

## Credo

### *I Believe*

This isn't expressing an opinion – it is expressing a *decision*, something is a deciding factor in the way I intend to live – I have found the window that opens onto reality; I need to open it to see all that God has given, and why it is given. It is all there because God is love and nothing else. The inner life of the trinity is *the perfection of the lover, the beloved and the love they share*. Whilst this is perfect love to the highest degree – it isn't total. There is a reality of love that is not perfect, it is surrounded by the limits of time and space – for perfect love to be total it embraces what is not perfect on equal terms – *where everyone is a first-born*.

Jesus, Word made flesh, one person, two natures. In his divinity he *is* God's Word with us – in his humanity he is *the perfect receiver* and embracer of this same Word. As *the beloved of Abba* he is what God would be in all of us. Abba loves the Son totally, and in loving and embracing the humanity of Jesus he is loving and embracing all who share this humanity with him – as equals; there is no second-class.

Grace – the experience of being lovable and loved – lets me see this by letting me see myself as I am, fresh from the hands of God; a unique gift to creation. We see reality through faith not through reason. Faith opens me up to purpose and direction – showing me how I come out from God and that is also my destiny – to return. Because I am gift the fact that I was not *asked* if I wanted to be born – I was given to myself, a free gift, able to become gift for others. I was made without my consent – the gift I have been given, my life is, my opportunity to receive what I've been given, and freely say yes to it. Life is meant to be our yes.

We experience faith in two ways – first, the ordinary, everyday faith we can't live without. I don't require proof that the chair will not collapse, I don't ask the bus-driver for his driving licence – but there is a difference; whilst I do not have the background information I know somebody who does – when I turn on a light that's as far as it goes for me – how it works, somebody has that information; it is able to be obtained. By contrast, divine faith can only be known through Revelation – it is beyond reason or intelligence why there is one God in three persons; why the magnificence and splendour of eternal God is totally present in a helpless child clinging to a human breast.

*I believe in God* is a decision that there is someone beyond, that we are not self-starting. Nor did we fashion our world, which we can't understand. We can and we do explore and search for how it began – but we will never, unaided, discover *why* it all happened. Evolution is a challenge, the universe doesn't carry its own explanation. *Why am I here, where am I going* – a spider knows how to spin its web, the bee gathers honey, but not us – we seem to be lost without any help.

Because we can reflect and ponder we can despair as well as hope – *what is the quintessence of dust* – asks Hamlet. We have much in common with animal life – eating, procreating. I can disown my life and die, I can experience joy – enjoy *a stranger and afraid in a world I never made* – Houseman. Masterpieces in stone, paint and song, remind us that aspiration is not a rarity. Saint and artist tell us we are more than a biological package – we are fired by something much deeper.

What dominates consciousness – the object of my faith – what I long for with all my heart, what I freely choose as the one thing necessary above all others – my God? There can only be one true object of faith, one God, which the mind names as truth and the heart calls good. The mind, unaided, cannot reach Truth, no more than an unaided heart can instinctively opt for good. We may not actually believe what we think we believe.

Consciousness has many levels – dreams and fantasies emerge from sub-consciousness to tell us strange things. Likewise we experience our self as divided when faith competes with doubt *I can speak words of*

*admiration all the while nurturing jealous thoughts!* This malaise of consciousness is universal, yet we are searching for truth and for someone to trust! It is to this little spark of faith that the Word speaks, assuring me that my heart really is a temple and not a tomb – *we will come and make our abode*. Which makes *I believe in God* homecoming.

Reeds bending in the wind, flames flickering, sheep lost are found; Simon the coward becomes Peter the leader; the Prodigal returns to a royal welcome; the feared persecutor [Paul] is now a believer who gives himself to spreading the Word. Judas worries us – like us he betrayed love [so did Peter] but unlike Peter who, like Judas, couldn't forgive himself – but discovered he could be forgiven. His sin was not his betrayal, but in not believing he could be forgiven. Faith always seeks to affirm life – no matter what the circumstances.

### **Abba**

We know why flowers turn towards sunlight that the *natural* world is as it should be. But what about us – we believe that Jesus is the *Light of the World*, the light that warms and attracts – so why do we not turn towards the light? Is there a blockage preventing this? We have a residual fear because we have been taught that God is holy, forgiving never needing to blame – and we are not! But this fear can work to our benefit when it urges us to accept God's commands – [by no means the best of motives].

Once we accept these commands we realise they are not impositions in any sense, but an invitation into a new way of being human, a way shot through with freedom. This is true wisdom – first-born of fear [like Magdalen at the tomb]. We *experience* this – we do not know about it – we *experience* it as a presence that both attracts and intimidates [like Peter's *go away from me or you will get hurt*]. This presence is beyond our control – transcendent – but within us as experience – immanent.

We cannot *think* God – God is beyond all comprehension – we can only welcome the gift of real presence and begin to enjoy it [contemplation]. Once this warmth starts to permeate, the initial fear gives way as this presence has nothing of threat – it is totally and unconditionally for me, just *because* I am me! It lets me become aware that I am something of God – gift to myself to become gift for others. Listen to George Herbert talk of this:

*Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lacked any thing.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
Love said, you shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*

Love is born in darkness, as daylight emerges from night-time. God's seeming faraway worries us – God *up there* a long way from us *down here*. Jesus is unique in that he experiences my distant God as Abba. My mind is all right with the word God, but nothing seems to be happening in my heart; the god of the mind seems to be ice for the heart; probably because we are not yet primarily heart-full, but a head-full. Love, not logic lights up the world.

Abba speaks to imagination, which is good because we are not all trained thinkers – we respond more readily to story; love, not logic warms the world. *Abba* appeals to imagination. *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day* – writes Shakespeare. Jesus said *I am the Good Shepherd* to people in a land where sheep pastured on local hillsides and needed to be protected from predation.

Religion is poetry, not proof. To reduce it to logic to fit it into the mind is to extinguish its fire and we find ourselves reduced to ashes. Jesus' first and last words is Father; telling us that NT is the love-story of Father and Son. What sustained him was not gritting his teeth and making the best of things, but this fatherly affection which has no room for envy, jealousy or malice. We go around virtually annihilating each other all the while claiming discipleship with one who is Resurrection into life.

That it can and does work we see in parents sacrificing all for children, teachers for students, nurses for patients, strangers for the needy; ordinary folk doing ordinary things extraordinarily well – including the undeserving and the ungrateful. Jesus doesn't claim to be the goal of our travelling. He is the *way* – go with friar Christ to Abba. We cannot live without a future, something to attract – marriage, career prospects and the like – but such hope has always to be genuinely real, yet always unattainable; hope disappears when it is achieved.

However, the future is present in Jesus [while remaining future]. He reveals God as love; the Father we cannot physically see, yet whose presence is real precisely through Jesus incarnating the love that is God. We are not called to be satellites of God, nor cringing servants – everyone is a first-born child of God – loved into existence with no conditions attached – what is born of love is meant to be free. This is daunting – but we are not left on our own – *without me you can do nothing - if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you* – Jn.15.

What is asked of us by invitation is not to become a member of a club – but to dare to live as a human being in an entirely different way; one never heard of before yet on free offer. It is a way of living that even embraces death bursting into eternal life. We are asked to agree to be reborn into what eye has not seen nor ear heard. A paradox! *The Father is greater than I* and yet Jesus goes on to say *I am equal to the Father... the Father and I are one*. Somehow, subordination does not imply inequality. Which is a truth the power-brokers need to learn.

There is a hierarchy in God without domination, obedience without coercion – such is the kingdom whose essence is love. Jesus show us that God is not a loner – but Abba. We cannot see Abba, there is too much light, yet as is the moth, we too are attracted by light and warmth. *Show us the Father...* is the apostles' plea; why can't we see and enjoy? Jesus is this light-filtered for the eye to see, a lens dimmed to enable us to see. The time for glory is not yet, we haven't the eyes, and so we live by faith – seeing as *through glass darkly* – 1Cor.13.12.

Faith starts through accepting our inability to see, yet wanting to transcend the obstacles; faith affords rest knowing that vision is coming. The question: have I the stamina for this? Not if I rely on my own resources. Those who saw faith realised in Jesus saw him being driven from within. He does not deny that he is *possessed*.

The Spirit in him radiates warmth and attractiveness and universal welcome. It brings peace to the anxious, love to the lonely and forgiveness to the sinner [all three conditions are in each one of us].

We are aware of love, not through sight but through sign. Sin causes inner conflict; I am not at home with myself; I really do desire good yet indulge in the opposite. The difference the gift of the Spirit makes is who Jesus is: *blessed are the peace-makers – they shall see God!* We can't adequately define love – we can't reach God, but we have been reached by God! God is relationship – with everything that is not God, and we are made in that image. A life without relating is a life without God, which is why our primary instinct is wanting to belong.

To love is the fruit of being loved – and we are loved into existence with this gift – we can become what we have received. The power that we call *almighty* is not the ability to do everything, but the ability to give self away totally for the sake of another. This is why Trinity is not just a doctrine – it is a way of living: a lover, a beloved and their shared mutuality in love. The thinker communicates a truth, but cannot communicate an *experience*. That belongs to the artist, and the poet and all who live creatively. God is three times holy because God is life, love and enjoyment.

### **Creator**

*Holding a hazel-nut someone asked: what's this? How about this for an answer: it is everything that is made! In this tiny nut see that God made it, God loves it and God sustains it – Julian of Norwich.* Everything created carries the hall-mark *made by God*. Missing this point was the sadness that caused Jesus to speak of eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear. The Book of Genesis is not the time-table for Creation, but a reminder that Creation is continuing to evolve; our world is not given to us as a finished product which we managed to make a mess of. God created a world able to be made perfect by the way it is lived-in – we are co-creators of our world.

Sin cannot block God's plan – just makes it more painful, now involving a hammer and nails. See the activity of creation in the seasons moving into each other – dying and rising. See it in the artist, the poet, the musician and the scientist – each uncovering nature's potential; along with all whose creativity continues to bring order out of chaos. Chaos we don't like – we like shape and continuity, which is why Genesis applauds such artistry – *and God saw that it was good!*

It's as if goodness spills over from God and humankind is asked to embrace it and release its multifarious potential. God makes a trust and makes us trustees – both privilege and responsibility. Which means we can both promote or retard creation! Love always promotes increase – eager to see the oak tree in the acorn. Creation as it is meant to be is what the fruit of love looks like, itself remaining invisible; prompting the artist to take up the brush and the poet the pen – each trying to make visible what remains unseen. Wonder is possible on seeing a beautiful landscape, a new-born baby's finger-nails!

There is obviously risk involved in all this. Did God risk too much in making us the stewards of creation? With our track record we would have to say yes! Except for one thing. It was always God's intention to become part of creation. Jesus is no after-thought, in no way did God have *to get a man in* to repair the damage. God rates genuine humanness much more than we do, and believes in us even when we ignore the Creator and seek possession. We call the world our oyster from which we extract the divine pearl and try to own it.

We have a smouldering resentment of our creaturely state – we would take creation as our right and rule as lord and master over an atheistic state. This is why *I believe in Creator God* must be genuine, so that becomes both truth and prayer. The truth sets us free from living in a God-forsaken place with the prayer *that we may*

see. The gift of my life is more valuable than what I do with it; which is not seen when I treat Creation as my local supermarket where I'm intent on getting bargains.

I know I am seeing creation as it really is when reverence surges up within me. I have only to look to industrial wastelands to see what happens to what is ours – slag heaps, rivers choking with pollutants, high-rise flats like filing cabinets, where there is loneliness and isolation. When reverence is missing we too are downgraded, become items, a labour force. When everything is measured by its usefulness we are no more than consumers rushing for the sales.

What is beauty? It is what happens when truth impacts on our senses – music, poetry or even the design of a vacuum-cleaner! Idolatry is paying homage to our own inventions – forgetting where ingenuity comes from. Einstein spoke of his *amazement at the laws of nature, vastly superior to human thinking*. A real person is a humble person who reverences creation so much that knowledge becomes wisdom, and emotions develop into wonder.

### Jesus

What God is like is a nonsense statement. No one has seen God, who cannot be *like* anything. Traditional picture of God is *elderly male, white-bearded*. The ways we image God has a lot to say about us. If I see a judge or a policeman God, it will be evident in my other attitudes. A good question to ask is why are so many religious people without joy? *O God, make bad people good and good people nice!* A child's prayer!

We confess our belief in our being in the image and likeness of God; while most of us are dissatisfied with ourselves. What is missing? We are very familiar with Paul's outburst – *How is it that I do things I do not like to do, and cannot do what I would like?* We have alibis – yet we know we are not fated. There are too many rags-to-riches stories, even in the Church community to confound that. Augustine is remembered for his restless heart – but really, how can I find rest in a God I cannot see?

No one can *think* God, nor *imagine*... thinking and imagining are not able for it. So, if there is to be contact it must begin with God, and in a way we are able to receive. We look for good people to help and guide us – which is different from *great* people! History shows most *great* people tend to be bad! Power corrupts more than gold; and great gifts are too often used to destroy. Yet we do seek the good person – it is built-into us so to do. Created by goodness it tends to manifest itself. But who decides what is good?

Jesus, fully alive, is what God would be in all of us. Starting from there we can find out what *reality* really means! God is no longer hidden, no longer an idea but a person. Jesus' whole ministry was to persuade us that God and us are meant to be together – as the lover and the loved, in a two-way exchange. There is no incompatibility. We don't *learn* this from what Jesus *says or does*, but from who he is. Not just a good man, there are many such; but the God-man.

Great truths are not understood but experienced [believed]. This is what *mystery* means; not the unknown or the unintelligible, not something we cannot know anything about, but something we cannot know *everything* about! Creation is mystery – we don't know how it began, or how it will end. Its frontiers lie beyond the reach of telescopes – its intricacies beyond understanding – we send satellites to explore, yet the stars retain their secrets.

The mystery that impacts most with us is ourselves! What is a human being, what is its capacity? Are we more animal than angel? Are we the crown of creation or evolution's most spectacular failure, destined for extinction like the dinosaur? Or is there something mysterious about us; will we break the confines of time

and space? The mind can cope with definitions, but only a *person* can hold mystery. This unknownness of a person is what makes us attractive – all those things that take us by surprise.

We were not very old when we discovered we are 2 people! *I'm not myself today!* At the same time we love and despise ourselves. We love some, but not others; we are not even in control of ourselves – we find ourselves doing what we would rather not do. We want to love – God and others openly and freely, but we are chained to resentments. Is this it, wanting to love yet unable to do so?

Let's start there. It is said that *love* is the 36<sup>th</sup> word in every song! Do we know what we are singing about? This is the most impenetrable mystery of all because love is God. To say *God is love* goes against what is normally understood by the word. We can't know what love is by falling in love and say that is God. The truth is the opposite – only those who know God know love. Love cannot be produced by whipping up emotions, holding hands and the like. Wonderful and good as they are, but not love.

But how do we know God and so discover love? God is only known through his self-revealing – and there is only one such revelation - Jesus the Christ. Love is God and its manifestation is Jesus Christ. We cannot know what love is and then attach it to God. Certainly, there is romance and passion, both figure in high drama and devastating tragedy. If we would know love we must know God, through his self-disclosure.

Authentic Christianity is essentially optimistic, because of the nature of this self-revelation. We have a future! To natural eyes God seems remote and even aloof. To natural eyes it seems that God can be for us or against us – no wonder there so many so-called atheists. Our imagination is eclipsed by sin – and all is obscure. This led to the observation: *The mass of human beings live lives of quiet desperation!* Why?

So much depends on our imagination – which has us see ghosts and hear voices. Voltaire remarked: *God made us in his own image and we have returned the compliment!* We protect God from imagination – Jesus reveals God. The God we image is simply our fears writ large. The God of Revelation is freedom. We need to be free of two illusions: our image of God and our image of ourselves. Who we know and what we see is distorted by human frailty – to the extent of even saying *I'm only human!* Sinful behaviour is not human – sin is a virus with no vaccine protection. Its destiny is death.

In Jesus we see authentic humanness; made of the same dust of the earth as ourselves, enclosed in human weakness, knowing the shocks of flesh and blood living. He was taunted, abused and killed. Not superman – just a complete human being. He is the norm we the abnormal. His life was not privileged; he sought no exemptions. He was neither wealthy nor destitute – just what we ought to be. He is fully human, not because he is God but because he is sinless. He shows sin is not human – it makes us sub-human.

Where we see oppression, fear, power games – even the pomp of prelates, as well as *ordinary* malice we are seeing only disfigurement, which so widespread we settle for *that's it, I'm only human!* But if there is sin, there is also sanctity – where there is violence there can be gentleness, and cowardice can reveal heroism. Jesus doesn't claim to know truth – he says *I am truth!* To *have* truth makes it a philosophy, a formula for producing theories producing a variety of –isms and –ologies. All of which end up discarded because we equate novelty with truth.

Jesus shuns abstraction because it is not real. Truth is a person – which lends relevance to what is personal. There is no sanctity in system, no salvation in projects or programmes; whereas person and truth are as inseparable as sun and light. Truth is one – error multiple. We live in an erroneous atmosphere, Christ lives truth.

## Sinless

God is sinless – but we now know that the truly human being is also sinless – made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus Christ, truly human is sinless. The more Christ-like we become, so much the more human we will be, and the human more divine.

The *Fall* happened in time and space; Jesus was born in time and space, and by the way he inhabited his life reorders things, so that others might follow his invitation. However, this is not the reason why he became part of Creation. The purpose of the Incarnation is love, not getting rid of sin. Jesus, in this sense, originates nothing but redeems everything. We can become through the gift of adoption what he is through nature – the Son of the Father truly flesh and blood.

The broken folk he ate and supped with became sensitised to something special within him that was palpable and available – an assuredness, trustworthy and friendly. He speaks of it as *I and the Father are one...* not *near* to God – but *one with God* through difference but without division. Whereas we can only say: *I and the Father are two!* This is where sin originates – in division and separation from our origin. Sin is not what we do. It is what we are. We do not become sinners by committing sin – we commit sin because we are sinners.

The infant is taken to the font before there is any question of sin – yet born in separation from its origin. It needs to be re-born, which it cannot do. This is the work of the Spirit. What happens at the font is not over and done with there. That is the beginning. Living is not an easy stroll in the park. It follows a Camino way through peaks and valleys, meeting constantly the need for a yes or a no. The situation is neutral – but the yes and no are decisive. Life happens through making choices. This is what Jesus refers to when he tells people who have been healed – *your faith has saved you*. Grace has been offered and has been accepted.

Anxiety is always fertile ground for sin to flourish, sometimes seen as a minor irritant – Jesus counsels: *do not be anxious*, don't let false gods succeed in seducing you. We have just one pair of hands – all we need; we have only one heart – also all we need; provided we operate in unity. Anxiety creates division and erratic behaviour – whatever we are doing we feel we should be doing something else! Satan, the author of division, promising the good life all the time in many different ways, with promises never kept.

Free from sin is not stopping doing this or that, but realising [making real] true freedom and this at times, as Jesus promised, *by leading us into places we would rather not go* – Jn.21.18. Jesus is never anxious, because he lives within the embrace of love – he *experiences* being loved [doesn't just know it]. He makes us aware of Abba by giving us the Spirit – *God enjoying being God for all of us*. This is what made Irenaeus say: *God is praised when we are fully alive*. The Spirit is our maturing, there can be no life without growth [hence the purpose of evolution].

A leaf is the sign of a tree's life, just as dawn signifies that light is never far away. Jesus had to follow this path to maturity, he was not instantly mature. He grew through the school of suffering – there can be no love where there is no suffering. Life happens through a series of dying and rising – rise, fall, decay and renew. It seems that at 12 years old Jesus died to childhood – not without suffering – by searching for the answer to *who am I?*

His inner strength was his awareness of and enthusiasm for his being the beloved of Abba – *This is my Son, the beloved*. His route back to Abba was no by-pass, but through the inner city streets of everyday living. From this he knew human experience, he knew temptation. It is human to be tempted [we are tempted towards good as well as towards bad], it is inhuman to sin.

He was led into the wilderness of life where all temptations happen. He confronts the tempter, each temptation also offers salvation even when power, prestige and possessions loom large to seduce the heart. Instant bread, instant power, and instant celebrity status – at a cost: to renounce Abba [*Deus providebit*].

This is to dispense with the Creator so that we can do what we like with creation – and how we have tried! For Jesus, commitment to the love of Abba is total, come what may. Anxious hearts fall for easy money and success without effort. *Need* is seldom the occasion of sin. The poor, as a rule, have a certain gratitude for what they have – note how readily they give it away for those who have nothing.

Jesus sees no virtue in the poverty of penury; it is an evil to be addressed. He sees danger in wealth [wealth is not dangerous in itself]. Jesus feels pity for two classes – both wealthy. Those who have money and those who have piety – affluence of gold and affluence of virtue; since both see salvation as something to be acquired. The temptations of the pious are the more subtle, but we need revelation to show this to us. The connotation *Pharisee* is not confined to a particular time or place; it can be found in every heart.

As soon as we begin to take stock of our goodness, we cease to be good. When we make comparisons we claim to be God. The saint is not conscious of personal sanctity – when Paul says *by the grace of God I am what I am* - 1Cor.15.10, this is no longer Paul the Pharisee, but a grateful person for what has been given; one who knows grace and enjoys it.

Without a sense of need or some experience of failure we have no hold on grace as the oxygen of life. A sense of need is necessary – yet we resent being creatures! Humility does not come easily – *Learn from me, I am meek and humble hearted...* so that *my joy be yours, and complete* – Mt.11.29. Humility literally means *get real!* The word comes from the Latin *humus* – rich soil, full of potential for fertility.

Jesus' origin is in Abba – he is God-made-flesh; born of Mary, true and totally man. The heresies claim *Jesus is God masquerading as man* – or he is simply man *favoured by God*. Our pride and glory is our mind – but it is limited. It can set man on the moon, bring trapped miners safely to the surface – but cannot tell us why there is a moon! As Pope Benedict asked: *why is there something and not nothing?* This is where philosophy and science remain agnostic. The mind's genius is to bring order, calculate and cut to size, which we need because there is too much reality.

The mind is the corrective to anarchy and an agent of beauty. But it achieves order by excluding reality – those vast areas that make the poet eloquent and the lover break into song, and which religion is meant to celebrate – the realm of mystery. This is the estate of the heart, which has its own logic and language – other than that of the mind. Both are available – the heart teeming with metaphor and imagery [everyday language]. The mind is cautious of what it does not understand – which is why *pride* is such a capital sin [*caput* – resides in the head]. It disregards mystery and the realities it cannot reach: *unless I see I will not believe* – Jn.20.25. To which Jesus says: *blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe* – *ibid*.

We can believe what we do not understand – God-made-flesh. Religion that is small enough for the mind is never big enough for the heart. The mind cannot know God – only love allows such access – love is faith in action. Jesus is God without qualification, sinless. The mind, which sees all mankind as flawed, cannot make room for this. Whereas the heart, which on its own, is equally incapable, can be graced to receive without needing to understand. We can't *argue* the Incarnation, we can't even envisage its possibility. We have the fact – which asks for faith, the ability to travel beyond having to understand. Which is why the Christian mind is eminently real, yet necessarily humble.



The energy which eternally generates unity in God, makes God flesh and blood, born of the Virgin Mary – showing us that God is not just for God. Unity in God is pure wonder, unity in God-made-man is total surprise. In no way is this condescension by God. Mary is creature, not constrained by the unfreedom of sin, who said yes where human instinct says no – because she is free to say yes – yes to what she doesn't fully understand.

Faith is fertile, fertility is woman's glory. The fruit of her act of faith is a new creation – God-man. She is free and willing to partner God when God joins the human race in a unity beyond all wildest dreams. There is no separation between Creator and creature. The Son of God is Son of Mary. She did not understand the suffering that would touch her, seeing her motherhood not so much as privilege as responsibility. She patently did understand everything that was happening – we hear her ask her son *why have you done this to us?*

Michelangelo's *Pieta* captures the absence of resentment on her face, the face of one who believes that not even this can derail God's plan – her Son has not died uselessly. How does she know? She doesn't – she simply believes.

### **Suffering**

This is no accident, no technical hitch. A religion silent on suffering is a castle in the air. Some have tried to argue that pain is illusory and can be wished away. As we know, pain is no illusion nor is illness always imaginary; so too sin has its invoice – guilt and remorse. Death is a fact. It has its own authority over our emotions and, like love cannot be hidden. There is no anaesthetic for bereavement. Death asks questions of ambitions, even has us ask what the point of life is if this is how it ends.

Life is lived between the poles of love and death, with love yearning for immortality [every love-song voices this]. There is nothing poetic here, simply stark human longing – which for Mary is in a faith that would defy death. Only love has the courage to believe in eternity, yet death came to Romeo and Juliet, to saint and sinner, to Jesus Christ.

### **Hell**

Jesus revises our understanding of God – God is mercy without conditions, and this mercy is universal, no conditions. God does not ask us to be worthy – despite our *Lord, I'm not worthy* – simply to be willing to receive something freely given. If this is true there is evidence – the Cross and all that it implies demonstrates this. Had Jesus not died he would not have been one of us.

To stand at a grave-side is to face the destiny of human kind as *dust to dust*. Words, music, flowers all help, but do little to dispel that life, wonderful as it is, ends in heartbreak. Where there was love, charged with immortality with a time for poetry and song – but now this! Jesus died as we will. Few stayed to ease his agony. Rejection is the worst pain – rejected by his own people, and seemingly by God – *my God why have you forsaken me?*

Jesus suffers every human experience, submits to reality, clay in the potter's hands – *he was made sin for us* – 2Cor.5.21 [not made *to* sin]. Without sinning he freely took-on the terrible consequences. The splendour of love is its felt oneness with all reality. Sin, by contrast, is separation and division, out of tune, no harmony.

This is why the cross symbolises Christianity, where love takes on death; wholeness with sin – where death seems to win. What is the point if we end up dead? He who claimed to be *life of the world* ends up dead. The love that drew people to him had lost its magic – on Calvary sin has its finest hour. Sin is much more than individual sins. S Paul speaks of the world being dislocated – we are so obsessed with our own shortcomings that we fail to see evil at loose in the whole world.

It is with this outside sin that Jesus engages. Individual sinners were no problem for him – for the Peters and the Magdalens he had words and gestures of peace. His problem was with those in denial – denying they were sinners; such clandestine sin is toxic. He saw vividly in the Garden how sin glories in victory in the blood of God.

## Rising

*But I hae dreamed a dreamy dream  
Beyond the Isle of Skye.  
I saw a dead man win a fight  
And I think that man was I.*

A dream! Resurrection is no dream; it is hard fact. The Easter narrative is pure, unadorned fact. It was not a spectacular event – no one saw it happen, it was in the dead of night. Jesus was a child of the night – the event [like his birth] that changed history forever was seen by no one. We know celebrities like to be heralded with pomp and ceremony designed to impress. No reassurance needed here.

The Resurrection opens up to an empty stage, in a garden – no lights apart from the mist and early dawn-light. Only the silence that chills in a place where a loved-one has died. His miracles, his care and compassion are all buried here. He was aware that we seem to believe more in death than life. Resurrection breaks the sequence of cause and effect. It is too much for logic or for plain common sense. Nothing he'd done or said disposed his friends to expect this! He was gone. Only life is real and he is dead.

They would mourn and remember him, but not believe him. He had said so much about life – yet his young life was cut short. The Spirit blazed within him yet seemingly found no way out. He spoke of a willing spirit but a weak flesh. He spoke of the Kingdom already here, with more to come. Calvary is the cross-road. The life that climbed that hill is not the life the human heart longs for.

This first life as to reach its conclusion – it involved letting go with no little struggle. No one is exempt from experiencing dying. He gave himself and seemingly left behind faithful followers and friends, and experienced the absence of Abba – *he descended into hell*. The Creed doesn't just say he rose from the dead, but also from hell! Life's worst pain is radical loneliness that no friend can alleviate – such is death. The real pain of Calvary was not physical, but the pain of total abandonment.

For the Jew death meant absolute loneliness – hell; where we pass beyond the reach of love. He descended into hell to show us the way out! He died alone so that no one need ever do so again. He made death the next step into fullness of life, by showing that there is no greater love [which death cannot touch] than to live life for others. The only hell we can now know is freely chosen isolation. He has shown us that death cannot take away our choice for life. Hell could not hold him – he is raised up, and we the beneficiaries.

Calvary is a past event – Resurrection isn't. Jesus died once and for all. Easter is ever contemporary. Jesus *is* risen not *has* risen. He is alive – where is he? His only home is the heart – often sinful and sad; fearing emptiness and loss of identity – overlooked by everybody, including God. And yet so few believe in Resurrection. How many wish they had known him? He hadn't come to condemn or console, he had come to

change! *Repent* is the word the Gospels use. But it actually calls for radical change; not just tinkering with the system. New values to replace routine praxis; conversion from the real to the really real.

Resurrection is fire – and we fear its heat. It challenges *more of the same* – since God is unchangingly always new. Life's hallmark is growth, and growth happens through recurring crises. [Hamlet saw life as hell, to be intensified by death]. We believe in death – we *seek* to believe in Resurrection. Faith in the Resurrection is the faith of the fearless – and most of us are afraid. Which is why Jesus says so often *do not be afraid!* We are so oppressed by fear that we look for safety in the status quo – the idolatry of the past.

To believe is seeing life as growth, to disbelieve is to see life as ever more of the same; which makes little or no demand; is a safe and daily sedative. Which is why Jesus tells us *leave the dead to bury the dead*, and we end up celebrating Easter as a past event; a fitting epilogue to a wonderful life, locked away safely in the archives. This in spite of Paul's words – If Christ *is* not risen [not was], faith is a delusion. This disturbs – Resurrection is disturbing, for it has no status quo.

*Christ called himself truth, not custom* – writes Tertullian. Truth is a tree growing – custom is dead wood creosoted to preserve. Truth is of God, custom a human invention. Truth is fire, custom refrigeration. Custom can be a good servant, but a terrible master. Custom can be kind – but absolves us from having to think. Which is why the Gospel is news, not history: *You have heard it said to them of old... but I say this...* Ever the present tense: *Behold, I make all things new* is Resurrection-speak.

The Jews were dedicated to custom, taking pride in the Temple, the Torah and the Sabbath. What did Jesus mean when he said he had come to complete the Law? To replace the Temple and change the Sabbath to Sunday – Easter Sunday! On that day custom surrendered to truth – life before Calvary is not what he came to bring. Where we see life we see Resurrection, ongoing creativity; the genius of love brings death into creativity. Art and poetry are not initially technique – they are inspiration, prompted by the Spirit.

### **Holy Spirit**

When people said Jesus *speaks with authority* they were experiencing the impact of his personality. He was energised by fire and heat that radiated from him. They felt him to be much more than the local carpenter. He had wisdom and courage, he was what he said. He said he was possessed by the Spirit of Abba. When he died, the Spirit, which had found in him perfect human expression, was handed over to the world – *receive the Holy Spirit*.

Fully alive people – alive in the Spirit – are a delight to be with; but they are rare! They are in love with life in all its possibilities. Success is not their ambition, nor are they disturbed by failure. They are found in all kinds of places – wherever life is being lived rich or poor, happy or sad. What such folk have in common is that they have already died – died to the self that seeks only to get and to keep.

We are a divided self – we long for such freedom, yet we cling to what seems to be our life insurance policy, making sure first and foremost that I get and keep what I need. If we would be fully alive we must die to this interior divide – giving our churchy part to God and keeping the rest for ourselves. Jesus doesn't ask for part of me, but a baptism of total immersion, our yes to death by drowning so as to rise into the new way of living.

That is what he said when his disciples asked to share his values: *can you be baptised as I have been?* Every death seems to be disaster; only with the Resurrection were the disciples renewed in an entirely new way. They had died to the half-real and came alive with his Spirit. Peter's spirit collapsed when the cock crew, now he comes to be fully alive, realising the truth of *whoever would save his life must lose it*.

The Resurrection proves nothing, but reveals everything. Death is no longer the great leveller, it cannot touch love. The wide-eyed child has no problem believing in heaven – where everyone is kind and life is full of good things. Fairyland dies as we get older and meet sin and suffering, and experience injustice and unfairness, promises made but not kept. Life at times seems more like hell than heaven.

Heaven is a state, not a place. When we experience calm after a rough-ride we relax and enjoy – and might even say *this is heaven*, when time doesn't intrude and silence is welcome. The essence of this heaven is that we didn't have to make it, we are visited by surprise. Heaven is the meeting between us and God. Jesus didn't disappear into the clouds – he went home. The pain proper to love is its longing; incomplete love is always painful – note what happens after a phone conversation with a faraway loved one – there are tears, because what shouldn't end appears to have done so.

This longing says we are meant for something more [Ascension]. Jesus knew both bodily crucifixion and abandonment [descended into hell]. He was raised and ascended to the first encounter between God and man on equal terms. Great truths are beyond the reach of words and ideas – even poetry and music fall short. In the presence of worship, we need simply *be still and come to know*. Every loving experience creates the desire for ascension into total intimacy.

Resurrection does not mean a return to living as we have been accustomed, but a breakthrough into the larger life Jesus spoke of – he didn't come back like Lazarus [who still had to die]. As yet we do not fully understand the risen Christ, we are still within the parameters of death; likewise with Ascension – we feel it as a desire for larger and pain-free living. Ascension is ascension to heaven, heaven means home and home means happiness in belonging, love with a love personal and ever deepening.

Hell is total isolation in solitary confinement – by our own choosing to be there. This loneliness is self-induced, not absence of company, but not enough of self – refusal of offered friendship. It has its attractiveness – free from the mutuality of friendships, no need or place for gratitude [Scrooge-like] as we are self-contained and self-fulfilled; owing no one anything.

Life calls for heaven – Jesus descended into hell to get rid of it. Heaven did not know human enjoyment before Christ. It is not a house in the country, off limits until now. Heaven is real when God and creation are appropriately united – it is not just where God lives; it is our personal and communal future fully realised. We, by contrast, can make hell – left to ourselves we have no future: *eat, drink and be merry...* [Ecclesiastes.8.15, Is.22.13].

We have a choice [God sends no one anywhere] selfishness and chosen isolation, or accept we have a future with the desire for more life fully realised; something experienced even now, whenever we *experience* this is a good place to be. A place that has no status quo!

## **Judgement**

This is probably the most feared aspect of what is to come for the believer – because we see it as what we know of judgement here and now, only writ large. If this were so, then Christianity is hardly Good News. This misunderstands Jesus, who said: *I have not come to condemn but to save*. Judgment is not in the heavenly assizes court – where we stand and wait for the verdict. Judgement means self-judgement. God's ways are not our ways – truth is *revealed*, not deduced or thought through.

The Creed says *he* [Jesus] will judge; the same he who will not cast the first stone... who has compassion for failure and welcomes sinners. The same he whose crucifixion shouts out *you will be lost over my dead body*. *I have come for sinners* is his claim. The good don't need me! There's something to ponder – goodness, if it is

mine, tells me I don't need Christ. Jesus never criticised the Pharisees for their sinfulness, but for their goodness – their meticulous observance of the Law [good in itself but never primary].

Speaking of Magdalen, he says: *much is forgiven her, because she loves much...* Forgiveness is the setting for Judgement, not common sense. Common sense would never welcome the homecoming of the Prodigal. The father neither condones nor ignores the extravagance, but really welcomes his coming home. Jesus refuses to let go of us. Judas' sin was not betraying Jesus, but not believing in mercy – he couldn't forgive himself so he took his own life. Whereas Peter, guilty of the same betrayal, also unable to forgive himself, through that glance of Jesus realised he could be forgiven.

The opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith; faith in God as all-giving and forgiving. We want to be perfect before we come near God – we attach over-importance to *Lord, I'm not worthy...* He doesn't ask us to be worthy but to be willing! Forgiveness takes two – a giver and a receiver – lack of faith disables God: *he could work no miracles there because of their lack of faith.* Receiving forgiveness means trying to become what I am receiving – for others.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries were afraid of God, but not of him! Children flocked to him, the sick sought him out – this is our judge, who knows what it is like to live the human condition, to suffer unjustly and be condemned to death. Judgment is new, a light that only those who don't want it believe they don't need it, they are their own saviours. Notice how such people, commendable for observance and doing the right thing, are sad. Religion is to be a support, not a burden. Being alive surely carries responsibilities, but as Jesus said: *a yoke that is easy and its burden light.* We cannot live on merit, only on mercy.

Why did God give us a critical faculty if we are not to judge? Parents have to make judgements about and for their children; likewise teachers with students, nurses with patients... But judgement must always serve life – not impede it. A parent refusing to judge a constantly disobedient child is not loving, because not saving. This is true of all systems and structures – they are wrong if they are not serving life. Everyone having the responsibility of judging is proxy for God, to judge as God judges – to promote full living *I have come that you may have abundant life.*

Interesting to note that those who hate are also capable of loving – it is cold indifference that is the clammy hand of death. Jesus was dismayed by so much tepidity and indifference to the plight of others – yet mercy is also available here for anyone daring to ask!

We know only too well – often from personal experience – so often, those who judge themselves condemn themselves. To be obsessed with sin is not healthy. Awareness of sin belongs within the context of forgiveness, that my sin is my entitlement to Christ, his words: *I have come for sinners.* Happiness is determined by what is at the heart of our consciousness. My heart is dyed with the colours of my leisure thoughts. Faith doesn't make a better me, but a new me: *behold I make all things new* – Rev.21.5. Which explains why many religious folk are sad when they see themselves out of true. What God seeks is not someone without sin, but forgiven sinners. Every saint has a past, and every sinner a future.

### **Believe in the Holy Spirit**

What motivates us, gets us out of bed in the morning, has us risk – is some inner need, something that can become passionate in its expression we often refer to as spirit – we are spirited. Spirit is not an easy word to cope with, perhaps because it is always moving, can't be caged-in. It is *life's* genius; no spirit in a grave – or on the moon where there is no life, no laughter.

Spirit means enterprise, zest for more life and for more enjoyment. Spirited folk are a joy to be with. Jesus was such, and people flocked to be with him even into wild and lonely places because of the magnetism that came from him; but most especially, what he said had the ring of truth and trustworthiness. Truth carries its own authority – it does not inform, it transforms.

As the flower seeks sunlight, so we seek freedom, as the hungry seek food. In the days of youth we saw freedom as release from the constraints of family, school and church. It's my life. I don't need rules or systems. Whatever this is it isn't freedom! The essence of freedom is a heightened sense of responsibilities. False freedoms make my life *my* place, it becomes my prison, where nobody wants to go.

Freedom is the birth-right of everyone. Dictators, like bullies repress it. Democracy, though far from perfect in practice, has the right foundation by allowing freedom to flourish. Democracy is relatively new, around for only 3% of recorded history. Its presence is very restricted to certain areas of the globe. It is a wonderful enterprise, but continually under threat – a tree taking decades to grow can be felled in minutes.

Our hearts want freedom, yet we also are afraid; those who fear freedom want to deprive others of it. Why fear? Because freedom brings responsibilities, and those who fear this will trade their freedom for anything that will live their lives for them. It is by no means true that everyone wants freedom, and bullies thrive on such timidity. Such paves the way for the *Police State*.

Freedom is an inner reality, freedom from inner fears, phobias and hang-ups – but not just freedom-from, its primary role is freedom *for*. Without it our hold on life is tenuous, enjoyment virtually non-existent and prayer becomes a repeated task, something to be done – we become dispirited. It is the role of the Spirit to enliven, invigorate – as we see from the crowds who gathered wherever Jesus was, even though unaware of the presence of the Spirit, they experienced his presence.

He invites – *come to me all who are overburdened... come and see...* Jesus doesn't summon the Spirit from the skies to descend on us, the Spirit is *in* him and radiates from him to any and everyone. Like walking into sunlight from chilly shadows. The first move is to be in reach – to frequent his company, just be there. The common experience of those who abide in this is – the move from the chill, reflects common sinfulness into experiencing being a forgiven sinner – conversion involves the agony before the ecstasy.

For Saul, it was his journey to Damascus; Francis discovered the difference between leper and leprosy. Paul had a talent for observance – no one kept the rules as he did, after his conversion he was accused by Jewry of breaking the Law – there are over 500 precepts, yet he asked which one he had broken. But he was not a happy man – ablaze with anger and determined to hunt down Christians and get rid of them. Zeal and enthusiasm will brutalise, if not tenderised by love... Saul approved of the murder of Stephen. He had a divided heart, believing he was doing God's work – *it's hard to kick against the goad*.

When he was told *I am Jesus and you are persecuting me* – no more was needed, truth had set him free. No one can convert, conversion is the work of the Spirit, and Jesus is our access. Paul was a religious man, so why could he not initiate his own conversion? He needed to be set free from a religion of law, regulation and system, which is why he says *by the grace of God I am what I am*.

The worst I can say about another is not that they are bad, but they are dead. Evil can be made good, sin forgiven; whereas death is the virus infecting all of us, sets us brooding over a past we cannot change, lamenting over the present and seeing no future. Our conversation is littered with woe and complaints. It is to settle for this that is the sin against the Spirit. We pray and recognise – *all life and holiness is from you, Lord*.

The Spirit is gift, not invasion; and there is a resistance within us. We often glory in being leaders of the opposition. The genius of evil is to remain hidden, but very much there. In stronger characters it is concealed as defiance – *I will not serve!* For most of us it operates through fear – *depart from me I am a sinner*. The former believes there is no need for salvation, the latter *even God can't save me* [the difference between Judas and Peter: both couldn't forgive themselves, Peter realised he could be forgiven].

Darkness is untruth lived. It is the Spirit who is the light of life. By itself my mind cannot reach God, only an idol born of my imagination; light changes servile fear into reverence. The Spirit is the wind of change – it is change that frightens us: *To live is to change, to be perfect is to have changed often* – Newman. Tough as the closed mind was for Jesus to penetrate, the closed heart was worse. There was fierce resistance from the pious, the pillars of the Church, who believed they believed.

This reminds us that faith is not evaluated by listing devotions. Faith is alive and growing and its flowering is love. With *moral rectitude* [observance] there is no guarantee of love, a cold heart is lived-atheism. Love of God makes contact through love of others. It is never easy to love unpleasant and irritating people. But we are born to praise not slander. If we cannot praise our neighbour we can't praise God. God makes people because they are lovable – whether we see it or not.

Wonder, admiration gratitude and the like are the evidence of love. Unhappiness tends to be of our own making – with its cohorts: when avarice breeds poverty, fear begets war and envy locks us in on ourselves, which has us project all we don't like in ourselves. The one and only antidote – God loves me *exactly as I am*. The Holy Spirit is the one, true spirit; not a wild wind whipping up emotions.

I was trying to get some young children to guess the word *thank-you* asking them various lead questions, without much success. I asked what you do when you receive a surprise birthday present – hoping for thank-you – eventually I said you say thank-you! One voice said no you don't – you open it! Out of the mouths of babes – I thought there's a lesson in this. How many gifts have I received and never opened? The Holy Spirit is gift – have I opened it? If I have, others will see fruits and gifts in me, for them – Gifts of the Spirit 1 Corinthians 12. Fruits of the Spirit Gal.5.22.

There are many competing spirits, but only one Holy Spirit. How do we know which is which? The Spirit of Jesus is whatever produces the fruits that were evident in him. A spirit may lead us away from Christ into emotional huddles; something appealing to those experiencing the aridity of doctrinal religion. Emotions are not to be suppressed [can't be suppressed] they are gifts of God, but always in need of control. The artist works within talent; the preacher must preach the Word, not his/her word.

Some see visions and dream dreams – there is often *too much* religious experience. Jesus did not speak in tongues – which is not confined to spiritual people. Love *is* – holiness *is*. We tend to notice what makes headlines – Jesus never *made* the headlines. To live by the Spirit is to live as he did, quietly, with a strong sense of personal responsibility.

We experience the Spirit – but how? Often in temptation, which can be to good as well as to bad. Christ was tempted – he was human. Temptation does not have to end in sin. Jesus met temptation but did not succumb; there was no contrary spirit in him, he was totally possessed by the Spirit of Abba. The Spirit is somewhat muted being contained in flesh and blood living: *the Spirit is willing, the flesh is weak*.

Jesus died broken and bled white, only after he yielded up his spirit in death does it find freedom from time and space. Pentecost makes the availability of the Spirit universal – light for the mind and courage for the heart. The Spirit is ever present in sunshine and in showers – like the Transfiguration and Gethsemane.

For Jesus the prospect of such a horrendous death was daunting – and at the same time was obviously the will of Abba, the purpose of his life. It was not the will of Abba that he should die, but that he show in every circumstance how much Abba loves creation, no matter the cost. Our times are caught up in pain avoiding – ruling out the unpleasant from showing the will of the Father.

By contrast, in Corinth Paul had to restore the balance where life had become all spirit; revelling in the extraordinary at the expense of the real. This was certainly spirit, but not the Holy Spirit: he tells them *we preach Christ crucified*. A corrective for those who see the glorious resurrection as the only reality. There is but one uphill path to Resurrection, called Calvary. There is no theology of the Spirit without the theology of the Cross.

Because creation is pregnant with the Spirit of God – *those who have eyes, let them see* – Mt.13.16 – for wherever there is truth and goodness, there is the Spirit – whether it be in nature or personified in saint or sinner. The artist doesn't set out to create a masterpiece. The Suffolk countryside is there for all to see, John Constable saw much more than most, and was compelled to express it, prompted by the Spirit; likewise only a Lowry sees beauty in industrial wasteland prompted in a similar way from within. There is beauty in a desert [where there is nothing created by human hands]. The Spirit removes our cataracts to let us see what was hitherto hidden.

Made in the image of God the Spirit also flourishes where there is Trinity – eyes to see goodness and beauty. This activity of the Spirit was the magnetism in Jesus attracting so many. By contrast we live within a kind of anonymity – even taking for granted the gift of being alive. God loves ordinary folk – which is why he made so many! Fame is not success. Whereas being fully alive is wholeness – and true worship. The Spirit works by daring.

Daring us to believe we are *lovely!* God is love and love only creates lovely things – but God created me, therefore...! The Spirit is gentle strength – gentleness without strength is sentiment; and strength without gentleness produces the bully. Gentle strength brings harmony, where it is a good place to be. The Spirit is like oil and wine – oil to soothe and wine to excite. The spirit is given to so that we can receive from Jesus: *I have come that you may life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. *Where there is goodness celebrate it; where goodness is damaged repair it; where goodness is missing, bring it with you* – after Bonaventure.

Christian faith is no spendthrift affair. Keeping self for self is not Christian. We are sent to baptise in the 3 names of 1 God: *Father for whom service is freedom; Son our brother walking with us; Spirit who brings light to the mind and enthusiasm to the heart*. Everyone has mission to live fully with and for others. Peter was changed from Holy Thursday's coward to Pentecost's rock of strength.

It is rare to find folk naturally open to the Spirit, since faith infused is simple, but never easy. Faith is always urging us to more – not to get more, but to become more, faith really is all or nothing. *Unless you are born in a new way you will not have life ...* Jn.3.5. When Jesus died his following was pitifully few, but more than enough – the tiny bit of yeast, the pinch of salt.

There are many gifts but only one Spirit and everyone is blest and uniquely gifted. The Spirit travels well through the ordinary daily round of sunshine and showers; those who seek to avoid the ordinary are also avoiding the Spirit. Most people work hard and repetitively 90% - spirited people know the joy of living fully.



Is happiness within our reach? An honest answer could well be no – judging by experience of so much injustice pain and suffering forces us to look back in anger.

Betrayal, bullying, individualism and the like all hit us where we are most vulnerable. Is the good life little more than a pipe-dream? The response would seem to be negative – unless! Unless we have the password to unlock – for the Word that sets us free is available for anyone willing to receive it. The Word is both messenger and message – *I am the way, the truth and the life* – Jn.14.6. This new life is humanness at its excellent best.

Death experienced as destruction is over – this man died and is fully alive through the Spirit now on offer to all of us. When the Spirit who is holy meets the living that is mine – what happens? Ask Peter, Paul, Francis and so many more. Sadly, pessimism is proving attractive. It exempts from compassion, from getting involved with its pitiful cry – *leave me alone, I'm not worthy!* No one, certainly not God asks for worthiness – simply for us to be willing.

Jesus used money and saw no virtue in abject poverty. Such poverty is the sin the poor do not commit but have to endure. But there is an even more malignant poverty that of the lonely and despairing heart. Money cannot fill the void nor gadgetry substitute for love; because love is not a human product. It is pure gift of the Spirit – not a present, but a real presence.

When sorrow or bereavement beset – they hurt, and go on hurting – but they cannot kill. Death now arrives not as destruction but as the first step into new and eternal living – fully alive and totally free, because, he one of us, is risen and tells us *where I am you too will be* – Jn.14.3 because he has gone to prepare for us. This is the Good News he has asked to spread far and wide. We need help to do this – the light and courage which is the Spirit in us.

More often than not it is unhelpful to tell struggling people to pray. Prayer does not come naturally, we need to do what his friends did: *Lord, teach us to pray!* He told them say *Our Father* – something we can't do unless we are aware of being son or daughter. We need to hear Jesus call us sister/brother first if we are to own God as Abba. We need to be empty of self to allow the Spirit to fill us full. We are created empty deliberately, and we strive hard to fill that emptiness with enthusiasm to better ourselves. Empty so as to be filled by the Spirit – but first I will need a skip to off-load, something the Spirit will do for me, with gift of enthusiasm, if I am willing.

As we see in creation, the Spirit flourishes in chaos to fashion an evolving world. So too with chaotic me! Indeed, payer, fasting and alms deeds have their right and proper place – but can never substitute for the living Spirit, the Person who fashions prayerful persons – it was said of Francis *he did not so much pray as become a prayer*. Jesus prayed to Abba through the Spirit – as he never prayed alone, but with the Spirit, so can we, if we believe.

### **Church – Holy, Catholic**

The Spirit needs to be located, needs an accessible home. We know where to go to find fuel for the car, food for the table. Where can we find the fuel of life? It is here in time and space – waiting to be seen. It is like a Church spire – which points somewhere; it points upwards.

The Church is not an institution. It has and it needs institution – but is a living reality that cannot be constrained by custom, system or tradition. The Church is not a religious multi-national. Jesus is the Church's one and only foundation: *The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord*. Peter, James, John and Paul did not found churches – they were church-ed by the Church. We cannot say *the Church is like...* Paul uses two

metaphors – one speaking of intimacy in Christ – the Church is the *Body of Christ*. The other, the Church is the *bride of Christ*.

The Church is mystery, the more we discover the more there is to discover. It stands on one event which takes two words to express – death and resurrection. This event changed everything. Had Jesus not died he would not have been one of us; had he not risen from the dead, as Paul says *we are the most deluded of people*. Because he died there is the possibility of seeing him held in the past, a hero of long-ago. A dead Christ is pointless.

In the infant Church people were not dressed in black, in a state of mourning. Three words explain this: *Christ is risen*. He is alive and really present in and through the Spirit. People alive in the Spirit are not sinless, but sin no longer dictates – they are forgiven sinners. Living truly as forgiven sinners means: *God is praised when we are fully alive* – and it shows. Their impact: *see how they love one another*.

The primary mission of the Church is to make this universally present – not to make all members of a denomination, but of the Body of Christ – who lived, died and is risen. It is important to realise that in the resurrection Jesus is simultaneously dead and alive – not he died and next rose from the dead.

Simultaneously dead and alive [with the 5 death dealing wounds visible] shows death has been stripped of its power. He is dead and alive! He is not trapped in history, and is to be found where he promised to be, in a community of people, so different in many ways but totally one in owning Christ is truly risen – the Church, his risen body.

*Church* has no *meaning* without Christ and is *powerless* without the Spirit. The Church is to make both evidently present and totally available. To be faithful to such a mission the Church needs institution – those who administer institution have no autonomous function – save to be at the service of this living event. The Church is made up of men and women, tempted by power and ambition, where faith is real – which will show in *how they love one another*; passionate in celebration and involvement, with minimal reliance on law.

Faith that is weak cannot impede this, but the Spirit can be somewhat mute through mechanical liturgies, arid preaching and routine prayer; when Good News will search in vain for appropriate eloquence, leaving no one to gainsay *the death of God* the world lives by. Within the Church the sad want to leave the present and go back to former security. Prophets will continue to emerge however, since the Spirit cannot be silenced.

Institution is necessary – though it needs constant control if it is to be faithful to serving the mystery: *They were told that their messages were not for themselves, but for you. And now this Good News has been announced to you by those who preached in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven* – 1Pet.1.12. Power not money is the source of corruption, yet the Church needs institution as the body needs skeleton. An invertebrate Church is a corpse.

Like its spire, the Church points away from itself – if it does not point it will disappoint, forcing people to seek other places to support their worship. Self-preservation is ever the temptation – what Jesus warned about salt losing its savour. The Spirit remains and will rekindle. Church history is of decline that does not become extinction. Note how after the demise of Marxism in Russia Orthodox worship instantly blossomed. The Spirit finds eloquence through ordinary people like Catherine of Sienna to rebuke the Pope, Francis of Assisi reproving the glamour of prelates. Institution, though powerful, cannot suffocate prophecy.

The Church is Sacrament – a sign that achieves what it signifies. A handshake is a sign, but much more than one hand grasping another. It has value conveying a reality. There are ways and means to get round a contract,

but not a handshake. Love doesn't need language, it needs signs and symbols that achieve what they symbolise. Jesus did not point to himself, he saw himself as Sacrament of Abba: *whoever sees me sees the Father*.

The Church is not for the Church but for the world. The world has every right to be the world, to seek to better itself by its efforts. But it is badly wounded, not yet what it should be. Wars and terror abound, suggesting we have lost the plot, trapped within a vicious cycle of war and fragile peace. This is why Jesus says: *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world* – Jn.16.33. Where is the evidence for this?

Silly to suggest Church-goers are *better* people. Augustine reminded us: *God has many people the Church doesn't have, and the Church has many people God doesn't have*. Baptism can end in barren living. The Church is certainly not anti-world, it is meant to be what the world could be. The world is restless in its search for peace and cannot find it. If the Church is to serve the world it must embrace constant reform, to overcome the frequent temptation of self-preservation. It is the instrument, not the music.

Authority in the Church is real, but derived authority. It must see authority as Jesus sees it – a means for serving freedom. A religion of fear is false and unattractive, a counter-sign. Humankind needs freedom as much as it needs food. The strongest argument against the Church is its history. Few question its ideals, many query its performance. Every one of us is aware of falling short – many say *Jesus is Lord*, but where is the heart? *These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me* – Mt.15.8. Truth belongs only in the heart.

Left to myself I don't know who I am, where I'm from or where I am going. Note how Jesus speaks of his authority: *I know where I come from and I know where I am going* – Jn.8.14. When the Church strives to embrace this it becomes light and life. But so often it is frustrated by a fixation on sin. The Church is to be the evidence that God is present, desires to be present and will never leave. This why the Church must celebrate not just preach. It celebrates a death – Calvary shows the malevolence of death, it kills God! Sin has its finest hour on Calvary.

We have little problem believing in Calvary – it is still going on all around us. It is Resurrection that changes everything when the supremacy of good is recognised. So – how do we celebrate? The classic symbol is a shared meal. It affirms needs – need for food and need for affection. Invited for supper, I may not be in need of food, but short on friendship. At a meal the shy become articulate, the cynic mellows and the lonely experience being wanted.

Bread and wine are more than common food – they are effective signs of Jesus giving more than food; through the genius of Sacrament he gave himself – life and more life. The bill for the meal was death, death freely accepted. It is in sacrifice, large or small, that love finds eloquence. Love without sacrifice lacks stamina. It is the sacrifice we celebrate, it sets free anyone who acknowledges their need – need for a love big enough to overcome death.

The Church's priority is not social but worship – worthship – as Jesus is Sacrament of Abba, the Church is Sacrament of Jesus. Other works and outreach are good and necessary, but secondary. Only the Church proclaims the presence of God in Word and Sacrament; not its own word – the given [Gospel] word. *The Gospel of the Lord!*

Mass begins right where we are – off centre, at odds with ourselves, so the chance to say *Lord have mercy* is most welcome. Through proclamation the readings make Christ present, always a challenge as our thoughts

are not God's thoughts; the homily helps us focus; and we offer ourselves through bread and wine, moving towards communion and a *willingness* to welcome the Lord [not worthiness], and to strive to become what we receive. First, the Church must seek to become one. As sinners we are dismembered, and through the Eucharist we become re-membered [*do this in memory of me*]. Having opted to be re-membered we are sent in peace to our world.

To confess belief in God is not difficult – to confess *God believes in me* is not so easy. There is an amount of counter witness, there is sin but the Church is for sinners. A Church for saints is pointless. It is fashionable to say religion is caught not taught – not true! Teaching is necessary to communicate revealed truths. Truth is not caught through imagination unaided. Left to ourselves we fashion God in our own image – a God who blames, and demands revenge.

A Creed is needed, emotion is not sufficient; we need facts cased in propositions – which never fully articulate the facts. Yet the proposition is needed as a pointer to Truth. *I believe in God* is a proposition, which says more than it seems to say – it is really saying *I believe in God who believes in me!* This calls for humility for the mind unaided cannot fathom the depths of reality – I can't live on what I know. Knowledge on its own leaves me living in the red. Einstein reputedly said *Science tells us nothing important!*

Truths are received, and it is not the mind that receives them, but mind, heart and hand. *I believe in God* is not an intellectual nod, but total submission that has nothing of me in it to spoil it – it is pure gift which we diminish by interpreting. Our mind is enlightened from beyond us, our heart moved by this to energise our hand – don't spoil it by interpreting it. To live by this gift requires faith not just understanding – and faith is given, not taught.

This is why the Church is to be attractive – there is only one source of enduring attraction that God loves me just as I am. This is way beyond the reach of knowledge to the threshold of mystery – why me when there is so much else seemingly more wonderful? This requires dying to self first and last. This why we enter the Church through dying – drowning in Baptism to be raised from the same font by the Holy Spirit. I need help to live this, community, Church.

This is not palatable for those who prefer a one-to-one with God with no go-between – a kind of instinct to be with God but without our neighbour. Babel is an example – *If you go off alone into the desert, whose feet will you wash?* - S Gregory. John is blunt: *whoever says he loves God and despises his neighbour is a liar*. I could well be unaware of my lie – which is why I need the community called Church to accuse me! Jesus was no recluse and didn't live in a cloister.

Everyone was invited to the meal, many declined. Such an invitation demands willingness to share – which is what Catholic means, it doesn't belong to the like-minded. Faith is the only requisite; for faith blossoms into outreaching love and is ever impartial. There is only the one reality: *I was hungry and you fed me*. Jesus is not a holy picture but really present in good honest folk who are always willing to help. He came into our world needing love and care – a helpless baby – and has never forgotten what he received and what we need!

However, charitable works are not the primary concern of the Church – the first concern is *liturgy*. Our understanding of liturgy has been neutered by seeing it as performance – do what is printed in red and say what is printed in black! Liturgy is the reminder that we must first receive before we can give [not the other way round] we must commune before we communicate – be with God so that God becomes the focus of our consciousness.

Daily pressure has us seek salvation elsewhere, to worship at the shrine of money. As the first sin was idolatry, being constantly busy is its modern equivalent, and earnings are its sacrament. The purpose of authentic liturgy is not to get things right but to be freed from such idolatry. Weekly, six days' work or no work weigh heavily upon us, causing faith to falter and lose its spark. *Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened* is no idle invitation. Which is why the Offertory precedes Communion – offer myself to become unburdened.

If this is going to happen liturgy must be alive – relaying the fire and energy of forgiveness from God. Truth speaks through beauty, through appropriate use of word and song. As liturgy is the primary sign of Christ's real presence among us, it must have *feel* – otherwise we are simply attending a performance for the self-satisfying. People come for bread and we offer stones. Worship in Spirit and in Truth is always primary – the holy has a fascinating authority over the mind and emotions – the desire for goodness is endemic.

We can't define holiness [God is 3 times holy] but it can be recognised; first as a presence bringing more than a human attribute alone. Holy is equal to circumstance, no matter how hostile, and to pain no matter how harrowing and even to death – holy is head, heart and hand in harmony, with no semblance of any dislocation. We tend to be over-anxious, accepting anxiety like we put up with the flu.

Jesus' counsel – *be not anxious* – often seems like a pipe dream, well-meant but not possible. Anxiety is a kind of precondition for sin. Were we not anxious we would not be envious. Anxiety promotes mistrust – God is either not interested or can't help. Such indifference is corrosive. By contrast Jesus reveals Abba's care – and the Church is meant to be the Sacrament of Christ. If all the Church actually does is warn or condemn, it betrays its mission; which is to save – as Jesus said *I am here to save not to condemn* – Jn.3.17. *Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you* – this has to be told in genuine language to the heart in need.

When we come to God we need company – one of the most consoling reminders an abused victim can be told is: *you are not alone, there are many like you*. The viciousness of sin is its isolation, its partial living. To be is to belong – the Church is not so much for those who believe in God, but those who believe God believes in them. Without the Incarnation such audacity would be impossible.

*Efficiency* is far from being the primary virtue custom holds it to be. Where we find people seeking to be together to help and console each other, there is the Church; and much more than efficiency is needed if it is to be the effective Sacrament of this, bringing peace, life and the love of God to any wishing to receive. But where the emphasis is on law and observance the Spirit is effectively silenced by the plethora of reports and resolutions.

Of course there has to be law and regulation – but they *have to be* servants of life, not its masters. S Paul has much to say about this. The law has value but it cannot save: *But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter* – Rom.7.6. *It is the Spirit that gives life* – 2Cor.3.6. The administrator works for order, the prophet for freedom – both in harmony make the prose and poetry of the Church.

Prophets are rare and they disturb – being deeply rooted in Revelation they are unafraid to speak what is true in the eyes of God, and so is usually excluded and even killed. Jesus lamented that the Prophets went unheard by and large. This is broken humanness to reject in favour of the status quo – whereas living by faith has no status quo [faith is alive and active never *the same*]! The rich and powerful turned service into seeking praise – *they already have their reward*.

Ordinary folk who listened to Jesus soon realised they were not hearing a party political broadcast – they said *he speaks with authority*, truth in life as well as in words. Like its parent love, truth sets free, calms and soothes

and removes anxiety. The Church always has prophets, even though they are often unwanted – like Newman and Chardin, both were seeped in Scripture yet found little or no support from so-called authority. The irony – it was Newman’s insights that helped form the basis for Vatican II!

Freedom is how the heart experiences truth – *call no one Father save only Abba* – Mt.23.9. Atheistic regimes are seldom benign. Jesus was obedient yet totally free; obedience of a son in love with the Father. It is this *sonship* [not a gender issue] to which all are called, not to servitude. Many fear freedom because it brings responsibilities – the more unafraid the Church becomes the fewer the rules and the rhetoric.

### **Communion of saints**

*Saint* is a word many are not comfortable with – it seems to suggest something out of our reach. We admire such people, yet at arm’s length. John Vianney, as a young man lived only on potatoes, later in life he said *only a fool would do that!* Holiness is not super-human but what it means to be a fully alive human being. Its original meaning was *baptised*, Paul addresses his converts as saints, yet was also critical of their shortcomings. *It is in saints that Grace conquers nature* – Newman.

Baptism provides an image of the communion of saints. Child, parents and God-parents a community in miniature. A child is naturalised into this community through birth, a loving, natural family of parents and siblings. This natural family will diminish and die, there will be bereavement and loneliness, but the need for good company remains and becomes more acute. Life always seeks more life, not less.

The calling of the baptised is to belong – it does not end at the font, which is where it begins. Baptism is not a fulfilment, it is a promise – a seed that needs care and nourishment. No one can predict what will become of this child – whether it will reach healthy fulfilment or not. So much depends on the people here at the font, standing shyly but wanting to be there. Their presence testifies to their willingness to help, aid and protect this young emerging life. They represent the wider community [Church] that does not diminish and die, and will always be there.

Parents and God-parents also need support – this is the purpose of the Eucharist, which makes all this possible. Baptism is not for baptism, it is for Eucharist – when real communion is experienced as real presence. We cannot create community no matter how willing and gregarious we may be. We do not make of ourselves one body by visiting and talking to each other. We need to stand side-by-side, looking in the same direction, being taken into the one body, so as to become gradually what we are now experiencing – body-given, blood poured out – in loving service.

Unity is not native to us, like discord! Unity is God and can only be received: *my peace I leave with you, a peace the world cannot give* – Jn.14.27. We do not receive communion for personal satisfaction, we receive in order to give. We receive the body of Christ to build the body of humankind – the peace the world aches for. This world is shot through with envy – the only peace it knows is the temporary absence of war.

When *the world* first met Christians their reaction – *see how they love one another!* This is a timely reminder that God has no favourites, everyone is a first-born. We say *Lord I’m not worthy* – a simple fact. But God is not asking us to be worthy, simply to be willing to enjoy. Only God is worthy, but we are born with an attraction to worthiness – which we interpret as we will, sometimes for ill rather than for good, when we are obsessed with power and control.

Loneliness is littleness, living in the attic of this spacious house called me. We need to belong to something bigger than ourselves – it is this, for example, that inspires astronomers to reach for the skies, and explorers brave arctic ice – and most of us seek the affection of family and friends and enjoy *going home*.

Wholeness [holiness] is never a condition of Church membership – which is why genuinely holy people are totally unaware of being whole. There is a wholesome fear as well as a terrifying fear – the silence when we see the vastness of ocean, or gaze into the sky and see the myriads of stars. It is a fear that attracts and humbles. If this is so in all aspects of creation, what must the Creator be like? And yet we see God in ordinary human clay – and see the awesome God as Abba, as he desires.

What makes the communion of saints is not club membership, it is the bringing together by God through the giving of the one Spirit – who makes of many one - *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit* – 1Cor.12.13 which is why we baptise in 3 names; such is the one God. Canonisation is for the few, communion for the many – ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well. Every saint has a past, every sinner a future.

### **Forgiveness of sin**

Forgiveness is the life-blood of faith – and don't think for a moment that we understand or knowingly believe it; yet all it takes is utter conviction that God loves me exactly as I am – without conditions. It is a fire that doesn't go out – the burning bush ablaze but never consumed. Some speak casually of sin as if it is no more than grime and dirt. We recognise obvious sins like lying and murder – these are really effects of sin; sin lies deep down inside. We can neither diagnose it nor remove it, so it plagues us.

I've never met anyone who deliberately set out to be envious, yet we are tormented and tempted so much by it – when we are passed-over in favour of another – we resent, and our words reflect it. This is sin – Adam envied God and was consumed by a passion to be as God is. It is worth remembering that goodness causes much more envy than evil. Sin is refusing to accept Jesus Christ as the norm of goodness – they chose Barabbas! Sin is separation, preceded by anxiety.

I am anxious because I am not together, I am not one with where I come from and where I am going. My being is given – fact; but not my well-being. Worry debilitates, wastes experiences that could be enjoyed. Whatever I'm doing I worry I should be doing something else. At play I feel I should be working; making merry when I feel I should be making money. I am 2 people who don't get on – that is my sin.

My origin and destiny is God – do I experience this like Adam, as envy? He invented an origin that didn't need God, where he will make all the decisions, no need for God – the rest is history. His dislocation from his origin, he doesn't know who he is or what he's for. Anxiety takes over with envy and guilt not far behind. Sin is much more than what I do or say – these are symptoms of the virus, which is my unfreedom and my inability to do anything about it.

Jesus reveals in himself that sin is not necessary – like death. He is fully alive, yet without sin. Sin is not being human – *I'm only human* – but being sub-human. Jesus is living evidence that God and humankind belong together – no separation, so no anxiety. Adam's sin is not determinative for history – it is not present in the historical Jesus. Jesus reveals that our origin is never sin, but grace and love.

In human terms forgiveness is not logical. Logic calls for reprisal and retaliation, the classic solution to our hurting – *an eye for an eye!* Jesus is not just speaking a new language – he is overturning the accepted code of behaviour, what else is *love your enemy, do good to those who hurt you?* We offend God, who never retaliates; Christ has come to bring forgiveness for all without exception. Not turning a blind eye like a suspended sentence. Forgiveness is unconditional, restores self-worth, gives us back our future, above all takes away fear – *do not be afraid, it's only me and I love you.*

As the norm is you get what you pay for – it was no easy task revealing the forgiving God [no such thing as a free lunch]. The Eucharist puts paid to that. This is the market currency which we inevitably apply to God – and so we have human sacrifice and slaughter to appease an angry God. We are at odds with God and the rest of Creation; and we can do nothing about it. We can't barter with God, though we try!

Honest sinners were not a problem for Jesus, his words with them were always tender and compassionate. It was the upright, the self-righteous who not only opposed him, but hunted him down and killed him. *I don't need forgiveness; I've done nothing wrong!* His mission in words: *your sins are forgiven – your faith makes you whole*. This tells us that the opposite of sin is not moral excellence, but living faith. Conscious virtue has me believe I am my own saviour. Time and again we see this kind of holiness conflicting with authentic humanity. Wholeness means fully human, and shows as beauty, truth and honesty – the language of goodness.

Where there is forgiveness goodness is ever present – the homecoming of the Prodigal. This has found its way into every culture and language [goodness always spreads itself] as something attractive, and yet it is not a moral tale; which are rooted in our kind of justice – they inevitably end in the good winning and the bad losing! Honest living is not like that – despite films, books, theatre and opera! Innocence suffers and evil succeeds, with rampant unfairness.

We've all met the Prodigal – the rebellious teenager for whom home and school are too restricting, parents and teachers who don't understand! The father of the prodigal lets him go – he has to learn the hard way. He has money, so he has friends – until the money runs out. Only a tiny thread remains – he hasn't completely forgotten his dad. His return is definitely not affection based – he needs food and a roof, he is prepared to eat humble pie – sheer necessity, but not the best of motives.

It doesn't happen as planned. Parables hit home when they go wrong – when what happens shouldn't be happening. He never gets to finish his confession – his dad welcomes him like royalty. Forgiveness is always extravagant – a ring, a new suit and a fatted calf! His life is remade around the table – good company, real communion and the father remakes his son.

What about the empty chair? The older brother is angry – and in a sense has a point [if we judge by normal justice]. He wants justice and punishment first. He's done his duty, kept the rules – yet received nothing! His father listens and accepts what is said, but does not retract what he has done. Forgiveness is the only true agent for restoration; whereas our kind of justice sees this as weakness. Forgiveness is God's duty-free!

We do sympathise with the older brother; but it shows how the sins of the just are life's real impediment – the Church-goer with the acid tongue, and an unforgiving heart. A good son, but not a brother! God as Abba can only be real when sons and daughters can own him as father and each other as siblings. This young man, the older brother, is jealous of love – forgiveness is a no-no.

This is why the Gospel is like crazy paving. Its stories don't fit moral categories. Simon the Pharisee is outraged at the way Jesus welcomes Mary – only to be told *she is forgiven because she loves much* – this is too much for our moral codes. Peter also had a problem, which shows when he asks *how many times must I forgive?* Like Judas, Peter could not forgive himself for what he had done – but that glance from Jesus changed everything – he could not forgive himself but he could be forgiven! Indeed, for Judas the wages of sin was death!

Listen to Portia's words in the *Merchant of Venice* – *therefore Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this: that in the course of justice none of us would see salvation.*



## Resurrection of the body

Somebody once wrote: *there is another man inside me, who is very angry with me* – Sir Thomas Browne [Scientist – C17]. We all recognise the demon of disquiet – civil war within; in which we wrongly name the combatants body and soul. Body and soul are not two distinct entities – every person is *one*, single animated body. Jewish tradition held on to this; sadly, the Greeks opted for a dualism, with body in the inferior role.

When Jesus wanted to express his real presence he said *this is my body* – the totality of his person. We even own this sub-consciously when we speak of *somebody, nobody...* There is conflict within us but the combatants are not body and soul but spirit and spirit! Resurrection of the body means total resurrection; but not *from* the body! In taking flesh in Jesus God is not slumming it. It takes one as big as God to *realise* [make real] human's full potential – able to make God really present.

This is why we feel boxed-in – that we are capable of more than this [which is why the Letter to the Hebrews says: *with us in mind God promised something more*] we are living within limits. Everybody has one talent [at least] – *personality!* The energy for this the Spirit, the ignition. But it needs a way to express itself – the body provides the vocabulary. God is pure Spirit – no one has seen God. Jesus is his incarnate Word, his visibility – not a visual aid. The total revealing of God, nothing missing, yet within the limits of *human*. Jesus admired birds from within his human limits. He tells us the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Which means our reach is greater than our grasp?

We are baptised not to save our souls but ourselves; not to become angelic, but *other Christs*. Jesus is not just life, but life and more life [resurrection]. *Life and more life belong together*, like thirst and water. He speaks of himself as *living water*. He doesn't see the body as second class – he is always eager to heal; and in the Eucharist gives himself totally as bread of life – it is Christ-risen we receive.

Even in our agnostic world spirit will not be denied – manifest in the world of art, music and creative imagination. The Cathedral locates the Spirit in space, Sunday presents it in time. The artist designing stained glass is not a technician – he/she is enabling the Spirit to shine through. There is no beauty without truth – the agnostic admires architecture. There is a world far removed from the stock-market, and the super-stores. The world issuing from human creativity has a nobility and maybe a half-remembered sanctity [I don't know why I came here, but I am glad I did].

Faith converges on resurrection – which is diminished if it is seen as rejecting the body – an anaemic spirituality, short on fun and suspicious of laughter. It mutilates creation - dishonouring the Creator. The body *is* creation. The artist seeks by hand, head and heart to convey something of the mystery that is human; such people bolster faith, showing how being human is made for transformation. The Resurrection shows that such hope is not confounded: born mortal precisely for immortality.

The saint is the artist of living with the resurrection as inspiration. Like any life project it calls for training, and in no way denies the potential excellence of the body. The body needs to know it is the chosen abode of the Spirit – if over-indulged it falters and dies, leaving no room for the Spirit. Resurrection is of the whole person. There is a death instinct in us and when the pain of things gets too much we desire to end it all. This is to disbelieve, to deny our God-given destiny, to live without hope – simply exist.

Will life result in something or nothing? Will I know resurrection or simply disappear? For people of faith *personality* reaches fulfilment through resurrection; which is not liberation from the body but its full potential, able to enjoy the real presence of God. It is pernicious dualism that vitiates this – soul is good, body is not! No wonder this erupted in opposition to the colours and contrasts of creation, to diversity as crucial for unity, instead of enjoying life's good things.

## **Eternal life**

*Enjoy yourself – you will be a long-time dead!* This is the sad creed of many. Life means coping with death as its extinguisher. We can't prove there is an after-life – or that there isn't! Philosophy has contrived ingenious arguments; while they might persuade, they will never convince. The most persuasive argument comes from the conviction that life is for more not less love and happiness; that good leads to more good. We are much more than a sum of chemical compounds.

There is a spark that will not be extinguished, an energy stronger than death. GKC said he would rather live in agony than not live. We are in love with life – the greatest dread is annihilation. The Jews had a tenuous hold on after-life settling for *Sheol* a place of lifelessness, without pain, pleasure or purpose. Christianity is bold in its belief in brim-full after-life. Life is consistently present in Revelation: *I have come that you may have life in abundance*. Made in the image of God we have an instinct for this.

To speak of *everlasting life* can be misleading – suggesting something going-on-and-on [more like hell than heaven]. *Eternal life* is preferable, it dispenses with any notion of *too much time*, because it is to do with quality not quantity. Not on-and-on, but deeper and deeper. S John tells us that we know what we are, but not what we shall be. Most presentations of heaven tend to be somewhat infantile. As human beings, above all else we want to enjoy loving and being loved [Trinity], but love cannot be imaged. The love we are experiencing is under constant threat, even though it lifts us beyond whatever words could do – it can make us do even dangerous things like *lay down life for another!*

## **Heaven**

The word often brings a smile, but it won't go away! It is in every ballad about love and joy. Words like rapture, bliss and ecstasy really can't be experienced in words alone, where they only stammer to describe. Prose is unable and even poetry is limited. Every religion has its heaven – the free place of plenty. Perhaps we can get closer in understanding heaven if we try looking at hell – war is hell, which makes heaven peace and harmony.

C18 France had enough of the corrupt Bourbons and sought heaven through revolution, with Madame Guillotine the blade of salvation – trying to make heaven by making hell. There was blood, war, cruelty and tyranny – but no heaven. We are tempted by promises – even to believing electioneering propaganda. Jesus does not see heaven as rearranging the furniture – such ways are merely cosmetic side-shows. The change needed is a change of heart the need to address more than the externals. Lenin, on his death-bed, spoke of the revolution as well-intentioned, but resulted in injustice, cruelty and murder; *when all that was needed was ten men like Francis of Assisi*.

Jesus had rebels and zealots among his followers – wanting to make him king. They saw him as a Jewish Caesar. His kingdom has its throne in every heart – in our divided hearts. Wars and conflicts are merely conflicts of the heart magnified into class against class, race against race. Jesus says *I am life!* Life is not to be owned but to be received and given. His kingdom is born through dying when the victims precede the victors. It is a kingdom without courtiers, no police or army – just the heart.

Many said and still say this is foolishness in the extreme – a pipe dream. In human terms his life was a failure, ending in death leaving his kingdom still-born. Yet the kingdom remains with us, as yet half-realised, but very much here. To recognise Jesus risen is to have a foot in the door; often called *fools for Christ's sake*. Paul, a fanatical Pharisee, deeply religious now sees the kingdom that is neither Jewish nor Gentile, neither male nor female, slave or free. It is universal and not made by human hands. Its foundation stone is Jesus-risen: *to live is Christ, to die is gain* – Phil.1.21.

This dying starts in Baptism, where we find a new centre of gravity. The enemy is the ego wanting always to be first – we are told *the first will be last in the kingdom* where humility flourishes *humus* the good soil producing a harvest of 100-fold. Humility is not natural to us seeing all life being of God, holy in its origin. Humility is realism – seeing all creation as of the Creator – this world is God’s world, with life freely given.

We will never lose being made in the image of God – but we have lost our *likeness* to God through the way we inhabit the world, with evidence all too visible. We claim to know what life is and what it is for and set out in pursuit of its fullness. This is what pride is; refusing to see what life is, where it is from and why. Jesus came with the good news *I know where I am from and where I am going* – Jn.8, and he has come to gift this to anyone wishing to receive it. Humility is simply being at home with this.

Eternal life begins here. There can be no after-life without a before-life. God sends no one to hell – we are more than proficient in doing that for ourselves. There is no coercive power in God whatsoever. Both heaven and hell carry the same description: how we will experience love for ever. If I insist on living with everything is for me and about me, living in a loving atmosphere [like the spoiled child in a loving family] will make me constantly suspicious, envious and jealous – hell. There is a world of difference between *special needs* and *special wants*!

The Mass of Requiem reflects on two themes – light and rest. So much of the pain in living is through darkness, is the inability to understand ourselves and our experiences. Such suffering seems wasteful, with faith faltering and hope diminishing. We need light that darkness can never overcome, a vision not available this side of death, since it is the fruit of death lived as a prelude to life. Then there is rest – or refreshment – never is it inertia – who would want a static heaven?

There will be activity without tension, life without pressure or fatigue. Our prayer at the Requiem is for the loved one to enjoy fully what is still partially ours who remain – *eternal rest... let perpetual light...* Heaven is often presented as a place – which is fine if that means *home* – home, where we live and are cherished and wanted. We all have the homing instinct – where there is freedom and welcome, fun and enjoyment and relaxation.

By contrast: hell is self-imposed isolation [*God cannot isolate, but we can*] unending. To live is to belong, God is pure relationship – and total self-giving. It is where loneliness is shed and aloneness can be gift.