is already holy in its origin and is still waiting for it to be lived in as it deserves. We are not conscripts harnessed for God's work, but the beloved of Abba, called to receive and share what passionate living really means. This is the enterprising Spirit that led Jesus every day of his life, into everyday dying for everyday rising; and invites us to be part of it through breaking bread together for the self-same reason.

Like all value living, this requires discipline - but discipline means *the art of the disciple* - which is simply the fleshing-out [*literally*] of this passionate spirit, along with appropriate asceticism - a word we shouldn't fear, since it simply means appropriate exercise - working-out so as to discover the artful sharing of life.

Beauty, Goodness, Harmony, Friendship are what constantly motivates genuinely human living to inhabit what is, with a view what could be. This is never achieved solely through coercion or regimentation, only through spontaneous desire to surprise life with even more life. Something that does require priorities. If my heart isn't in it, it is not going to happen. This requires renunciation - never the negative getting rid - but totally positive, as the derivation of the word implies, *re-announce*. I am now announcing that my life is under new management: *I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me* - Gal.2.20.

Deliberately to choose pain and suffering for their own sake is an obscenity, since they both mock fullness of life. Life is shot-through with pain and suffering and we can only engage with them in ways that can actually serve fullness of life... without any trace of the *vacuous offer it up*.

This is where love does embrace suffering, but suffering is not love and cannot be a substitute for it. Love doesn't seek-out suffering, but seeks ways to live with it differently; recognising that bigness of heart is often fostered through patience in suffering, just as gentleness and forbearance often attach themselves to those who care for the sufferers, yet the presence of such effects must never be used as an attempt to justify suffering.

The persistent call of Scripture is to rid the world of suffering, while Revelation shows God who suffers. For God is only love and for us who follow this way, suffering is failure which can only be overcome, as the Resurrection shows, by love. God cannot live in the world we have fashioned - a world that requires someone to blame, scapegoats, cannot welcome a God who excludes no one, and so we killed him.

Or so we thought. Love cannot be killed. Christ is alive with a life on offer to anyone willing to receive it - a different way of being a human being, not needing to have someone to blame. In terms of the world we have made God has to be a failure.

The Cross should not be held up as an ideal for which we strive. Jesus would have risen no matter how he died, since love itself cannot die. We should never forget the message of the cross. Love is, inevitably, suffering love. It is only the passionate commitment to love that lets us endure all, so that all might enjoy. The cross tells me, not probably but with certainty, that my most passionate loving will be my most poignant suffering [*bereavement*], the reality of the impact of tragic death.

We don't need telling that we give-up most for the well-being of those we most love. It is the passion that prompts such love that insists on this, and this alone accounts for it. Suffering and pain can only be embraced through love for others, never for their own sake. The intensity of passion that opens me to the reality of the other is also the measure of my vulnerability to pain and suffering; and yet death itself is not a price too high in a world in which God is love.

Greater love there is not than you give your life for another - Jn.15.13. In this Jesus has shown us how the nadir of life that death appears to be, has become its very pinnacle: *this is my body/blood given for you* - Mt.26.26.

After we learn to live there is nothing more important than learning how to die. To follow Christ is not to mimic him, nor even to repeat what he said and did, as if God will be delighted to see us all from the same jelly-mould. The one, undeniable truth carried by each of us is the ability to make God present, through Grace, simply by being the self God created us to be - something no one else can do for us. We are loved by God uniquely and individually, never en masse, and this to such a degree as to make real a relationship not replicated anywhere else. God only creates originals, not copies.

My sinfulness does not rob God of something others could give; thereby I steal from God what God could only receive from me. God is Abba, my Father, but whether this becomes a complete reality depends on my willingness to become the beloved of Abba I was fashioned to be. As I wrestle with my demons, helped by Grace, God awaits the outcome.

No one can do my dying for me; and when it happens it will mirror how I've lived. Life is both my task and my glory. It is God's eternal desire for me to bid farewell to sin, to come in out of the cold to the warmth that has always been faithfully there, waiting. God simply wants me to enjoy seeing my surprise and delight on discovering what it really means to be fully myself. Something St. Irenaeus refers to as genuine worship. The history of sin in my life is not a list of what I have done or failed to do. *It is how I have compromised with death at the cost of life.*

Sin - hamartia - *missing the mark* requires the discipline of target practice. It takes no talent at all to miss a target - ask any golfer. - I can miss consciously or unconsciously. Whereas to hit takes practice, and the practice-ground is everyday life itself, willing to show me who is my neighbour. It is a moving target and I need to discover how to get a line on it, to anticipate hazards and avoid traps. Such skill requires an active and power-filled Sacramental life, something already there for the receiving.

When this is writ large are we facing more than an uphill task to change values in society into Kingdom values? Not if we are attentive to what Jesus is telling us, that we are not to go out and change the world, but to go in and change ourselves: *I will take away your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh* - Ezek.11.19. This will persuade us, first, that I am Good News. Not that I now have something I lacked previously, but I am waking to the fact that I am the body of God. I don't join, or leave - that is who I am, whether healthy or sick.

As my behaviour starts to reflect this new awareness and hearing the cry of the poor becomes more habitual, we will see just how enriching this is. Listen to so many who, on being praised for their selfless service of the poor, genuinely say: I received more than I gave.

Institutions, systems, churches, moral codes are simply *the social context* from within which I learn to choose responsibly. Genesis repeatedly presents God saying - *let there be light... let there be...* God calls into being by allowing what is called to become. Understanding this is crucial if we are to *appreciate and God saw that it was good...* as if our heeding this and responding to let there be... actually surprises God with the way chaos gives way to order - *and God saw....*

What we speak of as Evolution is the long meander by means of which atoms, molecules and the like, are gradually ordered into the life forms and the being we are enjoying. Neither Genesis nor the Gospels justify us laying down rules and regulations about becoming.

History and culture have fashioned us into people who tend to be law-abiding, and our belonging is festooned with legal scaffolding, so much so that we seem to believe that without rules we return to chaos. Spiritual life rests on trust not law, trust in God's persuasive power is here forever. We are in the image of God, and if this is allowed to be, then what sustains such life is what is proper to my own being. Fidelity to the love that willed me into existence prompts me to cherish the values proper to such living.

Since all this is *will be* but is not yet, we do need the help of law and rule, but always as a means to an end. Just as the Religious Life is not well described as *vowed life*, but as seeking a life of intimacy with God, and to this end needs the help of the Gospel Counsels, so too the purpose of rule and regulation is always to serve the life, not the other way round.

We are not yet fully redeemed, but on the way to it, and until such a time as foretold in the Book of Revelation - *And night will be abolished; they will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be shining on them. They will reign for ever and ever.* - 22.5 we need structures to help serve the life.

My faith tells me that the issue is not whether I am good or right, but that I am loved by God, and that this becomes more apparent to me through the trust I place in the gracious possibilities with which life surprises me, welling-up within myself. God lets me be, because my loving only has value in freedom, when freely chosen, sincerely desired and honestly fashioned with an ever deepening passion. Since it is not within God's power to force me, I can only be trusted. Whether I am trustworthy, the witness of my life will show.

As lovers discover in fascination how much more life can be enjoyed together, so too, if I trust myself to discovering the unlimited possibilities for more life [*the something more of Hebrews - 11.40*] promised to all who would be open to receive it, will I experience the truth of *I have come that you may have abundant life* - Jn.10.10. Life carries so many possibilities and has a special place even for death. I can long for eternal life with all my heart to enjoy love with loved ones; yet there is a niggler of doubt, the feeling: how can this really be with death waiting round the corner?

It is prayer that lets us hold this doubt in the proper tension, and that it is by letting life be fully what it is meant to be, that I too, with Francis can eventually say: *welcome, sister death*. Scripture insists that *no one can see the face of God and live* - Ps.42.2. yet if death allows me to see God's face - then truly is death welcome. What makes this genuine prayer and not whistling in the dark, is the faith that the raw materials of this life have been redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Death cannot contain forever anyone living in love. This prayer is not asking for miracles, that new life will somehow be given us, it is the conviction that the *only* life I've got, this wounded life, can be more than it is at any given moment, since it is held within gracious relationships that invite and challenge my cooperation and will never let me abandon myself.

I should not look for answers or cures, though such an imperative can be very compelling. Simply ask for the fidelity to remain in love with life - life for everyone. Faith is as simple and ordinary as bread, water, unspectacular justice and genuine affection. Just ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

The success or otherwise of my spiritual quest rests simply on the answer to a simple question: what am I willing to settle for? If I'm willing to sift through the choices I make every day, to get below the surface of living by auto-pilot, into the world of reality, I will gradually discover exactly where my heart lies. A heart restless until it is pledged to another, and strives earnestly to honour such a pledge. Who or what is my other?

I'm aware that I have frequently compromised value-living in the name of convenience, through fear of being seen to be different, or through straightforward selfishness. At the same time, knowing that my intent is to settle for nothing less than everything, come what may. This everything is not filtered to us through obedience to law or sin. A God who has to demand or coerce, threaten or blame, is not nearly big enough, certainly not a god demanding the pound of flesh by insisting on the death of a totally innocent other.

There is infinite passion solely because God is love and nothing else. God is total fullness, God is the emptying of total fullness that we might be filled full; and no matter how much we struggle, how much we give, it will never be enough. Love always has a healthy not being satisfied quality, as Paul insists in 1Corinthians; and what makes it unthreatening is the assurance that an infinite thirst has an infinite resource and truly, in this case - what God has joined together will never be separated. The quality of this relationship to God is not

obedience or conformity, but the creative challenge which says I dare you to risk giving all by being fully yourself... *for this I came, to be myself.* - Hopkins.

In a world rife with cruelty, oppression and unfairness, in a world full of fear, faith-living is tough, and it's tempting to follow the easy way and settle for the accepted ways of law and order, recognising power. Life is meant both to ask the question and provide the answer. What would kingdom living actually look like if it were universal? This is, after all, what we pray for everyday - thy Kingdom come. The call is ever for Incarnation. For the word, my word, to become flesh so that through me the world can know its Saviour. *A new commandment I give you* - there is nothing new about love of God and neighbour, it is right through the Old Testament.

What is new is when I actually hear myself being addressed: I dare you, Austin, to risk it. I consider myself to be a reasonably good, peace-loving person, even though I do hesitate, turn back and compromise. For every hour of prayer in quiet, there are a hundred more in the market place. Where do I get the nerve and energy to transcend - *the things I'd rather not do I find myself doing* - [like Paul before me]? Why not accept his answer as well as his difficulty? He asks - who will set me free... and answers - *thanks be to God, Jesus Christ.* - Rom.7.25.

The Gospel says Jesus spoke with authority - Mt.7.29. Jesus did not have to have back-up for what he said, unlike the teachers and rabbis who had to say *thus says the Lord...* He is God's Word made flesh, truth made flesh. He doesn't simply speak the truth, he is truth. This tells us just how serious is the claim made in the Gospels about certain ways of living - *the truth is not in him* - Jn.8.44. Jesus is not there - *truly, I don't know you.* If I insist on making myself unrecognisable to God, I will succeed.

Jesus asks - Jn.8.43. - Why don't you understand what I am saying? *Because the word/truth is not in you...* How will I know this? This is what he says: *Whoever loves me, keeps my commands.* - Jn.14.15. My belief may well be sound, but what about my conviction? Has my faith actually penetrated to the depths of me, so that I no longer desire the gifts, for which I am grateful, but simply the presence of the Giver; not the beautiful but Beauty; not truths but Truth.

If I reflect on the way love has already been with me during my life, I will notice there is a setting better suited to enjoying this than others, and that is celebration - a gift that doesn't require any reason for it to happen other than itself. Love ripens and matures when it is celebrated: wherever you find love, celebrate it.

What safeguards life from being an unreal and romantic option solely, is realising that investment in living is not sufficient, there needs to be total self-involvement, without partiality - this is what I long for with all my heart. Such loving is never compromised by preferences. I do have preferences, and they are gifts that enable me to express and share the uniqueness God gives me. But they can never form the basis for a belonging in which everyone should be totally free and to enjoy being themselves.

Pain, suffering and injustice are real enough without need for me to make them the content of liturgical celebration; I should ever define myself simply by what I'm against. For example, St. Francis would not be a member of an anti-abortion movement. But he would be fully pro-life. Like the Lord he was not, after his conversion, an anti-person. To be anti is to exclude and there is no exclusion in God. This is the tougher love that taking up my daily cross implies.

Jesus did not come to celebrate with good people; he came to save all - even the rapist, the abuser, the murderer. The cross shows two things - first that there was no one excluded from his ministry, and secondly such a ministry cannot breathe in the world we have made for

ourselves. God is more aware of reality than ever I will be, since God is reality. It's not for me to use prayers to keep God up to date. Worship requires *worship*. Though full of sweet and sour, my life is good; I live in a good world, full of good things, and good people. I believe life is worth it, to the extent of wanting to share it.

Liturgy is meant to facilitate life and our experience of goodness in being alive. Liturgy and all forms of prayer add nothing whatsoever to God, settle no debts [*because there are none*]. We are here to celebrate appropriately - in joy and in sorrow - and by so doing to open ourselves even more to Grace through the presence of God. We are called to be the Good News - i.e. news that is unquestionably good for those who hear it.

So our first step is not what we do or say - but ourselves, who we are. Good News cannot be told, *only shared through life with life*. My presence is the vehicle entrusted to me, one not found anywhere else, for me to communicate goodness.

When Jesus said *come and see* to me I probably wasn't aware that this journey of a lifetime was the reason why I was created. *In creating me God gave me to myself; in saving me God gave God to me and in calling me to be holy, God desires to give me to God.* [*notice who does the giving*]. Even with what I have seen so far [*and as Jesus promised we haven't seen anything yet.*] I am persuaded, not just that life is for living, but for living-with; and all this not because I believe in God, but because God believes in me.

What is the Good News? A simple question - but what about the answer? God says to me/you: *do you believe me when I say I love you?*

Lord, take me where you want me to go - show me who you want me to meet - tell me what you want me to say - and keep me out of your way!