

God, the Man [*Jesus*] of his Word [revised]

Chapter One

God never began to love me...

*"Once justified on the grounds of faith, let us enjoy peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, as it was through him we have obtained access, through faith in that grace in which we stand... We are confident even our afflictions give rise to endurance, and endurance gives proof of our faith, and a proved faith gives ground for hope" –
Rom. 5.1-4.*

"The appointed time has come, the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good News" – Mk. 1.15. Am I a believer? How would I know? Would you know me as a believer were you to live with me? This is ever the key question. Abraham, *our Father in Faith*, wasn't able to recognise God's voice, as he had never heard of the One God, surrounded as he was by believers in a plethora of gods. There was nothing familiar to him about this challenge.

This is the crucial issue for living faith, since it constitutes us *familiar* in the authentic sense of the word – *one of the family* - included in the intimacy that is the one God in three Persons. To believe is to move gently, amazingly yet surely towards confessing, not so much that I believe in God, but God believes in me!

Where does this come from? First, even in everyday living, we believe far more than we understand. This is readily verified from our intimacies, where we frequently find ourselves inarticulate within the depth of such feelings – lost for words. This is where faith really resides – where I begin to *experience* what value feels like, and the almost instinctive need to search for the *something more* that the Letter to the Hebrews assures us God has in mind for us.

Not getting something more, but *desiring something more*, this is nothing other in reality than our thirst for the infinite expressing itself within what is limited and finite. We distinguish between natural faith - when we don't actually know ourselves, but we can get the information [intricacies of science e.g.]; and supernatural faith - where the only way is Revelation [One God in Three Persons].

In a very real sense the true believer, the person of faith, gradually becomes what is believed, since the effect of faith is *to deepen our awareness of God-with-us just as we are*, in whom *we exist and move and have our being* – Acts.17.28. It is to realise that God loves me; *always has* and always will; and loves me exactly as I am – no preconditions, no *pre-nuptial* agreements. How I am, how I respond, ignore or neglect this truth in no way removes me from God's love. But what does *always has* mean? There obviously was a time when I didn't exist, before I was conceived in the womb. Yet in God there is no beginning and no ending, no movement from one moment to another. God simply *is* – unchangingly always new. I can never *get used to* God. So, who was God loving before I was born?

God never began to love me – I am eternally loved in the heart of God; and I am gifted with life so that in living this life in the manner in which it is given, I can gradually discover the face I had before I was born. The state of Original Sin has seen to it that I have not lived my life *in the manner in which it is given!* I need to be set free from this, redeemed, and saved. In the Word that created me, made flesh in Jesus Christ, I am made able to live my humanity differently. As Scripture assures me, and so *know God and Jesus whom God has sent.*

God is nothing else but love and love only creates what is lovely, but God created me, therefore I am lovely! Do I, can I believe this without any hesitation? Surely to say that *I am God's gift to creation* – is outrageous arrogance? Yet this is true. In as much as I am able to be myself as God intended, I bring something of God to creation that has not been seen before, nor ever can be again.

Not surprisingly we find this somewhat unreal! Just as God did not create a perfect world [which we spoiled and God had *to get a man in*] but a world able to become perfect by the way it is lived-in, an evolutionary world; so too I have not inhabited myself, my capacity for loveliness, worthily; making it increasingly difficult for others to be the loveliness they could be, when I am around. What is core here is that the *Christic* reality is not just that God loves me, or simply that I am a sinner in need of God, but that I am a forgiven sinner. God is staking a claim on me, inviting me – maybe even challenging me – to allow me to experience God as Abba, and myself as beloved of Abba, through the free gift of the fully alive intimacy of God, the Holy Spirit.

This Holy Spirit was freely given to us in Baptism; and we have duly said thank-you for the gift in so many ways – through prayer, repentance and worship... But have we ever dared to open this present? Have we, with all the good intent we can muster, tried to do good, to be good, to be faithful... yet is it true – however and sadly *I did it my way!*

Recall the meeting between Jesus and Peter, when he tells Peter that he is going to suffer, to be condemned and to die; and Peter's reaction – *God forbid, this must not happen*. To which Jesus counters with the seemingly harsh *Get behind me, Satan!* No doubt Jesus recalled the last time he heard this, during his temptations in the desert, when Satan also promised him *a Kingdom without suffering!*

To be a disciple is to follow, and Peter had stepped-out from following Jesus to pursue his own thinking. Jesus is *inviting* him to step back in line, even though, at present it makes no sense, to take on board God's thinking and not our own. No doubt Peter too could recall a former experience when Jesus spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, when many walked away in disgust; and Jesus asked him – are you going too? No explanations, no saying they have misunderstood – simply, are you going too?

It is clear from Peter's response that he had opened that present of the Holy Spirit, when he says in effect – I haven't a clue what you are talking about, *but if you say so, it is enough!* Peter is a man of faith. This is a salutary warning to anyone exercising authority – if it is going to be in any way life-enhancing, it needs to be in line – almost as if we let God do the thinking and God lets us do the believing.

Creation is of God. How it actually came about has been and will be food for scientific speculation – the big bang etc. It is right and proper for Science to seek and search in this regard. However, imagine a gathering of scientists engaged in such a project – someone arrives and presents them with a cake for their coffee break. Probably most of them could analyse and work out what is in the make-up of this cake. But none of them can ever know *why* it was made, without being told by the donor. They need revelation. So too with creation, Science may well discover *what* happened, it will always need to be told *why*, will always need Revelation.

Since we do have Revelation, we have been told *why*; and in remembering that all is from God, then nothing can ever be called profane. There is nothing in creation that needs to be made holy, but all of creation individually and collectively [including ourselves] deserves the respect due to such beginnings. Creation is respected and enabled to worship God precisely by the way it is lived-in.

God did not simply *inform* us about the *why* of creation – but the very purpose of Creation, the *why*, its complete meaning, is given to us in the Word made flesh – the Incarnation. Prior to Incarnation we knew God,

only as if from the outside. The Old Testament is the gradual unfolding of Revelation, where God's presence was felt among his chosen, in a flame by night, a lone cloud in a cloudless sky, by day; a bush ablaze without being consumed... but yet, as it were from the outside. In and through the Incarnation, we now know God from the inside – God is totally with us in Jesus Christ – we also are invited to become *familiars* of God, through being made able to know God as Abba and ourselves as beloved of Abba; and this through the freely given gift of God's own love-life, the Holy Spirit.

God is nothing other than total love, and for love to be real there has to be not 1, not 2 but 3 realities. There is the Lover, there is the Beloved, there is the Mutuality of this giving, receiving and responding – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are made in God's image, and we all carry crucial evidence of this. All of us, individually, experience the need to love, to be loved, to enjoy the environment in which this flourishes.

We are aware of this with certainty – not scientific certainty, the fruit of facts pondered in the light of historical research - we know it because *we have been made aware of it* – it is gifted to us through God's self-revealing offered to us so that we can receive, accept and become what we have received – it is more assured than certainty, because it is believed.

We all have a kind of hierarchy of values for everyday living. Some things carry more importance for us than others, some are important enough for us not to want to compromise – it is all or nothing. When we take this hierarchy seriously, seeing integrity as crucial, the consequences include a sense of purpose about life, something which, in Jesus, allowed him to say "*I know where I come from and I know where I am going*" – John 8.14 and showing us how this is the foundation of personal authority. He clearly had no power, but spoke *with authority* - Mt.7.29 and was universally attractive, someone, at last, who knows what life is all about.

The ignoring of this hierarchy, or having it ignored in us by those who wield power, is disturbing to the point of anger; showing how in attacking my values [my faith] I am being attacked. Perhaps even resulting in the anguished – *I'm worth more than this* – which is truly said.

Abraham had his values, personal convictions, letting him feel the compelling pull of integrity. He wasn't confronted face-to-face by God demanding a change in his life. It was something much more mundane and even ordinary that intruded on his priorities, a family crisis, and lack of available grassland for their increasing flocks. This is the way the Spirit works, prompting ordinary folk to do ordinary things, extraordinarily well: "*If you can't be trusted with little things, how can you be trusted with greater*" – Lk.19.26. Abraham was challenged by his own integrity – somebody has to do something – *I am somebody!* This is how he becomes known as our *father in faith*, when freedom blossoms through responsible living.

We are in our world through networks of relationships which we are constantly shaping and re-shaping in our pursuit of the *good life*, one with meaning, purpose and enjoyment. This happens through the ways we organise our choosing. Some things are patently more important to us than others – but how did I get this sense of priority? Certainly family environment, enculturation, education, socialisation all have a part in this, but we must not overlook that religious sense that enables us to look beyond our horizons and to stretch beyond our reach, our likeness to God making itself felt as thirst for the unlimited.

Listen to the Gospel and hear Jesus tell you that this is why he came – "*I have come that you may enjoy life in abundance*" – Jn.10.10. In our pursuit of value living, quality living, we must quickly learn the difference between *value* and *valuables*. Our valuables are outside us, sought after to make life more secure and enjoyable, those things I call *mine* – like power, wealth, status, privilege. Indeed, there can be value in such

things, but only in so far as they render my claim to serve more credible, which is the root and branch of human living – *I have come to serve, not to be served.* – Mt.20.28.

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he was not only in his proper place, but in the place he desired to be. So, the first movement we make in faith is to let God be God – to let God wash our feet, and in this way to enable us to become what we are receiving, to wash each other's feet – to live in service.

Value is essentially personal. It is the way we experience self in pursuit of integrity, facing reality exactly as it is and not as we would prefer it to be. When we are in those serious moments of life – a birth, a death... our valuing takes little or no account of our valuables. What is the feeling in the presence of a loved-one dying; aware that the greatest gift we have to give, our love, is seemingly impotent, just isn't big enough to save – as we see it? It is then most of all we too cry out in anguish, in anger... *"My God why?"* Peter and Judas both betrayed Jesus, they had disowned the love of their lives; Judas, unable to forgive himself, destroyed himself. Peter, no doubt prompted by Grace, could not forgive himself either, but *allowed himself to be forgiven!*

For a believer, forgiveness is crucial, so much so, that it is virtually synonymous with faith in Jesus. But what have we done to our understanding of forgiveness? Now it seems to imply that forgiveness means having no antipathetic feelings towards the sinner. This is far from the truth. Forgiveness belongs solely within the one sinned against. To demand that we *must* forgive runs the risk of adding injustice to injustice. Many sinned-against folk do not want to forgive, and to be told they *have to* if they want to be Christian is to re-victimise.

The wonder of forgiveness is that it is essentially gift. I cannot forgive. Only God forgives, and it is in allowing myself to be forgiven – like Peter – that I can grow gradually into what I am receiving and become a forgiver in turn – again, like Peter! Forgiveness means recognising that for whatever reason it is no longer true that I have ill-will towards the sinner. Some people even resent this transformation, yet, hand on heart, they cannot say they wish the person ill – the same one they wanted previously to see damned to hell. They have no desire to meet, even less to shake hands, yet for some reason all ill-will has gone. Here lies the wonder of the gift of forgiveness, the freedom it brings! I am no longer in thrall to the anger and vengeful feelings that once enchained me whenever the sin against me came to mind.

It isn't possible to come close to the fire without feeling its warmth. I cannot welcome God's love for me through accepting God's forgiveness myself, without feeling the warmth of being loved, and even becoming lovely. Sin has no more power over me, and when this permeates to my depth, I want simply to set others free in the same way. As far as I am concerned, the sinner no longer has power over me, though feelings remain – somehow changed, yet still real.

This is why words like *I can forgive but I can't forget*, are meaningless. If the Lord had meant us to forget why did he give us memories? What is gift, is that now I can forgive without having to forget. I am sure Jesus can never forget Good Friday – yet his words of encounter after the Resurrection, as the stranger on the shore, were not the confrontation no doubt the disciples were expecting – *where were you last Friday?* – Simply the utterance of a totally free man – *have you had breakfast?*

Jesus offers us salvation through his commitment to be our servant, and he simply asks that we allow him to be so. John assures us that to *"all who believe, he gave power to become children of God"* To know God as Abba and ourselves as the beloved of Abba.

This is one reason why Christianity is not properly described when called a religion. Religion tends to deal with things in so far as they relate to the divine; whereas Christianity is the reality of God with us, penetrating

to the very heart of human experiencing in the Word made flesh. Jesus reveals in his own person, through the quality of relationships, the reality of God-with-us, God's total commitment in love to everything created, that it has an eternal destiny, with special intimacy to be enjoyed by humankind: *"He is the yes pronounced on God's promises, every one of them. That is why it is through Jesus Christ that we say Amen"* – 2Cor.1.20.

In Jesus God is totally present to us, and his sole desire is for us to be totally present to God, to enjoy as equals [through Grace] the mutuality of intimacy proper to the Trinity. Because Jesus is truly God, truly man he is both the God who gives and the man who receives – each of these worthily, he achieves in the flesh who the Word is in the Trinity, the complete self-expression of God. Through the gift of faith, as John told us, there is much more – *"to all who believe he gives power..."* to know God as Abba, the Holy Spirit, God's own love-life. Through this giving the community of believers, the Church, is the most substantial Sacrament of this; the guaranteed institutional experience of God-with-us in this manner.

The Church became necessary when the offer Jesus brought in himself was comprehensively rejected. His declared purpose in being with us was to bring abundance of life for everyone. But he was turned down. We know only too well the lengths to which we went to silence this Word. The offer, once given, is never taken back until it achieves its purpose – Is.55.11. God does not revoke the Word. This invitation is to every one of every age, and is to be offered in the same manner as Jesus offered, the quality of real presence inviting and welcoming

The way of life isn't meant to be an obstacle course, or an endurance test. But there are obstacles – and no person or institution is called to add to them. Life is to follow the call of fascination, like those first disciples who went back to ask him *where do you live?"* – Jn.1.38. To which he responds, with the only worthwhile answer to such a question – *"come and see!"* The incident ends there: we don't know what they saw, or how long they stayed or what they asked him. What was important was *their actually moving out* to accept the invitation, at least at that moment to opt to live differently, and to do so simply at the word of another, the first step into believing that someone believed in them.

Is this a reasonable thing to do? Yes, provided we realise that such promptings towards faith – accepting the word of another – are not motivated by any external imperative, but purely from an inner urge, deeply rooted and calling-out. This is the consequence of experiencing our personal horizons as nowhere near wide enough to cope with what we are feeling. But how do I stretch beyond my reach?

Abraham was motivated by personal integrity, yet he struggled to make room for Grace which was asking him to be open to far more than he could achieve for himself. He grew into accepting God's word at its face value; he heard it, accepted it and lived it as best he could. He didn't do this [believe] because he knew God, but came to God more and more because he risked believing. He allowed himself to be attracted out of his own comfort zones, apprehensive at letting go control of his life, letting God lead. Realising how exhilarating it is to live, not so much by knowing God as being known by God!

In Jesus is revealed to us that we are special, loved uniquely by God so much so that God willed us to exist so that we could know and enjoy this, together. Jesus the Word of God speaks truth truthfully. By contrast, the greatest possible lie is *not to speak untruths, but to speak the truth falsely*; to say that God and you and your well-being are a priority for me when my behaviour puts me first for me – is the greater lie. Why? Because in so doing I am inviting you into a relationship which I have no intention of honouring – I am saying I respect you, when clearly this is not so.

In contrast to Abraham we have Zachary, John the Baptist's father. Asking for proof before accepting the word; and who would suggest that he wasn't being reasonable in the light of what he was told? His wife in her advanced old age and barren – is now pregnant? Clearly, written and/or spoken words alone will never suffice for a would-be believer. The word needs to become trustworthy, something John says we can identify with [see and touch] as well as hear. The word must become flesh.

To be ready for faith, to be as open to accept the word of another as is a child, allows what God started in giving me to me in creating me to continue as my way of life. The greatest human experience is to be able to live entirely by faith – not needing proof or prior evidence – yet this also requires that what I hear [as well as what I speak] is the truth spoken truthfully; and as some would add, *and should it become necessary you may even use words!*

All this is given, is gift: notice who does the giving – *In creating me God gives me to myself; in saving me God gives God to me; in making me holy [whole] God gives me to God.* This is why faith is all to do with response – to listen, to heed, to receive, and to become what I am receiving for others. In this way I discover that God who is Father, from whom all originates and to whom all will return; who is Son in whom all that is received from the Father is celebrated and enjoyed; through that mutual love who is the Holy Spirit... God actually believes in me!

Sounds wonderful, but what did it actually feel like? Abraham had no other believers around to encourage and affirm him. He had never even heard of the one God. He had no one to turn to when the seemingly outrageous was being asked of him. He had every *right* to see his son, who had been gifted to him so that his descendants would be *as many as the grains of sand on the shore* taking him into old age as the joy of his life. Now he is being asked to sacrifice him! The conversation between father and son is enlightening. It shows the purpose behind what we now call *evangelisation*, to help another believe, no matter what the cost, and in this way find real freedom! It is to allow another, through me, to have access to the Word and not just to my version of it. We need not just the Word, but God's meaning of God's Word. The Word was made flesh – Jesus who is the Christ

When faith is present it has to contend with lots of other things. And whilst faith is not one option among many, but *the way to God*, it finds itself confronted by my own interests, my own needs, which are natural and usually good. Faith is here inviting me to trust and change [*believe and repent*] freely to walk into insecurity on my own behalf, simply because the one asking me says he has my well-being at heart!

My experiences of inadequacy are sometimes rather threatening, that overpowering sense of personal worthlessness in the face of what seems to be so many injustices. Life certainly is not fair, and I am frequently prompted to become the fleeing refugee rather than the resolute pilgrim. It is more and more evident that whilst I can do nothing to save myself, I can be tempted into accepting [believing] that in the heart of such impotence, I can be saved! The bridge spanning the divide between the two is the Cross.

The Church used to sing – *lava quod est sordidum, riga quod est aridum, sana quod est saucium...wash the soiled, water the parched, heal the bruised.* Not so that I can feel better about things, but so that I can become more alive and relish what faith makes possible. To be a believer is not so much to wish to get from A to B – from earth to heaven – as to enjoy the journey. The Spirit seeps into us, keeping pace with our slowness of desire and enthusiasm. After all, we are being asked not to undergo by-pass surgery, but to accept a heart transplant – *I will put within you a heart of flesh* - Ezek.11.19 – Solomon's believing heart [1Kings.3.12].

Human behaviour, morality, embraces who we are and not just what we do. A person comprises bodily, spiritual, reasonable and emotional experiences, immersed in hopes, dreams, fears, dislikes and plain simple prejudices. Our Gospel commitment would have us try to live today from tomorrow and not from yesterday. If I am rooted in my past, I have to cope with its considerable baggage every time serious decision-making looms. Whereas, all there is in front of me is Jesus Christ welcoming me, just as I am, and as this is uniquely true for each of us, we already belong as a community of believers, the Church.

A believer is made able to say *the reason for what I do is who I am*. Jesus shows how he is not governed by the 10 Commandments, but is, in flesh and blood terms, what it means to be *beloved of Abba!* Christian behaviour is to become the eager *yes* to the invitation to intimacy. Only a person can make such a response to the freely offered love in such ways so as to become what we have been given!

We are flesh and blood spirited people; limited, influenced and limited by both nature and nurture, yet Graced by God with the ability to be true to the destiny towards which we are continually being called from within our experience of everyday living. Jesus' life and values show us what it means to be fully alive as a human being, He lived a human life in such a way that God was totally present in him, and what he is by nature we are called to by Grace, so that, as with him, the reason for what we do is who we are, children of God.

How does a child of God live? *The Child of God*, the only begotten Son, is of flesh and blood like ours, so that Jesus Christ, the Gospel, is normative for every would-be child of God, most especially adult children. We too experience the Fatherhood of God with Jesus, but not in the same way. Revelation tells us that the origin of this attraction towards goodness and the need for purpose in life, the searching after value and meaning, comes from God and takes us back there.

Without Revelation to guide us we would know nothing of the Spirit and *his holy operation* within us: "*The Spirit witnesses to our own spirit that we are children of God*" – Romans 8.16. Karl Rahner referred to this as *the coming together of the historical and the personal, to nourish each other before ever genuine faith can be born*. This reminds us that the completion of faith requires much more than a personal, inner conviction. We need to know God through Jesus, whom he has sent. Life centres totally around the Word, the way I came out from God, and the way of my return, knowingly, willingly and eagerly.

Faith knowing is a totally different kind of knowing than other ways, where the object to be known or the reflection to be made involves something *out there*, waiting to be examined and understood. Faith first of all involves accepting that I am acceptable to God! When I start to commit myself to believe, it is because experiences are happening in new ways, calling for a change in priorities: *love your enemy... give to the poor... hold no one in disregard*. To be *full of faith* [faithful] is to become saturated with these priorities since *now is the acceptable time*" – Mk. 1.15 and to do this in the context of reality, as the way I have freely chosen to live. Incredibly [!] faith living means accepting my own loveliness, because that is what God sees and takes delight in, is me.

Believers cannot forego what *is* for what *was* or for what *might have been*, yet faith is truly instrumental in prompting towards *what ought to be*. The challenge to be fully alive is the call to intimacy with God, through freedom credibly expressed. God is neither to be feared nor placated, one whose rules demand observance as from afar. God is nothing other than total love, who invites us into this very intimacy by Gracing us with the challenge to responsible living: "*To act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God*" – Micah 6.8.

The Parable of the workers arriving at the last hour and receiving equal pay is not an injustice to those who have worked all day. It is simply the amazing assurance that no matter how late we are in turning to God, we

will receive the all of God – nothing subtracted or withheld! No room here for being jealous of love, since full living is based on Grace and not just good works, on total inclusiveness.

Whenever Francis counsels the brethren about authority and its exercise, he always has the image of *Almighty God* as a helpless child clinging to a human breast!

“Be of great discretion, of praiseworthy reputation, no private loves, lest while you show favour to one you beget scandal in the group... [Be a man] in whom zeal for prayer is a close friend, available to be stormed by everyone, to provide for all with kindness. Such a friar will not commit the foul sin of favouritism... will comfort the afflicted, since he is the last resource for the troubled; he should bend stormy characters to meekness... forego something that is his right... in no way bring down the fabric of justice in his eagerness to maintain status” –

Celano – [Second Life - Omnibus of Sources n.185]

Chapter Two

Bring him to birth by the way you live...

I saw Mummy kissing Santa Claus... a once popular song. Presumably the intended inference is what would Daddy say?

We have an innate sense that this unique relationship tells us that this should not be happening. The question of the appropriateness of behaviour is paramount, and it's downplaying in modern times calls for scrutiny.

Another example can be found in some forms of traditional Marian devotion. The Church has beautiful doctrines of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth, the Divine Motherhood, the Assumption... but underpinning all of them is the one crucial reality – a simple, uncomplicated woman, about whom the Gospel has something to tell us. We are told that she was betrothed to Joseph, who became her husband, and she his wife. Why do we not have devotion to Mary, wife of Joseph? She wasn't asked to do anything in the manner of Jeremias or Isaias, simply to be the self she was to receive from the Holy Spirit, and become mother of the Word made flesh, she, the wife of Joseph.

Devotion to Mary deserves maturity and responsibility, she herself made possible the presence of God as man in Jesus her Son, not an eternal infant. Missing this point risks seeing Mary simply as the Mother we cannot do without, the safe woman for a man having difficulty coping with the feminine. Francis helps me in this regard when he wrote [to the friars] *you are mothers of the Lord! We have conceived through Word and Sacrament, now we must bring him to birth by the way we live* [1st Letter to the Faithful]. His profound devotion to Mary is vigorously Christ-centred, nothing sentimental or safely static, always dynamic, giving thanks to God for the *poor Lady* who made the Lord his *friar*.

Being a wife tells us that her own vocational choice was marriage. This was her chosen life, and it is out of this reservoir of experience that she is able to fulfil her call to be Mother of God. She was asked to be mother, not just give birth. We need to appreciate how she understood and honoured her responsibilities, and that when we honour her as the Immaculate Mother of God, which truly she is, we do not do so in a way that isolates her, when her own choice in life was to be with.

“In the course of her Son's preaching she received the words whereby, in extolling a kingdom beyond the concerns of the ties of flesh and blood, he declared blessed those who heard and kept the Word of God, as she

was faithfully doing. Thus, the blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith"
[Lumen Gentium – 58]

We have Jesus' own word that Mary is blessed, she heard the Word and kept it, so much so that she is truly the Model of the Church, whilst being its most faithful member. She exemplifies faith living, fully committed to her word becoming flesh and so able to present the world with its Saviour. This is the path to mature and wholesome living, trod by any ordinary person willing to ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

All this would have been impossible without the *overshadowing* of the Spirit... *and the child will be called Son of God!* She gave her own thanks that her emptiness was assured. We should appreciate that the emptiness we all feel is something deliberately implanted within all of us, when there seems to be no obvious way that the voracious demand for meaning, purpose or direction can be assured. We can try very hard through assiduous hard work, getting qualified... all excellent and to be commended, but all of them incapable of *assuring* that our emptiness is being filled, simply because however many finite values we embrace, none of them alone, nor all of them together are able to satisfy a thirst that is infinite. We have been made empty, with an infinite longing, so that God could be our fulfilment.

However, by the time we become aware that our emptiness contains the potential fruit of our own goodness that our honest efforts are not forever doomed to frustration as the adage prompts – *nature abhors a vacuum*, when we realise that our infinite thirst can be more than satisfied by that infinite Source whose sole desire and delight is to do so. It is then we begin the process of self-emptying, not because what we have achieved is wrong, but that it is not and can never be, on its own, enough. We have that same assurance of the overshadowing of the Spirit, so that we too can present the world with its Saviour by the way we are present, being ourselves. We must learn the priority primary in Mary – *prius mente concepit quam ventre* – *she conceived the Word in her heart before ever in her womb.*

To be with someone obviously content to be oneself, is to meet genuine simplicity – not complexity – one having nothing to defend. Such *unicity* is the coalescing of life with life's purpose, progressing gently towards fullness of meaning. Such maturing is not solely the right of explicit faith living, more to our ability to experience living that is *real*, and not simply a facsimile coloured by the jaundice of prejudice and protective living. There is a world of difference between the genuinely free person and the pseudo preaching freedom through being aggressively dismissive of all other views. One invites difference respected as a call for celebration, the other leads to division and fragmentation. The first-fruit of the Spirit is always to hold no one in disregard.

To be at peace, is far from being in a state of inertia. The *truth that sets free* redeems us from our fragmentation and alienations, by helping us reconcile opposites, yet without aggressive confrontation. Claiming to *do the truth in love* – Eph.4.15, whilst ignoring any residual anger, will always be counterproductive.

*"With deep roots and a firm foundation, may you in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length, the height and depth of Christ's love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge.
So may you be filled with the fullness of God" –*

Eph.3.18.

To be free requires us *being set free*, to reach down to where living and dying are real experiences. As Jesus responded to Nicodemus who asked *"But how can someone be born when old, can such a one enter the womb a second time?"* - with – *"no one can enter the Kingdom without being born from water and the Spirit. Flesh can*

give birth only to flesh; it is the Spirit who gives birth to spirit" – Jn.3.4. This is what makes free people of rich and poor alike, the happy and the sad, you and me.

Welcoming the Word as it is, calls for honesty and integrity, so much so, that provided we understand this properly, we can say that honest living will not be *wrong* living, even though it may not be *right* living! Once the honest person becomes aware that such living is not as it ought to be, honesty will not allow anything else but the need to change. We can say that *honesty + truth = conversion!* Given a commitment to honesty in pursuit of Truth we need simply ask, as Paul did on the Damascus road – *what do I do now?* Paul was converted *because he persecuted the Church honestly*. Such was his commitment to the Law and it's upholding that he could tolerate deviation; until he came face to face with Truth, and thus began, for him, the process of truth setting free.

Slavery to observance alone, casts a dark shadow over life. There is no room for providence, since foresight is the one virtue, obedience becomes perseverance, poverty becomes thrift and community little more than survival of the fittest. Value is lost sight of, because of over concern for valuables. The request for solitude is dismissed as time-wasting and life-giving affirmation dispensed with as pandering to the inadequate. Without both solitude and affirmation there is little chance of the necessary anticipation if we are to be there for each other. Availability is of little avail [!] if that is all it is. My being available still requires asking – and if, for whatever reason you cannot ask for help – I might as well be miles away! Care and compassionate living calls for sensitive anticipation. Notice what disappears through Martha's insistence on efficiency – no place for the *better part!*

Paul insists that the Law cannot save; it can only convince us of sin, of our need for salvation, by facing us with what ought to be in the light of what is, and our impotence to do anything about it. In writing to the Church in Rome he is anguished in crying out - *I would rather not do the things I find myself doing... who will rescue me from this pitiable state?* A question he answers with – *thanks be to God, Christ Jesus!* – Rom. 7.24.

Since Jesus is Truth, to be truthful is to be involved with him – knowingly or otherwise. This kind of closeness, if not intimacy, has implications; it is to become a *believer*. We are not believers simply in Christianity, but in Jesus the Christ. *Christianity* is what is met when people profess to believe in Jesus Christ and actually live this in flesh and blood relating. Creed and doctrine are like the wake of a ship, something has gone before them. We need to be mindful of the pitfall of allowing orthodoxy to oust intimacy by relying solely on institution.

The first disciples were attracted personally by Jesus – *Where do you live?* – What came to be called Christian doctrine was this reality reflected upon and articulated for the benefit of all. This initial experience was simple curiosity – maybe even enthusiasm. For us, coming along later there was already a corpus of doctrine. But even when this becomes articulated as commending a preferential option for the poor, we have drifted away from what Jesus said – he said *blessed are the poor*. Presumably, those who make a preferential option are equally blessed – but the imperative is – *blessed are the poor* – the way of life of a believer!

We have the all-embracing reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, even before we believe. We see the whole picture. Not so the first disciples. They lived these realities as they each unfolded. Watching the execution, they knew nothing about Easter Day! This is why Paul insists that we walk with him and not simply follow his footprints. Creed, Code and Doctrine can just as easily lead us astray as they did Paul, unless they are allowed to fulfil their proper purpose, enabling us to meet the Lord ourselves.

Recall the villagers, the friends of the woman Jesus spoke with at Jacob's well. She told them *I think he is special, he told me all about myself...* In their turn they went to see and came back to say to her – *now we believe because we have seen him for ourselves.* – cf. Jn. 4.6.

Life is given so that we can enjoy intimacy with God, eternally. We take on *value* by exposure to it, by catching it. There is always the temptation to try to encapsulate *value* as a system to be taken on board. This is fine for cultivating habit, but *value*, as a long term process, is to bring me to want it *with all my heart* and not simply because it is the way I'm accustomed to.

To profess having my life centred on the Word of God means the enfleshing of this Word is evident in my everyday living. Missing this often leads to seeing life as running a tidy ship, where there is a place for everything and everything should be in its place [the hideous: *Keep the rule and the rule will keep you!*] Jesus came that we might live well, experience life as abundantly attractive. All too often the price of running a tidy ship, while allowing smooth sailing *above* decks, requires a *slave galley* below.

We are creatures of our past, infected by Greek dualism, which has surely served us well, helping us conveniently sort one thing from another – but seldom allowing for realities that do not fit the *either/or* pattern.

There is a real distinction between body and soul in that one is transient, the other permanent – but this allowed what is less than permanent to be down-graded in value terms. We ended up with the confusion of trying to *save our souls* within a faith in the *resurrection of the body*; seeing this passing world as where we live *mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.*

Jesus leaves us in no doubt about the primacy of the spiritual – *do not fear the one who can kill the body, but the one who can cast the soul into hell...* - Lk.12.5. Life is for integration not segregation, and to miss this is to allow healthy and positive *renunciation* to degenerate into self-centred destructive *denunciation.*

To renounce is to have purpose, to do something positive, so that something *more* might transpire. It is to *re-announce*, to say in a new way; e.g. Christian *renunciation* is to proclaim that my life is *under new management*, no longer am I trying to live by the spirit of self, but by the Spirit of God – *the Lord, the giver of life* [Credo]. To renounce the world can never mean to denounce it. John wrote in detail about the world and the flesh; and it is the same author who sets his Gospel entirely on *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us* – Jn.1.14. Bonaventure reminds us how special our world is – *the dust of this earth has become the body of God!*

There is much of value and encouragement in what has been written about the soul and God, but it has also promoted an image of God, as God of the individual. Individuality is unquestionably a unique gift; and we rightly feel affronted when it is intrusively ignored; when we are taken for granted or dismissed as irrelevant. We are constituted uniquely individual, but just as surely endowed with the need to belong, we are social by nature. We are not just located in this world, we belong here. Our uniqueness flourishes only when we are free to cherish and to be cherished, through the coming together of unique freedoms.

Sadly, we seem to live more by gesture than by friendship. Whereas ritual gesture *gets by* through superficial good manners backed up by words carrying nothing but their own sound; friendship by contrast brings mutuality, trust, loyalty and even intimacy. Friendship features strongly in Scripture, where we learn about the friendship between God and Abraham, the God who spoke with Moses as one friend to another.

Jesus deliberately called his disciples friends – not because he liked their company, which he may well have done, but – *because the Father has told me all about you!* This is the reality that generates peace, *peace that the world cannot give*. To be at peace is to enjoy life as it really is – and as it really is could be tragic as well as happy. Peace, normally understood, is some form of tranquillity in the heart of chaos. To receive the peace of Christ requires the overcoming of the causes of divisive injustices, not just the effects. It means recognising that my bully tactics, which effectively dismisses others, is equally as offensive as all other forms of personal imperialism.

We are slow learners! We don't live in isolation; we are social by nature attracted by all kinds and varieties of groupings. As well as the many good things to be found there, hidden oppressions also lurk, along with the fears that prompt unnatural dependencies and exploitations, with the rich getting richer... Happily, such is the resilience of the call to be fully alive, that there are many who will not settle for a life of protectionist grumbling, content with pointing out mistakes [of others], but who want to live differently.

We do not inherit a ready-made life; we earn our identity through the quality of our relating and belonging, where nothing is pre-planned – where missing a bus can lead to a chance and fruitful encounter. Such coming together will never flourish while two remain anonymous. Much more than polite conversation is needed. We need to make room for each other, welcoming the difference another makes, this is the raw material of communion. Yet for this to blossom into intimacy the two must remain two, since love requires that there always be someone, and someone else.

There is paradox in the *otherness* of love, to fall for someone doesn't require that I first decide to be outgoing, or devise ways and means for others to notice me. My first experience of *other* is myself. I am not self-starting. I do not carry within me my own explanation. I am not an owner-occupier. Life is total gift – meaning that its reality and its completion is gifted from beyond me. My life is real evidence of *other*.

To grow is to learn how to accept myself as given, calling for gratitude. Listen to Jesus' words *whoever will lose life...* Mt. 10.39. We are being told the difference between self-centredness and self-love that is real. Genuine love for oneself requires, of its essence, that we move from self towards *other*. The more I freely move out towards another, to that extent will my identity be discovered to me. This is precisely what we have been given in Jesus – Love going out to create other loves in its own likeness.

Relating is not just physical presence to another, but seeking to belong through the attractiveness stimulated by fascination of value seen as worth striving for. However, we have been badly affected by the history of evil as well as by our experiences of good. We have been hurt by relationships that soured; we have taken on, almost subconsciously, institutional prejudices, harmful habits, spiritual as well as physical. Yet we are not just an amalgam of our past. We can never be justified in simply identifying ourselves as products of history. We forge our history by the way we inhabit our freedom [and are *allowed* so to do] here and now.

How do we establish safe norms to help us pursue what is genuinely good for everyone? *"My word is truth... and truth will set you free"* – Jn. 8.32. Freedom is a relationship, an intimacy which convinces of the worthiness of full living, a challenge through integrity. It is Jesus who is Lord of Salvation, and not just his words.

Some simplistically urge that the pursuit of goodness is the norm for good living. Put like that it is fraught with danger. First, all good things do not have to be done; we need some kind of selection process. Secondly, a blind pursuit goodness doesn't leave room for determining proper orientation for behaviour patterns. So often the reaction to negation is – *why, what's wrong with it?* We should be able to presume that *something wrong* is not being proposed. What is at issue is *the appropriateness*. Is this appropriate behaviour for who I

say I am? There has to be room for the *ought* of good living. It's not sufficient to say *I can do it* – the determining factor is – *should I* be doing this. Reasonably easy, when it is deciding between good and bad, more difficult when the choice is between good and good.

This is where Revelation helps. The allegory of the Fall of the Race carries the home truth. The prohibition from eating of the tree whose fruit is the knowledge of good and evil is simply saying that it is not for us to decide what is good and what isn't. Something we have done repeatedly, in spite of the warning. At the root of enmity and fragmentation, of division and aggression there is one individual [or group] trying to enforce his/her understanding of goodness.

Jesus is emphatic – “*Only God is good*” – Luke 18.19. Goodness is Godness, and this goodness is fully revealed in Jesus the Christ, who lives it first, and then tells us what is involved [*Sermon on the Mount*]. Jesus is the only norm of goodness. The Good News that he brought is not that everything is all right, but that everything is not all right, but that is all right! Goodness involves openness to God and care for each other, seeking to remove the evil and hurt of injustices.

We cannot be close to the fire without experiencing warmth; we cannot be open to love without becoming loving. Bonaventure tells us: *wherever you find goodness, celebrate it; wherever you find goodness damaged, repair it; wherever you find goodness missing, bring it with you*. Jesus promises that anyone believing in him will do what he does – what was personal and individual to him in the Incarnation has become universal through the Resurrection, in the power of the Spirit.

To be a believer is to have a new shape to life, not just for special occasions like Sundays and Holy Days, but to live in an entirely different way; as Jesus told Nicodemus – not going back to the beginning and starting over again, rather is it living in an entirely new and given way. I cannot be open to love without experiencing an inner compulsion to share it. To insist on retaining what makes sense to me is to base everything on personal security, knowing I can cope, yet runs the risk of unbelief, where even God is not safe! There are so many truths of faith that seemingly defy reason – yet they are true!

Jesus resisted established ways: calling God *Abba*, placing himself above Moses, yet the servant who washes tired feet; making space in his life for women and children; became ritually unclean through his free association with some people; insisting that the Sabbath was made for us not the reverse. All this and much more went against the rules, yet while admiring such integrity, we should be mindful of our own unjust structures which he would equally resist.

When faced with the challenge of the unusual, our immediate reaction tends to be negative, prompted more by defence of our own status quo than by openness to whichever way the Spirit might ask us not to harden our hearts. It is one thing to applaud Jesus' courage, in his openness to lepers – but what about the short-shrift we pay to the poor man at the *back* door, or the cynical and patronising laugh with which we greet opinions other than our own. It is in ways like this that the crucifixion of the *different* continues and Redemption is resisted.

Difference – in contrast to division – is an invitation to celebrate the truth that we are not all alike; a call to strive for that unity in life which only issues from diversity respected: there are Three Persons in one God, who are all equal, but not the same. This applies not just to our personal identity, but equally to the ways we follow in search of it.

After Mary said her *yes*, what followed was not really *according to the book!* – a pregnant virgin, angels talking to shepherds, an old man and woman predicting good things, yet in ominous tones. With the many consequences that surfaced in Mary's life, is it any wonder we read that she kept all this in her heart, where faith is real and human understanding stays respectfully silent.

Her Son always seemed to be bigger than she expected, which is characteristic of faith which helps us accept far more than we understand. By accepting to live by faith and not simply by reason she set him free from the impossible limits of expectation, a faith that was real, even on Holy Saturday! The poet, Hopkins, refers to this as *Mary letting God's glory through* by her holding onto nothing that would impede its free flow – *I give thanks that my emptiness is assured!* Not only did she hold no expectations of him, neither did she cling to expectations of herself – *let my life happen according to [your] Word.* – Lk. 1.38.

In this way Mary is what God would be in all of us; where there is no discrepancy between life and vocation. We have been perhaps a little too quick to acclaim Mary as Virgin Mother, immaculately conceived, Queen of Heaven, Star of the Sea... which she is of course all of these, but *what about what she chose as her own vocation?* All of those splendid titles separate her out, in a sense isolate her, when she chose not to be isolated but to-be-with, Mary, wife of Joseph. As we have already seen what a pity we do not have such a feast day!

How different this is from so many *look-alikes*, when words are impressive and gestures generous, but where person-to-person warmth is conspicuous by its absence! Where there is no love, there is nothing! Where there is no place for the *needy other* all else is futile, since everyone has the right to expect acceptance and congruence between what is said and what is felt! Mary did not simply go through the motions of making sure she did her duty; she became *mother* in the fullest sense. Integrity of this kind is of far more value than physical virginity, or even the absence of sin. It is how she totally identified herself with her vocation – to present the world with its Saviour, by being his Mother.

Nor was she simply passive at the time she received the invitation. To say *yes* with integrity calls for the involvement of will-power. This is an aspect of vocation that is patently in decline today. So strong is the urge to live by the preference principle – *if I don't like it I won't do it* – as to undermine any basis for trust; Mary wasn't asked *would she like* to become mother, but would she become mother! Living solely by preference betrays the uniqueness of the individual – *the ability to respond as no one else can* – by descending into pernicious and negative individualism.

Free living is truthful living, not just the correct behaving that sees love condemned and apathy embraced, simply to suit personal preference. There is such a God-given gift as personal preference, but as with every other gift, it is there to help me enhance and surprise the lives of others. To see reality as pain-avoiding, the absence of the unpleasant and uncongenial, is to miss the whole wonder and mystery of the Incarnation. Freedom means full living life as it is, and not just when I prefer it. God is present *now*, and every now is *given* – *now is the acceptable time* – Mk.1.15.

Grace is what it says it is, freely given, unearned, without mortgage or debt. *What value is there in loving those who love you? You must love your enemy and pray for those hurting you!* – Mt.5.44. To realise my dislike for someone or something, far from absolving me from trying, places me in a situation where I need to work even harder, which can only be done through an act of will, through Grace *which is always freely available!*

I once heard a superior tell us, at a final profession, you are now going to hear x hand over his will to me in obedience! God forbid! There will be times when what I have promised will appear irksome and maybe even unpleasant to fulfil; then I am going to need my will power if I am to remain faithful! There is something of

the Prodigal's older brother in all of us – jealous of unconditional love! When God made us, he didn't make statues, but made us able to make ourselves in response to the various challenges of Grace, the way we make our choices in pursuit of meaning; doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

We enjoy the same vocation as Mary; able to bring forth from within us more than is there by nature, and present the world with its Saviour by the way we are present. This is true freedom, and the means towards its realising is through every honest effort – not necessarily *correct* – to keep one's word in the manner of *and the Word was made flesh*. To keep self only for self, and offer simply my occasional functioning in specific [*and personally approved*] areas sins against the whole purpose of such enfleshment and its spirit of grace and truth. Remember, Mary is what God would be in all of us.

Chapter Three

Beloved of Abba...

We know that Jesus is not Superman! Yet there is evidence enough around to show that this truth is not always respected! So many Christological heresies happened precisely because he was not allowed to be *like us in everything but sin!* – Hebrews 2.17. We dare not let him have the same needs we experience, even though the Gospel presents him foot-sore, thirsty, angry, happy, sad... even when he wanted a drink of water by the well, having to wait for someone with a bucket!

I am sure we all have incidents unwitting or otherwise, when valuable things were used for less than appropriate purposes, when their innate value was not respected – antique furniture used as a work-bench, a piece of cut-glass as an ash-tray, a valuable painting used as a stiffening support under a mattress... Yet without any doubt the most outrageous abuse is of ourselves and our potential. It took the Incarnation to make us aware of it, and it seems to be taking forever to persuade us to believe it!

When the early Church spoke of Jesus as *the Christ*, they were saying something specific; that in this man, Jesus from Nazareth has been *realised* [made real] everything promised by God in the Scriptures. He is so open to God as to be totally one with God, and his life-story reveals to us an invitation to enjoy such intimacy ourselves. Such is our potential, because of the Incarnation, for us to assert without hesitation that only God is big enough for one so fully alive.

Anyone able for and comfortable with calling God *Abba*, obviously enjoys a special relationship. The Gospel identifies this relationship as *Beloved of Abba*. On two separate occasions – the Baptism in the Jordan and the Transfiguration – Jesus is referred to as *the Beloved*. Jesus has no i.d. crisis. He is the Beloved, *a relationship not a title*. So much so that when the disciples saw him pray they didn't hear him say anything, or do anything, he was simply enjoying being someone – *the Beloved of Abba*.

His declared purpose for being with us – *that you may have abundant life* – that you may live well! We too can know God as Abba and ourselves as beloved – *"to all who believe he gave power to know God as Father"* – John 1.12. Interesting to note that evil spirits have no problem in recognising him! – *"We know who you are, the holy one of God"* – Mk. 3.11. A salutary reminder that simply being right about Jesus doesn't make me good!

Redemption sets us free to know and *enjoy* [Augustine] God as God is, through Jesus whom he has sent – John 3.34. The Sin of the World – Original Sin – reached its lowest in seeking to be rid of God's Word on Good Friday. Here is our radical distortion, responsible for the tangled knots of relationships, our vitiated potential

motivated by our insistence on being self-explained, self-fulfilled, and self-centred in every possible way. Jesus unravelled these knots by living his relationships differently, by his self-emptying. He has a human nature blighted by the effects of sin – *“He was made sin for us”* – 2Cor.5.21. – suffering the effects of sin though sinless himself. This is true holiness. Holiness is not to make us more than human, but more human. We need only recall the impact of being sinned against to realise how much *less than human* it makes us feel.

There is more, much more! Jesus brought with him both the enthusiasm for this new way and the resolve to let it be, and this as gift for anyone willing to receive: *“to all who believe... he gave power to know the Fatherhood of God”* – John 1.12. We are familiar with Grace – as a word! Grace is a kind of shorthand for how we enter into the relationship with God we were created to receive. Moses, we are told, saw God from the back – Exodus 33; whereas Jesus is the gracious gift of God as God is. The Redemption he brought was the way he lived and died a full human life. With his final words he hands over his own Spirit, the very love-life of God, so that we can live differently, become fully alive.

Paul goes to great lengths to stress the gratuity of this. There is no way we can reach God by our own efforts, but we have been reached by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. In practice, this means that at every level of life, whenever we open ourselves to *other* for their well-being, whenever we take one step beyond self – a step the same both towards saint and sinner – then is the Redemption gifted to us, active within us. So all embracing is this gift as to show us that while every saint has a past, every sinner has a future, because of coming to know the Father, through the Son gifted to us in the Spirit – *“poured into our hearts”* – Romans 5.5.

The very word *poured* suggests the abundance which accompanies all God’s giving. Sadly, we miss seeing this when we interpret e.g. the Parable of the workers arriving at the 11th hour, yet receiving full pay, as unfair to those working all day. Whereas we are being told that no matter how late we arrive, with God we are assured of receiving nothing less than the all of God – cf. Matthew 20.6. The incredible truth – *my sin is my entitlement to Jesus – I have come for sinners!*

Isaac Newton was so inspired by this that he likened it to walking along the shore, looking at all the shells washed-up on the sand, remaining unaware of the vast ocean of unrealised truth [*as we see from Blue Planet II*] immediately in front of him. So too Michelangelo, sculpting a lion, was asked by a child *how did you know it was in there?*

Faith is all about someone who does know what is *in there*, in every human being. Could this be why Jesus counsels that we become as children? A child is ready for faith, will believe anything, and the fact that such naïveté has led to child abuse has more to say about the mendacity of the abuser than the credulity of the child. *The Lord said it would be better for such people to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round their necks than to fall into the hands of God!* – Lk.17.2 We need the openness of a child, guided by what we have learned in our day-by-day living thus far.

Paradoxically, faith is about me believing in myself, a point easily missed. Whenever there is conversation that includes God, we automatically assume that God presides; such is not God’s priority, for whom *“every hair of your head matters”* – Matthew 10.30. Almighty, applied to power in God, does not mean God can do everything, but there is nothing preventing God from fulfilling the imperative of love – even death on a cross – Philippians 2.8. For God, almighty means the integrity to remain faithful to the Word who says God loves us, will never stop loving us, and loves us exactly as we are.

This is the basic Christian experience, to help us become more aware of the sympathy and love God has for us, and that we exist for no other reason than that God delights in who we are, each one uniquely and all of us together. This is to own God as Abba! Jesus speaks of this as the basis of his authority - "*I know where I come from, I know where I am going*" – John 8.14.

It has been asked – if my reality is that I come out from God in order to return, why not remain there in the first place and save all the hassle of a life-time's struggle? Because God created me without my consent, but cannot save me without it, and my life-time allows me to own this gift, to discover its purpose, and to long for it with all my heart. Such awareness gifted to us through the way we live and the choices we make is what is meant by a state of Grace. It is to discover the real abundance in living fully, and so to live as to foster and prompt the desire for this experience beyond ourselves: love God and your neighbour!

Jesus shows us this desire to be fully alive is to be open to *something more* - recorded in the Letter to the Hebrews – 11.40. We do this primarily through our belonging, through our relationships. We have a choice – live in grace – or dis-grace! Whilst we are usually vague about what Grace means – we know perfectly well what we mean by disgrace! As Augustine reminded: *omnis homo Adam, omnis homo Christus!* – And it is Grace that makes the difference, the Word breathing love.

This is where theology can enlighten us – that we become more conscious of being known by God rather than becoming frenetic in trying to know God. For God, to know is to love, and it will take forever for us to appreciate the ardent fascination God has in us. Whereas, while sin convinces us that there are times when God simply isn't big enough for us, Grace tells us that we are always big enough for God.

Creation, *through its human component*, rejected to live by this gift, deciding to follow other paths, other ways! Whereas we all said "no", the Word made flesh said "yes" – as Paul tells us, he is God's "yes" to Creation – 2Cor.1.20. In him, true God and true Man, we have, at one and the same time the divine proposal for God's total self-giving and the perfect human response and acceptance. Living within our broken condition, though sinless, he turned the ultimate in rejection into optimum in loving: *greater love than this there is not, than you give your life for another...* - John 15.13.

In this way does death become the universal sacrament of Grace. Death reaches everyone, not just as the end of life on earth, but as the opening into life without ending. Nothing matters more after I am born than how I die – die to self so as to live – "*Whosoever loses life... will find it*" – Matthew 16.25.

Nothing, other than myself can justify my existence – it is me as I am meant to be that occasioned this free and loving creative act from God. The difficulties arrive along with me as I am meant to be! Nurture implants other priorities. My first experience of living is being held in a sea of sheer delight in my mother's womb, where I wanted for nothing. With birthing comes a major disruption of all this. My newfound independence is accompanied by a separation from what was a delightful and unthreatening experience of living.

This could suggest that independence does not initially feel like a good thing! This is compounded by the way nurture takes over, persuading me that for me to be acceptable, there are certain norms and expectations for me to live up to, all of which are outside my reality. Where is the persuasion that I am good simply because I'm me? The fruit of family-life?

Culture isn't tuned-in to the individual. Value is seen to come through conformity to external norms and customs already in place, before I arrived, but which I am expected to accept. My living requires me to distinguish between what is and what is not me. This requires a fundamental option, a basic direction, against

which experiences in living can be seen to be of value or otherwise. With the onset of formal education and formation within which the dreams of childhood, the complexities of adolescence, varied experiences of belonging, all come together to be sorted into the helpful and not so helpful, in the search for my fundamental option to become more real.

Focus on the word "real" - what is real is that God is not an option for us. Reality is that we are of God, from God and for God. This is the purpose of life, to live so fully as to accept the gift of intimacy with God - *I have come that you may have life in abundance*" - John 20.31. The only purpose of the gift of life is to enjoy intimacy with Abba, through the Spirit in Jesus whom he has sent. It is true that I cannot know God as God is, but I am known by God, to be known by God is to be loved, and this means communication, something to be experienced. All that we see and appreciate, everything created carries something unique of God, and yet not one of them is or all of them together are God. Does this mean that my experience of myself as of God is such, but not God?

We cannot come face to face with God; not a prohibition but an inability. But it doesn't rest there, since we can be reached by God. There is a new, given way of knowing, coming with the assurance that to invest self in living this new way is to move gradually into knowing God as Abba - *to all who believe he gave power to know God as Father* - John.1. Paul assures us also, *then we will know [ourselves] as we are known* - cf.1Cor.13.12.

This is the challenge. *Am I prepared to accept myself as known, in a way which I do not know myself?* It is simply asking me to accept being loved. The ultimate in faith is to let go of what has hitherto been *my way*, for the vision another has of me, a way that does not remain unknown to me, but comes only through intimacy in communion. Revealed truth forms us: Creation, Incarnation, Salvation, Life of Grace, Intimacy with God, allowing ourselves to be overshadowed by the Spirit.

God not only knows who God is - the Eternal Word, made flesh in Jesus - God also enjoys being God - the Holy Spirit; and we are made in this image: not only to know that we have the gift and call to abundant life, but the challenge also to enjoy what we are receiving. It is the fullness of this revelation that gives the lie to any joyless expression of spiritual living. Not only are we destined through the Spirit and like Jesus, to know where we are from and where we are going - cf. John 8.14, but like Mary to feel ourselves able to present the world with its Saviour by the way we are present in this new way. Like Paul we are invited to become *Servants of the Mystery* - cf. Ephesians 3.9. Yet the question remains: what does this feel like?

We are, in the main, aware of the gift of the Holy Spirit through Baptism and Sacramental living. We welcome the gift and we give thanks for it in many different ways both personal and liturgical. But have we yet done the one crucial thing? Have we opened it? Have we released the Spirit within us? By our fruits will this be known! *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* Galatians 5.21.

It is still not uncommon to hear about the death of God! Science and Technology are on the move, sadly at times diverting into a kind of *Scientism* - the belief that everything will, eventually, submit to a scientific explanation. No longer any need for the *God of the gaps*, invented to console our ignorance and take away our fears.

Unlike people of former times, we have answers to many of life's problems. More and more are we able to manage for ourselves. Without being delayed by this debate, we need only note in passing that a human being cannot claim to be totally explained by evolution. There are issues within us that require something

other than the physical history of matter as their explanation. There are the *hopes and fears of all the years* to be met, as our Christmas carolling reminds us. Our need to cherish and be cherished, our multi-faceted selection processes, based on no more than simple like and dislike, as well as personal desire and preference. There is very much within us requiring something other and greater than self as its explanation.

Even a cursory reflection reveals to us that the world and everything within it does not carry its own explanation, though it is able to receive its purpose, and so recognise its origin and moves towards its destiny. The part of creation specifically designed to receive this knowledge, and become capable of freely choosing to accept this responsibility, is humankind. Long before the waters were muddied by the Medieval controversies, Revelation brought to us the truth that all is destined to be *in Christ, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight* - Ephesians 1.4. Whichever way we view the coming of Christ, the Word made flesh, Redemption, the life of Grace, Divine filiation... none of these demanded the Incarnation for them to happen. God could have achieved all this without taking flesh. But there is one *effect* which could not have happened otherwise.

If creation is meant to be the perfect expression of God *outside* the Godhead, to be so realised as to become totally one with God, this could only happen if God always intended to be part of creation. In the humanity of Jesus, Creation has already achieved this purpose, when what is created – his humanity – is totally one with his divinity, what is uncreated, called the *Hypostatic Union*. It is no longer a question of how or when will creation achieve, but for us to recognise what Paul longs for: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death* – Phil.3.10.

This happens when what has been individually realised in Christ becomes universal for Creation through humankind being wide open to the same Spirit, thus allowing all Creation to praise God by the way it is lived-in. We are not pre-programmed by Mother Nature, with a variety of CD's to hand for every eventuality: *ideas, feelings, likes, dislikes, love, fear, fascination...* There is no way that physical matter can enable freedom. For this we need to seek to order our senses towards God, who made us this way, so that we can be made able to bring forth from within ourselves, through Grace, infinitely more than is there by nature.

Only God is good – Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. *"No one is good—except God alone* - Mk.10.17. In so far as we accept the relationship God claims with us through Jesus – to know God as Father – we become *sensitised* towards goodness in its myriad of forms, most especially through the gift of heightened sensitivity to the needs of others. But why did everything have to happen in the way it did? Why so much suffering, especially by the innocent? Was the Cross inevitable for Jesus?

There are attitudes towards the Cross that are unhelpful; little more than excuses for not facing up to life's responsibilities. What do the wounds of Christ mean?

The reality of death has to be set within the context of the tremendous will to live that is evident even in the newly born baby, a vigorous resistance to anything death-dealing. Ask also why we seek to control, to hurt, to put down, to dismiss? Why do we seek to harness power for alienation rather than integration, using nuclear energy not to serve life but to threaten it with destruction?

When Jesus surrendered his life on the cross he did not surrender his *self*, indeed it was fidelity to himself that led him to the cross. Can I save myself without the cross, without losing my life? Jesus tells us that it is in losing life that we find it – Mk. 8.35. This is telling us that love of neighbour, for example, means being active in promoting another's well-being. Jesus did not say blessed are the peace-lovers, but *blessed are the peace-*

makers! I cannot *give* this to another without first receiving it as gift for myself, in order to become what I am receiving.

Jesus could easily have avoided confrontation with authorities by staying away from public places, keeping out of trouble. [*Living in lockdown!*] Why did he have such harsh words for Peter – *Get behind me Satan!* Matt.16.23 – who was only trying *to do the sensible thing?*

To follow such a path, for Jesus, would have been to lie! He accepted his mission to show how deeply God loves all creation, and to show it without exception, *holding no one, no thing in disregard*. The consequence of such obedience, fidelity to his word, is stark in its deeper meaning: *greater love than this there is not, than you give your life for another* – John 15.13. Jesus no more wanted to die than does anyone. He did not come to die, but to show the Father's love, by being his Father's Son, being himself. It is such fidelity to one's given word that constitutes – *doing the truth in love* – Eph.4.15. The almighty in almighty God is precisely that. *Almighty* seen in the light of the cross is *supreme power, freely to give oneself in love*.

Life faces us with objective truths, and occasionally these are set within subjective experiences that carry different priorities for us. This causes so much break-down in communication when the response made to a felt need pays little or no homage to this. There is no way I can be aware of the subjective experience of another, without my making space within *my* priorities by the obedience of attentive listening. It is my ignoring such a priority that makes the cross inevitable - for my neighbour!

Peter was not mistaken in his outburst, nor was Jesus' *get behind me Satan* declining the suggestion. It was said out of genuine friendship – *his* truth, but not Jesus' truth. The apparent harshness of Jesus' reply simply highlights the human cost of *doing the truth in love*. Perhaps it brought to mind that other occasion when Jesus named Satan, during his three-fold temptations – and *my ways are not your ways* – Is.55.8. His way is truth in the flesh – loving without *terms and conditions apply*. We trespass on holy ground through our insensitivities; along with formal demands for blind obedience to maintain the structures, instead of allowing them to serve life. Too often it is cruelty that separates doing the truth in duty, from doing the truth in love.

To the question of – why the Cross? – There is no easy solution, since we are not dealing with two different interpretations of reality, *but with two different realities!* My own need to discover love in my life through truthful incarnation, is as unique to me as yours is to you. God doesn't create copies. It is respecting this and not counting the cost that allows me the necessary poverty of willingness to take up the cross.

Such poverty is the absence of the certitude needed to fend-off hypocrisy. Without a willingness to accept such insecurity, there cannot be the desired inventiveness of a free spirit. Importing ready-made security systems impedes this. See an illustration of this in the once accepted role of priesthood, wherein we presumed to know what priesthood meant through age-long customs and traditions; whereas Vatican II prompts us to see priesthood as the challenge *to be as open and as vulnerable as Jesus*, who had no *given* role to fit into.

If our primacy is to be the primacy of love, like Jesus who *came to his people to set them free* – Lk.1.68, we must leave the *other* free to say *yes or no!* To love is to offer without conditions, other than legitimate hope for the well-being of the other. When love is genuinely offered and comprehensively rejected there is nothing else remaining but to entrust them to the Father's care – *Then, said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.* - Luke 23.34. Such love is not and cannot be fated through nature, in no way does it happen through any evolving process.

A world without God makes no sense. Consider simply what happens as a consequence of simply trusting self-reliance, a quality of sophisticated living thanks to the creditable achievements of science and technology. It seems always to polarise into the rich getting richer and the poor becoming poorer, leading on into the blame culture that inevitably generates envy and the desire for revenge. There will be no peace on earth and scarcely any good will either, as long as the good life is reserved for a minority.

Overtaken and jaded as we are by the pleasure principle, comforts, privileges, indulgence have so crowded into us that the legitimate aspirations that the many be content with less so that the few may have more is no longer an option worth considering. And yet this is no less than our common origin prompting us and destiny summoning us, to move beyond every barrier that would impede the good life being available to each and to all, in line with Jesus' aspiration – *I have come that you may enjoy abundant life* – John 10.10.

Picture a world without pain, without fear, without injustice and its many cohorts, where there is no want, no need for incentives, and wide open to creativity. Compare the world as it is, with people ready, willing and able to be there for others anticipating needs, to live responsibly within the environment, accepting responsibility for each other – and ask which is preferable.

It is futile to ask *did God have any other options than this world when creating*. When God creates, this is what happens. God did not create a perfect world which we abused and maltreated to the extent that God *had to get a man in* to fix things! Creation was made able to make itself *by the way it is lived-in* responsibly and *affectively*. Responsible living is self-transcendence not self-indulgence. *We are made in the image of the self-emptying Father, in the likeness of the totally receptive and inventive Son, within the mutuality of that sheer delight God enjoys being God, the Holy Spirit*. That part of creation able to receive both the awareness of this and the desire actively to become what we are receiving, is humankind. This *power* is generated by Grace within us – what we call the will of God. God's desire for us to know and experience the life of God as *ours*, and uniquely so, for each one.

God's will is not a series of do's and don'ts. It is the overwhelming desire God has to communicate to us the fullness of love, intimacy with God. When we occasionally glimpse this faith living, we see a whole new way of being alive, and become aware of what Jesus meant – *you do not live by bread alone* – Mt.4.4. Our inner and felt need for this of itself, is insufficient for its realising. The need for purpose, meaning and relevance, our desire to cherish and be cherished, needs to encounter the fully alive, risen Jesus Christ.

Living without Jesus, either perforce of never having heard of him, or through deliberately disregarding him, inevitably paves the way for imagination to take over, and the projection into creation of a God of our needs. The proliferation of so many *religions* testifies to this. This is not to imply that this is wrong, but that without the authentication of God's Word made flesh among us, interpretation of the Word is wide open to the influence of fears and dreams, in albeit the honest pursuit of freedom. We need not just God's Word, *but God's meaning of God's Word* – the Word made flesh – *God with skin!*

Many good people in Israel were ready to point the way to the Lord to perfect strangers [*Magi*] and yet remain at home themselves. We are no different. This is how humans respond to divine proposals. We cannot cope with too much reality, we need to trust and in consequence change – *be converted and believe* – Mk.1.15.

We have fine sounding words to proclaim our commitment to the poor, and still find ourselves impotent about the next poor person at the door. So too, we are impressively eloquent on matters of peace with justice, and yet remain obstinately silent in the face of so many systemic injustices, simply because it is not done to

rock the boat! We have made great advances through Renewal Programmes, yet the lot of those structurally marginalised is *to remain* the poor relation!

The Holy Spirit is the only author of change through love, and is never a spirit of preservation at all costs. We have our idols, and our prayers and celebrations are not always free from tinges of idolatry. Much hard work and effort has been spent in getting to know God through Jesus the Christ, yet we betray all this by making an end out of a means.

We must employ *means*, and we must respect them as such. It was failure to do this that occasioned Paul's outburst: *You say I am for Paul, I'm for Apollos... I am for Christ!* – 1Cor.1.12. As a Franciscan friar it is ever necessary for me to remember that the one thing Francis was not was a Franciscan! To see Christ is to see the face of God – *whoever sees me, sees the Father* – John 12.45. He was all for Christ!

Contrary to what is often said, mystery is not something I can know nothing about, but something I can never know everything about! The more that is discovered, the more there is to discover. This will not change, even in heaven. We will never exhaust the unfathomable riches of God, though we will know differently *when we will know as we are known* – 1Cor.13.12. God remains unchangingly always new – Heb.6.16. We will never know God in the sense of *comprehending* – but we are not called to this, we are invited simply *to enjoy God*, as Augustine tells us. To be in a quasi-static permanence [a denial of *with us in mind God promised something more* – Heb.10.34.] is to be in hell. Yet Jesus reveals the *all of God*, and there was nothing mysterious in attractiveness: warmth, affection, laughter and tears – tangible evidence of *things unseen*, which occasionally broke through to the surface [Transfiguration].

Chapter Four

Simple does not mean easy...

Deus providebit! God will provide. How do we know? What does *May the divine assistance remain always with us* mean? Does it mean: *do your best and leave the rest to God?* Dividing life into my best and God's rest?

Naaman, the leper comes to mind – 2Kings 5.1. The well-to-do man who had everything, including leprosy! He tried everything to be cured, to no avail. His Hebrew slave-girl commended her God to him. He was now prepared to try anything. He set-out, armed with credentials, to meet the Hebrew King. He got a cool reception. The king appeared to think Naaman was asking of him something proper to Yahweh alone, and sent him packing. The prophet Elisha intervened and suggested that Naaman go and wash 3 times in the river! Naaman had had enough – *we have a big and better river in the Euphrates...* But his servant reminded him that if he had been given something arduous to do he would have done it, why not try this? The rest is history.

The point to notice: three unsolicited, unforced interventions by – the slave, the prophet, the servant. None of them *had* to do what they did. They simply did something good for someone in need. This is the pathway for Divine Providence – heightened sensitivity to others' needs, hearts and hands and voices – ordinary folk doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

In the wake of the rail and air disasters of 1988, angry people asked – *where was the good God in all this? Where were all those so-called guardian angels?* A survivor in a radio interview said: *I was trapped in the aircraft, drenched in aviation fuel, terrified of being incinerated – then there was my guardian angel – wearing a fireman's uniform... followed by others in nurses' uniforms...* May this divine assistance ever remain with us!

As long ago, when Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes to feed the hungry, so now may the Spirit of Jesus *which has been poured into our hearts* – Romans 5.5 prompt us to provide the hearts, hands and feet for this good work to continue, the Grace of God remains impotent otherwise. To be *servants of mystery* – Eph.3.9 is to be enlivened by this Spirit, to find self attracted to ways of peace with justice and reconciliation without any need to blame. We must take care to realise that fostering the ways of democracy is not of itself peace-making, since many so-called democracies provide well for the few, but not for all.

Is democracy really *of the people, by the people, for the people*? Look closer at some so-called freedoms: *freedom of expression* – is this universal when the economically influential few control the media? Are we really in a land of the free where Immigration rules are racially biased? Can there be real freedom before the law when political, religious and economic structures disenfranchise?

Democracy means to make and take decisions on the basis of equality for all as its primary motive, and not to allow political expediencies and market forces to oust this. Such integrity needs the re-routing of decision-making processes. Decisions affecting the lives of ordinary folk *should be taken with them and not just for them*. This applies equally to Church structures. How many ordinary lay-folk actually participated, as by right in the Synod of the Laity? Where is the confidence Jesus showed when in the company of ordinary folk? If decisions about the welfare of the unfree rest solely with those who enjoy freedom, then the cry of the poor has not much chance of a hearing. Jesus commented about his absence from such situations – *the healthy have no need of the physician* – Matt.9.12.

There are freedoms on offer! We are encouraged to discover our rights to make choices and improve our lot. Jesus' words: *The Scribes and Pharisees occupy the seat of Moses, they do their deeds to be seen by others... they love seats of honour in the Synagogue... love being called Rabbi...* Matt.23.1. True as this sadly is, it only touches the externals! There is far greater urgency of need for inner freedom. Jesus didn't just crusade for those who have no income, his care was for those who wept, those thirsting for a touch of personal worth, and most especially for those who were impotent to do anything to remedy their plight.

We are all psychologically limited, wounding and wounded by sounds that are *right* sounding but lacking in credibility through absence of personal involvement and/or commitment. *Jesus looked at him and loved him* – Mk.1.10. He was actively seeking to promote the well-being of this young man. When he asked Jesus what he should do, he was told to sell-up, give to the poor and become a disciple. The young man could have retorted with *why don't you practice what you preach?* What would I have said had those words been said to me? To be there, totally, for another is simple – but never easy! Simple, in that being there is straightforward in its meaning; not easy because I am infected by holding onto so many things I need to defend, not just possessions, but my attitudes and anything else that weakens my already handicapped credibility. The difference between *simple* and *easy* is the word integrity. Jesus says *Let your yes be yes* – Matt.5.37. Protesting that I already give half of my wealth to the poor is of little help here, since I am being asked to become one with those thirsting for peace through justice. Giving freely to the poor *is a matter of justice not charity*.

Attitudes here are not without some arrogance. We even speak about the laws of nature, as if we invented them instead of discovering their pre-existence. We cannot decide that the sun will not rise tomorrow, or alter the order of the seasons. Knowing about such things helps us live within them appropriately – harnessing the gifts of nature so that all might experience them equally though never in the same way. Goodness received is the first part of worthiness – calling for us to become what we are receiving for each other in order to celebrate together.

Confusion arises through assuming that freedom and the ability to choose are synonymous. Choice is not the *essence* of freedom – [there is no choice in God]. We cannot be constrained nor made in any way unfree, other than by personal consent. Conditions can be hugely oppressive and intimidating, but *unfreedom* can never be imposed. *Iron bars do not a prison make* unless we allow it! Hostile presence can be totally intimidating, yet human resilience is ever possible. Recall the student, alone, facing the tanks in Tienanman Square! His oppressors cannot be remembered, yet his simple integrity remains intact.

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

[Inscribed by an unknown hand on the walls of Dachau]

Coercion is the imposition of one's will upon another, without their consent. This is not undesirable between parents and children, teachers and pupils. While circumstance might demand something of this nature, to impose it as a way of life is to play the pagan – Jesus' words: *be not like the pagans, those who make their authority felt* - Lk.22.25. This is power-abuse, used to dominate rather than serve, to control and manipulate either to maintain the status quo or simply to impose change.

Power is usually understood as a facility to produce results – be it nuclear or plain and ordinary horse-power; which in effect is simply bragging about *how much power!* There is not much difference between this and stark brute force, once the veneer of pseudo-sophistry has been peeled away. As both Prince and Pope became more and more enmeshed in power games, *the freedom of the children of God* came to mean little more than freedom to obey, *do what you are told – I'll tell you when you need to know!* Justice can never be sustained through power! It is salutary to remember that at the end of the game bishop and pawn go into the same box!

The Gospel seeks to ensure that structures serve the life. Christ must win-through over all power centres, ensuring that *power serves justice* since it is exercised by everyone on behalf of each other. Power cannot save, but it can be salvific through serving all, with no one excluded or marginalised, since its purpose is to maintain a degree of external order, not to create justice.

This is why honouring the Sabbath is crucial to Gospel living, because it is intended to provide space and time to allow us to remember, recall, remind ourselves that we are created to become contemplative, and through honouring this centre, become gradually aware of who we are! *The Sabbath was made for man* – Mk.2.27.

Justice, while it requires the service of structures, must never be compromised by them. It is right and proper to write down and proclaim workers' rights, and to have them respected and honoured. But they are not written on stone tablets. We all know who the victims of injustice are, and hear this vindicated by such remarks as: *they have received what is their due!* Obedience to the Gospel has a necessary non-conformism about it, and it is the task of Justice to protect rights needed for human maturation, and never to be deflected from this through unhealthy compromise.

Justice is at the service of Charity, and Charity of its nature is self-emptying for another. The proper ordering of justice through charity is disrupted when these two are separated. Charity always seeks, not just for the person *to be*, but *to-be-with*, and it is the role of justice to facilitate this progression. At times this will mean a willed non-conformity, existing peacefully within the status quo, suggesting that it [*justice*] remains open to providing for a better future: *...by speaking of a new Covenant, he has pronounced the first one obsolete; and*

anything that is becoming obsolete will disappear – Heb.8.13. This is the paradox of the Mystery of Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, with a *sameness* that is unchangingly always new.

Evil is not firmly rooted in the human heart. We are vulnerable, yet open to the influence for conversion as well as its opposite. Sin is not simply situated in the human heart; it is to be found within our structures often seemingly to a degree sufficient to shift culpability away from the individual. If we go on obeying some rules, we must go on sinning! Some economic structures make it impossible *to act justly, to love tenderly...* thus making it ever more unlikely that we *walk humbly with God* – Micah.6.8.

We are not saved by good intentions. We need to be aware of the reality of personal sin, and how to recognise sinful structures. The Gospel counsels us to be wary of casting out one devil to make room for even more! Conversion follows change of heart and renewal of structures. The Church has, in past times, allied itself with structures that have been less than just, bolstering regimes that have been tyrannical!

We know that the law is spiritual, but I am not; I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not acknowledge my own actions as mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest. But if what I do is against my will, then clearly I agree with the law and hold it to be admirable. This means that it is no longer I that performs the action, but sin dwelling in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me – I mean my unspiritual self – for though the will to do good is there, the ability to effect it is not. The good I wish to do, I fail to do; what I do is the wrong which is against my will; clearly it is no longer I who am the agent, but sin which has its dwelling in me –
Romans 7.14-20.

There is a place for coercive power in the name of the common good, but as a way of life it is inimical to human freedom, no matter how noble the intent. One needs only ask recipients of such behaviour what it feels like; this engenders such cynicism as *we reserve compassion for our friends, and justice for everyone else!* Coercion mocks personal worthiness, ensuring that personal feelings and fears fall on deaf ears in favour of what has been pre-planned and already decided, without reference to those having to live with the consequences of this. Persuasion, God's chosen way, is deemed to be too time-wasting requiring, as of necessity, listening, evaluating and discerning together.

God is not immune from such treatment either. *Almighty* God tends to suggest God having an infinity of *power-over*; whereas Revelation is more than clear that the infinity of power in God is persuasive, not coercive, an inexhaustible, unique to everyone, desire to be with intimately, and never *I'm in charge!* To see only coercive power in God, means seeing our relationship with God as founded on weakness, helpless and hopeless without God. This we most certainly are, but does God's point of view matter?

The Word made flesh assures us of a threefold oneness: God loves us; God will always love us; God loves us exactly as we are! Weak and helpless sinners we certainly are; in need of redemption, most surely. Yet what God has revealed to us in Jesus is that we are in a position of strength, not weakness. I can ignore God, disown God, and forget God. God can do none of this as regards me. Why? Because he *says* he loves me. God cannot take back this Word, Jesus Christ; and, moreover, the same Scriptures tell us *the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever* - Is.40.8 and elsewhere in the same Book – *The Word of God will not return to God without achieving its purpose.*

Our quote from Romans 7 continues in vv.24-25 – asking: *Wretched creature that I am, who is there to save me from this state of death? Who but God, thanks be to him through Christ Jesus!* How weak and helpless can I be, yet how strong in the intent of God! This is hard to accept, and maybe at times we would prefer a God

of precept and command, when we seem to cope more easily with doing what we are told than with exercising personal responsibility for the imperatives of love.

This came home to Francis with a searing realism, when he began to gaze on Christ crucified now with an awareness not so much that this is what my sins have done, but virtually hearing God say to him through the crucified Lord – *you will be lost over my dead body!* And the Letter to the Hebrews says: *The power of Jesus to save, is utterly certain since he is living forever to intercede for all who come to God because of him* – 7.25.

Like Jacob who was said to be *strong against God* – Gen.32.28, Francis saw how strong he was in his total weakness. He saw reality as it is, and not obscured by our undoubted indigence. The question we need constantly to confront is: am I big enough for such freedom? Indeed, there are many, so many, who will never countenance that we owe God nothing, since without God there would be nothing! Surely, we owe God everything? All this is undeniably true. Listen to John telling us that what matters is not our love for God but God's love for us – not that our love doesn't matter, but that God's love is total, complete and, unlike us, is eternally reliable. In calling us, the Church, the new *Israel* - a word which means *strong against God!* – Gen.32.28, the New Testament assures us of our birth-right. Yet we are sinners, we are guilty, how do we cope with this?

Jesus assures us that in accepting the life of Grace we are not best described as sinners, but as *forgiven sinners*. How are we persuaded of such value? We are convinced by truthful persuasion, along with its effects through personal conviction, made concrete in good example: *Imitate me as I imitate Christ* – 1Cor.11.1. This is Christian maturing, having the audacity to say something like that!

Persuasion is attractive, not coercive, eliciting risk simply by the quality of presence. Goodness is always alluring. This is the arena for choosing and decision-making in pursuit of value and not stimulated through fear. It means facing real alternatives, choosing this partner *for life* and not another one – all the while being committed to the integrity of one's given word. It could mean opting for the fruitfulness of celibacy rather than the creativity of marriage, or courageously living a loving life in the single state. None of these choices are to be made out of weakness or fear. To ignore this is simply seeking a refuge, where we become refugees in life. We are responsible for what we become, and we are better *persuaded* towards such *becoming* than coerced.

Love is freedom from the dominance of possessiveness. We opt for love because it is more compelling than our hitherto self-centredness. Life is very much determined by our enthusiasm for it, wholehearted, passionate commitment. This requires two feet firmly on the ground dealing with the ordinary stuff of life, where coercion is an unwelcome intruder, when commitment is the chosen way of living.

Scripture abounds with imagery of an *involved* God: pleading, urging, persuading, even arguing the point – with Abraham – and losing! Jacob becomes Israel through wrestling with God successfully. Hosea presents God as pleading with an unfaithful wife – *come back to me...* and the Song of Songs makes it abundantly clear how God pursues us. All of this is shot through with freedom, like that enjoyed by the young man in Mk. 10. For whom the love of God was not enough - *he went away sad!*

Here is the incredible truth, we know many times in our own lives when, like this young man, God as *not been enough* for us and we followed other paths [*ending also in sadness!*], but there never will be a time when we are not enough for God! But where this really impacts is in realising that the language God uses to communicate this to us is *Incarnation*.

The Word of God seeking my love is Jesus Christ, who is with me totally without any hint of coercion. Coercive force is so wide-spread that it has penetrated even into our ways of referring to God, diverting our gaze away from the Cross, whose eloquence proclaims that the aggressive violence responsible for this cannot in anyway cause a response that is equally violent and aggressive – *Father, forgive them, they don't know...*Lk.23.34.

Providence and freedom sit well together. We are not key-board keys waiting to be pressed, ready to go on producing the same letter time after time, no matter how many *in power* positions behave towards us as if this were so. No question, we are dependant beings, depending on a reasonable access to earth, air, fire and water, right on through to warm affection and gentle affirmation.

We are all influenced by history, family and environment, and on top of this we have our own unique temperament; yet none of these individually, nor can all of them collectively *compel* us one way or another. They can condition and even incline us, but within our own freedom they cannot compel us.

But first, our freedom needs to be set free! It is one thing to have the ability to act freely, but it takes more than a little courage to invest oneself in it as a way of life. We learn by imitation how to walk, but not *where* to walk. We learn how to speak, but not *what* to say. There is a deal of unfinished business in all of us, of necessity. We protest vigorously when we are treated as finished products, which others claim to know all about – *you can't tell me anything about him/her...* We need to keep firmly in mind that any specific moment in our lives does not contain all there is to us.

We possess infinite potential, and only some of it will become flesh and blood. We need to attend as to how and when such choices come to be made, and what are their implications. Commitment is not having a happy time currently, within this *throw-away* culture motivated as it is by self-promotion before all else; so that when things get tough we are prompted to let go and move on – no more is it deemed important to set to and try to make things work with renewed determination.

Where is God's will in all this? The eternal heart and mind of God is that every single thing in creation, each in its own way, can reflect its origin in the total, self-emptying love of God. This depends on humankind accepting to live humanity in a new way, to live differently in response to the invitation to intimacy with God, living in creation in such fashion as to let all creation achieve this purpose. The face of the earth will be changed by the way it is lived-in. This is something that has already been achieved totally in Jesus, in whom what is created [*his humanity*] and what is uncreated [*his divinity*] are completely one. But what is true of him must become universal, through the giving of that same Holy Spirit *poured into our hearts*. It is a sobering thought that *both heaven and hell* are the ways God's love will be experienced forever!

Some seem to think that to justify anything one need only append the word *love* to the enterprise. Everything that is normally forbidden or unlawful, or even unhealthy, seems to get this seal of approval; and this because we lose sight of the fact that love and truth are inseparable. Life is about *doing the truth in love* – Eph.4.15.

In an age that is gradually emerging from an unhealthy fear of the body, it is crucial to appreciate this truth. To love is to be active in promoting the well-being of the other, not simply the passive and inept wishing them well! Just as Jesus said *blessed are the peace-makers* – peace lovers abound aplenty, not so peace-makers. To love is to welcome and encourage the other to reach full potential as a human being, irrespective of what we might prefer for that person. This applies equally to those who embrace the vow of chastity – remembering that everybody is obliged to live chastely. To love is to desire to know more and more, to seek to open self to intimacy in trust and respect, moving to what 1Cor.13.12 refers to: *when we shall know as we are known*.

Letting *life happen according to the Word* – Lk.1.38 allows the Spirit to achieve in us what it achieved in Mary, to make the Lord present wherever we are present. However, where order *should* be, disorder abounds and not all of it is of our own doing. To be a believer is gradually to become aware, through the heightened sensitivity living by Grace brings, of the plight and needs of others [*as Mary going to Elizabeth*]. Moreover, God has lived our disorder fully, without having any answers: he was wrongly accused, unjustly tried and condemned, brutally killed... to the extent of asking where Abba was on Good Friday?

Moreover, it is not the Cross that saves us, Jesus is our Saviour. The cross was what was demanded of him claiming to show how much God loves us, even those acting unjustly, abusing most cruelly – all are to be recipients of God's unconditional love.

The Cross is not saying that God's patience is inexhaustible, that God will not resort to coercion, but that God *cannot* coerce. Jesus shows how survival by violence is worse than death. As Paul reminds us - Rom.8.38 *nothing can separate us from the love of God*. There is no power whatsoever, no force or persecution, no violence that can deprive us of God's love. Yes, he died, nailed to a cross, mocked and abandoned - yet is he alive, risen from the dead, not to claim revenge, not to blame, but to carry-on loving no longer impeded by death and its minions.

There is a beautiful cameo piece in the Gospel that sums this up. *The stranger on the shore*: John 21.7, after Good Friday the disciples having returned to former ways, with disillusion, returning to their fishing are coming ashore - they see the Lord waiting there. No doubt guilt and shame at abandoning him so disgracefully is uppermost - but what does he say to them? No blame, no inquest, no pointing the finger, simply: *have you had breakfast?* The Easter message: *God holds no one in disregard*.

Life's purpose is to live well. We are not placed on this planet devoid of all inter-action. We not only feel, we co-feel. We belong, we relate and relating means leaving self freely, to be with others, in quality living, affirming and welcoming the differences each other makes. Far from sinning against freedom of choice, this requires, of necessity, our free-will power, if we are freely and willingly to go against our own preferred ways.

To this end we all have gifts, talents, skills to help create the appropriate environment for each other to flourish. More than likely some if not all of our gifts are unknown to us, which is not surprising when we realise that our gifts and talents are not meant for us to keep, but to be used to gift ourselves to each other in such a variety of ways.

We have not been conscripted by Jesus to *serve the cause!* We see all too frequently the decadence of such behaviour, for example, when terrorists blasphemously attempt to subjugate people to systems, demanding giving of one's own life as well as taking the lives of others.

Neither should we think that to be fully alive, means to be without pain! The experience of "fullness" is all to do with the *quality* of life, the appropriate response to life as it is. Ecclesiastes 3.1 reminds us

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:*

*a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,*

a time to kill and a time to heal,

*a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

A reminder of the appropriate time for everything; there is an appropriate response to bereavement, and it is sadness and even anger, since to be missed is to be loved. To enjoy life to the full is equally the right of the terminally ill as of the hale and hearty. This is a crucial awareness, since while the circumstances of life are, in the main, out of our control, control over the *quality* of such living most certainly isn't. We are not fated, but graced people.

When we accept to live by the life of Grace, when we risk opening the gift of the Spirit poured into us, we begin to see the *real* of everything. God is real, and as the Psalm says – *in your light we see light!* – Ps.36.9, we begin to see the *real* of everyone and everything *and* to appreciate such gifts with the desire to give thanks [*like Francis in his Cantic for Creation*].

What is real, asked the rabbit one day... Real isn't how you are made, said the skin horse, it is something which happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real. Does it hurt? Sometimes... but when you are real you don't mind being hurt. It doesn't happen all at once, you become, it takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real you cannot be ugly, except to people who don't understand!

The Velveteen Rabbit – Margery Williams.

We cannot pretend to be without limitations, and we do resent them, yet we can become fully free within them. If I am afflicted with chronic heart disease, or have lost the use of limbs, I can do one of two things. I can simply fade away under such a heavy burden into daily negativity [*and maybe hostility*], or I can enjoy life to the full within the potential given me –

Lord, grant me the serenity to accept things I can't change, courage to change things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference! –
Serenity Prayer.

To live by the Grace of that prayer produces the kind of heroism and infectiousness we have all witnessed in so many courageous folk. It evokes tears of compassion, appreciation and affirmation in those privileged to witness it – a telling example of the gifts given to one for the benefit of others.

Such living shows just how worthwhile life is, that it is *designed* to be shared, it is a good place to be. The annual fund-raising TV Programme *Children in Need* confronts us with the heroism of so many young people

who have not allowed themselves to be constrained by some most horrendous handicaps, who refuse to lie down, and do not let circumstances impede their enjoyment of life. This very rightly earns thunderous applause, sadly from a nation which, through its abortion legislation is making it more and more impossible for such heroism to be born!

At times our thinking and the verbalising of it betrays us into speaking about *handicapped* people, expressing genuine sympathy for some who cannot enjoy life like the rest of us. What a pity so many cannot see TV entertainment – when even more cannot read Braille! The use of *handicap* in this sense is something we impose on others; it isn't an innate experience for *them* [us?]. What is different, is that, granted the universality of limitations, some are more patent than others, yet are we all limited.

This is why Jesus did not just *win* eternal life for us, but shows us how to live today from tomorrow and not from yesterday. And this within the greatest and universal limitation of all, showing us how to die well! Many express surprise on hearing Francis hail *bodily death* as a beloved sister in his Canticle – *welcome, sister bodily death!* It is as if he is remembering what Scripture says about death – *no one can see the face of God and live!* – Ex.33.20 – and yells back in great excitement – *if death allows me to see God's face, then welcome sister death!* It is not for us to play God and decide who will live and who will not, this is far beyond our responsibilities. But we can receive awareness of life's purpose gratefully, the proper and only response to Grace.

Chapter Five

I have called you friends...

All I know is that I was blind, and now I can see – Jn.9.25. Such was the defence of the unsighted man healed by Jesus when accosted by the authorities. This is the difference faith makes. It does not create new realities, but indicates where the *real* is to be found, *realising [making real]* everything in the proper sense of that word. It makes apparent what has always been there, but thus far has gone undetected, since reason *unaided* cannot see the *length, breadth and depth* – Eph.3.18 of reality.

Faith gives substance to our hope and convinces us of realities we do not see –
Heb.11.1.

This is not just a different way of knowing, but a different way of living, one that is pure gift, yet from within all of us. Listen to Martha and Mary taking Jesus to task after their brother's death when Jesus arrived *too late!* *I do believe in the Resurrection on the last day, but if you had been here he would not have died!* Jesus replies: *I am the Resurrection and the life* - Jn.11.24. Living faith lifts us out of the seeming finality all around us, into a hitherto unknown experience of living, infinitely attractive and in no way a velleity [*a mere wish, not strong enough to produce action*].

Faith is *poured into hearts* – Rom.5.5, through Baptism, or rather are we given a potential, since it requires a favourable environment if it is to flourish. It is like a tender shoot among a whole host of counter realities; a situation that persists until it slowly dawns that faith is not just one option in life among so many others, but is *the reality* of what it means to be fully alive, well able to cope with a world that has death in it! As noted earlier [p.2] we *know* we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and like responsible recipients have also said *thank-you* in so many ways, but have we dared to open it? This is a rhetorical question, since if we had, our lives would have changed radically and it would show:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. – Gal.5.23.

This is all about the ordinary of everyday living. The quest for value-living, discerning the purpose of life through choices that we must make, soon becomes an imperative, if we are to live responsibly. It concerns the quality of our relationships, and not just an intellectual nod to formulated truths. Thomas Aquinas comforts us by showing that a believer makes an act of faith in the *person* to whose words we give our free assent, the *beliefs* themselves are secondary, though important. To believe is to believe-in. As Tillich says: *it is freely accepting being acceptable to God*. This is why faith actually changes the believer, bringing about conversion by allowing God access to us as *responsible* people [*well capable of response*].

There are two cameo pieces in the Gospel, each involving Peter. The first concerns the reaction to Jesus' stark proclamation – *unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...* Jn.6.56. – this [*seeming cannibalism*] is too much, and they turned away – Jn.6.41. Jesus offered no explanation, but said to his disciples – *will you go away too?* – Jn.6.61-62. To use modern idiom for Peter's reply – *I haven't a clue what you are talking about, but if you say it...* The second incident illustrates the demand for change that faith makes. For whatever reason, Peter had become more aware of Jesus' identity, seeing himself in contrast, he says [*again using modern idiom*] *Stay away from me, if you stay with the likes of me you'll get hurt...* to which Jesus replies: *yes, but if you stay with the likes of me I'll make you a fisher of men* – cf. Lk.5.8. Living faith is exploring the giftedness of the unique relationship God claims with each one of us.

This is where all forms of renewal in faith programmes should begin, realising that if the relationship Jesus claims with us [*as our brother makes us also beloved of Abba*] remains *unopened* – *one-sided* – then *Institutionalism* is all we have to look forward to. The capacity for friendship is of the essence of being fully alive. The friendship Jesus speaks about is not the capricious way we find some people attractive more than we do others. *I have called you friends... the Father has told me all about you...* cf. Jn.15.15. What the Father makes known to us is that we are who we are as a direct and incarnate choice of God's uniquely personal love for each one. Truly, it is love alone that personalises, and it is on this that the Kingdom is founded.

A community can never be such in reality if all it has to keep it together is the authority of the one in charge, nor will it survive simply on good-will. Like each of its members, a community also has a mission, or more properly put, a community is called to be *community in mission*. The divine proposal – *the gift of life* – is that the intimacy God would have with us individually finds full expression in the infinity of the ways of being human together. Jesus offered this freely to everyone willing to hear it – *those who have ears, let them hear...* Mt.13.15.

Such a mission is about proclaiming *we are for Christ*, because we have been given the same Spirit that is his by nature as Son of God, and so we can allow God to be present in this world through us by the ways we are present to the world in living faith. Such presence varies in intensity in appropriate ways, but is truly universal wherever there is living in the Spirit.

How sad to see this side-lined in communities in which relationships are little more than structural mechanisms. Structures need to be *strong* if they are to achieve their purpose – *to serve the life!* But life's purpose can never be to serve the structures! To shift to this imbalance means there is no respect, no place for personal initiatives – *we don't do options*, because the message is already carved in stone, and all that

remains is that we carry them out – to the letter! How sad to concentrate so much on renewing methods of communication *when there is nothing to communicate just more of the same!* Whatever name belongs to such a group of frustrated people, it certainly cannot be *I have called you friends!*

Renewal, confined solely to economics, mission, organization and efficiency is worthless and pointless without the necessary foundation of the personal commitment of each to the other, anchored in the community of Church in the world. Heed the warning Jesus gave to the Church in his own day – *You travel over sea and land to win one convert, and when you have succeeded you make him twice as fit for hell as you are yourselves* – Mt.23.15.

There is frustration when best efforts at renewal seem to have little impact and are treated as *more of the same* – *Magni passus sed extra viam!* - concentrating on effort expended, yet forgetting the *necessary togetherness* which is what it is all about. It is salutary to remember that individualism is not only found in overtly selfish ways, it is also rampant in some seemingly self-emptying endeavours. I could spend every moment in doing things for others – but why? The only valid reason is because that is where the Lord promised *we can find him*.

Initially Jesus did not praise Peter for his faith – that came later – but that he had been open to receive. Life in Christ is far more concerned with how much we are willing to receive rather than achieve. Faith is total gift, gift that goes on *being given*. It cannot be earned or bought, it is there *gratis [grace]*, and the appropriate response to grace is gratitude. What is it that is given? It is the ability to recognise Jesus from Nazareth as the Christ and, in time, to allow this to percolate every aspect of my living as the motivating power of life – *I live now no longer I, but Christ lives in me* – Gal.2.20.

This means that faith is to be *experienced*, not just known by our usual way of knowing – it is the *new way* of knowing that transcends both intellection and any need for it. It was this that brought Peter to his knees – *keep away from me, I am a sinner* – Lk.5.8. Expectations are proper and legitimate, but they can get in the way occasionally. *If you want to make God smile, tell him your plans!* Jesus was crucified because he didn't live up to expectations. There are times when God's love is not big enough for us, illustrated in Mk. 10 with the rich young man, who went away sad.

The security of faith rests on the growing awareness that whilst there are times in my life when God isn't enough for me, there never will be a time when I am not enough for God! [*Legend has it that this young man reappeared, when the man next to Jesus on Calvary said to him – Remember me?*]. Apocryphal as this could well be, it does show how love never abandons us, despite our rejection of it.

If everything in life has to pass the logic test, we are going to have problems with such realities as wonder, fascination and mystery. It is true that if we recklessly violate the ways of reason, we enter into the world of the absurd. However, there is *a difference in kind [not just degree]* between faith and reason. Reason takes us to that frontier where, in order to further, there is nothing to rely on but the given word of another – *seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand* – Augustine.

Reason brought John Henry Newman to this frontier, where he found himself longing for *the kindly light* of faith to pierce the *encircling gloom* of reason unenlightened. Ask such a one what is the underlying quality experience, and hear that it is *courage*, in whose presence all other powers of conviction and persuasion must fall silent. It is when on hearing *I love you* – your whole being responds, *yes, I know!* Then does it become necessary to fit this new experience into the mind, as Peter urges us – *Give an account of the faith that is in you* - 1Peter.1.7.

Where this comes from has been variously described – Augustine's *restless heart*. Rahner's *awakening to something that has always been there*, a given instinct for God that is alive and active, seeking to express itself in ways as yet unknown to us, since things of God are always unchangingly always new –

Believe me when I tell you this, the one who has learned to believe will be able do what I do, and even greater things...

Jn.14.6.

We all experience inadequacy and irrelevance, and at times to a painful degree. We need only recall the seeming inadequacy of our love to prevent the dying of a loved one. The experience of personal involvement is high when expectations of us are that we *be someone* rather than say or do something. It is moments like this that bring us something of the reality of *let this cup pass from me!* – Mt.26.39, yet knowing it cannot because personal integrity will not allow it.

The work of the Spirit in us is gradual, keeping pace with our level of believing, just one step ahead gently urging us forward. The signs are incontrovertible – *I will hear what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* – Ps.85.8. When Paul numbers the Gifts he speaks of them present all at once, not just one now and again! This is why we need to be wary of the ascetic who has no joy, and to question authority that is without gentleness. Yet simply having Jesus around is as insufficient now as it was in his own days on earth, when many, many more saw him than the few who believed. Even his friends couldn't understand him and his family were for having him put away – Mk.3.21.

To the unbeliever, faith is either an enigma or a no-go-area, perhaps because it often is confused with credulity. Newman was speaking from profound experience when he said that *thousands of problems do not qualify to make a single doubt*. To believe means accepting the whole purpose of life from Life itself. There is a close connection between faith and beliefs, though they are distinct. Faith is believing in the God who believes in me. The many and serious implications of this we spell out via truths/beliefs.

I am Truth – claims Jesus – Jn.14.6. He did not say I know what is true, he said I am Truth. *Credo* literally means *I pledge my heart*, and involves movement towards conversion. This is why in the Baptismal Liturgy, the response appropriate to embracing faith is *I do*, not I agree. The Gospel presents faith as a new way of being human, focused on and revolving round Jesus, now able, through the Spirit, to share his enthusiasm for and enjoyment of fullness of life.

This being said, it is now apparent that faith brings about change in the believer – whereas a mere intellectual nod to Christian truths does not. To have as one's primary focus feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, and never to marginalise by pointing the finger of blame, means a radical change in life-style: *by their fruits you will know...* Mt.7.16. Yet without the formulation of life through truths, all would be indeterminate. Expression via creed and dogma is trying to fit into our understanding what we are already confessing in our hearts. Faith seeks to be lived-out through incarnation, and as it is the eternity of God we seek to express, it comes as no surprise that we [*the Church*] believe far more than we understand.

There is a tendency to become over-catechised and under-evangelised! A great deal of attention and industry is applied to making sure we are properly informed about faith matters, and this is good. What is missing is an equivalent, if not greater, emphasis on our perennial need for ongoing evangelisation, the challenge individually and communally to *living faith, faith with skin!* To overlook this is to cater for starvation diets through a variety of programmes, which could be of enormous help when grounded in real, live shared

experiences of faith. The warning signs are ominous, the descent from challenging liturgical vibrancy into little more than rubrical necessity. It is neither truthful nor honest to ignore or in any way to by-pass our beliefs, all the while professing faith in the God of such values.

To believe is to believe in someone, not something; and to feel compelled to let this show in some bodily way, what Paul calls – *doing the truth in love*. – Eph.4.15. A believer strives to live every aspect of life to the full, and this in all its forms from agony through to ecstasy and everywhere in between. This calls not just for a change of habit, just doing different things, but to opt for that proffered heart transplant – *I will take away your heart of stone and put within you a heart of flesh* – Ezek.11.19. This will mean, not a resolve to pray, but a desire to become a prayer – as Francis' biographer wrote of him – *he did not so much pray as become himself a prayer!*

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, at first sight it might seem a strange request for Jews, who are brought up from infancy to integrate all aspects of life with prayer – they already knew how to pray! But not like they had seen him pray! They didn't hear him say or see him do anything, they simply saw him quietly being himself! On two occasions we hear who he is! At his Baptism by John and during the Transfiguration - Mt.3.17; 17.5. He is the *beloved of Abba!* He, so to speak, sits down within this and lets it be real, literally experiencing himself as the beloved. What is his by nature, as Son God, is ours by Grace – *to all who believe... he gave power to know God as Father* - Jn.1.12. So that he can say - *when you pray say Our Father* – Mt.6.9.

We find this stressed variously throughout Revelation – *I hate your pilgrim feasts; I take no delight in your sacred ceremonies. When you present offerings I will not accept them... shame on you who have plenty and remain unconcerned about those who have nothing* - Amos 5. *Put aside your evil deeds, pursue justice and champion the rights of the poor* – Is.1.13.

To begin with, I am told that when you meet as a congregation you fall into sharply divided groups... the result is that it is impossible for you to celebrate the Lord's Supper because each of you is in such a hurry to eat alone, that while one goes hungry another has too much to drink... are you so contemptuous of the Church that you embarrass the poor? –
1Cor.11.18-22.

Faith requires a moral and religious change as well as calling for an ecclesial outreach. We are a community called Church, and this is why doctrines are honoured or condemned, in as much as they open or close off access to the Mystery of God. We are called to be *servants of the Mystery* – Col.4.3. To be within the presence of the Mystery is to be with one in whom there can be no deceit, and not simply to have a *devotion* to the Jesus of history. Jesus is the *same today, yesterday and forever* – Heb.13.8, and remains unchangingly always new, or, as Augustine observes - *there is no one younger than God!* Faith shows us much more than a good man who helped the poor and oppressed, by telling us who he is: - *it is not flesh and blood that has told you this, but my Father in Heaven...* Mt.16.17.

Jesus tells us where his authority lies, not for him the abusive *I'm in charge, I know what's right...* He simply says – *I know where I come from and where I am going.* – Jn.8.14, and this is relevant for all creation. There is a thirst to know the secrets of life, where it is from, how it happened, what is it for? Jesus simply says – *I am the way, the truth, the life* – Jn.14.6. This is the Mystery in which we are all caught up and has been made clear to us through Jesus proclaiming *God is Abba!*

Church life, over the years, has moved in and out of the significance of this Revelation. A life marked with fascination, awe and wonder has drifted into the cul-de-sacs of fundamentalisms, and even tepid superstition. We need constantly to be challenged to believe, to make room for faith, in a time when overzealous self-interest and the frenetic clamour of science and technology – all in themselves good – yet misguidedly trying to *direct* life instead of *servicing*.

It is paradoxically exhilarating to meet what our world would call *primitives*, where comforts are minimal, but who themselves are wide-open to wonder and to be surprised. I have in mind such a one who, sitting alone in the scrub-land of the Kalahari Desert, when I asked him what he was doing said – *waiting for a bus* – and when I asked him when it was due, he said: *sometimes Thursday, sometimes Friday!* How would I cope with the implications there? All because we have lost our cherishing of solitude.

For a culture in which time = profit/loss there is no room for what is deemed to be wasting time. At the same time, the thought of solitude being thrust upon us, wanted or otherwise, is abhorrent. Whereas solitude is a deliberately willed experience in order to *be there for someone else!* There is a passivity to it, but this is underwritten by an alertness focused away from self – *be still and know that I am God* – Ps.46.10. Far from being a soporific, a moment of solitude calls for clear alertness in order to hear. Look at the sprinter waiting to hear the crack of the starter's pistol – almost wanting to be the first to hear it. Solitude is like the difference between hearing this pistol shot in the grandstand, and the sprinter hearing it.

In former days, written into every horarium of a Religious community was the word *recreation*. Which has this in common with solitude, it is a time to be there for another, and not simply an invitation to relax in common. Relaxation is a purely personal experience. We all like to relax in different ways, it means to be there for myself, and it is good to be able to do this from time to time. How relaxation is enjoyed is purely a matter of taste. For some it is sitting and reading, for others walking or listening to music.

Recreation, however, is something different, since it means being there for others. It can entail hard effort, and with a legitimate expectation that others are there for us. If we would know the quality of life in a community, look for the presence of solitude, since community rests on this same founding principle. In groups where community life is minimal, we will find that relaxation has replaced both recreation and solitude. There must be room for both relaxation and recreation, but recreation stands no chance of viability if there is no priority given to personal solitude.

Expressions like *quiet time* often attract unfair comments – *What is wrong with using the well-tried word Meditation?* Everything is wrong with it if it means something completely different! Quiet time is both necessary and wholesome, since it contains the essentials for being there for another. It is in tune with the more dramatic desert experience, so strong in Christian tradition. To have a desert experience doesn't actually require a desert! I have spent time in the desert on more than one occasion, and in none of them did I feel the benefit of solitude! What is striking, and points to the core value of such experiences, is that there is nothing in a desert made by human hands – as also with a mountain-top or a sea-shore. A challenge to recognise within each one of us that which is not made by human hands, and for us to visit there frequently to be with the one who created it for that purpose, to know *where I come from and where I am going* – Jn.8.14.

The cost of sophisticated living, the increase in tempo, everything is now to be *instant*, all this fuels the rise of impatience and the demise of its virtue. Impatience renders me impotent in my creativity. If a bus or train is delayed and I impatiently keep looking at my watch, I have got all the time in the world with nothing to do, but I can do nothing. I cannot even sit back and watch the world go by. This is not to decry the wonders and inventiveness of science and technology, which truly have contributed well to life's quality enhancement, but

a reminder of what could happen if we don't control rather than be controlled. We are now decades into generations who cannot work or play without the presence of music [*musak!*]. Somehow, somewhere the *ought* that is missing from all this has to be reinstated, to get us away from the notion that because something can be done it should be done!

Bonaventure, interpreting Scripture, says that knowledge that does not lead to love is erroneous; taking wisdom out of knowledge simply leaves information. Advances have been made in extending life's span [*in the West*], but without the necessary priority afforded to helping the increasing numbers requiring varying kinds of support. Indeed, the surge in genetic engineering suggests a decline in respect for the dignity of life itself. Again, we are within the ethic of convenience, because we can do it we should do it.

A believer is one who is aware of the appropriateness of harmony between Creator and creation. This the first fruit of: *I will take away your heart of stone and put within you a heart of flesh...* Ezek.36.26 highlights the *how* of decision-making, making us sensitive not just to what is, but to what *ought* to be. Current chaos and insensitivities are consequent upon reserving to oneself what is good and what is not, and this in the face of the express counsel of Genesis which tells us that it is not for us to decide what is good. *Only God is good* – Ps.73.1. And the goodness that only God is, is with us as goodness made flesh in Jesus, the Christ. Goodness is far more to do with how much we are prepared to receive rather than to achieve.

Merit requires clear understanding, since it does not simply mean that something is achieved purely in consequence of following a process. Good works do not merit heaven. It is Grace alone that allows us to live within the *ordering* of God, though the living still has to be undergone. It is one thing to know what should be, and another to own the implications of what is known sufficiently to allow them to become flesh and blood realities. Just to mouth words against injustice, is gratuitously offensive, without any intent to incarnate them. Jesus said blessed are the *peace-makers*, not *peace-lovers*.

Light allows us to see what would otherwise remain concealed. Jesus, the Light of the World, allows us to see everything, except the origin of the light. Truth and reality are coterminous, especially in the face of a reluctance to live in the dark; yet there is a shadow. We are surrounded by so many obvious ruins, faced with evidence of what used-to-be; evidence of death and decay is abundant enough to persuade us that whilst our hope is firmly rooted in eternal life, there is a very real *not yet!* We do have a legitimate longing for permanence, when we won't have to endure so many separations, either by circumstance or bereavement, a conviction that goodness outlives its opposites. This is the very real world of faith.

Faith can and does accommodate life's negative experiences, as, for example, faith allowed Francis to welcome *sister bodily death* – letting him realise that *no one can see the face of God and live* – Ex.33.20 which erupted into the enthusiasm: *if death allows me to see the face of God, then welcome sister!* When we shrink away from feelings of emptiness and absence of hope, something that can occur naturally, we seek for all kinds of re-fills: power, wealth, status... until faith gently affirms that we are deliberately created empty in order to be filled full, like Mary who prayed in thanksgiving because her *emptiness is assured* – Lk.1.48.

All attempts to be filled with anything less than everything must fail, because the capacity is infinite! Only God is big enough – *the Holy Spirit will overshadow you* – Lk.1.35. It is the role of the Spirit to bring forth from within more than is there by nature. In this way did Mary present the world with its Saviour. Our vocation is no different. Through the action of the Holy Spirit within us, we are asked to make the Lord present in our world by the way we are present, and not simply by what we say.

God is life – we are made in this image, and from time to time our nature has a longing to know where it is from and where it is going. This shows in all kinds of ways in which goodness is allowed to be present. Recall the words of Bonaventure: *wherever you find goodness, celebrate it; wherever you find goodness damaged, repair it; wherever you find goodness missing, bring it with you.* Even evil-motivated people try to pass off their nefarious deeds as good.

Searching for goodness requires much more than what we know we can achieve, we need to be lured beyond ourselves by fascination, willingness to dream, to outreach ourselves. Such fruits are readily recognised and universally desired – the ways in which e.g. art and poetry inspire, when music raises us up, realising that the poet doesn't just say things differently, but says different things. Paradoxically this even shows when we have taken a wrong turning, because the *feeling* was good; as long as we are honest, we may not be right, but we won't be wrong, since honesty leads eventually to truth and on to conversion.

Many there are who would lay the blame for so many *wrong turns* at the door of the Church, insisting that the Church has trapped what was good, obvious and attractive about Jesus within over-concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxy, the letter rather than the spirit which is always in search of intimacy. This what compelled those first *hearers* of Jesus to say – *this man speaks with authority* – Mt.7.29. History shows that the poor always suffer wherever ritual purity and doctrinal rectitude take precedence over personal well-being and respect. There is an ecclesiastical dimension to our common life, but it is always to be at the service of the ecclesial. For the same reason, and in all fairness, we shouldn't feel shielded by the fact that such accusations are levelled at the ecclesiastical Institution, since we are the ecclesia!

Francis discovered this truth in a rather circuitous way, he came to see that the things he naturally relied on, like wealth, economic security, status, privilege... were now sterile. He moved away from behaving in such a self-sufficient way, through the growing awareness that everything about life and creation is gift. God does not create property, only gifts; and free access such giftedness is the birth-right of everyone – we are all equal [*creatures of the same Creator*] but not the same. He came to see that he was looking in the wrong places, so he gave up his former ways, leaving it all behind him – or so he thought!

What actually happened, he had unwittingly let-go his acquisitions, let-go his role as owner-occupier, thus setting everything free to come back to him in a new way. Because of our common origin in Abba, the sun is now his brother, the moon his sister, the whole world his friary, the place where sisters and brothers live. Nothing of the romantic here, rather a profound and God-given instinct. He was experiencing Jesus as his friar, his brother – a relationship claimed by Jesus with Francis – the same Jesus who is God's creative Word, from whom all takes its origin. No longer are we creatures of the Creator, but sisters and brothers of friar Christ, owning God as Abba and ourselves as *beloved of Abba!*

If we are willing to risk stepping outside the limits that mind and sense impose, and venture into the mysterious world of faith, we too will see more and more the vastness of the potential invested by God in all creation. We need first to rescue our daily living from the narrow confines of satisfying needs, by allowing faith to direct us, until we discover that relationship that was always there, just waiting to be claimed. That we are specifically made to enjoy intimacy with God as equals.

But how do we know what is, by definition, deemed to be unknowable? How can we know God? First, we cannot know God as God knows God; but we can receive a new way of knowing, one which allows us to know ourselves *as we are known*. We cannot capture God under the microscope. God is the one who knows but who cannot be thought, much less comprehended. We cannot reach God unaided, but we have been reached by God. God is nothing else but love, to be known by love is to be loved, and to accept being loved is to

become lovely, because *God loves the lovely* – friar John Duns Scotus. This is why Jesus tells us to love as you love yourself. I cannot love God without loving what God enjoys as lovely!

There isn't much future in speaking of God as *before/after*, but there is both a before and an after for us. Though we can only know God in time, God is *eternal* and *eternal* does not mean unending time, but the absence of time. There is no beginning, no end, no past and no future; there is the *ever-present*. This means that the Father does not come first, God is never without Word and Spirit. There is the ever-present Trinity-producing-love from *whose fullness we have all received* - in time.

We generally assume that there was a time when we did not exist – before we were born, and that there never will be a time when we don't exist. Yet this isn't strictly true. The ever-present God never *began* to love me – *Before the foundation of the world God destines us in Christ* – Eph.1.3. As there is no ending in God, neither is there any beginning. God always loves me. So, who was God looking at before I was born?

This reminds us that we are forever in the heart of God; and that aspect of our reality we call time-life, is given to us precisely for this purpose, so that by actually living in pursuit of goodness and compassion, we gradually discover the face we had before we were born. We see this not as in a mirror, but reflected back to us by anyone who sees us as worth being with, either through friendship, fellowship, gratitude... but most especially when another looks us in the eye and says *I love you!* The value of such saying is when it simply means – *look at me, this is who I am because of you!* Then do we find we are being given back to ourselves in a new way of being alive.

When Romans 8.27 counsels us to pray, *using God's own language*, we are simply being reminded that living language is incarnational, words need to become flesh and not simply empty sounds. John reminds us that what we preach is *what we have seen, touched, held in our hands...* 1Jn.1.3. Only the giftedness which is Grace allows this, letting ourselves be loved by God, so as to become for each other what we are uniquely receiving ourselves. Paul virtually yells at us that God loved us when we were unlovable. If my life has brought me now to a situation in which I can *know God through Jesus whom he has sent*, then I need to give thanks for all of my life, not just selected highlights, all of it has brought me to where I should be. Such is the mystery of love, to make of the good, the bad and ugly of my life and experience of how much God loves me.

Jesus unambiguously says – *I have come for sinners* – Mt.9.13. Jesus has come for me – do I believe him? When I do, it means that I am not just no longer a sinner, but a forgiven sinner, and a sinner who needed to be forgiven. How can I cope with such a happy-sadness? In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we do not simply receive forgiveness of sin, but through the active Grace of this Sacrament, we are challenged gradually to become what we are receiving. Only God forgives, we cannot forgive except by receiving such from God and becoming what we have received for each other.

Chapter Six

Crib, Cross - the Breaking of Bread...

Love is not and cannot be a product of evolution, since it does not result from evolving physical matter. There is an innate *sympathy* in us for our origin – for love, compassion and intimacy, yet is it something beyond the scope of analytical scrutiny. We are aware of this presence, as Jesus told us, through its impact on daily living, even to the extent of being able – as Mary so profoundly epitomises – to bring from within ourselves more than is there by nature: *The Spirit of the Lord will overshadow you... the child you bring forth will be called Son of God...* Lk.1.35.

God is love – nothing else but love says John. When love is abused, desecrated, degraded and diminished the very sense of shame and the consequent regret following our awareness of what has happened, itself testifies that love deserves more than this. We can no more insulate ourselves from God than we can detach ourselves from the world around us. Our beginning is Love, and this is ever present, even in unseemly ways, and in the anguish of the seeming absence of love. This hunger, this need, is itself a call from God, a pull from within oneself – even it cries out in anger, *I'm worth more than this!*

The impact of the absence of love is not God hiding from us, but *the very real way God is with us*. We are culturally groomed to expect God to be found in the serenity and quiet of the chapel. No wonder we miss out so often on the reality of God-with-us. Everything about us happens *within* God. We cannot get outside God, even our sin happens *within God!* What does that mean?

In the Gospel Jesus says to Peter – *the time will come when another will bind you, and lead you into places you would rather not go* – Jn.21.18. We do the same with God, who will never abandon us, comes with us into the very heart of our sin, *because we are there*, and this love is there calling us home. What Francis, and those following his way, understand by *sin*, is anything, everything that ruptures, destroys or in any way abuses the bonds of our innate belonging; our coming out from God, *already belonging* to each other. This is the heart of the Command to love God and neighbour.

Whilst there are so many and so varied individual vocations, each suited to promoting and enhancing personal dignity, there is also a *common* calling belonging to everything created. Every created thing is from God and for God. The vast majority of creation is not able to *know* this, other than through its innate tendencies.

The part of creation able to be made aware of this, and become enthused enough to do something about it, is the place and role of humankind. Genesis gave us the responsibility of *naming Creation for God* - Gen.2.19. Whilst creation as a whole cannot of itself know its vocation, it can and should be lived-in appropriately by those whose vocation is both to know this and to do something about it. Our world is saved only by the way it is lived-in.

Everyone is blessed with the ability to become aware of being seen by God – *and God saw that it was good* - Gen.1.31 - and we *feel* more alive when goodness is an experience. But there is a problem! In everyday friendship we can see and touch each other, but with God we need to be gifted so that what Peter wrote may also be true of us – *you have not seen him, yet you believe* – 1Pet.1.8. God did not remain anonymous – *who sees me sees the Father* - Jn.12.45, says Jesus, be that in the Crib, Cross or the breaking of bread.

Yet, in a sense, even in Jesus God was hidden. For the few who believed there were many more that did not. But those who did believe not only found God, but also *discovered themselves!* What a transformation from that fearful huddle in that locked room at Pentecost, into enthused evangelists wanting to share, no matter what the consequences. When they accepted Jesus' invitation to *come and see* – Jn.1.39, they learned the difference between Truth and truths.

They *experienced* compassion, they *felt* wanted, attracted by affection, and there was not a church in sight! They discovered that coming fully alive was more about living my life as you need it, not as I see it – they discovered what that felt like. He didn't tell them to get real, but he showed them why they should never objectify reality, but to allow others, including all creation, to be fully present as they really are.

When Zacchaeus insisted on amending his ways, Jesus didn't tell him he was wrong; nor did he do so with Judas; nor will he do that to us! He invites everyone to enjoy being alive, always in the context of truth, something crucial for every conversion story. When Peter told Jesus: *you'll get hurt if you stay with the likes of me - [go away from me I'm a sinner – Lk.5.8.]* he meant every word of it. That is how *he was experiencing* the sheer goodness of Jesus' presence in sharp contrast to what he saw in himself. To which Jesus replies – *yes, but if you stay with the likes of me...* For conversion to flow such personal truth must allow itself to stand naked before Truth, and not just hear what others say about Him. The intriguing conversation between Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well highlights this, when others came to meet him and to say – *now we believe because we have seen him for ourselves – Jn.4.6.* Meeting integrity in the face of institutionalised brutality, is to be reduced to awesome silence, as in Gethsemane.

The passing of 2,000 + years doesn't diminish value, but can blur and dull awareness. The coming of *Industry* the separation of *everyday life* from religion, the emergence of scientific ingenuity leading to technological control and economic prosperity have all left their mark. Jesus did not set-up a cultural environment, he simply showed us how to relate differently, and in this way to bring about change to the face of the earth; enlisting the help of all this human endeavour. But there is a priority: *I have come that you may have abundant life – Jn.10.10,* which means we must not allow the many *means* to become *ends*, when the powerful prosper affording the poor their rightful place - the *privilege* of remaining where they are!

The core value of the Incarnation is God claiming equality with us, emptying self and taking the form of a slave. This is how equality becomes real, recognising that we are all equal *because* we are not the same. In this coming to be with us, all forms of exclusion are foregone. Our liturgies must serve truth, the ongoing invitation into intimacy with God for everyone.

As ever, the temptation to compromise is there, to slip into rubrical purity [*publicly and privately*] in order to *get our prayers in!* We are called together by the Word who is Jesus the Christ, to share through Word and Sacrament by trying to become what we are first receiving. Christ is alive, really, truly, substantially and our sole God-given purpose is to be with him, and let all else receive its appropriate justification from this.

To be baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus, is to realise real need not just to confront the effects of sin, but to pursue its root cause, our self-aggrandisement at the expense of others. The impact of this on the first Christian followers was the desire to hold all things in common, so that nobody was in need [*the two belong together!*]. To be Christian is to be concerned to provide enrichment of life for everyone – *he came to his people to set them free – Lk.1.74,* free to be delighted to be oneself.

Look not just at the fact that Jesus is Saviour, but also ask – why do we need saving? The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II declared: *The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ in redeeming us...*

We have all come from God and during the course of our lives, like a circle bending back upon itself we are all being drawn back into God; pulled towards God, as it were, by a love that desires to be in full union with us. But that journey finds its proper goal, direction and meaning only if it passes through the cross of Christ; or, as we might say today more broadly, only as it travels the same path of values as exemplified – personified – in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Michael Cusato, ofm – *The Cord* – April/June 2008

We sing around the Crib – *The hopes and fears of all the years* – sentiments equally valid around the cross, where the promise was *realised* in a manner no one could have expected or even wanted. This vilified man,

fastened to a cross is the only one small enough to show the enormity of God's love for us, with nothing missing! Those words echo through history – *it is accomplished – I've done it!* Not the beating, not the humiliation or the awful dying – but *I said I would witness to how much God loves everything created, and I have!*

Have we ever doubted that Jesus would forget what he promised when he said – *this is body/my blood* – of course not. Why not? Because he said he would be there! Can God rely with equal confidence on me and my given word? It is Jesus, not just his dying, that is our Salvation, just as each Christmas we do not enter the land of make-believe and pretend we are waiting for Jesus to be born, *rather is he waiting to be born in us* when we say what we mean and become what we say. Redemption is not an amnesty from sin, but the challenge, along with Grace-given, to live in an entirely new way.

Paul uses the strange sounding – *he was made sin for us* – 2Cor.5.21, *who knew no sin!* In no way did Jesus sin, but in every way he did not flinch from taking on the consequences of sin proper to us, especially meaningless death. Sin is to refuse love – actively or passively. It stunts growth, dissipates vital energies, distorting them to serve self-interest alone. Life is openness to relationships, splendid in harmony exciting in possibilities, linking everyone into that unity that depends, of its essence, on the diversity of each being honoured, desired and respected.

Sadly, we made a veritable Gorgon's head of this infinite potential by our knotted selfishness, confusion and fearful isolation. Jesus lived his relationships so that this tangled mess be gradually unravelled, because he did not simply live well, but brought with him the power to enable us to do likewise – *to all who believe he gave power to know God as Abba* – Jn.1.12. Redemption is humanness properly inhabited, taking up the challenge to live differently, through the Spirit – *who has been poured into our hearts* – Rom.8.16.

The time is ripe for realignment – to look to God, not so much from what we feel we need, but to welcome what is being freely and abundantly offered. Indeed, our *needs* might be very compelling, but to use this as our way of life will leave the greater part of our human potential untouched. This persuades us, mistakenly, to believe our needs are answered because we needed them to be answered. This disguises so much spontaneous generosity and inventive goodness. We feel unwell, go the doctor, and get a prescription...

Where is the quality level within all this? Recall the surprise when a doctor sometimes says something unexpectedly helpful. Notice how people whose vocation is to offer a kind of service are treated by and large. Look to the check-out at a Supermarket and see and hear good folk [*cashiers*] being used and abused. Yes, we do need to get out, we do need this and that, and so do those who are serving us. God help us if friends only call-in when they know we need them to.

This takes us right back to the implications of the Incarnation, seeing how we need constantly to raise our eyes above horizon to see things as they are, and not just how they appear to us. Nowhere is this more cogent than understanding our salvation. God saved us, not because we needed saving [*which we certainly do*] but because God literally loves to do so. Allowing things to be real in their own right requires us to begin with ourselves. Before ever we experience needs, we are already specially desired and chosen recipients of God's love. That is our reality, and our starting point for every aspect of living. It is the reassurance that we matter in the many good times, that challenges us to realise that we are worthy of better behaviour in our sinful times!

If we believe God, then we need to struggle with the fact that we owe God nothing! It is certainly true that everything owes its existence to God, that everything is totally dependent on God. But what happens when

we discover that everything from God is totally gift – even our lives are gifted to us. We wouldn't dream of asking a friend who has just given us a present – *what do I owe you*. So, why demean God by asking this! The first and proper reaction to gift [*Grace*] is gratitude, which is truly experienced in humility. God loves us, always will, and loves us exactly as we are. We can do nothing about this, *but we can be changed by it!* If we are truly grateful for the gift that is *us*, there is no way we can behave as if we are self-starting and self-explained.

Gratitude is what happens within when we realise that we matter, that we do make a difference, simply because of who we are; that family and friends have not forgotten us, even though we may not have remembered them as we ought. At the awareness level, the gift comes first, not our awareness of it – it is already there before ever we have any awareness. Just as using loving words to another does not create the relationship, but simply brings to the surface the need to express what has been simmering within, for some time. So, I cannot respond to God's love just by *thinking* that it is a good thing to do.

It happens when the presence of Grace [*gifted-love*] makes itself felt in ways demanding expression, through humble gratitude. There is need to respect Grace, by affording it a contemplative welcome. This brings home to us that God is not speaking to us *out of the blue*, but out of ourselves – *be still and know* – Ps.46.10. It is a reality that came to be when we came to be, and now is calling for attention, speaking to us of our Trinitarian origin, through our needing to love, to be loved and enjoy the environment in which both can flourish.

For Francis of Assisi, and for those who would follow his way the inviolability of the person is paramount. Every creature is from God, and pre-eminent among them is humankind. Made in the image and likeness of God, tells us first, that the Mystery of One God in Three Persons is the mysterious foundation of all relationships: the love of the Father for the Son, a love infinitely reciprocated and enjoyed in the mutuality to total self-emptying love, who is the Holy Spirit [*the lover, the beloved, the love they share*]. This is proclaiming to us that for love to be real there is need for not just one, or even two but three – since love always begets a third, one uniquely distinct from, yet intimately caught up with, the relationship of the other two. God doesn't just know who God is [*the Word*], God also totally enjoys being God [Holy Spirit].

This tells us that to become real in this context we need to remember that we already belong to each other, and the fruit of relating is community with the sisters and brothers Francis hallows in his Canticle. From here we enter into greater refinements through family, Church and other forms of outreach by which we become aware through Grace – i.e. heightened sensitivity to the needs of others.

The *crux* of the matter is literally that – Cross. Evil so often appears to prosper at the expense of goodness. It is the mean and the selfish, the bullies who seem to get their way. So why make the effort? As if by a kind of innate instinct, evil loses its grip when death is around. Certainly the place of evil is on this side of death, as the Resurrection proclaims, there is no way evil can reach through and beyond death, even though it often seeks to harness death as its ultimate threat. Evil has tried every way to get rid of Good, most *crucially* when trying to silence the Word forever.

Three days later, having done its worst, *death itself is redeemed and given back to us* as the pathway to perfect love – *Greater love there is not than you give your life for another* – Jn.15.13. The Cross is the symbol of the total reliability of love, provided we never separate the dying from the rising. In the cross, the worst of evil and the best of good collide. The taunt – *If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross...* got it so wrong – Mt.27.40. Meaningless death is redeemed not by Jesus avoiding death, but by living his death into eternal life.

Perhaps the worst legacy of sin is the way it has saturated us with a false experience of death. Had there been no sin, presumably biological life would still have come to an end, such is its nature. Death has been hi-jacked, into becoming the ultimate in total disintegration, an unwanted and meaningless end to something which we feel should not happen. Indeed, we often try to veil this by seeing something other than what is really there – listen to us wax lyrical on seeing autumn leaves – death – those leaves are dead. It is when death encroaches personally that it translates into anguish, grief, anger. Faced with the imminent death of a loved one all notions of wealth, status, power... evaporate. What sin has done to death echoes throughout creation to such an extent that nothing was more important than that Jesus give us not just new life, but also new dying.

The impact of Jesus living, dying and rising was not immediately seen for what it truly is. Both Peter and Paul had teething problems with the mystery of the Cross. They first saw it as a dreadful mistake alone, for which *you Jews* were responsible. Perceptible change gradually appears in the writings, a growing awareness of how the cross and resurrection do belong together: *and receiving the promise of the Spirit, he has poured forth his Spirit* – Acts.2.22. Jesus is alive, no longer constrained by limitation, with his divinity allowed full expression *through his humanity*. Now a created humanity can do what God alone could do – give the Holy Spirit – *he breathed on them...* Jn.20.22. This is what the Old Testament refers to as *the Messianic Gift*.

In his travels, Paul encountered numerous problems, to some he must have seemed to be a walking disaster area: beaten, imprisoned, stoned, exiled and finally executed. Yet he held fast to his mission preaching the Second Coming and the Resurrection. Even though his own experiences seemed to challenge all this, yet feed-back assured him that the Word was taking root. There was, patently, strength in weakness, and it tuned him into the truth, that this is the favoured place for the workings of the Spirit [*this runs right through 1Thessalonians*]. *The Gospel is given not just in word but also in power* – 1Thess.1.4; 2.14 [*the Messianic gift*]. There seemed to be a great disproportion between what was being asked of him, and the tools provided for him. A reminder to all of us, that when we seek to operate from within our own strengths alone, we are likely to transmit a religion, an ideology, maybe even Christianity, but not Christ!

The Gospel asserts that weakness is not an unfortunate condition, but a necessary pre-requisite. Jesus had none of the attributes of power, and was defenceless in the presence of those thus endowed. Yet so many responded to him, and even the powerful felt powerless in his presence. Ordinary folk, contrasting him with their leaders, said – *this man speaks with authority* – Lk.4.32. Sadly, we tend to link authority and power, and thus diminish both.

Unarmed truth has no place for ambiguity. Lying, cowardice, injustice... all welcome the cloak of ambiguity and the respectability of rationalisation: *It is good that one man should die...* Jn.11.50. It didn't take us long to deal with unarmed truth! Yet this is the quality in him that was supremely attractive: for whom *yes meant yes and no meant no* – Mt.5.37. Without this quality, his words would be diminished by fear, and unwarranted respect for always doing the right thing. He would remain trapped by culture, offering at best, a survival package.

Such impotence in Jesus was not the inability to defend himself, nor failure to resolve other peoples' problems. He simply indicates where genuine strength is to be found. The Resurrection is the vindication of this. But the Resurrection is not an isolated event, *it is the guaranteed fruit of a human life lived differently*. Evil has no permanent abode within hearts, and so the possibility of change and conversion is ever real. We are not fated beings, we are the recipients of free will, to know goodness and cherish love.

The pull of *power* is strong, even those chosen to speak and act in the name of God, to show that true power is a ministry of service, but sadly succumb to power games on occasion. Jesus uses an emphatic word to illustrate this - *do not be like the pagans, who make their authority felt...* Mt.6.7. We all suffer from this seduction, the temptation to ally ourselves with the *powerful and influential [it's not what you know but who...]*. Indeed, *Religion* is assured of a warm welcome wherever it submits to the status quo!

The Gospel asserts the primacy of Truth, to which all systems, powers and dominions are subordinate, and from which they gain their authenticity. When Christianity allowed itself to be at home among the *powerful* it has become little more than an organ of state, like the police or civil service. In such situations the Church has found herself shoring-up oppressive regimes, since cultural power always ends up controlling those who embrace it.

How familiar this sounds! Paul, called the Isaias of the New Testament, must have reflected on: *only when a man is aware of his own weakness can he be filled with the power of God* – Is.10.23; 11.1, since this proved catalytic for change in his thinking. No longer is he content simply to proclaim the Resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ, but Christ's death and resurrection: *True, he died on the cross in weakness, but he lives by the power of God; and we who share his weakness shall, by the power of God, live with him in your service* – 2Cor.13.4. This is not saying all is well when we see ourselves as failures! He shows how weakness begets strength, not because it is weak, but because in weakness there is no other but God! In the desolation of the cross, when Christ cries out in anguish – *my God why...?* Mt.27.46 – he is still saying *my God!*

In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, seemingly abandoned by God, he does not abandon God; somehow believing that he was in the place the Father wanted him to be; not nailed to a cross but witnessing to the total reliability of self-emptying love. Jesus did not rise in spite of his death, but through his death. Nor did he spend his life looking for the cross, as if God is well pleased by suffering and dying in themselves. Jesus claimed to bring life in abundance for everyone – Jn.10.10.

We have access to this life through Baptism, which is not properly called the Sacrament of Church membership, it *is* Church membership; the Sacrament of the oneness of humanity in Jesus Christ. Membership of the Kingdom is not like having a nationality – which is marked by *difference*. The Kingdom is the oneness of humanity as it is meant to be, where all are *equal but not the same*. The energy for such binding belongs to the power that raised Jesus from the dead, the first-born of many.

But God is rich in mercy, for the great love he bore us, brought us to life with Christ even when we were dead in our sins; it is by his grace you are saved. In union with Christ Jesus he raised us up and enthroned us with him in heaven, so that he might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ. It is by his grace that you are saved, through trusting him, it is not your own doing. It is a gift of God, not a reward for what you have done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of, for we are God's handiwork, created in Christ to devote ourselves to the good deeds for which God made us" –

Eph.2.4-10

A favourite theme for Paul is our Baptism into Christ's death and Resurrection. It is faith that enlivens us to our need for God, it is Baptism that lets us do something about it: *Baptised into union with him, you have put on Christ as a garment* – Gal.3.27; Rom.7.4, allowing us access to intimacy, able to know God as Abba, and ourselves as *beloved of Abba*.

In 1Cor.15.3. Paul writes –

I handed on to you the facts that had been handed on to me – the ministry of faith. Have you forgotten that when you were baptised in to union with Jesus Christ you were baptised into his death? Through Baptism we died and lay buried with him in order that as he was raised from the dead, so we too might set our feet on the road to new life –

Rom.6.3.

Baptism isn't just a single event, it is a new way of being human, gaining access to the spirit, zeal and enthusiasm Jesus has for others, to heal and save in love.

Baptism endows us with this same energy for the self-same purpose – to reconcile the world to God, through Christ by this power of the Spirit: *it is now no longer I but Christ living in me* – Gal.2.20. Jesus replaced the Law, he did not simply make a ritual change. He abolished the concept of simple Law-observance alone. He did not abolish it because it was faulty, he replaced it because it had served its purpose, now there is to be something new. There is only one Life Principle, through Grace it is gifted within us and not outside like legal strictures or precepts. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, now with direct influence [*conversion*] on our natural, human energies: *If the Spirit is the Source of Life, let the Spirit guide you* – Gal.5.25.

This is fine-sounding – but where can I touch it and taste it, hold it in my hands, what colour is it...? I have the Holy Spirit within me, and also, I do need reminding that I am a sinner! I am caught up every day with the things of God and the things of self, and as a rule I am not too happy about the mix. It is from the very heart of these real life experiences that the Spirit seeks to lift me up into becoming a real human being, in contrast to the gravitational pull of self, which would anchor me in a less than fully human way of living: *he came to his people to set them free* – Lk.1.68.

Seen in this way the significance of the Cross is apparent. Yet it is wrong thinking to assume that simply taking on ascetical practices [*spiritual aerobics*] will result in intimacy with God. Such ways may and do have value, but on their own cannot change a stony heart.

The presence of love does not get rid of negative living overnight, but it does cease to be of primary importance, and with the commitment to the new way of living will dissolve through lack of use! No one relishes the idea of dying to self to the point of heroism, simply because it has to be done! But when the well-being of the other becomes paramount, we willingly take up the cross and follow - Mt.16.24.

The presence of love in Jesus is equally balanced between the desire to be loved and the urge to love another. For us, a healthy sense of sin is to be aware of dishonesty, infidelity, lack of integrity... at the same time aware that I am capable of doing otherwise, much in the way that made Paul exclaim:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

He is rescued from such obvious frustration by saying – *thanks be to God, Christ Jesus* – Rom.7.24. I too cannot save myself, but I can be saved - *thanks be to God, in Christ Jesus!*

Take it deeper – in no way am I *acting justly* simply by submitting to ritual actions: *Go first and be reconciled with you brother, then come [together?] and offer your gift...*Mt.5.24. Sin is much other than a bad social attitude. It is the deliberate rejection of love in favour of its opposite. Turning from sin means letting God be

real for me, in the way the Prodigal returned, simply letting his Father be himself for him. The dynamic of salvation is Grace – gift. I am not just being forgiven, but being challenged to become for others what I am receiving myself. I am not so much forgiven as becoming a forgiver, through Grace.

Such a powerful experience is never occasioned by simply satisfying precepts or commands. As with evangelisation, where I cannot evangelise without first being evangelised, so I am not yet convinced of sin unless I am aware of betraying love – wrongdoing maybe, but not sin. Ritual cleansing has a powerful role, *but can never be a substitute for that sense of sin that shows me to be an abuser and betrayer of love.*

I do not need to beg forgiveness in order to start doing things better for the future, rather to become aware of Jesus Christ, my forgiveness, through goodness, justice, love and compassion all of which are present in him, and his desire is for me to receive all this, so as to become what I am being given. I do not need simply to own my mistakes; I need the heart transplant that takes away my stony heart in order that the Spirit can – *create for me a new heart... put a new spirit in me* – Ps.51.

Chapter Seven

But if you say it...

Whilst we can think, choose, cherish... what we really long for, always seems to be beyond our reach. We have a thirst for the infinite because of our origin in God, and this comes with the *offer* for us to attain towards it – *if!* We are called by Grace, with the assurance that all our efforts will be enough, through this gift energising nature. But, how can we be sure, how do we know that this desire for the infinite is real and not simply our security systems coming to terms with the unknown?

The God we seek, the almighty, eternal Lord, is not to be sought in mysterious spaces beyond our reach, but abiding deep within us. The God who transcends infinitely is, at the same time, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. God is transcendently immanent.

Listen to Jesus with the man who could neither hear, nor speak, unable to communicate, trapped within himself. Jesus dismantles the barriers – *Epheta – be open...* Mk.7.33. We are trapped within self-centred living, unable to communicate properly – with self-emptying generosity – and we need just as surely the presence of healing and enabling Grace, the power of prayer in faith, the honest attempt to articulate self with God truly... *Lord, if you will, you can...* Mt.8.2.

This awareness cannot be defined or pinned down in any way. It is not primarily felt, though it can filter through to this level. It happens within free will, and only allows for evidence in the way Jesus said it would – *By their fruits...* Mt.7.16. Such faith, in other words, demands incarnation, and the presence of so many others coming to terms with this new way of being alive with its absence of self-centredness, disposes of the charge of living in fantasy land. This is the *call* of Eucharistic community.

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel we read of the understandable reaction to the outrageous things Jesus was saying: *unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...* Jn.6.33. We are accustomed to Eucharistic language, but imagine hearing this for the very first time! This is where credibility has to coincide with integrity.

We are disinclined to accept statements unproven. Indeed, it is only believers who have problems here, since the non-believer can be simply dismissive. Here, there is real crisis for the believer, since there is no evidence other than the credibility of the speaker. We see this exemplified in Peter's reaction. Whereas the majority

said this is too much, this is going too far... Peter effectively says *I haven't a clue either what this means, but if you say it...* cf. Jn.6.60. The Eucharist is supremely *Mysterium Fidei*. An agnostic researcher, in admiration of much of Catholic belief, demurred at the teaching on Resurrection and Real Presence. He said, because of this he must conclude that it really is nonsense – to which his interviewer responded with – *yes, it is, but is it true?*

Everyday living is to do with all kinds of encounters and relating, out of which we hope to grow in understanding reality and to appreciate that we do need to relate to be real. This ranges from simply not wanting to be alone, right through to profoundly ardent desires for intimacy. It is the temperature of these various encounters that assures us that we are not at the mercy of every passing whim, allowing us a sense of self as being worthwhile, without the need to justify our existence. From this we progress through cooperating with Grace into understanding worship for what it truly is – *worship!* God created me because God loves me, therefore I am lovable and lovely – do I really believe this? For this we too need the courage of Peter – *if you say it...* and then the integrity to try to become this for others.

Jesus reminded his sceptic hearers: *It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is of no avail, my words are spirit and they are life* - Jn.6.63. Here we see mystery – *this is my body given... my blood poured out... for you*. None of this makes sense to our normal way of knowing; yet when Peter was asked – *will you go away too?* He replies courageously – *Lord, to whom shall we go...?* – Jn.6.68. This is the perennial question for anyone searching earnestly for truth. Where else can we go if not to the Eucharistic Christ, the way, the truth, the life?

We confidently proclaim that Jesus Christ is necessary for the world, but is the necessary Christ able to get at our world? *Seeing that they were about to carry him off and make him king, Jesus hid himself...* Jn.6.15. Have we not tried to do the same with our attitudes to the Eucharistic presence?

The primary purpose of the Eucharist for us is to *take and eat*. We are called to take and eat, and to let the Lord wash our tired feet, so that we can gradually become what we are receiving. The Eucharist as Sacrament is entrusted to the Church, but intended for the world. It is through our coming to eat and drink together, that we discover how to become Eucharist for others – we too become body given, blood poured out, for others in all kinds of service, because we first allow the Lord to be the food and energy of our lives. If others are to be reached by the saving love of Jesus Christ, it will be *through hands and hearts not his* yet committed to allowing this to happen by first receiving what is being freely offered.

The Eucharist is for people, and the manner of our gathering to celebrate this Mystery of the Lord's presence must reflect this. The Eucharist is the most *substantial* presence of the Lord in our world. The Incarnation is not static, not the enthronement of Christ once and for all, simply requiring adoration from creation. The Incarnation *is* the reality of God with us, seeking to make of many one: *the plunging of the divine Unity into the ultimate depths of the multiple* – [Science and Christ – T. de Chardin]. Do we in effect actually try to separate Eucharist from Incarnation by making our celebrations static events – *going to Mass* – has it become something we do, rather than who we are to become?

Jesus came into our world, God-with-us. But as we had no desire to be with God [our sinfulness] fidelity to his vocation became for him the way of the Cross. He comes with the desire to make us one in the Father's love, yet in a world intent on fragmentation, division and separation. It is in the Resurrection when sin and its divisiveness had done its worst to eliminate *the Word-breathing-love* – [cf. Letter of James & Romans 8] that we see the full emergence of good. Alienating death is completely transformed, not eliminated, by the very manner of him living his dying: *greater love than this there is not, than one dies for another...* Jn.15.13.

The image of God feeding his people is not novel: *this is the bread given by the Lord...* Ex.16.8. exclaimed Moses. Jesus' friends had seen him feed hungry people. At the Last Supper, the conversation must have been more to do with what he meant by *being taken from them*, than with intricacies of Eucharistic theology. He used sacrificial language: *this my body/blood... given...* He spoke of shedding his blood for the forgiveness of sin. Something was being offered to them, within a setting that was familiar, a ritual meal shared in thanksgiving for deliverance from captivity.

The atmosphere is intimate, communion in its proper sense. He is making it crystal clear how the Mysteries – Incarnation/Redemption – are really, truly and substantially present throughout history. The Eucharist, is the bond of Charity since all who share are being offered the opportunity to become what they are first receiving – body given, blood poured out in the service of one another. It is not primarily a profound mystical experience for the individual, but a common union [*communion*] of each with the other, in Christ

The Apostles gathered in that Upper Room, did not know what was going on, other than the annual Passover celebration. *We do know why we come together, but our way of knowing has tended to get in the way of our communing properly.* The *how* of the Eucharist will remain forever a mystery. It is the Risen Lord who is present in sacramental form. The symbolic separation of body and blood is our *doing this in memory of...* Why did the Cross have to happen? In its relevance this is a question heard every day: why bereavement, which can be so obviously unfair and maybe even unjust. Lazarus' sister confronted Jesus with this – *If you had been here this wouldn't have happened...* Jn.11.32. God is present where we least expect it, in tragedy and disaster. On Good Friday Martha could not have repeated these words!

It sounds strange to say it, but prayer can, at times be alienating, in the sense that it can take me away from myself to persuade me that my salvation comes from beyond me as gift. This is a step in faith beyond self, as one owning need for salvation towards another who claims to be just that for me: *Jesus is the Lord of my Salvation...*

We are surrounded by the process of birth into life and decline into death. Many ask, with a fatalistic attitude, is this it? The natural evidence suggests *yes*. But look deeper and see them as the symbols they truly are: *for night shall be no more, they need no light, no sun, for the Lord will be their light* – Rev.22.4. Faith persuades us that from a certain death on a cross, there issues forth eternal life, and this happened when the world was desperately trying to manufacture its own idea of *greatness*.

Never had Rome been so powerful. Its lord and master, Caesar Augustus, knew nothing of the birth of that baby in Bethlehem, in a stable in the far-flung outskirts of his empire. Yet he played a part, unwittingly, by authorising the census of all *his* people, which became the back-drop against which God, who is *unchangingly always new*, - Heb.6.16 comes among us, *a helpless child clinging to a human breast* [Francis of Assisi].

The Church is a creation of the Resurrection, and at Pentecost realised that Jesus, with whom they had shared the last 3 years and had seen him brutally killed, was alive and truly one with Yahweh-God. They were literally *confirmed* in this, and would no longer sit in a frightened huddle, not knowing how to cope. No longer were they apologists for Jesus, but witnesses to the Resurrection, for Jesus was with them, as he promised to be. The Spirit of the Risen Lord had overshadowed them, and they too, like Mary before them, were asked to present the Saviour to the world by the way they were present: *you are mothers of the Lord, having conceived through Word and Sacrament, bring him to birth by the way you live* – cf. *Letter to Faithful* – Francis of Assisi.

In those early days the expectation of the return of Jesus in glory was that it would be sooner rather than later. Only gradually did it emerge that much has to happen before ever this would come to be. It was now

that the full impact of the Resurrection was felt, realising that this was not just a local, one-off victory over local adversity. Indeed, it wasn't just saying something about Resurrection for every individual, but about our belonging as a community of believers, directly constituted as such because of the Resurrection. This was hinted at by the prophecy of the Maccabees to their persecutors: *fiend though you are, you are setting us free... since we die for the King of the Universe, who will raise us up to a life everlastingly new* – 2Macc.7.9.

The story of Dives and Lazarus – Luke 16.19 highlights Jewish thinking about a place of eternal happiness, when even Dives in his misery spares a thought for *community*, pleading for his brethren. On Calvary Jesus fulfils this Jewish longing when he promises Malchus, *the good thief, this day you will be with me in Paradise!* – Lk.23.43. A promise to be kept not as one sitting in the awesome majesty of a judge, but with arms flung wide to embrace a welcome brother. [*Legend has it that this was the second time Jesus met this man – the first time when he turned from Jesus and went away sad!* - Lk.18.23.].

The New Testament is alive with evidence of a vibrancy in this new community, to such an extent that they were appreciating this future to be, in part, already with them:

You too, when you listened to the Word of Truth, the Good News and believed it, became one in Christ receiving the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, who is the pledge that we will be glorified, when God has redeemed what is his own -
Eph.1.13.

We know that for Paul, death has blighted life – when we are unable to see it differently: *and the last enemy to be overcome is death* – 1Cor.15.26. The sheer newness of this must have been mind-blowing: *those who are alive will have no advantage over those who have died when that time comes* - 1Thess.4.15. Christ is with us from conception right through bodily death; and because of the Resurrection we are made able to cope well with a world that has death in it.

The process of dying has been redeemed, given back to us as the sure way to eternal life. This process does not have to wait for the moment of expiry. We can start now – not in any way through a morbid desire to be gone from this life, but as the hope that sustains through the coming of our self-emptying God, to live, to die and rise out of death so that: *where I am you too will be* – Jn.14.3.

Jesus' actual dying carries the claim to eternal living: *He became obedient to death; therefore, God has raised him up* – Phil.2.8. This broke the strangle-hold death held over fragile hopes. An entirely new way of living has been freely given us, a way which allows the human and the divine to be totally one, as in Jesus, the Christ:

We know that Christ, once raised from the dead, is never to die again. He is no longer subject to death. In dying as he did, he died once for all time, in living as he lives he lives in God. In the same way you must understand yourselves as dead to sin and alive to God, in Jesus Christ -
Rom.6.9-11.

Jesus did not simply die for himself. As the Second Adam he embodies and represents everyone: *As in Adam everyone dies, so in Christ will everyone be brought to life; but each in their own proper place. Christ, the first fruits and, after Christ, those belonging to him* – 1Cor.15.22. Paul shows himself to be one of those who *belong* - *I have been crucified with Christ, the life I now live is not my life, but the life Christ lives in me; and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me. I will not nullify the Grace of God. If righteousness comes by law, then Christ died for nothing.* Gal.2.20-21, anyone who knows *being in love*, knows precisely what *the life I now live is not my life* – means; it is Graced, given and cannot be erased.

Calvary is not a static event, something to be looked back-to with due reverence and gratitude. Certainly Christ died but once, but the Resurrection ensures that the living, dying, rising Lord is ever present as living, dying and rising – this is who Jesus Christ is: *In Baptism we were buried with him and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendour of the Father, we also might set foot on the new path of life* - Rom.6.4. There is a true and healthy tension here – *being in Christ* means that I am then being truly myself!

Our God is not a fire-extinguisher God, waiting for us to realise that we can't cope on our own. Hoping that we will be all right, but just in case...! We all resist the Spirit, each in our own way. But it is only the gentle laving, and the warmth of Baptism that will eventually reassure us into accepting that it is all right to let go and let God. We have all received the present of the Spirit – we have even said thank-you – but have we dared open it?

Resurrection is not resuscitation: *then God, who raised up Jesus from the dead, will give new life to our mortal bodies, through the abiding presence of the Spirit* - Rom.8.11. The Spirit is ever alive and pro-active in ensuring bodily resurrection. What begins in Baptism reaches out to its consummation in the Parousia, when Christ comes in glory. This helps explain why Paul is not overly attentive to detail concerning the *appearance we will effect* in our rising. Death is relevant for him, not because it marks the beginning of a new life, resurrection does that, but because it brings to an end the limitations mortal living imposes on us prior to our dying: *for me, life is Christ and death is gain* – Phil.1.21. He goes on to say that he would not know whether to opt to go on living as now, or to move into the new life our dying preludes – cf. Phil.1.21-26.

To claim to have a perfect community is to make the Eucharist redundant! Communities are made up of all kinds and all sorts – of necessity. A community awash with tensions, struggles, hopes and fears is the kind of community Jesus specifically died for: *I have come for sinners* – Mt.9.13. We need, deliberately, to own that we do not live in perfect community, but we are community *on the way through our Eucharist* to becoming what *ought to be* precisely through accepting what truly is. This means to stop believing that compassion is a truly human virtue, waiting to be uncovered.

Compassionate is not what we are, but what we are called to become: *be compassionate, as your Father* – cf. Mt.5.43-48. We are being invited to become by Grace what we are not by nature. The Eucharist makes us able to gather to hear, to receive and to become. Paul goes to great pains to emphasise this:

To begin with, I am told that when you meet as a congregation you fall into sharply divided groups. I believe there is some truth in it, for divisions are bound to arise among you if only to show which of your members are genuine. The result is that when you meet... it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, when it comes to eating, each one of you takes his own supper, one goes hungry, and another has too much to drink. Have you no homes of your own to eat and drink in? Or are you so contemptuous of God's Church that you shame its poorer members? –
1Cor.11.18-22.

Such a powerful criterion is perennial. We must be sure in all our celebrations not to *embarrass the poor*. Can there be any greater embarrassment than preventing another from reaching the Lord [*the Bread of Life*]? Difficulties and problems, without even touching on sin, do not dissolve simply because we happen to be in Church. Repentance has to be efficacious, it has to *rise out of changed behaviour*, because of a heart transplant; otherwise all the *communions* in the world will contribute nothing to common-union.

Chapter Eight

I know where I come from...

What do I see when I look out onto my everyday world? All around me is the full spectrum of human potential – from the heights of personal courage, to the depths of demeaning depravity – in the morning the hero, by lunch-time the fool, and by night-fall the sinner. This is what Jesus warned us about in his story of the Sower scattering seed on varying types of soil. It isn't for us to ask: which am I? But to realise we are the whole lot, given varying circumstances.

It is not correct to say that there are two sources of energy within us – a principle of good and a principle of bad! We are born in original Grace, pure gifts of God, who have wandered into original sin; distorting and diverting the one energy for good into unimaginable ways of decadence. In facing this truth, we must remember that life is lived *now*, not yesterday or tomorrow. Being born and dying, along with everything in-between, actually happen in the *now* of life.

When Jesus spoke of the authority to do what he did, to say what he said he told us: - *I know where I come from and where I am going* - Jn.8.14. and his mission is to make us all aware in the same way and by the same source: *To all who believe... he gave power to know God as Father* – Jn.1.12. This is to be made able to know where we are from and where we are bound.

If we come out from God in order to return to God, why can't we remain forever within the safety of God instead of having to undertake the hazardous experiences of living? God made me without my consent, but having endowed me with the capacity for love, free will, God cannot save me without my consent. My life is *the way I accept the gift of myself* so enthusiastically as to make of it a free "yes", and so journey back to God by choice and increasingly ardent desire.

One crucial aspect of this travelling is – *never to forget that your past sins have been washed away* – 2Pet.1.9 – and this from one who should know! An implication of this stunning revelation is, if at this moment – *now* – Jesus Christ matters enough for me to give my life to be with him, and help others travel with us, then my life has already been successful, I am – *now* – where I am meant to be: *to know God and Jesus whom he has sent* – Jn.6.29. Though the rest of my life is waiting to be inhabited by this integrity, I am in a position now to give thanks for the *whole* of my life, the good, the bad and the not so good, I have only the one life, and it has brought me to where I should be. There is no indifference to sin in this, but to trust the reality of – *where sin abounds Grace abounds even more* – Rom.5.20.

This reminds us that the Church does not *confess* her faith in sin, but in the forgiveness of sin – *the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin...* we are not properly described as sinners, but as forgiven sinners. Christian hope is rock solid on its one foundation, the power of Jesus to save being utterly certain. Salvation belongs to the whole of my life, healing memories, calling me forward through generosity into everyday living. This is not to side-line my sinfulness. I have sinned, I do sin.

While Peter urges me to remember that *forgiveness of sin* applies to me too, yet I know that I have sinned, I do need to be forgiven, and there has to be space in my life for this very real experience. Yes, Lord, I believe you forgive me – yet I sinned and needed to be forgiven. The Gospel opens with the challenge – *repent and believe* – Mt.1.15. – *change and trust*.

The person I hurt through my insensitivities, betray through infidelity, might well have forgiven me, and embrace me yet again, but if personal integrity means anything, forgiveness, far from abolishing what has happened simply highlights its sheer gratuity in the face of my undeserving. I am responsible for what I have done or failed to do. Yet Grace in me, abounds even more than my disgrace. To incarnate this takes not a little courage.

I am being asked to live fully the *happy sadness* appropriate to a forgiven sinner. I am being asked to integrate being forgiven with my sinfulness and my need for forgiveness. How do I live with the real and genuine guilt for my sin, and at the same time freely accept the forgiveness already given to me? I need to accept forgiveness as it is offered, without condition, and at the same time integrate this into the very real awareness that I needed to be forgiven.

To know I have made a mistake is to be aware that I have done something I should not have done; whereas to be aware of being a sinner *is to know that I have seriously betrayed love*. Becoming aware of God's love through so much goodness in my life is very different from becoming aware of this same love through my sinfulness. Christian maturity asks me to stand upright within the joy of forgiveness, without the plague of guilt, aware that I was guilty, but now I am forgiven.

Allowing myself to do this is the work of a life-time – perhaps one reason why I have a life-time! But, to go on bemoaning my sin, is to reject forgiveness, to wallow in self-pity. I must let the joy of pardon and peace provide me with the wherewithal to make my sadness happy!

Betrayal is not big enough to quench love, though it will certainly make the expressing of it much more painful. To sit in a court-room and hear a loved-one described in negative terms, untrustworthy, a danger to society, is just one example of painful loving. It is God's unstoppable desire, that Creation and everything in it, each in its own appropriate way, should express God's love by sharing a love that can never be thwarted by sin, even though it made it so painful to express – as on Calvary.

Because our human nature is specifically made to receive Grace, it is capable of bringing forth from within much more than is there by nature. As we have seen, Mary is the beautiful exemplar of this, when through the overshadowing of the Spirit, as a creature she brought forth her Creator, presenting the world with its Saviour: *The Lord is with you* - Lk.1.28. This is the vocation of every human being, when through the indwelling of the same Holy Spirit, we too can make the Lord present by the way we are present, if we live the same way – *let my life happen according to the Word* – Lk.1.38.

We are an amalgam of the physical, psychological, emotional and the spiritual which, when lived together appropriately, is open to discover where we are from and where we are meant to be. But this *putting together* is the work of the Spirit, the one who *will make clear everything I have told you* – Jn.14.26 – that mysterious breathing into us what it means to be in the image and likeness of God: - *Jesus breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit* - Jn.20.22. Tensions, fears, likes and dislikes, preferences... all that *moves* within us require awareness, acceptance and direction, towards wholeness [*holiness*]. This calls for the *art of the disciple*, discipline, helping us along into intimacy with the Word who is Way, Truth and Life.

When we express our feelings through our relating, we are simply externalising something already within us. Attraction and fascination come first, then comes the felt need to show this in some way – needing to go public by saying/doing as unambiguously as possible. Sadly, institutional Christianity has not greatly felt the need for such a priority. There is more than enough evidence of misguided, no doubt well-intentioned, people

seeking to implant value more through the observance of rules and structures, thus having scant regard for how the individual actually *feels!*

Little wonder that observance got a bad press, seen more as constructing *bleak house* than providing for community. We need to be free enough to let value get to us, not just to be told I am loved, but to feel loved – not just to be told I have to pray, but to be invited to join prayer. Exposure to value lets enthusiasm free to pursue and intensify.

Jesus Christ made himself food, to become one with us. So too must our ecclesiastical [*as well as ecclesial*] structures retain this priority, to serve the Mystery: *Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel* – Eph.6.19. If this is to be real, then so must be our Gospel poverty. There was world-wide lamenting when the land-ownership of the Church was severely curtailed by Concordat, and yet the Church has never been more universal than when there is free access to the Mystery. Common-union is a priority way above juridical unity, which, when used as the basis for structure frightens us, having more to do with defending a position than inviting dialogue.

A worrying trend today is that more and more people who claim to be returning to Gospel values are finding it necessary to part company with the Church. Isn't the Church the Bride of Christ? The Church is the guaranteed, institutional experience of the real presence of God with us, through Word and Sacrament. The Church is the Sacrament of Christ: *In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross* – Col.1.19.

Who has the right to be embraced by the Church? The Word was made flesh, thus all human flesh shares kinship and the call to intimacy – to know God as Abba and self as the beloved of Abba. This is the priority of the Church, to work towards living community with Jesus the Christ, and not retreat into the fearful ways of maintenance over mission.

The second half of the 20th Century witnessed the *Christian* world becoming more and more de-Christianised. The necessary response was slow coming, many of the outmoded structures were kept in place, creating a virtual retreat into entrenchment. Mission required much more than re-vamping what was; simply adjusting terminology. New words came pouring in – *evangelisation, witness, word, sign, community, commitment, service... but a system designed to command found itself at odds with all this*, since it takes much more than simply changing labels to reignite credibility.

The Gospel is uncompromising, as to what *service* means, and missing this foundational principle has left us with an anaemic concept of mission. Mission is not one option among many offered by the Gospel, *it is the heart of Gospel living*; which means that the raw material is the everyday living of everyday folk. This is something we cannot come to with preconceived ideas and systems. Expertise is certainly valuable, but always at the disposition of service. *Mission is relationship*, getting involved in helping improve the quality of life for everyone, but most especially, responding to the cry of the poor. *The starting point for reflection on mission is not the Church as it is, but the Gospel as it is.*

The steady decline in Church membership testifies to the ineffectiveness of an Institution open for new members to come and join with those *already in!* Sadly, the fact that the Church is ongoing seemingly has more to do with nature than with mission – the message handed down from parents to children. This is something absolutely crucial, but is never to be confused with mission. The Gospel is there, prior to the Church. How did Jesus view mission? He faced real situations with *an appropriate presence*. He both affirmed and denounced, proclaimed and enabled, he set free and engendered hope.

Traditionally, renewal of mission outreach has tended to start with the Church. What is needed is to have the courage of personal conviction, the need for commitment to the personal love of God through Jesus Christ. The Church is charged with ensuring and enabling this through integrity without compromise to do what Jesus did, let the Word become a flesh and blood reality.

There is a story told about a manhole cover being left lying on muddy ground behind a newly built bungalow. The gardeners landscaped around it, presuming it to be there for a purpose. When the new owner remarked that it was a pity the manhole was sited in such a prominent place, the surveyor discovered there was only soil beneath it. Institutions notoriously gather manhole covers. Some perform valuable service and should be respected and honoured, others have outlived their usefulness [*every custom has a history*] and should be let go, ensuring that structures serve the life and not vice versa. The Church both local and universal will always be in need of such vigilance. Go back to the Architect's plans, the Gospel, there before the Church, and rediscover what is crucial.

Jesus did not found a Church in such fashion that all that was needed, periodically was to appoint new executives. He was fully present to his world and to the people of his world, affirming structures that helped and identifying those covering institutional injustices. He is emphatic, he has come to bring *life in abundance ... he came to his people to set them free...*

Life is always open to more life, which is what Hebrews assures us is what Grace is about: - *with us in mind God promised something more...* Heb.10.14. With this as our motivation we will eagerly seek and welcome structures that promote this. But before we enter fully into this we need to appreciate ourselves as worthy of full living, that our worship means taking God's Word and believing in my own worthship! As my origin is outside me and within another [*who is within me*], so too my journey away from me is so that: *noverim me noverim te – That I may know you and so know myself – Augustine [Who are you, Lord, and who am I? – Francis]*.

So many do not believe, and see no need to do so. What matters is not that we know, even though we are naturally curious, but that we recognise *our yearning to be desired by another*, to be appreciated and respected. Such is God's integrity that knowing and loving are inseparable, and this is able to dispose of fear: *perfect love casts out all fear – Jn.4.18.*

To be known by God [*from all eternity*] is to be loved by God [*from all eternity*!] Nor does the fact of being unaware of this nullify its presence. To know where I am from and where I am going, and not simply trying to get-by *by doing good and avoiding evil*, lets me live consciously creative within a new sense of purpose, the Kingdom values.

God's commitment to me is total – *Give yourself totally to him, who gave himself to you, totally!* [*Francis' Letter to Faithful*]. God's commitment to me is total self-emptying, to fill me full –

My beloved spoke to me. Come my beloved, come away... the winter is past... rise up and come. My beloved is mine and I am his. Have you seen my true love? Scarcely had I left them behind when I met my true love, I clung to him and would not let him go...

Song of Songs – Ch2 & 3.

This is neither language for the timid, nor of an abstract Supreme Being! The presence of this life-giving Spirit commands respect, celebration and imitation. Whatever words or language we employ to express this, we

need to be aware that this is prophetic language, because it asks that we *feel* every aspect of living, in all its nuances of light and dark, happy and sad, within the capacity for passionate living.

Look at the Baptist, able to be still and silent in the desert, yet full of fire when this is needed. Magdalene, overwhelmed by the sheer goodness of Jesus, would not allow structures or taboos to keep her away from him. Francis on La Verna, seared by the Stigmata experienced something of the personal love God had for him, in Jesus-crucified; and longed to respond with a passion for life, that first erupted on that other Mountain called Calvary, and which became open to everyone on Easter Day.

Here again we see the priority of receiving over achieving. We are made *whole [holy]* by our zest for life, not by our successes. Sadly, we tend to remain within the mediocrity of being nice with nice people. Somehow there is resistance to letting life flourish at maximum, almost as though we fear the engine might burn-out! Just in case, we keep things manageable, dull and predictable, but safe. Most of the time we manage to go around not hurting each other, yet it is a different reality from loving each other: *I don't trouble them and they don't trouble me!*

It takes as much courage to be publicly different as it does to say sorry! In spite of all the pressure to *get real*, we cannot take too much reality! Nowhere is this more cogent than when we start to become aware of God's personal love for us. God loves me exactly as I am! This is not me being asked to do something, simply to accept, to receive, indeed to become a grateful receiver: *make me a channel of your peace...* Sincere gratitude always prompts a desire to share. This is not just the pathway of the saint, but equally the meander of the sinner.

Distorted self-interest, self-concern, is the subversion of the energy that fires gratitude. There is a more than even chance of attaining reconciliation within a highly charged, emotive atmosphere than there would be surrounded by cold indifference. On the one hand the whole, angry person is involved, while the best that can be hoped for, on the other hand is little more than civilised courtesy.

Be as compassionate as your Father... Mt.5.48. Compassion is not a natural virtue, *compassion is who God is*, what we are called to become. It is to be lured out of our prison of self-concern which Jesus freely walked into so that we could, with equal freedom, walk out. The giftedness of life emerges through the courage it takes to respond to so much goodness – to laugh and cry, to cherish and be cherished – these are not just random mood swings, but the ways through which we can attain to the *perfection and holiness... as is the Father*. Our bodies provide the locus where self and all that is not self become aware of each other, and Grace urges upon us the right priorities, by letting us experience the freedom of a life of service.

Sadly, we have become accustomed to seeing *the Passion of Jesus* as his endurance of the last few days of Holy Week. Every page of the Gospel carries abundant evidence that his all consuming passion was for fullness of life – *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. But if this is to have authenticity, if it is to ring true, it must have the vital tension between crib and cross. It is the same love that comes to us in need of care, and love we cherish on Christmas morning, who pleads from the cross for us to see how much we are loved – *you will be lost over my dead body!*

We know only too well that Christmas-time is the way of the Cross for many; yet it is the same love waiting for us. It is axiomatic that crisis brings out the best in us – interesting that the root meaning of the word crisis is *crux/cross!* Jesus is truly the crux of life. The God of our pain is not the Supreme Being, not the immutable God of Philosophy. Our God is involved. Listen to the plaintive cries of the Prophet Hosea, or the seductive words of the Song of Songs.

The Incarnation is God with skin! The Word became flesh. The Word from whom all creation takes its origin, becomes like us. The dust of this earth has become the body of God. Such is the dignity of all creation; and growth in our likeness to God means coming alive with a zest for living at its very best.

We should not define ourselves, or each other, or allow ourselves to be defined, by what we are against. This fosters divisive living. Jesus comes with the invitation to full-living for everyone; and our acceptance of this invitation must honour that priority. Jesus was not an *anti*-person, since *anti* implies separation, division, even apartheid. Jesus was not anti those who condemned and crucified him: *Father, forgive them, they don't know...* Lk.23.34. There is a crucial difference between being anti-abortion and being pro-life, where no one is excluded! Jesus was so enthusiastically pro-life as to make it clear that death-dealing has no place in the ways of God.

Possibly the most insidious attack on a person is to isolate and confine, because human growth and development require, of necessity our ability to belong, to be with another. The highest qualitative experience one can have is to give one's life for another – *greater love than this there is not...* Jn.15.13. – and life's only purpose is to experience much love.

Salvation is not a prize for living a good life; not a trophy for acquiring virtue. *Jesus is our Salvation* - 1Thess.5.9. Salvation is an invitation to belong, to be-with. Augustine reacted strongly to the suggestion that God could in any way be *used!* He tells us that God can only be enjoyed. This invitation comes through a variety of channels, all of them efficacious, able to bring about what they promise. *Love loves the lovely* – John Duns Scotus, ofm, and brings to birth other loves through which it gains access to each and to all. We speak of *falling* in love, something unplanned, uncharted, unpredictable and characterised by risk.

It is shot through with risk because love presents me with an identity hitherto unknown and certainly unfamiliar to me, one which is exciting and compelling, not least because I am not sure that I can cope with it. In fact, I'm being asked to let-go my normal coping mechanisms and let my capacity for fascination surface and provide me with surprise rather than shock. Jesus always invited – *come and see* – Jn.1.39. – no promises, no guarantees, other than the seductiveness of his presence, the intriguing possibility of seeing how he lives. It is Love calling me from the fragmentation of my past into a love that is unchangingly always new - Heb.6.16.

Set this alongside the systems of education and formation we have elaborated, with all the expertise at our disposal, along with useful ways of evaluation. We have plotted a course to the moon, yet are woefully bereft as to where we are going, together as persons. We have to leave room for the *come and see* rather than trying to manufacture *go and look!* Faith is crucial, to take the Word as it is spoken to me – *come and see!* It has to be alive and active – Heb.4.12 – with my name included: *I have called you by your name* – Is.62.2; Rev.2.17.

There are no *sat navs*, no route maps, no manuals to show us how to fall in love! Without in any way rejecting or side-lining the culled wisdom of the past, which contains records of honest striving. We are asked – as they were, in their turn – to inhabit our creativity in ways that have no place for simply repeating the past. We are being lured by love to risk being found by God, to come out into the open, unafraid of our nakedness.

We find ourselves, not infrequently, holding back from that final step, even though we know we cannot save ourselves. We cry-out from within our parlous state, forgetting that God's indestructible love for us puts us in a situation of strength, not weakness, before God. God is totally committed to loving me exactly as I am. Thus am I prompted no longer to think myself into new ways of living, but to live myself into new ways of thinking.

Commitment is the resolve to live by value and not by expediency, aware that some relationships are not negotiable. This is why there is so much pain and anguish surrounding bereavement and a breakdown in relationships. So crucial are these relationships that we cannot be the same without them. To be in love is to live beyond self, to live my life according to the vision another has of it – by ardent free choice. Because of this I am different. Value lures me to trust the loyalty of the other, experienced through being with.

This is no everyday activity, though without it everyday living would be haunted by fear and doubt. We do not pledge our heart [credo] to trivial pursuits, even though, at times, the escapism they offer can be tempting. We are unclear about self-worth, and the worthwhileness of trust in the light of its implications. It is commitment that provides stability and earthing, by luring us to seek to become the values we articulate, because of another. Commitment is the handmaid of wholeheartedness.

Chapter Nine

Far more than Availability...

We are embraced by Mystery: we cannot see God, yet God was seen in the crib, tired and thirsty by Jacob's well, nailed to the cross – *who sees me sees the Father* – Jn.12.45. The mystery that tells us that *we cannot love the God we cannot see if we do not love the neighbour whom we can see* – 1Jn.4.20 is the challenge for us to be transparent.

I am no closer to God than I am to the person I choose to ignore; this challenges me to be ordinary to an extraordinary degree. I have been called out of anonymity by the Grace of God, and by that self-same Grace, I am asked to become this invitation for others. Such is the nature of Grace that we are made more sensitive to hear and to heed the cry of the poor, when we were once like Dives who just didn't see the poor Lazarus at his door, caught up as he was by things of self: *all that is needed for evil to flourish is that good people do nothing.*

Whatever the Will of God is, it will only prosper when it is provided with hearts and hands and feet, such is the vocation given us – Gen.2.19. We are invited to share God's life, each in our own way, to fashion ourselves beautifully for God, able to love with a love worthy of God, through Grace. This is why Francis reminded his brothers that they too are *mothers of the Lord, having conceived through Word and Sacrament, they must now bring him to birth by the way they live* – [Letter to Faithful.]

We are still held in thrall to the *Supreme Being, existing alone of himself, infinite in every perfection.* Only when God is allowed to be real, will love flourish. Creaturely nobility is neither affirmed nor sustained by constantly having our creaturely impotence stressed, rather than our invitation to become part of what the Incarnation has made possible. Creatures we certainly are, made in the image and likeness of our Creator, and the only God we know from Revelation is Abba, and not the Supreme Being. It is only by allowing ourselves to live in faith, the self-revealing of God, that we enter upon this new way of knowing, and discover that we believe far more than we understand, a characteristic we share with the Church.

Maritain wrote that *to offer the merely finite to a human being, gifted with a thirst for the infinite, is treachery.* Opening up to the infinite is to seek to live my life according to the vision another has of it! This is well exemplified through the experience of falling in love. However, we must never conclude that coming close to God *is like...* God and the ways of God are not *like* anything: *My ways are not yours...* Is.55.8. and can never become so, yet we are invited through Grace to share intimacy with God. It is precisely by receiving what God

is offering that we are challenged to become what we are receiving, and so be made able to love God with a love worthy of God, yet one which remains ours.

Redemption is not static; we are not recipients of an amnesty. Redemption is, by definition, co-terminus with living, requiring the enfleshment of what Grace is making possible. The only way to express what God asks in human terms is to do what God does – *the Word was made flesh. What are words but words* – Is.51.16 – unless they are received from the mouth of God, with the imperative to become flesh, since as Paul warns – *your salvation is not assured* – Phil.2.12. We have been lured by love and been made eager to respond with the courage to place our personal humanity at the service of the Spirit – the love-life of the Trinity. This requires an appropriate environment; belonging seeks the embrace of another, since it means someone and someone else together. Wherever such living is real, there is the Kingdom.

For this to be real we need a totally different vision of justice, since justice without charity is no justice. *Justice without charity is revenge*. This means that we are challenged much more by *in-depth living* than simply *being around* for each other. To love is pre-eminently active – to love is to be active in promoting another's well-being – requiring far more than *availability*.

Availability is fine-sounding, but fragile in the extreme. Available means I'm here, waiting to be asked. But suppose for whatever reason – fear, embarrassment, pride... - the other cannot ask? I might as well be elsewhere! What is needed is *anticipation* the fruit of listening, - especially to what is not being said. This ensures we respond to what the other needs, and *not what we think they need*.

The Prophets show us a compassionate God, and an indignant God in the face of greed and grasping, when everything in Creation is gift. God doesn't create possessions. We need to relinquish our own versions of both compassion and indignation. Compassion is not a natural human virtue, compassion is who God is and who we are invited to become [Mt.5.18.]. Indignation is properly understood as evangelisation when its focus is only the plight of the other. We cannot hope to evangelise the poor without first being evangelised by the poor – to which the appropriate reaction is indignation – *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.* 1Jn.4.20.

To say that we all see things in the same way is to contradict why God created us individually. Each one is able to make God present in ways not possible elsewhere. Communication needs effort of the kind that respects differences, and welcomes insights, avoiding the gloom of dreary repeating the past because we know we can cope with that. We are given to each other to share our experiences of reality, as if each one is a filter that lets us see *something more* [always evidence of Grace].

There is no such *universally the same* experience of *reality*. To know what is real for anyone other than myself I need to make space to invite such enlightenment, I need to listen, to set aside, without abandoning, the way I see. Grace asks me to open-up to doing what God does: *He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant [listener]* – Phil.2.7. The degree of emptying will be in proportion to the enthusiasm prompting the response. It isn't enough to have a *felt* response; it needs to be *heart-felt!* [*This is what I long for with all my heart... Francis' response to Gospel*]. What else do the words of the Marriage ceremony mean – *for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness or in health... so as to love and to cherish with all my heart?* Life isn't about how much we achieve, but how much we are willing to receive the self-giving of *other*.

Where is this God who is nothing else but love in a broken and bruised world, where innocent suffering is commonplace, and justice favours the powerful? Where is the goodness in Creation for all, a creation that

can destroy through earthquake and flood, without any help from us? Where is the loving God where thousands die of starvation because nature has failed to supply rain and sunshine in adequate proportions? This doesn't attest well to a God who is *almighty*.

Jesus seems to acknowledge this. In our terms God is weak and powerless since the only way God fits into our thinking is as the one who is all-powerful. Francis was ever in awe at what *almighty God* meant for him: *a helpless child clinging to a human breast* He could never see such a God as remote and autocratic. To be compassionate as God is – Lk.6.36. – is to enter into the suffering of another without counting the cost, without any answers. This is so contrary to our blame culture world.

I have had the privilege to live for a short time with Christian communities in hostile and difficult surroundings, which confronted me to look into my world of preferences - likes and dislikes - approval and disapproval - which said to me how *dare you* intrude into such holy ground - where *God holds no one in disregard*. Likes and dislikes are perfectly natural - they make us different in attractive ways - but they can never form the basis for how a person is forced to live [*or not live*] simply because I'm around - I need to feel the real impact of *I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me* - in the sense that wherever my preferences and disapproval conditions the lives of others - Jesus Christ isn't there. Nothing is so ordinary in life that it doesn't deserve to be lived extraordinarily well. How can I be the person God loved enough to create - just as I am - where, clearly I'm not wanted?

All the expertise in the world, all the organisation - truly gifts of God - must put off its shoes before entering this holy ground, and to realise full-on that Easter is not simply about the one who suffered and died, and who is without blame - but one who suffered and died and is very much alive who will not and cannot blame. Being very much with the Church of the Exodus - where the priority is always *to hear the cry of the poor* is something for which I am grateful. What do I mean by that? When I was leaving Zambia, they said to me *thank-you, for coming to see us!* Easter seemed to fit into that - the Lord simply saying to me - *thank-you for coming to see* - after all, that's where he said he would be!

Do we really feel at home in the *Church of Leviticus*, with its emphasis on ritual purity and appearances, or in the *Church of Exodus*, with its priority of being able to hear the cry of the poor? This is what Francis hoped for when he counselled his friars to go out and spread the Good News.

Never lose sight of that cameo piece in the Gospel that sums this up. The stranger on the shore: John 21.7 - after Good Friday the disciples shell-shocked and lost had returned to their fishing, were coming ashore - they see the Lord waiting there. No doubt guilt and shame at abandoning him so disgracefully is uppermost - but what does he say to them? No blame, no inquest, no pointing the finger, simply: *have you had breakfast?* The Easter message: *God holds no one in disregard*.

The persistent call of Scripture is to rid the world of suffering, and Revelation shows us God who suffers. For God is only love and for us who follow this way, suffering is failure. Which is only overcome, as the Resurrection shows, by love. God cannot live in the world we have fashioned - a world that requires someone to blame, scapegoats, cannot welcome a God who excludes no one - and we killed him! Or so we thought. Love cannot be killed. Christ is alive with a life on offer to anyone willing to receive it - a different way of being a human being, not needing to have someone to blame. In terms of the world we have made God has to be a failure!

To see God in Jesus is to *see* compassion – Mt.5.18. – equally is it a wake-up call to get involved, to be open to Ezekiel's heart transplant – 37.26. – letting us become what we can't do naturally: enter into the suffering

of another precisely because that is where they are. This was so crucial for Francis that he models his understanding of Poverty around it. For him, living *sine proprio* [without anything of one's own] was not seeing how much we can live without, but how prepared are we to be able to enter into the suffering and needs of others – far from being without, it was a means, the freedom to be with.

Jesus put God into our hands, and we nailed his hands to a cross. We cannot hide behind *sent him to die* as the hymn says of the Father. We crucified him. What Jesus undertook was to show how much God loves creation and everything in it – and not to count the cost of so doing. The cost was high, seemingly too high – *Father, let this cup pass* – Mt.26.39. His humanity, rightly, protested at such an outrage; yet he tells us this is why he came: not to suffer and die, but to witness to God's love for all, holding none in disregard, even those with whips, hammers and nails.

Jesus didn't suffer death, he suffered life by entering fully into the very thick of it, no testing the water first to see if we were playing by the rules. Some welcomed him, others asked him to leave, those *in authority* engaged with him to be rid of him, but for all of us he prays: *Father, forgive them, they don't know...* Lk.23.34.

It is not the role of a servant to sit-back and from the safety of absence, direct operations. In fact, the term used of Jesus' service is the Greek *doulos* – *slave!* A slave has no say in his/her own life. When Francis prayed to experience something of the sufferings of Jesus, this was no morbid desire to suffer, nor an approval of the false idea that goodness without hardship is suspect, but out of the conviction that life and love are not possible without passionate involvement with the other, both in the joys of celebration and the anguish of injustice or the simple sufferings.

Here we glimpse the hall-mark of real living. The fire so intense as to sear away whatever separates us from the ones in need. Who would question Paul's enthusiasm? He wasn't just a writer of inspiring letters, but he was led by passion into trials and tribulations, refusing to be deterred from being *fully alive*, through being compassionate as is the Father.

Why do we need to canonise the negative? Why is our first response to others more often a *no* rather than a welcoming *yes*? What are we afraid of? We know that goodness is self-spreading, let it happen and it will find its way to everyone. This is not helped when misguided authority, both civil and religious downplays the attractiveness of self-discipline – a natural consequence of experienced enthusiasm – making it more of a control mechanism rather than the truly liberating process it ought to be. Life, as it is can be tough without deliberate attempts to make it tougher. This has been a sure way to remove joy from Gospel living, which tries to show us that only goodness produces goodness.

Wrongdoing is exactly what it says, omissions are an apathetic indifference to the lure of goodness. Jesus found greater response from sinners rather than from saints! Maybe the enthusiasm for wrong doing simply required a new focus! Modern-day saints have been labelled a drop-out culture, people who decide they want to be different. Whilst rejecting consumerism, this would not commend itself to the inner circle, neither does escaping into reliance on other dependencies commend itself to Gospel living. Where was the Church when such hunger was being felt?

Jesus could find no common ground with the apathetic – *because you are neither hot nor cold I vomit you out of my mouth [you make me sick!]* - Rev.3.16.- or the indifferent. With sinners he shared enthusiasm. Conversion is an impossible task if there is nothing to convert – not only are we not good saints, we are not even good sinners! See how we destroy initiative [*we don't do options*] – *that's not our tradition!* What a mutilation of tradition! *It* may not be our *history*, but it still can be our tradition! Our history is the right and

proper of what happened, where it happened, when it happened... Our tradition is not so static. Tradition is the real live effort, enthusiasm, the blood sweat and tears it takes for individuals to keep faith with their given word.

We have even managed to abuse law, dragging it down to serve routine and structure rather than life, with the result - we have sinned, God is against us too, and we need to make reparation to an angry God! Revelation could not be more explicit, the glad tidings come what may, do what we might, God is always for us. Look at the cross and hear God say to us – *you will be lost over my dead body – this is how much you mean to me!*

The Wrath of God in Scripture, is not against sinners; Jesus said he had come for sinners. God is angry and jealous with everything that would *thwart relationships* – never with people. The *wrath of God* is aimed at whatever would hinder belonging. Are we comfortable with a God of passion and feeling? No wonder he is compelled to say – *truly, I do not know you* – Lk.13.25. If we insist on making ourselves unrecognisable to God, we will succeed. Sinners like Magdalene, Paul, Francis... were in fact *inspired by the fury of God*. Note the focus of Jesus' anger in the Temple, the place for intimacy with God being turned into a den of thieves. We are temples of the Spirit – 1Cor.3.16. We are made for intimacy with God, what are we making of ourselves?

Passion and compassion require total involvement. I cannot be casually passionate. There are some, particularly among male Anglo-Saxons, who are not comfortable with tactile expressions of affection and intimacy – *it isn't manly!*

Granted there is much sentimental posturing, masquerading as affection, yet passionate living is what life is all about: *I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze* – Lk.12.49. *You who were once far away have brought very near* – Eph.2.13 by the passion of Jesus. Jesus' passion should not be confined to the last three days of Holy Week. He came with a passion for fullness of life for everyone, and our salvation is all about God's passionate involvement with us. The call of the Gospel is to cast aside fear, come out of the ghettos, and let yourselves be loved in an entirely new way, with the total loving that is God.

Jansen would never have found a patron in Paul. Paul assures us, not only do we have access to the passionate life of God, but that this access is Jesus Christ. There is much more than good manners involved, more than being *nice*... it tells what com]passion truly is: to enter fully into the happiness, sadness, joy, anger of another without having any answers – to be there simply because that is where they are!

Jesus didn't analyse problems from afar, and then write a prescription. He came to be with and never looked back. Such involvement has to be underpinned by commitment – genuine concern for and desire to be with. Without commitment we are open to every passing attraction, influenced by the latest fashion. A committed person does not allow fear or apprehension at not being able to cope to intrude – rather it asks *whose anxiety am I coping with? There is no fear in love, perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.* - 1Jn.4.18

Deliverance from evil requires something entirely other than moving from one system to another, be that system socio-economic, political or religious. The evils of Capitalism are not eliminated by Socialism, nor by moving the other way. Conversion is not *attained* by adherence to philosophy or structure alone, in fact, cannot be attained at all. *Conversion can only be received*. We are not invited to do or say anything, simply to be someone, to become the person whom God loved into being. This is what the gift of my life is for, to live so fully as to discover why God loves me just as I am! This will inevitably mean that the face of the earth will be renewed – Eph.1.10.

The face of the earth will be changed by the way it is lived-in by those born again through water and the Holy Spirit. Personal sins are to be owned, but also the sins of the *just*, the sins of systems both sacred and secular. We all need a personal Saviour, and such is the wonder of God, that owning our sinfulness underlines our strength, not our weakness. We are strong, not because we are sinners, but forgiven sinners, saturated with God's fidelity in loving us. My sin is my entitlement to Christ – he said so!

This gives us the courage to face the inadequacies of our loving, not just God, but ourselves and each other. When God created us he promised and *spoke* into each one of us – *this is who I am for you!* The *this* is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is God's totally intimate love for us, in Person.

What about my *speaking*? I can let others know who and what I cherish and what I will surely not miss. But this is to subvert this wonderful gift of communication when we manufacture language to suit the occasion. Language allows us to externalise the passion for life that we are actually feeling within ourselves, something requiring expression, be that something joyful, sorrowful, or even in anger. Francis was no doubt impressed by this when he counselled his brethren: *a short word the Lord made...* as if emphasising that words have to become flesh to be real – *what fills the heart overflows out of the mouth* – Mt.12.34. Jesus also said – *my words are spirit and they are life* – Jn.6.33. What description would fit the words I use?

In considering abuse like this, it is tempting to censure the *media* whilst remaining seemingly unaware of the ways we abuse our own media. It is food for thought to remember Jesus' attitude to abuse, especially of another person. In the presence of Herod, he remained silent. *The Word of God has nothing to say to such a one. Corruptio optima pessima* – [*the worst kind of corruption is to corrupt what is best*].

Eliot's reminder that we have moved from wisdom, through erudition on down to information is timely. Our times have less room for truth in the mad rush for convenient efficiency. Rush and dash are ousting respect for value in the name of the search for valuables. There isn't time now to go back and look again – *to re-spect*, everything is now sacrificed on the altar of convenience.

Can we really express surprise at the insidiousness of such decadence, more and more detached as we are from our life-giving source – the living Word that is spirit and life, with its assurance that life is freely gifted to us – *you received without charge, give without charge* – Mt.10.8.

We need to be mindful of the fact that true life in the Church is community living – we are not a set of individuals each with a private relationship with Jesus. We are community, and we see how this was manifest in Acts 6 and when Paul takes the Corinthians to task for *sinning* against community – 1Cor.11.

Jesus is the Bread of Life for a basic community, gathered in his name, and through whom he works – *see how they love one another*. They *felt* secure, not because they were able to get and to keep, but because they entrusted themselves to each other, holding all things in common *so that nobody was in want* – Acts 2.44. We need to take the words of 1Cor.11 to heart and ask ourselves are we simply window-dressing our behaviour just to make it more acceptable?

In many areas our living experience has more to do with *disgrace* than with Grace. This is not to say that life should be all sunshine and roses when it clearly isn't. As we have seen the *Good News* is not that everything is all right, but that everything is *not* all right, yet that is all right! Grace is the gift to help us live in the reality of life exactly as it is, being born, dying and everything in between. Within the reality of this we obviously need to come together to laugh and to cry.

We are the most unfortunate of people... says Paul – 1Cor.15.13 if we do not believe that Christ is Risen. Easter Day burst right through the conditioning that our life-span is from birth to death, showing how what we saw as meaningless death is now full to overflowing with meaning. Jesus not only redeemed our living, but also and most crucially, our dying. Out of the seemingly ultimate in disintegration, our falling apart in death, he creates the epitome of love – *Greater love there is not than you die for another* – Jn.15.13. – and he shows us that we do not have to wait until our last moments before incarnating this.

There are situations that compel us to cry-out for a saviour, very real moments, but moments that require the sustaining energy of living faith. It is faith that lets us accept another's word, to believe *in things unseen* – Heb.11.1 – to trust the integrity of the one who promises. Which of us ever doubts that the real presence will happen during our Eucharist – do we fear that Jesus may not *turn up*? We do not – and why? Because he said so! I am blessed with such certainty from God, but what does God receive from me through my word? There is no way I can distance myself from God's love for me – but I can make *me* unrecognisable to God – *Truly I do not know you* - Mt.25.12 – by refusing to be the me God created me to be, one who can make God present in the world by the way I am present, as one who loves God and neighbour – in my own unique way.

Love means never having to say sorry – became popular quote since *Love Story* was filmed. Is it true? Within relationships there is a happy-sadness at not being the person we would love to be for the other. It will happen that my crass infidelities will be forgiven, but where is the room and space for me to recover self-respect, due to the fact that I am not just forgiven but I needed to be forgiven! Is it fanciful to see Purgatory reflected here?

When I come face to face with God I will realise two things: first, it is all true – that God loves me abundantly, and there is nothing I can do to stop this; second, God loves me exactly as I am! No provisos, no demands none of *conditions apply* we use in business matters... loves me just as I am! I truly will need space and time to get my head round this, if I am to see it in the light of my more than lack-lustre response, to recover my self-respect and return with a heartfelt *thank-you*. Christian maturity is about bringing these realities together in a deliriously happy sadness!

There can be unexpected jeopardy in the ardour of such love, since it awakens in us the desire to respond in kind, letting-go of my well established self-identity: *what matters is God's love for us* – as John insists, not our love for God. This is not to descry our love, but to show the rock-solid foundation of our true identity is a love that can never diminish, nor lose its ardour – unlike our loving!

We feel long before we think. Every human condition rests within a sea of feelings that can both help and hinder. Whilst the appropriateness or otherwise of our involvement cannot be gauged solely by our feelings – there are many occasions when we are compelled to say *yes* when our feelings would prefer *no!*

Highly charged, emotional situations call more for persuasion than for coercion, the gentle strength able to command respect through integrity. Genuine communication is there to facilitate wider and wider well-being, especially when the communication contains corrective elements. Sadly, overmuch attention tends to be paid to preserving the status quo, *not rocking the boat*, often to the detriment of the individual.

Nurture and conditioning implant the thinking that power and authority are the same thing. Jesus, patently had no power, yet is described as one *speaking with authority* – Mt.7.29. Authority is what is perceived in the presence of the other, because of sincerity, transparency and trustworthiness. Indeed, Law and Order, when

respected for what they are meant to be – [*means not ends*] – foster the primacy of the person, ensuring that structures serve the life, and not life preserving structures.

Much social disquiet and unrest is generated by abuse of legislation, using it to serve the few, leaving the many socially deprived and impotent. Social sin proliferates through protectionism in vested interest, nationalism to the detriment of the stranger, feudalism, sexism, ageism, racism... Wherever there is a coming together for all kinds of purposes, there will ever be the need for redemption from the plundering of the well-being of individuals.

The official verdict leading to the condemning of Jesus was based on his violating the Law of the Sabbath. He was *removed* by vested interest. Letting him go free would have called for recognition of his *new way of being a human being* – with its challenge to the status quo. It is a sobering thought to reflect for what we will all approve of a killing! And yet abuse of *regulation* continues unabated – be that rule civil, religious, political, domestic...

There clearly are different rules for the rich and for the poor, for the titled and the untitled. I remember visiting Phoenix Park [*Dublin*] immediately prior to Pope John Paul II's visit – to see the corrals erected to contain the *faithful*, and the seating provided for their *servants*! When Jesus entered the Jordan to be baptised by John, he did so to associate himself with those who were realising that if we want to change the world we must begin by changing ourselves. Conversion starts at home. Where is the apartheid in my relating? Who do I treat as less than equal, for whatever reason, and what am I going to do about it?

Undue harshness often lurks under the guise of respectability in some forms of correction, by calling it *right and proper* or *this hurts me more than it hurts you*! Younger people tend to be on the receiving end of this – *what are today's young people coming to?* Whereas all kinds of so-called excuses are made for those who, in reality, have had a life-time to learn and are still remiss. We are as energetic as ever in wanting to remove the speck from eyes not our own, all the while ignoring the log, not just in our own eye but in the eyes of others who just happen to enjoy an aura of privilege. It's far easier for me to correct you than to correct myself!

Chapter Ten

That you may enjoy life...

In making me, God gave me to myself; in saving me, God gives himself to me; in making me holy, God gives me to God! God is the giver, and in Jesus, Word made flesh, God is the perfect receiver also. My life is not mine, it is gifted to me, and so is the purpose of that life. God created me by loving me into existence, so that I can so cherish that gift of being able to live that I desire to do so *abundantly*. The reason why Christ came – *I have come that you may have abundant life* – Jn.10.10.

We don't *feel* life happening, we *co-feel*, discovering what *be compassionate as is the Father...* really means [*cf. Mt.5.43*]; that compassion means entering into the *feelings/passion, suffering* of another. We can and we do have a volcanic power for feeling and co-feeling, though so-called good taste has us try to repress them. It is true that feelings can impair judgement, but what is even worse is believing that repression also removes the impairment. Maturity asks of us an awareness of what is actually happening, and adopting the appropriate discipline to enable honest living by recognising what is, and not acting *in spite* of it.

Jesus had genuine rapport with feeling people, even those whose feelings led them into sinful ways, far more than with *head* people. He was affirming to those who struggled: the rich young man, and his magnetic

possessions; Nicodemus, the cautious diplomat, Magdalene, Dismas the *good thief*. He even tried to get Pilate to see beyond safety-first.

Love thy neighbour – means the willingness to enter each other's lives as God has entered ours: *he who was made sin for our sake...* 2Cor.5.21. Not just feeling for others, but co-feeling, being where they are simply because that is where they are. The *fullness* of humanity reaches its peak in Jesus laying down his life for others: *even while we were still enemies* - Rom.5.10.

Such is the grandeur of human compassion that it takes one who is God-made-flesh to realise it fully. Because this energy is volatile it is surrounded by ambiguity. Instead of leading us to self-donation according to the image in which we are made, we use it for self-indulgence when we opt to live by the Pleasure Principle, avoiding tough-love at all costs.

It is true that all good things do not have to be done – nor indeed can all good things be done. Choices have to be made. Goodness already is. It is not for us to create. *Only God is good...* Lk.18.19. The goodness that *only God is*, has become flesh in Jesus. The Genesis prohibition is still waiting to be honoured: that we do not eat of the tree whose fruit is knowledge of good and evil – Gen.2.17. We are far too partial and biased to handle decision-making for deciding what is good and what isn't, so that *everyone* benefits, and no one is held in disrepute. Only God is big enough for this – God who is made flesh in Jesus. Not only living this goodness but bringing the gift to enable us to do likewise – *To all who believe he gave power to know God as Abba* – Jn.1.12.

But our gift of reason does have a crucial role to play. It has forcefulness in keeping with its allotted role, seeking to understand and control what comes under its influence. Reason is able to direct us towards life-enhancing living, without which there would be the worst forms of repression, the stifling of creativity in the name of good order, the primacy of the *status quo*, a way of living more associated with fear than with freedom.

Such living is devoid of prophecy, since the way of the prophet requires courage from the few who are open to a challenge to step off the beaten track. This calls for clear thinking and honest discernment, since not every spontaneous call for innovation is necessarily prophetic. In both Church and State, the clammy hand of repression has been felt, with censorship insensitively imposed, placing under suspicion anything that could possibly be problematic. The enormity of system is well-suited to dash hopes from creative enthusiasm.

We live in privileged times, where the resilience of the human spirit is beginning to prevail over tyranny. Totalitarian regimes are toppling world-wide, but we fool ourselves if we think we have, finally, *got it right*. Our prophets warn us not to behave in such fashion lest we simply replace one tyranny with another. Marxism has been seen to fail, but the consumerism of Capitalist societies has hardly been a resounding success, with its world-wide credit-crunch crises; even though this reverses the trend, with the rich also getting poorer.

Jesus shows what true integration means, when every aspect of human experience is valued and respected and allowed to issue into gentle strength, now able to cope with a world with suffering and death in it. This rests on the priority that my life is to be lived, not simply as I see it, but as others need it [*love of God and neighbour*]. Excess at whatever end of the spectrum, sins against such living: jaded living by the pleasure principle, and the inflexible tyranny of the dominance of order, forgetting that structures must always serve life. Gentle strength issues from focussing beyond self and self-first, whether such determination is prompted by fascination, or by apprehension at the possibility of pain and suffering. Such strength is truly gentle because it flows from having the heart and the head properly together.

It is often said that *science holds the keys*. It would be more accurate and indeed more challenging to say it as it really is: *science is more like a lock requiring a key*. Neither science nor technology is problematic. What has caused difficulty is the undue dominance afforded to both of them in matters of everyday living. Were Francis alive today he would be in the van of those singing praises for the achievements of both science and technology, just as he hallowed the achievement of nature through his Canticle. Yet he would never condone the pseudo principle that because science/technology *can* do something they should be let do it. Much more than scientific information is involved. While it is good and proper that ethical scientific experimentation should prosper, such enterprises are to be *humanised* by qualities specifically suited to this purpose: respect for truth, care, compassion, conviviality... as it is spelled out in Mat.5. – The Beatitudes.

We are not isolated entities randomly scattered over the planet. We are located with the need and the ability to belong. Science and technology flourish at their best when they unambiguously serve creation and foster its God-given purpose, to God as Abba and self as beloved of Abba.

For the constant calling for compassion and care to gain a heeding, much more is required than adherence to system amid the proliferation of good ideas. We need an atmosphere within which sympathy, empathy and antipathy have their appropriate place. The cry of today's Poor, as in the past, is because no one is prepared to hear and heed, there isn't the willingness to enter into the sufferings of others [*compassion*], until they fit certain criteria – such as being family, friends or even more regrettably, those from whom we could expect to benefit ourselves.

Those who do have time for others, irrespective of who they are, have found it necessary to step off the beaten track of custom, convention, even tradition, where everyone has to run in order to stand still. For such willing souls people are worth *wasting time* with – be they rich or poor, sick or well, living or dying. If such values are to surface it will be because others have been let-go, through conversion. What introduces the element of sacrifice here is that the values that have to go were taken on precisely because they were seen as attractive values; and they are well rooted within our value system and will bring a kind of bereavement at their demise, as any who has parted from any kind of habitual or addictive living can attest.

This is where discipline belongs, as a means, never an end! Francis was seen as one with the gentle strength of one wanting to belong. But this did not come naturally. He had to face the volcanic eruptions of his feelings, not to repress them, but to own them honestly for what they really are. He was gently strong because through authentic self-discipline, free and fully alive because he is now able to put himself into his words – he received the gift of incarnating his words. He was ever in awe at this integrity in Jesus. How did he believe in the Eucharistic presence, how did he fully expect Christ to honour his Word daily – *this is my body given, my blood poured out?* For no other reason that Christ said that is where he will be. Integrity asks, can God rely on what I say as much as I can rely on what he says? Such accountability, to honour what is promised, requires decision-making.

Francis was noted for the severity of his penances. He undertook these, not as punishments, but as the way he discerned necessary for him to be in control of himself. His past is littered with examples of his feelings/moods taking over; he was now taking the steps he deemed necessary so that he could let his words of promise and commitment become flesh. That he saw this as something personal is evident from his Rule, in which there is no mention of imposing such penances on others; though he does urge us to be real, and accept responsibility for what must happen first, if we truly desire our words to become flesh: *as the Lord showed me what it was mine to do, may he show you what it is yours to do*.

Church teaching and Tradition commanded his respect and obedience, but what set him alight, blazing with fervour was, to use his own words:

O sublime humility, O humble sublimity, that the Lord of the Universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under the form of bread. And what was written of him: ... of all the Solemnities he preferred to celebrate best of all the birthday of the Child Jesus; he called it the feast of feasts in which God became a tiny baby clinging to a human breast.

Such ardour, such impassioned love doesn't just happen, it is willed love – else it has no value. It calls for the *power* of the mind, not just cerebral activity; a deliberate seeking so as to relish real presence. Love calls for deliberation also, as well as an exercise of will. There is a pseudo version of love that indulges in words and gestures, yet without the full ardour of desire. See how easily words of praise flow, embraces exchanged – all the while leaving neighbour neglected: *whoever says he loves God and neglects neighbour, is a liar* – cf. 1Jn.2.4. What value has a system that is content as long as prayers are said, and neighbour unnoticed? To pray is to let God be real, by being real ourselves.

It is simple to test this. Since prayer is God-centred and not self-centred, we will inevitably find ourselves *sent* from prayer towards others, with heightened sensitivity to their needs. To be God-centred is to discover that God is you-and-me centred. Listen to the Mystics. Teresa of Avila could not get beyond the words *Our Father...* without being transfixed by their reality. She was led into silent adoration on *seeing* life as it ought to be. Genuine adoration is the appropriate response of the obedient lover. The lover who *listens*, one who is *all ears* so as not to miss a single word. I cannot be fervent in love, while ignoring what the lover cherishes most. God's love – or *God is love* – is totally reliable, and it is this love that is responsible for all *being*: *If we are faithless, he keeps faith for he cannot deny himself* – 2Tim.2.13.

Gospel living isn't simply knowing that I'm a sinner, but a forgiven sinner, one aware of the life-giving soul of reconciliation enough to make the search for peace with justice of prime concern. Such living is infinitely more challenging than simply *being* a convicted sinner, as if we see that God is on to us, and we had better mend our ways! Such reductionism can be expressed as living by – *I know I shouldn't but...* Knowing myself a forgiven sinner is challenging. I am forgiven, but I need also to let myself be forgiven, to learn by degrees that forgiveness has no strings attached, thus homing-in on my personal responsibility.

It is not forgiveness that calls for repentance, but my integrity. I am not simply forgiven, I needed to be forgiven; and this has happened gratuitously! What is the appropriate response to this? When Jesus tells us to *set our hearts on the Kingdom and its values* – Mt.6.33 – he is daring us to risk coming out from hiding and risk God loving us for real. Before ever we can evangelise, as is our Christian calling, we must first be evangelised, set ablaze with desire to be loved. No knowledge, no information, no technical know-how can substitute for this, because *for this was I born, for this I came... to witness to the truth* – Jn.18.37.

Why is this so daunting for us? If it is crucial why so many hang-ups? Just stating that something is crucial will not see it automatically honoured. I can be told I need major surgery, a heart transplant, but the consultant cannot simply tell my system not to reject it.

I am somehow reluctant to call to mind what Ezekiel said – *I will remove your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh* - Ezek.37.26. I am full of fear, even though I am continually being reassured – *do not be afraid* – Phil.3.8. Indeed, the Gospel begins and ends with this: to the shepherds in Bethlehem, to the disciples at the Ascension – *do not be afraid [it's only me and I love you!]*.

Spend some time with people who actually met Jesus, and see how he was never perfunctory, never fulfilling a role, but always attentive to whoever would come to be with him – for whatever reason. By the same token, he [*God's Word*] had nothing to say to those who *use* others for their own purposes – like Pilate. *Freedom of the children of God* means something specific – Rom.8.21 – not doing what you want, but wanting what you do. Human nature cannot sin, it is individuals, groups of individuals, systems set-up by individuals and by these groups, that sins.

Freedom is the God-given gift allowing me to own my behaviour, to accept responsibility for my life. It is when freedom is embraced with integrity that we learn something of what – *and the truth will set you free* – means – Jn.8.32. This is not canonising codified morality. We do have *truths* and we need them, but Jesus did not say that *truths* would set us free, but Truth! To be set free in Truth is to accept freely and urgently the relationship Jesus would have with each one of us, one uniquely personal and unrepeated elsewhere.

Such freedom requires a willingness to risk, but, risk uncontrolled, can descend into the slavery of promiscuity, which would have us equate such decadence with freedom! Equally, there is the temptation to a false *heroism*, since freedom calls for gigantic generosity. Freedom is first and foremost gift, yet requires the involvement of the unique person to be thoroughly respected. Freedom belongs to individuals [*it isn't strictly accurate to maintain it's a free country!*] and as such is vulnerable to set-backs ranging from personal foibles to deliberate perversions of Truth. Likewise, emotional distress can paralyze freedom, along with the impact of cultural and religious formation. Maturity moves us towards recognising what is, in the light of what ought!

Sin is *the* obstacle to personal freedom. It is so because it subverts and turns us inward to become self-seeking instead of self-donating, chiefly by having us live by the pleasure principle and become pain-avoiding at all costs. Freedom wilts in such isolation, since freedom is always freedom *for* and not simply freedom *from*! It is of little help in such situations to try to evaluate by using the superficial – *what I have done and what I have failed to do* – simply doing good and avoiding bad!

To love one another is to be active in promoting the well-being of the other, and not simply trying to avoid hurting each other. We are responsible for *ourselves*, not just for what we've done or not done. To try to live solely by what is laid down is to be forced to live on a starvation diet. There aren't any laws obliging us to be in one place rather than another, to send greetings, to surprise each other [*rather than shock!*], to help decorate a room, to share a holiday...

Freedom is a conscious journey towards Truth, by making responsible choices. This starts from awareness of personal untruth, not culpable lying, but being indifferent to the signs that tell me how I am living is not how I said I would live. We fall, so often for the temptation to seek something outside ourselves to which we must conform: The Ten Commandments, the Law of the Land... When the Jews cited such behaviour as evidence of their authenticity, Jesus has something interesting to say: *If God were your father you would love me, for I come from God...* Jn.8.41.

I cannot *possess* Truth. It is something I am invited to become. Just so, I need not simply God's word to guide me – as the Pharisees claimed – but also God's meaning of God's Word, Jesus Christ, It is a relationship, not a task-demander. Searching for integrity begins the demise of useless dualism. Paul points out how this was used against Jesus – *but as in those days the natural born son persecuted the spiritual son, so it is today* - Gal.4.29. They had frozen truth at a level they could cope with, and then used it as a weapon. Sadly, it is still alive and well.

In the dialogue between Jesus and his accusers, they were not speaking the same language. They accused him of violating an eternal precept. Yet his whole mission and purpose was precisely to replace this norm with himself! He is *offering himself as the yard-stick* to show us how compatible human and divine can be, when assisted by Grace. In order to embrace Christ freely, there has to be the letting-go of security systems. It is Truth – friar Christ – who sets us free.

Being set free comes with issues to be faced, like sin and death... Sin is such because it sets self up as the norm of goodness, without reference to other than self; structure exceeds its boundaries when it is allowed only to mandate rather than serve, canonising observance no matter what. Structure must always serve life. Both of these tend to gain free rein when death is on the horizon – *eat, drink, be merry for tomorrow you die!* But when confronted with the Mystery of Resurrection all three regain their servant state. The Resurrection is a reality outside me, cannot be objectified because it is Truth in Person, beyond the reach of death.

Paul insists that the Law cannot save, while convincing us of our need for a Saviour; but the Law convinces us of sin. Note our everyday reaction when we see law-in-action involving us. How do we feel when we see the flashing blue light behind us, or when the police call at the door? It certainly doesn't give us feelings of liberation.

We do not live by Law but by Truth, which needs law to help it serve life. In both Galatians 5 and Romans 8 we see how problem areas are not to do so much with neuroses and the like, as with our bondage to law. We are over-governed, over-protected, and also over-catechised but under-evangelised. Barbarism flourishes where the logic of cold reason reigns unchallenged: ridding the earth of rain forests in order to spread civilisation, as well as plundering the environment has brought the jungle into the city, the place where such rape is actually decided.

Environmental concerns can easily be reduced to a kind of faddism, if all it means is *back to nature*. What is seriously missing is profound respect for the innate dignity of everything created. We can learn something from the Desert Tradition in the Church. There is nothing made by human hands in a desert, a sea shore, a mountain-top. Equally true, there is a *place* within each one of us corresponding to this – not made by human hands. *The call to the desert* is an invitation for us consciously to enter into this sacred space, so as to discover where we are from and where we are going, it is our God-inhabited contemplative centre. There is no need to travel to reach this place, though the *reaching* is far from easy-come easy-go. It is here that love is to be found; not our trying to love God, but our becoming aware of God's love for us.

What Jesus said of the Baptist – *there is no one greater... yet the least in the Kingdom...* John was unrivalled in his love for God, in striving to keep God's commands – but it is infinitely greater to realise – through the Incarnation – that we are uniquely loved by God, always will be and we are loved exactly as we are.

In every love relationship, lovers reach a level where they identify the *other* by special names, names rising out of the relationship that is ongoing and intensifying, *signifying who you are for me*. So much so that when another, crassly intrudes, using this special name, it is offensive – daring to use the name without the relationship.

In the Book of Revelation, the Lord promises to give each one of us a white stone, on which is written our special name – from God to us: *I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.* – Rev.2.17. We need to frequent this sacred place if we are to hear and come to believe.

How we name this *sacred place* is not too important, provided we are clear what is being signified. Entry into this space is a condition for us *to know God and Jesus whom God sent* – 1Jn.4.9. It is a God created place of encounter wherein we can be with God and experience God with us. We can also learn from a literal desert experience.

A confrere of mine was trying, unsuccessfully, to dissuade a group of tourists from going off into the desert clad only in shorts and T-shirt. He pointed to the Bedouin in their copious dress from thousands of years of experience, to no avail. Later they had to be rescued out of various states of dehydration. A desert is hot by day, cold by night. The wise traveller seeks not to master the desert, but to master oneself within the desert. Equally, we must not seek to control God, but to control ourselves within God's presence. Just as any claim to self-sufficiency in the desert is as real as the next mirage, so too in God's presence such futile self-seeking is destined to wilt and die in the searing heat of love.

Contemplation is a God-given right for everyone, not just a privilege for some, it is *for anyone who has ears to hear* – Mt.11.15. It is to be able to see things as they are, to hear truth from God without any filtering or interpreting from us. It is the gift of seeing what *ought* in the light of what *is*, and then, encouraged by this same enlightening Spirit, to let such reality *be!* Such enlightenment is *given*, cannot be acquired no matter how strenuous our efforts. Hence the need to frequent that holy place. This gift is not a methodology, but the fruit of accepting the unique relationship God would have us, in and through the Word Incarnate.

Grace provides us with the sensitivity to recognise how this is already happening, if we do have the eyes to see! Arrogance often prompts us to expect something primitive and even decadent from cultures other than our own, whereas such heightened sensitivity can bring us to humility without humiliation. Francis counselled his friars to spread the Good News by being totally present – and he adds, *respect the God who was there before you came.*

Respect for Nature is not an option, it is a privilege: *The Lord's is the earth and its fullness...* Ps.21 – and this earth has been entrusted to us, to let it praise its Maker by the way we live in it. Nature has its own language which we need to learn and heed, only then will all this grandeur and fury, this gentleness and beauty tell us of the God who made us both.

Chapter Eleven

And God saw that it was very good....

Jesus commanded respect from authority, not power. Clearly he had no political clout or social influence, yet – *this man speaks with authority* – Mt.1.27. – they said. He not only means what he says, he becomes for others what he promises – he is Word made flesh, who enfleshes his every word.

Conversion/repentance is bogus if it means simply resorting to an occasional religious activity out of duty [*or fear*]. *Let your hearts be rent, not your garments torn* pleads the Prophet – Joel.2.13. *Whoever repents and is baptised will be saved...* Mk.16.16. *Whoever risks becoming fully alive will see the face of God – Blessed are the clean of heart, they shall see God...* Mt.5.8.

In everyday language, living by this Baptismal Spirit challenges us to be very ordinary in extraordinary ways. Jesus was a man of good sense, able to move to the core without being detained by the peripheral. He came up from the desert lean and sharp, ready for initiative and creative enterprise. Such is the fruit that issues as contentment with one's own self, created specifically by God to know God as Abba and self as beloved of

Abba. Paradoxically, to see the face of God is to become aware of being seen by God – *and God saw that it was good!* – Gen.1.31.

Jesus' sojourn in the desert had nothing to do with getting away from it all. It was the necessary step to enter completely into intimacy with the Father. We share such a need, a withdrawing from limited living so as to taste what the call to be fully alive means. Even a holiday break goes some way to achieving this, though there also limits here too, that need to be transcended. We need to be in charge of ourselves at all levels, seeing clearly our strengths and weaknesses, realising that – *when I am weak, then I am strong...* 2Cor.12.10.

A high-wire performer can stand, perfectly balanced and still, in tune with another environment by harnessing innate talent with ascetical praxis. Without such a combination he/she would face the insecurity of the rest of us. Ascetical living, forced or embraced, brings the message that is missing from luxury and distraction. Living in a desert is a full time job, where luxuries and distractions can be a hindrance, getting in the way of tasks needing to be done for survival. In a desert all pretence at self-sufficiency disappears, compelling us to live by what is there, by what is real, *and not by managing things*.

Take a look at John the Baptist, wild-looking and ungroomed – yet able to recognise the Lamb of God. As Scripture attests, *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of God* – Heb.10.31. Simply to speculate about life without venturing out into its fullness, may well engage the mind about harsh realities, but will serve little to equip is for the actual journey. In the Bedouin people there is evidence about life which is just as startling as discovering death; as amazing as the single bloom that refuses to fade. They know of insects and animals in places that have never seen water. God called his people into the desert, not to experience nothing, but to *experience nothing but God*.

With this in mind, where do suffering, pain and hardship fit in my life? Because we cannot find the appropriate place for suffering in life, we miss out on many occasions for celebration. So much harmony is spoiled because of our manic concern for pain-avoidance, be that pain physical, emotional, spiritual... We cannot see what is on the far side of the hill because of our determination to avoid climbing it. We still suffer from the puritanical falsity that suggests *the greater the pain the greater the merit* – such ideas are offensive to all that is best in human endeavour.

So much deviation surfaced in Religious Life, especially in Initial Formation programmes, when discipline was enforced, presuming or ignoring the role of enthusiasm; making an *end* out of the very helpful *means* discipline can be. This resulted in *the more difficult the practice the more virtuous the experience*. Only goodness begets goodness, issuing readily from compassion, gently strong affirmation and humble fraternal correction.

For centuries fraternal correction has enjoyed a bad press; and this because of horrendous distortion. The focus shifted from *fraternal* onto *correction*. One result of this was that only the person in charge could do that! It became an item on the Provincial Visitation Agenda.

The sole purpose of fraternal correction is to focus on the well-being of brother or sister. One could go so far as to say that if my fraternal concern is not there, I have no mandate for correction. It is to be concerned directly for freedom and well-being – to such an extent as to say *you are bigger person than this, it bothers me that things are not well with you* – not because he/she is not keeping the rules.

With this in mind it is easy to see that *we all have the privilege of fraternal correction*, that it is incumbent on us to notice when all is not well, and to try to do something about it, and not leave it solely to the one in

charge, having always the well-being of the other as the priority. Sadly, and all too often, when we hear the expression *we run a tidy ship here*, we can expect to see *tidiness* above, but a slave galley below!

Another aberration, was the expectancy that a period of Initial Formation was expected to produce a finished product. One need only observe the reactions and comments of more senior members when the attitude or behaviour of *the young* is anything less than perfect. Common sense ought to suggest that good example can be more readily expected from those who have spent more time *practising!* Renewal programmes, thank God, have focussed on this anomaly to such an extent that Constitutions and Statutes now focus on Ongoing Formation for life, incumbent on all, from cradle to grave.

We cannot live without structures, structures that emerge out of enthusiasm for Gospel living in line with a shared charism. But structures are meant to serve the life – not life to serve the structures. The *life* is the invitation into intimacy with God as Abba, through Christ as brother, enthused by the gift of their mutuality, the Holy Spirit. Such a priority is under threat wherever observance replaces intimacy resulting in lowest common denominator living, routinely.

A question often asked: why is it that in community where everyone is kind, and courteous – so often we seem to be as bachelors/spinsters sharing common board and lodging, where life is more *business-like* than *fraternal*. Talking with some children preparing for First Communion, I asked *what happens next when you receive a present*. I was hoping to lead them into saying you say *thank-you*, but one child said *no, that's not what you do next, what you do next is to open it!*

How right this is with the gift of the Holy Spirit! We have all received it, and we have all said thank-you, profusely, for it in many different ways. *But have we opened it?* In a sense the question is rhetorical, because if we have – it will show! Always and wherever the Spirit is welcomed, the result is heightened sensitivity to the needs of others: the switch from living my life as I see it, to living my life as you need it. See how this is so in Mary after the Annunciation. We might have expected her to go away in silence to reflect on what all this meant. But during the conversation she had heard about her cousin Elizabeth, and how she was going to need help!

There is nothing wrong with me living my life as I see it – a good, natural human life; it just isn't big enough to serve the life I am called to. I need to put myself under the microscope, perhaps using the Prodigal as guide. I need to spend more time realising how, in saying *yes* to his returning home, he had lost his current identity. His *natural* self is gone; he is no longer *the Prodigal*. He now has a *faith* self. He is trying to live his life on the word of another, no longer by what he wants. When Jesus introduced himself in the synagogue he said, after reading from Isaiah, *today this prophecy is being fulfilled, even as you listen...* The Holy Spirit makes us hyper-sensitive to the cry of the poor [*as Mary with Elizabeth*] – and it shows!

Living by my *natural* self is not sinful, not wrong. But clearly it isn't big enough for the Gospel challenge – to love God and neighbour. Just as the Prodigal had to let go of his own self-construct and receive what had been gifted to him, being son and brother, letting father and brother be themselves... so do I need to live by the norms of faith-living, than by using purely natural means. Where this happens we appreciate the meaning of *spirit and life*; a given enthusiasm for others to enjoy living, and not be reduced to polite existence. To meet me living solely my *natural life*, you will discover lots of things about me, my likes and preferences... but very little about you; to meet me living a *faith life* will be to meet a brother.

When we confess together at the beginning of our Eucharist, we mention many people... *all the angels and saints, and you my sisters and brothers...* to come home, is be with others. In the story of the Prodigal, there

is no mention of the father actually forgiving his son – the party is the forgiveness: *there will be joy... over one sinner who repents...* Lk.15.7-10.

When the Hebrews left Egypt it was with bands playing and drums beating – they were being set free from captivity. They *believed* this. They were also leaving their comfort zones, where they had food, work and shelter, albeit as slaves. They found it easy to merge into the background and have reasonable lives. There is nowhere to hide in the desert! The insecurity eventually got to them, and they reverted to natural living over faith – *at least we had food and shelter in Egypt!*

If we are to live by faith, we need to let go of other ways. My security systems have now become impediments; I need *new bars on my gates* - Ps.147.13. The need for God is for *an experience*, not just an idea. Whatever is needed for me to disengage from what is not God, is a precondition for Gospel living: *Come Holy Spirit, fill... and enkindle the fire...*

Raw enthusiasm dissipates energy, as an uncontrolled river wastes its energy in eroding the river banks. Channelled enthusiasm harnesses power as a capacity to serve, giving flowing water increased power and direction to produce heat and light through driving turbines. Just so, ideal structures, geared to serve the life, facilitate both shape and direction for the individual to grow through daring to enter into life-together.

Ever present will be the presence of *expediency*, which tends to make itself felt when the presence of God is more with us in absence: *Harden not your hearts... as when your fathers tested me... though they saw my work...* Ps.94. The quip says we are made in the image and likeness of God - and we have been returning the compliment ever since – *thus relieving God of a huge responsibility!* We must heed the words of Elijah – *Make up your minds... if the Lord is God, follow him, if it is Baal, follow him* – 1Kings 18.21. The Original Sin - not only are we not good saints, we are not even good sinners: *Because you are neither hot nor cold, I vomit you out of my mouth [you make sick]* – Rev.3.16.

Culture and Civilisation have conspired to persuade us that for life to be fulfilling, all kinds of *extras* will be needed. The standard of living has improved immensely over the years, sadly it has not been universally so. Working things out, using human ingenuity to plan for tomorrow focuses more on constructing something for ourselves, rather than enhancing, nurturing and developing *what we have been gifted with*. If life is given, so too is its purpose. The Giver must have had something in mind. Life itself and its purpose is given to us in Jesus, the Word/Life made flesh. Life is a relationship not a task, a relationship whose declared purpose is *that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10.

It is easy to visualise Paul as the thinker, the planner... but before any of these natural gifts could serve his life, *he had to let-go completely* of what had been up to now – *[I did it my way!]* He disappeared into the desert, blinded, and *led solely* by the Spirit. We have no record of what happened, but as with all faith living, *others* are the beneficiaries. Only after all this could he open his mouth, take up his pen – no longer driven, but led into entirely new ways.

He has shared with us what this actually felt like for him – *to know the height, the depth, the length and breadth of God's love...* Eph.3.18, is to *experience* it, a relationship, founded not on his love for God but on God's love for him, a love totally faithful, always fresh, eternally sure. He is who he is because God rejoices in the prospect.

What could and should happen is the wonderfully ecstatic good news, freely available for everyone willing to receive, each in a uniquely unrepeatable way. The Church provides opportunities for this to happen and for it to flourish through Sacramental life, and most especially through the quality of community-life engendered.

This involves recognising that evangelisation is not simply doing good things for each other and doing them together, but inviting the *other* to share these experiences, and to celebrate this through prayer and creative living.

Jesus gently chided Martha – *you are busy about many things, only one is necessary...* Lk.10.41. He is saying do not become so organised that there is no room for the surprise the Spirit brings. We must free ourselves to be sent to share and enjoy – *He called them, to be with him, that he might send them out* – Mk.3.16. Here is summarised every vocation. The invitation to intimacy, the call to be with [*contemplation*], and mission – so that he can send... Vocation is as necessary now as ever it was, to a world suffering under the malaise of ignorance of the Father

I have been privileged to have an albeit brief, yet unforgettable experience of being with people who have seemingly nothing but themselves, sun and sand. It was a profound *experience* of inadequacy, an inadequacy that was all mine. Being removed from the would be *necessities* of life is a sobering challenge, one which can turn life into a monotonous endurance test, or an invitation into genuine freedom!

The former is the product of simply seeing me in all this; the latter, what it is like to be there for someone else. This is the crossroads all conversion must meet. The enthusiasm needed is always gift, since it is the ability to focus away from self and self-first, towards self for others, which always carries the unexpected bonus of receiving far more than is given. Ask anyone given to charity work, especially at a demanding level, and the answer will always be – *I receive far more than I give.*

Such is what Grace feels like. Moved by the Spirit Paul writes – *I am capable of living in plenty, or living in want...* Phil.4.11; what decides which state, is not personal preference, but heightened sensitivity [*Spirit*] to the needs of others. It is not a decision to go there, but a willingness *to be sent*. Such detachment is not virtue in its own right, but a *means* well-suited to living by new priorities. It is neither the going without, nor the having, but the ability, through Grace to live life as others need it and not as I would have it for myself.

Francis asked his brother, in charge of the garden, to let part of it *be* in its natural state; not just because that was how it was given, but as a kind of sacrament, a reminder that we can do violence to ourselves [*and to each other*] if we are permanently cut off from the God-given, opting instead for the synthetic. The relentless march of the pseudo into the real would seem often to be inevitable – until it occasionally meets the challenge of such courageous otherness, as, for example, folk who are enthusiastically pro-life at every level.

Our world is not just ruining the environment, it is also brutalising us, through systems we either support or tolerate. There is as much potential for destructive energy in many so-called social projects as there is in a whole arsenal of nuclear weaponry. In the place where we are called as pilgrims, honouring creation by the way we live and travel in it as our God-given stewardship, we have virtually become hostages in a prison of our own making.

We have interpreted the real emptiness within each of us as an unacceptable void; and so we become frenetic in our fear of being left bereft, and dash to fill the space with things we deem to be necessary. Since this emptiness is intended by our Maker, and is therefore infinite; anything less than the infinite will never satisfy. We are made empty for God to be our fullness: *of his fullness we have all received* – Jn.1.16.

We appear to be slow learners in the ways of God. We see the devastation of inner-city life, the proliferation of urban violence. We are polluting the atmosphere in the name of expediency, choking our rivers with toxins and the detritus of unrestrained technology. And we boast – *I did it my way!* Nothing new here, simply faster

and deeper through technical know-how. The state of un-conversion is, sadly, alive and well. Never has there been a time best suited to hear the quiet challenge of Hosea – *Your God will espouse you, lead you into the desert and there speak to your heart* – 2.14.

Such a challenge comes in various way, but is by no means universally welcomed. At the time, when free conversion of petrol engines into lead-free capabilities was on offer, many rushed to take up the offer in the name of the environment. When it was learned that a small loss of power was involved, many had their cars reconverted, this time without reference to the environment! This is not being unfair to motorists. Observe what happens when the doors open on the first day of the Sales, or the urge to hoard when there's a hint of possible shortage. It is taken for granted that because something is in short supply, the price will rise!

Enough of examples, since we are all in need of conversion at varying levels. Yet the challenge remains. If I would know my real need for conversion, try letting the Gospel ways be enough, to answer the call to walk freely into the desert, to hear... and find out, how many escape routes we have! To meet the Gospel, face to face is to have all our absolutes reduced to their proper and relative status. Going into the desert is much more than being in empty spaces.

We know that there is no virtue in poverty for its own sake. Indeed, there are as many who are grasping and greedy among the poor, as there are among the well-to-do, though the latter cover this with a veneer of respectability. Being without does not make me poor in spirit, no more than being right about Jesus will make me good [*even the evil spirits were right about him!*], or that simply going to church makes me virtuous. The question is – where is my treasure, what do I value most. Jesus tells us to go into our hearts and find out – *where your treasure is* – Mt.6.21.

Many are apprehensive about doing such a thing, somehow worried about what we might discover. We need have no fear about discovering self as the motivating force of our lives – everyone needs, not by-pass surgery, but a heart transplant – *I will take away your stony heart and put a heart of flesh within you* – Ezk.37.26. We need this heart transplant in order to discover that a head transplant is of little use. The best intentions of a generous head have no chance where there is *a crafty heart!* Ignoring this has resulted in our best efforts being squandered in shoring-up what the Spirit is determined to pull down. Are we concerned with promoting an abundance of life, or are we content simply to cut the grass in the cemetery?

In the presence of those suffering any kind of dislocation, our mission is not to decide who or what is right or wrong; [*the Rwanda project*] such is for the individual to grasp, but is better able to do so when surrounded by the gentle challenge of authentic affirmation. People are not problems to solve, but mysteries to be celebrated. Genuine difficulties require the help of those willing so to do. Spiritual darkness calls for fellow travellers to walk the walk together.

Years ago I saw a book with the fascinating title – *Some Haystacks Don't Have Needles!* A reminder that some problems don't have answers, and that this should not consign the sufferer to go-it-alone. As the origin of the word says *compassion* means entering into another's suffering, simply because that is where they are. To enter without any answers. Who could possibly have an answer for the anguish of unexpected bereavement? Help is felt and appreciated when the sincerity of wanting to be there is tangible – miles away from *if you need me you know where I am!*

This is not to descry such expressed availability, though we need to be mindful that availability, normally understood, is not always helpful. It means that the initiative is now an added burden on the sufferer. If the person has to ask for help, and for whatever reason, is unable to do so [*fear, pride...*] then the offer of

availability is no longer viable. What is needed is *anticipation*. 20/20 vision is not required to see distress, hurt, loneliness... The fact that it is possible that such distress might be self-afflicted is of no consequence. What is primary, is here is someone who is not coping with life. But for anticipation to be real, I need to learn to listen, *to hear the cry of the poor...* and then be there no matter the qualms felt. I need to ask myself when tempted to pass-by on the other side *whose anxiety am I coping with?*

While rules should be respected and observed, it is far more urgent to ensure that individuals and groups are not being abused in the name of good order. The supreme law is the law of Charity, to seek first the well-being, even to the point of reprimand and correction. Personal conversion is a spiritual value and not just a social grace.

Because of the expectation to have a moral standard, there is the temptation to turn to substitutes. We think good thoughts, speak kind words - but conversion will not happen until such quality reaches beyond ideas, into our valuing system. The Old Testament puts it more starkly when urging us to stop calling evil good. At *on duty* times we can do speak and behave appropriately, but not always when *off duty*. In this sense Jesus did not have a private [*secret*] life.

Tradition tells us that the first compelling evidence for the Christian community was hospitality – *see how they love one another*. Jesus said – *I call you friends* – Jn.15.15. Jesus teaches us that there are two kinds of friendship – the friendship of attraction, when we find ourselves drawn to some and not to others, and the friendship of faith. The former is natural, good and healthy, but not big enough to form the basis for community, since preference intrudes.

Friendship in faith is based beyond us – *I call you friends because the Father has told me about you* – the gifted ability to see others as the Father sees them, and as such is always inclusive. Hospitality is the opening of self to others, where the openness and warmth of welcome arises out of God's openness and warmth towards us. Hospitality is first received, welcomed and shared. This is why individuals need to be set free to be themselves, and not accepted *on condition that...*

An individual can live within a group that genuinely professes care and support, and yet feel none of it. In trying to overcome such situations, it is totally counterproductive to try to apportion blame. We are all tempted by the arrogance that suggests that because *we can't see* the problem, therefore there isn't one!

Inimical to all good will and good intent is the icy spectre of secrecy. There are often very good and valid reasons for restricting access to information, but the impression often given is that secrecy itself is primary, at the expense of the courtesy necessary and common to all genuine ways of communication. When secrecy becomes a way of life, and indeed a weapon for control, it shows the unacceptable face of raw power as a mechanism for control. In faith circles, governing bodies have often abdicated their charism in favour of serving the structures, sacrificing concern for the well-being and primacy of its individual members. *Structure must always serve life*.

In a sense, there is no such reality as *the Institute/Community* no such reality as *the parish/Church*. These are abstract concepts used, legitimately to describe various gatherings of individuals who are together, of their own desire and volition, willing to accept responsibility and accountability for such choosing. The governing bodies, whatever their titles, are there to serve and animate people, eager to honour their option for Gospel living, in accord with accepted norms and charisms. Such groupings can never be elitist, while remaining faithful to their calling. Yet can readily descend into this, albeit unintentionally, if the founding Grace of *I have called you friends* becomes no more than a banner headline.

Authority [*contrasted with power*] is a ministry of service, serving the life; real authority honours and respects the primacy and dignity of the individual [*whether the individual deserves it or not – love your enemy*]. Where appropriate – demanded by *living the life together* – decision making should be more inclusive than its opposite. Attitudes conveyed by expressions like – *you will be told when you need to know* – belong in the armoury of the bully. Everyone, to varying degrees, enjoys passion for purposeful living, a gift to be respected and encouraged.

The guiding principle for those serving through authority is greatly to facilitate everyone's right and desire to *do the truth in love* – Eph.4.15. That such authority should shine with the evidence of service is why Francis insisted that the friars be able to approach their Ministers as if to servants, not the other way round. Any covert demand for submission from those in authority is to be challenged, since all are equally responsible for creating the environment in which truth can happen, only in love. To live consecration to Obedience does not mean abdicating responsibility for one's life. In making such a consecration the individual is handing over him/herself, not his/her free will. Indeed, the use of free will and determination is often required to honour this commitment. When trust is abused or treated in cavalier fashion by authority, whilst it does not nullify the commitment of the individual, it underlines the accountability of the abuser.

When law is allowed its proper and necessary place as tutor and guide, at the service of universal freedom, it helps uncover untruth by highlighting the transparency of Truth himself. *The purpose of law is to remind us of our need for salvation*. Of itself and by itself law cannot save. It serves well when it empties itself in the service of charity. It can be idol or tutor, it is for those *in authority* to ensure and guarantee the one rather than the other – *be not like the pagans, those who make their authority felt* – Lk.22.25 – a novel description of paganism; but one used by Jesus!

Chapter Twelve

Truth is love experienced...

Augustine compellingly reminds us that it is *passion* that impels us towards God, not servile fear, with words like *the heart is restless till it rests in God*. Restlessness has as many forms as the seekers it impels. Whether it is a consequence of divine illumination, or an experience of personal conversion, it will either become even more passionately vibrant, as is its true purpose, or become a constant irritant refusing to be ignored. There are no half-measures when seeking after life-in-abundance. It is of little relevance whether this ardour specifically names God directly, or is felt as the need to be passionately committed in life.

Our natural tendency is to choose from a search after value rather than valuables. This is where law of itself cannot be creative, being little more than general norms. What is needed is the freedom that prompts personal choice from within, a given enthusiasm, one that reinforces its presence the more we invest ourselves in pursuit of it. It is the Spirit who gives life, *the Spirit who will make clear everything I have said* – Jn.16.15.

Making space for such choosing calls for sensitivity, since the value content of such choices cannot always be appreciated from the outside! If those who have the ministry of care, through authority wittingly or otherwise, seek always good order first, it becomes increasingly difficult for creativity to flourish – *we don't do options* – innovative creativity is necessarily untidy. Since the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, those living by the Spirit will be visible through fidelity to a personal rhythm of life, lived commitment to truth is universally attractive; commonly appreciated as good people to be with, trustworthy and blessed with extraordinary good sense, devoid of any suggestion of exaggeration.

However, we do not become truthful simply by associating with people who think our thoughts and share our values. This is how ghettos begin. The Church teaches us:

In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law is fulfilled through love of God and neighbour. Through fidelity to conscience Christians join with everyone else in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships –

Gaudium et Spes 16.

Modern culture has created an atmosphere, in which lying and deceit become apparent by exposure. Lying and wilful deceit are not *caused* by exposure, nor do they disappear because of it. To lie is to mislead deliberately through words, making trustworthy communication less and less evident. Truth is love experienced, the Word made flesh as real presence. Salvation/Redemption is anchored securely to this Person, who is the way, truth and life.

If our zeal for life is not immediately freed to seek and search, it doesn't go away. It goes quietly on, suffusing other aspects of experience – like regret and healthy guilt – until the need for personal involvement becomes not only desirable but more and more possible, for anyone with courage enough to risk saying yes, and seeking to become that yes.

Friendship, hospitality, affirmation and ordinary decent living help along the way to welcoming others *for the difference they make*, and no longer people to be wary of because they are different. We are very much each other's keepers, recognising belonging as necessary and refreshing enough for this to be sacramentalised in a limitless variety of ways; not least gathering together to hear and share the Word and to break bread. Yet here too we need to guard against surrendering reality for symbol.

Genuine living is moving towards intimacy with God, through Grace and our cooperating with it, characterised by obvious self-worth shared and enjoyed. Static situations are unfriendly, since they afford no room for change, no room for the difference the other will always make, content with life which is simply more of the same, happily content with repeating the past because we know we can cope with it. Since no risk is required there is no room for creativity, in its place comes the temptation to regard others who are not as we are as misfits, and to be treated accordingly.

There can be confusion between symbols and the God they symbolise, when hospitality descends to good manners an antiseptic politeness content with life in the slow lane – letting it happen with the least possible inconvenience to the system. Equally, just as friendship is crucial to Gospel living, by the same token the welcoming of another's friends shares this priority.

Friends are crucial for human growth and development, and to ignore or actively reject another's friends is to ignore and reject the one whose friends they are. To respect another's values – e.g. in the choice of friends – does not mean I must agree with them, but I am honouring their right to have their own values. Interesting to remember that Jesus found approval and acceptance more from the *officially bad* than from the *officially good!*

Genuine life in the Spirit together is whole-hearted living in contrast to bleak house. It is known for its cordiality and conviviality which, once experienced, will never be confused with so many look-alikes, when sentiment confuses feelings and the focus switches to self. Spiritual living is ever other person centred, where, paradoxically, a greater sense of self is reached – *it is in losing your life that you will find it* – Mt.10.39.

Generosity and good-will preclude the intrusion of jealousy and envy, with a consequent loss of interest once the feelings dissipate. When living in the Spirit is in full flow it provokes reaction, varying from outright resistance to welcome without enthusiasm. Acceptance of Grace is never sufficient until it is clearly whole-hearted – *this is what I long for with all my heart* – [Francis and the Gospel]. More often there is an atmosphere of respectability, insisting that this is not real, but all right for those *who like that kind of thing*, but not for us [presumably, *who know better!*].

Such a veneer of respectability is not far removed from the casual and trite remarks used to keep the unacceptable at arms' length. This is a sorry sight when operating at the one-to-one level, but reaches tragic proportions when it characterises a group, making it incapable of universal welcome and limiting approval to certain external and well defined expectations. When Jesus found himself in such company he was impotent to do anything for them – *he could do nothing because of their lack of faith [in him]* – Mt.13.58.

Jesus remains unknown to anyone with disregard for truth, since he is Truth. As a corollary of this – *simply being right about Jesus does not make me good*. The evil spirit he cast out shouted *we know who you are, the holy One of God* – Mk.1.24 – perfectly correct, but they remained evil! Thomas Aquinas taught that it is far more human to be motivated by passion than by rational argument. Whilst I can't simply feel my way to truth, neither can I think my way to love. *Conversion is not to think my way into a new kind of living, but to live my way to a new kind of thinking*.

Violation of the physical laws carries obvious sanctions – if I put my hand into fire I will get burned. Violation of Spiritual laws is *far more disastrous*, though usually invisible. Refusing to set free my given zest for purposeful and exciting living often means that denied passion distorts into violent aggression. A group that foregoes its avowed spiritual values should not be surprised when suppressed energy reasserts itself as pernicious individualism, making way for selfishness, corruption and sophisticated forms of brutality. There is abundant evidence for this in cultural living when it can justify killing and other injustices under the guise of duty – *It is good that one man should die...* Jn.11.51. There is no daylight between such perpetrators and those condoning it vicariously with such expressions as – *that's life* – when in truth *that's death!*

This powerful energy within us, is open to redemption when we recognise it for what it truly is. Redemption is personal, and all that is proper to the person can be redeemed, provided it is first accepted as it really is. It is easier to repair the damage caused by excess than to inhibit passionate living: one who freely loses everything in love is infinitely richer than one who has never known love.

The giftedness of life – Grace – is crucial to being fully alive, since Grace always brings heightened sensitivity to the presence and the reality of others. It helps us understand the place of likes and dislikes. It is possible to exist [*very different from living*] without getting too involved. It can even appear to be an acceptable clean and tidy form of living, though it impedes the receiving of the full flow of Grace with its disinclination to step outside our own security system. Enthusiasm will not be denied, nor does it allow for half-measure, so limited living usually means pain-avoiding at all costs, hardly suited to freely entering into the sufferings of others – *compassion* – into which all Gospel-livers are called – cf. Mt.5.8.

Look for the fruits by which such living is certainly known – the elderly and infirm shunted out of sight, getting rid of the inconvenient unborn and the no longer useful elderly; the nimby principle is alive and well [*not in my back yard*] when it comes to locating accommodation for the needy, the handicapped, the bail hostels. Look closer and see how when we do not physically have the power to remove the unacceptable, we elect to live with them in ways that leave no doubt what we would do if we could.

Pain-avoiding wholesale is to rule out universal charity. Whilst it is good and proper to eliminate unnecessary pain, can never be at the expense of dismissing or belittling an individual - *whoever claims to love God and despises his neighbour is lying* - 1Jn.2.4. There is bad news and good news. The bad news is that we are liars; the good news is that we do not have to remain so.

There is such a reality as *the heresy of good works*. It is the dedicated and committed view that being is doing. Without *doing* being is sterile, but without *being* doing descends into worthless, confused fragmentation, doing good deeds from an unconverted heart – *let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn* – Joel 2.13. Only God is good, this goodness is made flesh in Jesus. The Old Testament speaks of God as *I am who I am* – Ex.3.14 and Jesus proclaims this by being himself for us, and with the promise – *to all who believe... he gave power to know God as Father* – Jn.1.

This Grace – *poured into our hearts* – Rom.5.5 – opens us to see that life is not a haphazard lottery waiting to be directed by rule, custom or tradition - *It is he who has made us servants of the new way, not written but spiritual, for written law condemns to death, the Spirit brings life* – 2Cor.3.6. Law has a proper and dignified place, to foster life in the Spirit faithfully, this it does well and effectively when it helps create an environment in which such a call can be heard and can flourish, when poor people really know they are blessed. The problem is not law, but what we have done with it.

Jesus portrays the fruits of Grace-living abundantly in the Gospel. Jesus not only brought new life, but also the energy to live this new life. Paul, the great law-observer, unwittingly found himself exposed to Truth, and discovered that his observance of law was constraining. This is where integrity became his saving grace. *Paul was converted because he persecuted the Church honestly*, and when honesty meets Truth the honest man faces change, conversion, so that as intended the Law could once more serve the Word.

So vibrant was this experience that he did not busy himself with changing structures, but allowed himself to be consumed completely by God present to him in Jesus. Such intimacy increasingly made the need for change not just necessary, but something eagerly sought after. This ardent protector of *status quo* emerges as prophet and teacher of the new way, enthusiasm for intimacy with the living God in Jesus the Lord.

As a man who didn't suffer fools gladly, he could not abide any half-measures. He takes his converts to task with strong words – at best they are complacent, but more often apathetic. They are lacking pathos, without zeal for full living. Lack of interest in one's own life soon festers enough to blight the lives of others. With such *living*, the leaders in Israel could do little or nothing to halt the downward slide into indifference – able to point the way to the three Kings, yet content to stay at home themselves. Time for the fiery zeal of a Prophet, who would not just reprove and reprimand, but first live invitingly the way he was preaching.

No one can have God's will imposed on them. The Gospel dares us to risk seeking for the meaning of life from its very origin. Some people are content freely to commit themselves to living in obedience to another. The will of God is also mediated in this way, the will of the intermediary-other can never equate to the will of God – *my ways are not your ways* – Rom.11.33. Sadly, the verve for life is often surgically removed in favour of preserving the system.

Technique, skill and know-how contribute a great deal to enthusiastic living, though there is no mechanical way into enthusiasm. Virtue lacking effort, knowledge without discipline, and love without knowledge – is little more than curiosity – having no place in search for an abundance of life. Genuine love always involves being led away from self by fascination with the reality of others.

Meeting people who have attained that happy harmony of self and other is always an attractive experience, a good place to be, a place to return to, often. That such people tend to be in short supply is witness to the accepted norms and values of life. Is our destiny simply to associate with others who have such new and inspiring values? People who *command* universal respect appear to have something in common – *in order to give we must first receive*. Indeed, for them, life is not so much how much can we achieve, as how much are we willing to receive.

They didn't decide to set themselves up in the God business, they found themselves overtaken by God, directly or anonymously, to such a degree that they could not go back to the way they were. They were not told they had got it all wrong, they were simply exposed to real love with the effect that meaning and purpose now only make sense with this at its heart - *I will take away your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh* - Ezk.37.26. The ways this love reached them are so often ordinary, and everyday, but always to extraordinary degrees.

Keep it simple is an axiom worthy of respect, but whose value is not easily come-by, since it involves a deal of integrity and therefore not a little pain. *Let your yes be yes and your no be no* – Mt.5.37. Lying is to mislead deliberately. Simplicity offers no home for this. How frequently do we modify/edit what we actually mean – even though the saying of it might seem to be impeccable?

The Holy Spirit is not an occasional and infrequent visitor to us. Released fully at Pentecost, the Spirit is all-pervading, ever-present. It is awareness of this presence that is impeded, even by *good* things we feel we have to attend to first. Choosing between good and bad is reasonably easy to see, but what about choosing between good and good? Responsible living is not something we must first put in place for ourselves. It is something we are invited to receive.

The willingness of some to accept has often involved foregoing what might seem to be the normal and reasonable way. For the majority of us it will mean a deeper commitment and insertion into what is the ordinary of our everyday living – *doing ordinary things extraordinarily well*. Both originate in the Spirit who, as with the Mother of God, enables us to bring forth from within ourselves much more than is there by nature.

What brings a sense of unreality is not the simple presence of things, but their restricted and qualified presence. Religion becomes sterile and boring when reduced to something static and repetitive. Revelation proclaims the Word to be both and simultaneously *alive and active* – Heb.11.12. It is the constraints of our insecurities that insists this Word always be familiar, lest it challenge us out of our comfort zones. God's ways are not ours, *God's Word is unchangingly always new* - Heb.6.16. I cannot experience God twice in the same way.

Since this is the Word-breathing-love it can never have been heard in this way before – just as when lovers say *I love you* so many times to each other, they are never repeating themselves. Indeed, when it does become repetitive, love has gone. Such happens when we dispense with faith-living and become accustomed to the unusual manna, like our ancestors in the desert, they refused to go out and gather each day, and tried to hoard enough for tomorrow as well - the manna rotted.

To attempt to fix God within the parameters of our perceived needs is to repeat this folly. A vision of heaven, in which God is comprehensively and definitively *known* is in fact Hell. Christ cannot be trapped by time and space, cannot be comprehended since he is unchangingly always new – *the same yesterday, today and forever* - Heb.13.8.

The wise person is the one who is aware that the more we know, the more there is to know. We are people from a past. Our culture seems to be obsessed with this in its determination to establish an instant culture: instant food, instant information, faster transport. Is this a genuine desire to prosper and progress or a naked fear of being left behind? Our growing inability to cherish what has passed points to the latter, most especially with our virtual sense of built-in obsolescence, our discard culture. An example of this made me look at my own motivations. Sitting in the tiny Portiuncola Chapel [*Assisi*], the cradle of Franciscan life, when three tourists walked in, festooned with cameras, and without pausing, even for a second, exited with the comment *that's done, what's next?* I need seriously to try to become aware of my own *using* of people and places!

The Spirit will not allow us to become curators of museums, determined to defend at all costs the status quo and the good order. If simply preserving good order was real and relevant, then no one should be excluded from well-ordered living. The Book of Revelation contains the words: *the message the Spirit has for the churches* – is not that seeking good order is wrong, but that, as a standalone, it is insufficient, partial and extremely selective. Respecting good order means setting in place the basis for confident [*con-fido*] searching.

Much has been done to better prospects for needy folk, though hunger and starvation are by no means eliminated; wars rage and refugees roam the face of the earth. The farmer is able to plan with a degree of certainty, given reasonable amounts of sun and rain, well-ordered land yields nourishment aplenty. But are our ways well-ordered to foster peace with justice as a universal experience? Are we actually moving towards a world community in which aggression and victimisation, deceit and inequality will have no place? Are we so unambiguously for abundant living that death-dealing ways will have no place?

Is it possible to bring about the necessary change simply by giving the in-place ways of elitism and dominance the new name of service? The Gospel is forcefully transparent in its focus on the dignity of the individual person being primary. In unashamedly competitive societies, such values are readily expendable, for the sake of the *cause*. This hardly differs from the philosophy of terrorism, even when masquerading under a veneer of sophistication and techno-speak.

Jesus teaches that the *person* reflects the image and likeness of God, we directly promote the experience of God-with-us in providing for the full maturing and healthy development of the person, totally pro-life. Spelling this out – this calls for freedom of association, for the person to be with other persons in ways that foster identity for each, because it is love alone that personalises.

Our God is one God in three Persons, we have been blessed, gifted with this image and likeness is also clearly expressed: *male and female he made them* – Gen.1.27. Sexuality is the gift of mutual attractiveness, though it can also be abused into creating division. The conversation between Jesus and the woman with many husbands is enlightening – Jn.4.18 – he is showing her that although she knew many men, she did not know them as wife to husband.

Something more than available physicality is needed. Just as simply articulating a name has no value in itself, it has to be supported by a background relationship for it have meaning. When Jesus asks her to *call* her husband, there is much more to this than a summons. Wholesome sexual activity requires much more than attractiveness; it needs the appropriateness of such a relationship. It is too easily overlooked that the virtue of Chastity is incumbent on everyone. It is possible for a couple to become such without *coupling*, equally *coupling alone* cannot produce a couple! The underpinning of an appropriate relationship is needed to validate this.

Chapter Thirteen

A Canticle, not a Ballad...

What characterises a human being is not simply the ability to reason, reflect, choose, but the ability to cherish and be cherished. Meeting people who invest themselves in such a priority is to meet fully alive people. To weigh the pros and cons before committing to action is both prudent and desirable, to perfect the theory first; yet it is an entirely different experience to be with one who steps right into the heart of things, moved by something greater than logic, yet without being foolhardy. Francis of Assisi was such a person. He didn't delay over speculation, and this was consequent upon his conversion, after he discovered Jesus – cf. 1Jn.4.1.

Why is Francis' praise of creation a Canticle and not just a ballad? Because Canticle goes beyond. Song relates to us all creation's wonders; whereas Canticle picks us up and shows us how creation and we as part of it, belong together in God. Bring this into our own day and ask e.g. is it sufficient simply to increase the pay-packet, to reduce unemployment in order to provide good living for everyone? Is this going to bring about the necessary heart transplant that Ezekiel speaks of – 11.19? What did Jesus mean when he told Nicodemus that he needed to be born all over again, in an entirely new way – Jn.3.4?

It wasn't a question of go back and start again and this time without making mistakes! He was talking about experiencing human living in an entirely new way. It is a challenge to become more intuitive than logical. To opt solely for rational living, is to be subject to the structures of logic, leaving no time or thought for other ways of knowing.

This is serious when we reflect that we all believe far more than we understand. It is not either/or, but both/and, since logic is given to us to help us choose wisely in the light of truth:

...up to the present, as we know, Creation in all its parts groans as if in the pangs of childbirth. What is more, we also, to whom the Spirit is given as the first-fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly as we look forward eagerly to our adoption, our liberation from mortality. It is in this hope that we are saved –
Rom.8.22-24.

This is the difference Jesus makes. Without the Incarnation we would only fear our total, creaturely dependency, instead of enjoying knowing [*in an entirely new and given way*] that we are called to enjoy the freedom of children of God. We are now out of the reach of logic, being alive with the expectancy proper to all first-born of God. How sad that the ways of Order and Structure have, for too long, rendered the meaning of *freedom of the children of God*, as nothing more than freedom to do what we are told. The obedience God makes possible from us is not blind assent to static and formalised regulation, but openness to the demands love of God and neighbour makes on us. To be free in the Spirit of Jesus is to want to live my life no longer as I see it, but as others need it in complete freedom.

Obedience – freedom to hear the Word – is not just necessary, it actually constitutes the motivating enthusiasm to come alive in the Spirit [*the foundation of Lectio Divina*], resulting in exciting spontaneity. We must not confuse *spontaneous* with a would-be look-alike – *instant!* What on earth do such assertions as - *we have spontaneous bidding prayers* - mean? How could we possibly know? Instant, yes! But there is no way I can plan in advance to be spontaneous! I can be asked to react instantly to something, but I cannot be spontaneous to order.

Spontaneity is a long time fermenting, before it demands to be owned when sparked by something or someone. When Francis heard the Gospel read and explained, he *spontaneously* cried out – *this is what I long for with all my heart!* Spontaneous moments are referred to in the Gospel in terms like – *in the fullness of time it came to pass [it happened!]* – cf. Mk.1.15. This *fullness* is not an agreed date, not the end of an era... but the moment when an experience and enthusiasm for brim-full living coincide, with a clarity so attractive as to set change in motion.

We have had moments like this, albeit and perhaps fleeting, yet compelling us to describe them in words like *it seemed as though time stood still*, the experience was complete, in that very moment there was a beginning, a middle and an end. This is what Grace actually feels like. Unlike Herod, who, when graced with the awareness of what Jesus was doing, succumbed to the insecurity of self-concern – *this is John, whom I killed...* Lk.9.7. Distracted by selfishness he misses the presence of God.

We know something of Gospel values. Tradition has codified the important elements for Christian living, but we too can miss out on the real presence of God by settling for what others say about him, and not hearing him for ourselves. We can learn from the villagers who thanked the woman at Jacob's well for telling them about him, but now we believe because we have seen him for ourselves – cf. Jn.4.6. Our first priority is to be hearers of the Word. How frustrating to hear the Gospel read as if reading from Shakespeare, interpreted for us. The Gospel is to be read simply – without embellishment – it is the Spirit alone who will *make clear everything I have told you*.

Many things clamour for attention – the most compelling being concern for self-preservation, and self-propagation. We need to be aware that Gospel living is not just one option among many, not take it or leave it, not even pick-and-mix, but *the way* for the courageous lover. The timid will search for something not so up front, and there are such ways, though littered with various hazards – such as the many *wants* we see as *needs*, which infallibly surface when the possibility of commitment looms.

There are many ingenious ways to opt for look-alikes when the absolutes of love face us. This will always happen when we begin to take Jesus seriously. Felt responses are insufficient, they need to be *heart-felt* – we really mean what we say when we cry-out: *this is what I long for with all my heart* – and I desire to let all else go to allow access to the one thing necessary – *to know God and Jesus whom he has sent* – Jn.17.3. Knowledge finds its value in making love known, but if the will is not to be suborned to no more than instinct, it needs the guidance of understanding in truth.

Faith is belief in things unseen – Heb.11.7. Revelation confronts us with what cannot be seen, known in any other way than by faith. It reveals to us that, though we are creatures in origin, because of the Incarnation we are in a filial relationship to God. Jesus, born by nature we *firstborn by Grace* – 2Cor.6.18. Jesus did not arrive with this message from God, he *is* the message – claiming us and creation as sisters and brothers, now able to know God as Abba and ourselves the beloved of Abba.

Francis came to know God as Abba through Jesus claiming him as friar, compelling him to say: *I no longer have a father on earth, only our Father who art in heaven*. Revelation is Jesus saying to us – *this is who I am for you [I love you]* – i.e. God's love incarnate, focussed uniquely and unrepeatably on each and every one.

It is when we confess this truth that we are realising that we believe far more than we will ever understand. For this to become real it is not enough simply to have God's Word, we need also to receive that which faith alone makes possible – *God's meaning of God's Word*, not our interpretation of it. We are loved, the beloved

of Abba and, moreover, we can become what we are receiving, as Jesus promised: *to all who believe he gave power to know God as Father* - Jn.1.12, received in Baptism.

Love by nature is self-diffusing, giving rise to many other loves. God is love, so there must be plurality in the one God: *lover – beloved – mutuality of this love* – Father, Son and Spirit.

Plurality in God arises out of perfection... the splendour and perfection of good finds expression in self-communication. But communication always moves from one to another one... Wherever there is communion, there is always someone and someone-else. –
Alexander of Hales.

... until all of us come to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God... to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ, is how Paul expresses it – Eph.4.13. As Jesus told Nicodemus, this involves being born in a new way in order *to become able to die differently – greater love there is not, than you die for another...* Jn.15.13. This involves us being real through real presence to others, rejoicing in who they are and where they are. To be alive in the Spirit is to be set free from the entrapments of culture, tradition, routine... *he came to his people to set them free, free from fear* – Lk.1.68.

Jesus' life and mission was to free us from enslavement to self-first living, from protectionism, from scapegoating. Indeed, freeing us into an entirely new way of being human, one in which humanity and divinity not only co-exist, but discover how they belong together. If life is for more life, there is no way that partial adherence, or qualified listening can attain to this, especially when faced with the necessity of dying. Neither will replacing one structure with another suffice since when vested interest is committed to maintaining the status quo, division and separation reappear.

Jesus did not come to confront. He brought an entirely new way of being human by living it openly and publicly himself, allowing the attractiveness of persuasion to replace all forms of coercion. This is the new creation Paul celebrates: - 2Cor.5.17. This new way is a stand-alone, and isn't to be allied to other ways and means – as with everything about Jesus, commitment means all or nothing – *let your yes mean yes, your no mean no* – Mt.5.37.

It might well be far more economical to fill the car with water instead of petrol, but no matter how persuasively this is done it isn't going to work! No matter how gently or aggressively we allow our humanity to be inspired by anything other than the Spirit of God, it just isn't going to work. All of us experience emptiness within ourselves, and panic as to how we can fill this infinite chasm. Revelation declares to us that we are created empty deliberately, so that God can fill us full – infinitely. By the time we become aware of this there will need to be much emptying out, of all the many ways we have tried to be self-fulfilling, be they good, bad or indifferent.

Because the whole is always greater than the sum of its individual parts, we must not fall into the trap of believing that because something works for some it should work for all. *As often as you did/did not do this to the least, you did/did not do it to me!* - Mt.25.45. This is to subvert this powerful message making of it an anti-rich slogan. Wealth is God's gift; prosperity is the intention of Grace. Jesus shows that if we are intent simply on self-first then we are not capable of accepting gifts in the manner they are given. We are to empower the powerless, enrich the impoverished, not by making them powerful or rich. He didn't come to change bank balances but to change hearts.

If Creation is from God in love, then its furtherance in well-being must be its continuing *arriving as gift*. As one writer expresses it: *once God created, Mother-God was always in the birthing room continually bringing goodness to be*. Humankind is that designated part of creation able to know this and collaborate with it. The seed of God's life is sown in Baptism, an energy capable of re-shaping us, making us similar to God in the most perfect way possible.

Grace allows us to love God *with a love that is ours*, with a Spirit that isn't. What could not be achieved through a creative act, creating an equal to God, has been achieved through the incredibly lovely self-emptying of God who *became poor so that we might be enriched* – 2Cor.6.10; 8.9.

Our relationship with God is filial, not servile. Creatureliness suggests servility, and our sinful response might suggest it to be appropriate, but the only begotten Son says we are children, adult children of Abba. What Christ is by nature, we are by Grace. We are enfleshed spirit. Attaining to Eternal Life is to know God and Jesus whom he has sent. Creation is both where and how we welcome God-with-us. It happens with Christ in mind. *We are destined in Christ to be one with God before the foundation of the world* - Eph.1.4.

Such a vocation demands that we be truly of the earth and of God. This is in stark contrast to a world view that sees God and holy things as little other than distractions in the search for real living. Among Christian believers, practical atheism is rife. The world no longer speaks to us of God, immersed as we are in a world of our own making. In the face of the entire Gospel counsels we live in it as owner/occupiers, with little more than dutiful lip-service paid to stewardship, as the vandalizing and plundering of our environment shows. When our world is there to be used, abused and discarded – we are on the slippery slope to self-destruction.

Yet Creation is waiting to be respected and allowed to lead us once again in thanksgiving and praise for all that is life enhancing. We need an appropriate humility to accept this, that the world has its own God-given purpose, to prosper and flourish precisely through testifying to its origin and destiny: *When I look at the heavens, the work of your hands, at the moon and stars you have set in place, what is man, frail mortal that you care for him?* – Ps.8.

One thing we do share in common – there is an all-out search and hunger for happiness and purpose without fear. But do we know what such words as *destiny* mean? We look for untrammelled joy, a way of living characterized by a new and given way of knowing arrived-at through intimacy in pursuit of value, when we become aware of Poet's promise – *then you will return to the place from where you started and know it for the very first time* – Eliot.

When this happened to Francis, he actually thought he was doing something else! Reading the signs of the times as best he could, he believed that what was destined for him was a profound experience of total renunciation. He did not want a divided heart, and so gently but surely set aside his hitherto relationship with creation – as owner-occupier! He renounced every kind of ownership in the sure belief that this had to be done.

What he never expected was that in doing precisely that he was freeing creation in its own regard to come back to him as God intended. He amazingly discovered that in living such positive renunciation [*re-announcing*] the world had become his *friary* – *the place where sisters and brothers live!* He realised that the human person is able to grace such journeying with the qualities appropriate for intimacy.

He wondered at, and waxed eloquent about the ways Creation organizes itself. Matter constantly moving towards spirit, uniting as one in the human, who through the given ability to know and appreciate, to plan

and decide, to honour the vocation God asked of us in Genesis, that we name creation for God. The body is no temporary holding cell for the restless spirit. How else can we confess belief in the Resurrection as being central to God's design? The gifted harmony of body/spirit shows us, in grace, how this points to the unthinkable – that God actually created us to be one with Abba intimately, through him whose body, like ours, came from the dust of the earth.

Only humankind is able to move freely both within and beyond the boundaries of Creation. We discover that it takes everything of God to realize fully our human potential. The Word was made flesh, lived, died and rose from the dead and is rightfully at home within the heart of Trinity – truly God, truly Man. This is why human dignity should seek its focal point around, not just our ability to know things as they are, but as they *ought* to be.

We are *intelligent* beings, aware of the *why* of things, we can move from multiplicity into synthesis and unity. We are not simply *receivers* of information, we are able to observe, assess and respond accordingly. More soberly, we recall too that with all this sophistication, we are here today and gone tomorrow. Why all this, if our allotted span is a mere *three score and ten* years? Immersed in a welter of the transient and limited, we are gifted with the trappings and language of eternal..

There is in us nostalgia for our origin, a dissatisfaction, albeit healthy, with every goodness that is incomplete and limited; we know disappointment when something genuinely good does not last, we know bereavement and separation. When a mother puts down the phone after speaking with family thousands of miles away, she will probably shed a tear, simply because something so good shouldn't come to an end. Such restlessness is caused by our relentless search for the one *of whose fullness we have all received* – Jn.1.16. This unrest has been the inspiration of poets, prophets, artists – *Penser c'est penser Dieu* – [to think is to think God] Pascal.

What is true of the intellect is equally true of the will. As well as the mind being enlightened, we also receive moral insights which, for example, allows us to differentiate between the pursuit of goodness for its own sake, and for it to be universally available, - and living solely by the pleasure principle. Just as knowledge cannot reach a desired stability, without illumination from the mind, so too behaviour cannot attain to the level of virtue without the influence of goodness.

Ignorance of these basic norms for good living, does not happen simply by intensifying scientific expertise. Jesus prayed within the signs of his own times: *Father, this world does not know you, but I know you and have made your name known...* - Jn.17.25. We often overlook the importance of this prayer; it shows us how ignorance of the Father can be addressed. He did not simply talk about God as Father, or set-up structures to implant this teaching. He simply made the Father known by being fully himself, his Father's Son.

Since our mission is no different - to make the Father known - we are challenged to do so in the same way, to become Christ-like. Jesus' identity is clearly referred to in the Gospels – *this my Son, the Beloved...* Mt.3.17; 17.5. That is who he is, and this is what he enfleshed. What he is by nature, we are called to by Grace – *to all who believed he gave power to know God as Father...*- Jn.1.12.

We are called to make the Father known by being Christ-like, being ourselves, adopted children of Abba, with all the rights of a first born. We know how the Beloved of Abba lives – it is the Gospel – and our receiving of the Spirit, the life of God freely offered, means welcoming the Word – *let my life happen according to your Word* – Lk.1.38. Then, like Mary, we too can present our world with its Saviour by the way we are present in our world.

History is full of efforts to establish communities and societies on Gospel principles – *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – *life, liberty the pursuit of happiness* – but without Christ! So too with the Enlightenment, Liberalism, Marxism, Capitalism... Each unique in its own way, ignoring the true nature of what it means to be human, each presuming that both the life and the world in which it is lived are given facts, and it is up to each of us to make something of them. This is merely ensuring that successive Utopias become a pilgrimage from one purgatory to another. As Descartes observed: to propose the merely finite, no matter how grandiose, to human beings, amounts to treachery, since it takes no account of the capacity for the infinite that is God-given in each one.

Nor is Christianity without blame here too. It has had periods of neglecting the genuinely human by over emphasis on *matters spiritual*. This led to religion becoming a merely private affair between the individual and God. In the hierarchy of Creation, the human has a specific mission, as the pivot around which creation turns. This turning is towards its origin, towards God, and the integrity of this movement is dependent on the commitment of humankind to its God-given calling. God did not create a perfect world, but one able to be made perfect by the way we live in it: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.* – 1Pet.1.23. This is synthesised by Scripture calling us *Priests, Prophets and Kings* – to make *real*, to make *holy* and to *celebrate*.

To trace a pathway to God, we must start from where we are, *people apart from God who have been reached by God*. Creation is already suited to this purpose, carrying within it helps deliberately designed for this task. For some, these helps have been attractive enough for them to commit life to this pursuit – the landscape of the heavens, the mystery of the deep, nature at its awesome best, in its violence of earthquake and flood.

But there remains one more step, to turn within, to wonder at *our ability to appreciate all this*, to discover that the tiny movements of the heart and mind, are all invitations to know and to love as we discover ourselves to be already known and loved.

But, of all the presences of God in Creation, it is only in the human heart that God is experienced as intimacy, an experience designed to lure us away from multi-splendored gifts so profuse in creation, so that our arms are freed to accept the embrace of the Giver of so many gifts. True Gospel Poverty

Chapter Fourteen

With all my heart...

Theoretically, we are capable of knowing and loving God, and of living according to this priority to fashion our world. But praxis is a very different reality. Did God risk failure when, as Genesis records, we were given the task of caring for and naming creation for God? On the surface of things, it would appear to be the case – unless there is a missing dimension.

We cannot insist that the Incarnation had to happen, if we were to be redeemed and recalled to intimacy with God. So many of the fruits of the Incarnation could have emerged without God having to become man. We could have been pardoned, received the life of Grace... Yet there is one reality that could not have been without the Incarnation: the vocation to bring Creation to completion as the perfect expression of God *outside* the Godhead, could not have happened – *Before the foundation of the world God destined us in Christ...* Eph.1.4.

Prior to 13th Century, the time of Francis of Assisi, not a lot of time and attention had been paid to the popular piety surrounding Christ's humanity, due in part, to concentration on his divinity occasioned by the need to

confront Christological heresies. One consequence of bringing Jesus back into the streets was to tone down considerably, the universal terror of Judgement, something both John Chrysostom and Augustine [*followed later by Bernard*] had attempted to foster with no little success.

Francis found himself so attracted and fascinated by the humanity, humility and poverty of God in Jesus, as to commit himself to it – *with all my heart!* This found expression in him urging devotion and celebration of the Mysteries, from Crib to Cross.

The coming of God in human form, the Incarnation, means that the active presence of the Eternal Word in the heart of the Trinity, is now with us through created form – *the dust of this earth became the body of God*. In no way can this, the greatest act of God in Creation, be seen as an after-thought. Indeed, the whole of Creation happens with Christ in mind. How sad to see this expressed almost as if something went wrong and God was forced – *to get a man in!*

The Incarnation is the supreme manifestation of God's love; and salvation and redemption are to be understood within this priority. Sadly, understanding all too often gets distorted by the intrusion of our needs. Because we needed something becomes the reason why we actually get it. There is clearly no doubt whatsoever that we need redemption, but we miss out on the wonder of God's eternal plan, if we presume that we are redeemed because we needed it!

Sin did not determine the fact of the Incarnation, merely the manner of it. God alone – Love alone – is supremely the motive. No less an authority than Thomas Aquinas states that if God willed to free us from sin, without any satisfaction, this would not be against the divine nature. The Incarnation proclaims that God always intends [*no beginning in God*] humanness to reach right into the heart of Trinitarian life, and be there as one belonging.

In Jesus Creation has already reached this intended perfection, when what is created – his humanity – is totally one with uncreated divinity. What remains now is that what is in Jesus, should be in all creation – *I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything the Father has told me...* Jn.15.15.

Humankind is a microcosm of Creation through the body rooted in the very dust of the earth, through the soul finding itself drawn into unity with spirit: *For it pleased God that in him all fullness should abide, and through him all things be reconciled, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross* - Col.1.18. Creation is totally Christ-centred, even to the extent – *God loved us while we were yet enemies* – Rom.5.10, with a love unconditional.

We are both body and spirit, and in no way adequately defined by emphasis on either alone. We are embodied spirits. Were we simply one or the other, it seems things would be simpler defined. Paul faces this issue, asks the relevant question and provides the crucial answer:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! –

Rom.7.15-25.

There is truly a primacy of spirit over body – *It is the spirit who gives life, the flesh is useless...* Jn.6.63. cf. Mt.10.28; Lk.15.5. Salvation is becoming fully alive – *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. Becoming fully myself, by knowing Abba through Jesus whom he has sent – Jn.3.34. This means that everything to do with living – since Jesus came to bring life in abundance – is relevant, moving from childlike wonder and amazement at so many good things all around us, onto the adult-child's [*unless you become as children...* Mt.18.3] profound intimacy with Giver of so much goodness.

A child gets happily caught up in play, the lover knows and seeks the hug, these and many other *good things* are gifted to us so that we can give them all away, in favour of finding the Giver. Creation will lead, if we allow it, through playing with its toys on and into intimacy with the Giver. It is the Spirit who enables this by making an appropriate place for body – but the opposite is not the case, as Paul made this point to the Roman Church. My body is mine, so that I can externalise what it means to be me, the me I can offer to you, the me that makes me eternally recognisable, through the Resurrection.

However, Jesus issues a timely reminder in telling us that if we persist, wilfully in selfishness [*sin*], we make ourselves truly unrecognisable. It is not that God ignores us, but that we succeed in making ourselves unknowable to God: *truly, I do not know you* – Mt.7.23. The sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin that cannot be forgiven – *determination not to accept forgiveness* – Mt.12.32.

Francis is known as *il Poverello*, the little Poor man. Some see in this as the man whose embrace of Poverty was such that he literally wanted nothing. Francis was not negatively motivated; he was gifted at birth with a longing, a desire for the best of everything, and after his conversion this same desire remained strong in him, only now, he had been made aware of *who* everything is: God as Abba through Christ as friar – *this is what I long for with all my heart*.

He had arrived at the possibility of intimacy with the Giver of so much goodness that he was determined to let all things go, so that he had the freedom to follow and enjoy his heart's desire. He moved from *presents to presence*, graphically symbolised by his request to die naked on his sister, mother earth.

Kingdom means that when things are as God intended them to be, the Lord is discerned as present. Of itself, when respected for what it is, Creation gravitates towards its origin. The current distraction between evolution and religion is sad to perceive. Truth is one, and cannot be divided against itself. God's plan for the emergence of creation includes the evolutionary process, and is not in any way locked into the dictates of Creationism [*the belief that the universe and living organisms originate from specific acts of divine creation, as in the biblical account, rather than by natural processes such as evolution*].

It is the vocation of humankind not simply to know what is, but also *what ought!* It is far from human maturity to act simply with the intent on *getting it right, not getting it wrong...* We are called not simply to do the right thing, but the honest thing. Today's insistence on *rights* overlooks something prior and superior – our *acceptance of our responsibilities*. We are gifted with a critical faculty, meaning that we are not simply amassing information, but can sift and sort what is taken in, through a hierarchy of priorities, acquired over time. We are aware that some things matter to us much more than others! This hierarchy, while being normative for behaviour, is by no means guaranteed infallible, and so needs formation and shaping according to the norms for goodness, that reside outside us and in God.

This process of moving from multiplicity to unity, is what makes the distinction between pure sense awareness and rational understanding. Many members of the animal kingdom outshine in their sense perception, yet

there is no coordination and simplification to intelligent awareness as to the why and wherefore of what is perceived. There is no urgency in the animal to seek to unify. It is this ability to pursue the one in and through the many which fosters our search for Perfect Unity through Total Trinity – the image in which we are made.

How can we, who are here today and gone tomorrow, sort out and make decisions about permanent and absolute values? Human experience alone is not sufficient. We need to perceive things, not just as they are, as they appear to us, but as they ought to be in their own right, as the Creator intended. To undertake responsible discernment is to enter into a God-like process, creatures of time and space linked irrevocably with the eternal.

Our usual way of knowing is via logic and abstraction, rather than by intuition. We cannot *know* God as we set out in search. The core of any energetic enterprise contains some expectation, almost a presentiment prompting the search for *the* one to the exclusion of every other. We have an inbuilt tendency towards good, so much so, that if the purveyor of evil is to have any success, it will come only through showing evil to be good. This is why we have the prohibition in Genesis, not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This prohibition is in fact not negative, rather does it point up the fact that goodness and the universal right to enjoy it, is far too vast for us to handle on our own.

In Mk.10.18, we read that *only God is good!* The goodness that only God is, is now fully revealed and readily available in goodness made flesh, Jesus the Christ. To claim to be motivated by goodness, means that the fruit of my living produces the same effects as does the living of Jesus. For example, as *a direct result* of the way I am living, hungry folk are fed, the lonely find friendship, the fearful have assurance of safety and security, and those who cannot cope no longer have to do so on their own.

If this is to happen the will must be liberated so as to pursue its proper object – to nurture affection and the desire to share, the eagerness to welcome reciprocated. It leads to that ultimate step over the threshold of Poverty, when the Giver is desired above all the many wonderful gifts, when anything less than everything will not suffice.

There's abundant evidence all around us reminding us that we are creatures of a Creator. With the coming of God to be with us in the Incarnation, we learn that creatures though we are, we are destined to know God as Abba and ourselves Abba's beloved. This is the Truth the mind seeks, and the attraction tugging at the will that Goodness provides, making of life's journey a nostalgia for home-coming. We came out from God by God's creative act, we return knowingly and willingly, having heard the Word and freely opting to become what we are hearing.

In speaking of his authority to do what he was doing, Jesus refers to it as: *I know where I come from, I know where I am going* – Jn.8.14. This is his identity, it is his life, it is the core of his mission, to spread universally awareness that God is gifting us with this self-same awareness, the ability to know God as Abba and ourselves as the beloved of Abba – *to all who believe... he gave power to know God as Father* – Jn.1.12.

Paradoxically Jesus' *power* comes through his powerlessness. In everyday terms he clearly has no power, no status, no authentication, no evidence of scholarship, yet his incarnating of the reality in God makes him eminently a man of authority.

He has brought, as he told Nicodemus, a new way of being a human being. A way that stands apart from that of get and keep, a way that will have nothing to do with having to find someone to blame; a way that attracted

many to see and hear. It is the way that knows nothing of eternal death, only eternal life *when every tear will be wiped away, on that day we shall see you our God as you are, we shall become like you*. In confronting evil's ultimate sanction – exclusion by death – in this way, he turns it around. Instead of being the ultimate in falling apart, disintegration, death now becomes the pinnacle of love, *by the way he lived – greater love than this there is not, than that you die for another* – Jn.15.13.

Between God and creation there is an infinite chasm. God is not simply a million times greater than we are, the most perfect human being, God is totally *other* – *My ways are not your ways* – Is.55.8. There is no way we can reach God; but we have been reached by God. Even our prayer only happens in this way – *we do not know how to pray* – Rom.8.26. When infinite power is at the service of infinite love, we have the Incarnation. Mercy and Justice have met [*Justice and Peace embraced* – Ps.84.11] in ways beyond simply repairing what has gone wrong. Love loves the lovely – there is mutuality between Lover, Beloved and the Enjoyment of this. Wonder of wonders, the Love that is God is offered to creatures who are not God, without conditions:

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

[John Duns Scotus – Eric Doyle, ofm. Clergy Review Sep.-Nov. 1972].

In Chapter One of his Letter to the Church in Ephesus, Paul invites us to remember that we owe Christ, not just our salvation from sin, but and primarily our initial Grace, the invitation to intimacy with Father, Son and Spirit; which constitutes the very essence of being a fully alive human being. Redemption actually underpins this, that God is not deflected from this creative purpose, not even by sin. Sin is not able to have God change course –

Jesus is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation – in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created through him... in him all things come together – Col.1.15.

It is interesting to insert this text between vv. 6 & 7 of Ephesians 1.

... to be accepted as sons through Jesus Christ, in order that the glory of his gracious gift, so graciously bestowed on us in the Beloved, might redound to his praise - Jesus is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation – in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created through him... in him all things come together – For in Christ our release is secured, and our sins are forgiven through the shedding of his blood. Therein lies the richness of God's free Grace lavished upon us, imparting full wisdom and insight.

Jesus dominates history, he penetrates, governs and explains the coming into being of everything, in a communion of Charity, flowing out from God to all Creation and inclusively back again. To be Christ-like is to live in intimacy, not just be an imitator. The world without Christ is orphaned from the Father, unable to attain to the dignity of fully alive human living. This is why humanism is so inhuman, since only God is big enough to release humanness to its full potential - complete intimacy with Holy God.

The coming of the Kingdom does not mean modifying what is already here. Jesus is unique. There is no person, group of persons, no system that can claim that the Gospel authenticates what they are already doing. Jesus is always a minority of one. What is needed is not by-pass surgery but a complete heart transplant: /

will take away your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh – Ezek.11.19. Gospel living begins with total change and absolute trust – Jn.1.18.

Malformation has penetrated to every level of human experience, so much so, that even our education and cultural programmes are geared to perpetuate it, with the inevitable consequence of causing us to live in an unreal world. The fiscal programmes and taxation systems are geared to maintaining the supremacy of wealth, and yet has the wealthy trying to evade the system altogether or forever seeking exemptions, legal or otherwise.

Peace and Good is the atmosphere of the Kingdom – *Peace is my parting gift to you, my peace I leave you... not as the world gives peace* - Jn.14.27. A peace owing nothing to either psychological or even religious good will. Piracy used to identify itself with a flag, now it is more subtle, appearing among the ranks of business and enterprise as *the acceptable way*. Under whatever guise such dishonesty appears, it still remains the charter for the greedy, where the rich get richer at the expense of the further impoverishment of the hardworking poor. Dishonesty can never succeed, despite its many claims so to do.

Truth cannot be promoted through lies and deceit, as the world-wide Credit Crunch showed. What has suddenly exploded at corporate level has been a long time simmering at the personal level. Like Charity, peace and justice must first break-out at home. Our Myopia needs attention, so that we can see that, despite the prophecies of doom and gloom, our world is not empty – as the bank vaults appear to be. The world is for people, all people and making sure the necessities of life are freely and universally available is not the fruit of charity but the demand of justice.

The *peace the world cannot give* starts where we all start, where we all belong, at the very heart of the intimacy that is God. This peace which only Jesus brings – *what we have touched, what we have held in our hands... this is what we preach* – 1Jn.1.1; we need not just willingness to receive this gift, but also the ability to recognise the obstacles that impede it, many of which might well be *good* in themselves. Francis did not shun wealth – he gave thanks for so many good gifts, but realised that good as they are, they could distract him from the All Good – he preferred the Giver to the gifts. His Canticle rejoices in so much abundant goodness, yet is totally overwhelmed by the Good who is the Giver.

When efficiency and market values become over-intrusive, the temptation to control and steer increases. It is necessary at all times, but most especially in times of temptation, to heed – *follow me, I am meek and humble of heart... you will find rest [peace]* – Mt.11.29. When change is needed because some are hurting, it helps to know what the hurting feels like. In all aspects of life, we are committed to *hear the cry of the poor* as being of the poor ourselves. The Beatitudes remind us that despite the good-sounding *preferential option for the poor*, poverty of spirit is not an option. Jesus said it starkly and bluntly – *Blessed are the poor!*

The Church is obliged, as from its founding Charter, to seek to maintain the proper balance within systems dealing with access to the good things of life. Anyone venturing out in the rain is going to get wet, equally the Church, heeding the cry of the poor, is going to be affected by its sojourn into all aspects of human encounter, and so must build-in ways to rediscover its foundational focus. This only happens in one way – through fidelity to hearing the Word together, and sharing in the breaking of bread.

But awareness can remain stranded within good ideas and projects, and simply become more information. The evil spirit in the Gospel knew who Jesus was – *You are the Holy One of God* – Mk.1.24. Such orthodoxy is perfect, yet is the spirit of evil. Being right about Jesus of itself does not make me good. Knowledge becomes

real and relevant when it makes contact with life-lived through significant relationships, since though it, is picked up by reason it has its origin in love.

The Word does not just communicate, as if passing-on information, but brings about the *experience* of the truth conveyed, in a manner unique to each receiver: *Whoever has ears, let them hear* – Mk.8.18. The locus for this happening is not hidden away in private contemplation, but in genuinely good liturgical celebration, called together to become the Eucharist we celebrate, for all to whom we find ourselves sent.

Reality is not just what I can see and touch, but awareness of the underlying quality in all of these. I will need much more than my senses if I am going to be fully alive. *If sense living can produce the mirage, and is at the same time the place where we live, then we are condemned to live this as punishment for some primordial misdemeanour* – so argued Plato.

There certainly is a two-fold aspect to what we understand as Real. To discover which is which, happens through a necessary asceticism. Jesus never condemned sense living, indeed he was himself highly sensitive to the finer things of Creation, as his Parables show. Nor does he exhort his followers to take up the harsher ways of the Baptist. He integrates all within the primacy of love, and calls such ordering *Life in the Kingdom*. His asceticism was picked up by Francis, and passed-on to us in his dying words: *As the Lord has shown me what it is mine to do, may he show you what it is yours to do*.

Sorting and sifting is always a means, never the end. This will issue in a renunciation – a re-announcing – not a getting rid of, but a declaration that my life is now under new management. No longer am I prompted and motivated to satisfy the spirit of self, but free to accept the challenge to become other-person centred, to hear the cry of the poor. Nothing in God's Creation will ever lead us away from God, which means that our renunciation must never degenerate into denunciation.

Our mission is to see and praise God in such a way that others can be helped do the same, through the quality of our presence with them. *Let all Creation praise the Lord*. The simple word *let*, is huge in its implication; since it asks of the will generosity, sensitivity and accountability – to enable what is of God to emerge as surprise in every aspect of life, evident through balance, and absence of any form of exaggeration.

Love is persistently seeking out any and every expression of the lovely. In highlighting and celebrating such realities Creation is being *let* praise God by being fully itself. It is recorded in a variety of ways how Creation actually responded when Francis showed such sensitivity: the crickets fell silent when he chided them for distracting others from Evening Prayer, reminding them that he too would fall silent when it was their turn to praise God.

Brother fire was considerate of his plea for gentleness during the cauterising of his eyes. Birds and fish listened, the wolf heeded... as if Creation saw nothing to fear in this man who was showing such creative respect by the way he lived. - *Creatures sought to return his affection, smiling when he held them, answering his call, obeying his command* – writes his Biographer – Thomas of Celano. Creation applauded when he enabled it to find its way back to God. This happened because his body, as part of Sister Mother Earth, was in harmony with his spirit which, in turn, was now in harmony with God. Such harmony with Creation is the fruit of Charity, and not a product of study and learning.

This is when life for him came round in full circle, and he discovered what it means to be in the *image of God*. In our human condition, we are able to be with God *through knowledge in love*, as embodied spirits. Nature of its essence moves towards union with spirit which, in turn is in pursuit of union with God. *To know God and*

Jesus whom he has sent – Jn.6.29 is the proper object of mind and will; God in the mind as explanation, God in the will as motivation – sheer goodness, from which we have come as created beings, and towards which we now, voluntarily intend and ardently desire.

There are many chapters in the Book of Creation, but only one story. To appreciate what we read in Creation we need some awareness of the God we are meeting. We are urged to be attentive to the *signs of the times*, but this of itself is insufficient. We need to be fed, nourished and nurtured, held and comforted in *the way* for the flourishing of all life. We are let to see God through the face of Jesus.

God within us needs to come face-to-face with God sent to us in Jesus. Left only with inner longing, we will seek to externalise anxiety within, and so blossoms all sorts of natural religions.

The Grace of inner awareness needs to meet the Grace of God who is Jesus: *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*– Heb.12.2. Full living is living in communion; it is essentially relational calling for some form of ritual expression for the praise of God, yet without the constraints of formulae. Worship – *worship* – welcomes initiative, and tempers respect for authority with appropriate reverence for individuality.

Crib and Cross are not devotional inventions. Only one who has confidence in the goodness and reliability of Creation would ever think of nourishing one's spiritual values from Nature's own mysteries. Devotion issues from feeling and emotion – *wishing a new-born child and his mother well; and commiserating with her at the tragic loss of her only son.*

This way is littered with hazards, not least substituting what is natural for what is supernatural, through misguided sentimentalism. Yet sentiment has its place in worship, since it carries a very real part of being person. Subsequent decadence does not take from initial value, but reinforces the need for ongoing renewal through return to the sources.

The seduction of humanism is ever present, tempting us into ways that disrupt appropriate balances. We reach out to God from within a world increasingly in need of creative "discipline" - *art of the disciple!* Above all, does this mean trying to see what is real, and not just either my version of reality or my preferences. Between ourselves and the rest of Creation there is a two-way flow: on the one hand, Creation provides for our needs at all levels, and so, we accept stewardship, to respect Creation for what it is in its own right – its ability to carry the presence of God. As things stand anything *that is not of self as self wants it*, has little chance of being respected - without a disciple's intent.

Our longing surfaces either through articulation in the normal way, and amid so much affluence, or as envy, and even as felt injustice when there is oppression and deprivation. But even when realisation is possible there comes a time when the *jaded* factor enters in. When Francis, prior to his conversion, returned from imprisonment to his former wealth, it felt to him to be dry and pointless. This can mark the first stage of conversion, daring to believe that we are not so much longing for God, as God is longing for us! The fact that such moments tend to be fleeting is a reminder that we cannot take too much reality, and to live with this at the forefront of our daily living is more than we can handle, without appropriate respect.

This sense of dis-ease, within surroundings in which we formerly excelled, has led many to risk that one step further, into the listening attitude that opens up into contemplation. All this because there has been a change

of emphasis. Initially, I might find stillness and tranquillity challenging, but staying with it can bring about – *be still and know that I am God* – Ps.37.7, 46.10.

For this to become part of my living, I need to enter into that place with the same desire and eagerness of the first occasion, and *never with the expectation of repeating what happened before, since God is unchangingly always new* – Heb.6.16. Heed Francis de Sales, who asks: *are you seeking the God of consolation, or the consolation of God?* Get this wrong, and we remove the sense of mystery; as anyone trying to analyse dreams will tell you.

The gift of fascination is well-suited to spiritual living. It is the ability to be taken out of ourselves, albeit momentarily, when awareness of time and space goes. For that moment it is to be as God is – the One who is totally transcendent. Scripture says in many places – *in the fullness of time it came to pass [it happened]*. The *happening* is an experience of life totally other than our normal experiencing – an experience that is whole and complete – with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Fascination has its own rules, and when we try to help it along it disappears, even a simple and commendable attempt to prolong the experience, will fail, since this is self intruding where there is only self-transcendence. Working towards creating the environment for such experiences to happen can never equate with being overtaken by wonder proper to fascination. It is a gift, letting us experience life as God-given, God-focused and God-present.

What then should be the appropriate disciple's art [*discipline*] in the light of this? The word *appropriate* is important, since self-effacement can be confused with a healthy sense of self. A spiritually alive person is detached from self-centred living, along with a wholesome and healthy sense of self. Francis desired nothing other than the will of God. But for this to be real he had to be his real self.

It is no coincidence that people like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Francis of Assisi... stand out as unique personalities, unrepeated elsewhere, yet none of them makes any sense if they are isolated and alone. Francis is known for his unique approach to God and Creation, but his life makes no sense without the life-giving relationship he refers to as *friar Christ*

Chapter Fifteen

Respect...having another look!

What is it within us that has us respect and desire to recall where we have been; who was with us; and to try to relive the enjoyment of those times, without falling too heavily into nostalgia? For an era that has walked on the moon and probed far beyond with incredible accuracy, that has advanced science and technology hugely, what place is there for the times when none of these was ever dreamed of? Is our past with us literally and only in ruins? Yet there is an obvious fascination for what happened way-back-when, as is seen from the popularity of such TV programmes as *Time-Team* and the like. What do we do with our past?

Left to itself, Nature did not appear to have a problem, for example, with waste disposal – nuclear or otherwise. Nature's cyclic activity integrates past and present, seeing yesterday as providing for tomorrow. Looking at a scrap-yard piled high with unwanted detritus, think of the humble butterfly and how it feeds off the shell that once formed its security, and freshly nourished flies into a future, neither rejecting nor neglecting its past.

By definition and unlike God, we are in a continual process of becoming, but does this have to be by getting rid of what was? Letting our heritage disintegrate simply has us face the future devoid of the necessary resources for a fruitful journey. Well within living memory we recall the disintegration of that most oppressive and tyrannical regime, the former Soviet Union – graphically symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and how, as if from nowhere, religious observance reappeared as if it had never gone away. This life-sustaining energy was kept alive, even like smouldering embers, during those long days and nights of fear-filled oppression. Ordinary, yet heroic folk held onto a past which held promise of a better future.

Equally, we need to be aware that we also violate our past when we insist in dragging it into the present. Like fine wine *the present is the fruit of a past harvest*, that has been carefully respected, processed and refined *into something appropriate for tomorrow*. Only then will it be welcomed and enjoyed as the significant present.

As in so many instances, problems arrive, along with what has been named *human respect*. *Respect* is usually a fine sounding and well-meant word. In this context, however, this isn't the case. It suggests that what other people might think becomes the overriding norm for progress, that human dignity and natural justice can be violated, as long as it keeps the majority happy. Most power-abuse situations begin this way, from a basis of fear. Some fear the past, some fear the present, others dread the future... yet in most cases what is being feared is fear itself!

There is anxiety about loss of status and the like. In Church matters notice how dilatory some pastors appear to be in recognising not just the basic needs of people, but their basic rights, as if ministry depends on benevolence more than service. Francis refers to those who are invited to be Ministers and Guardians [*Provincial and Local superiors*] as *the first servants of the brothers*. This he drew from the way Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. As in the heart of the Trinity, so also in the life of the Kingdom, there is no coercive power, only the eagerness of persuasion, by example.

Over the years it happened that part of the Grace of Ordination was seen as enlisting, in an established power structure, and this served ill to allow its genuine and foundational charism of service to be experienced as such. Our times both in Church and State reflect a sense of self as needing to be bolstered by power and status, and this within Christian countries too, where we confess that Jesus *emptied* himself in the service of others.

There is, currently, an interesting debate as to the ideal formation for service, which had an eminent scientist say he would rather be served by someone with *hands-on* experience, than by someone solely with academic excellence. As in most things, the *via media* applies for the ideal. Yet, fear compels many to strive for promotion, fear of the person waiting in the wings to take over. When the sense of self has more to do with *what have I got* than with who I am, confusion has entered-in about the appropriate roles of power and authority.

The ordinary folk in Jesus' day, as we have seen, spoke of him as one *having authority*. The quality of his presence, the words he spoke resounded positively within their everyday searching for meaning and purpose. Yet clearly he was a man without power. He called those blessed who found themselves able to accept him like this, without being scandalised by his lack of qualifications.

He had great difficulty relating to the *good* people, because their goodness was neither inclusive nor whole. *If you keep your welcome for those who welcome you, what virtue is that...? I say, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you* – Mt.5.44; Lk.6.27. Loving means much more than not hurting, it includes wishing well, no matter what the circumstances, indeed, actively promoting such well-being.

Sadly, this is as novel today as when first spoken. Remember the song of yesteryear: *I've grown accustomed to her face?* *Getting used-to* is part of relating, deriving its respect and value from the quality of presence. When this experience lacks or disregards respect, it is no longer truthful, then *getting-used-to* become problematic and at times hostile – *You can't tell me anything about him!* The temptation to take evasive action is strong in all of us – the pretence not to see – and we greet with a false smile and clichéd words.

Once we start believing that we really do *know* each other, we will find ourselves more comfortable with the company of those who were scandalised by Jesus. He just didn't fit! We can and do become as familiar with our own sin so as easily to discount it. No matter how successful we might appear to be in this, there is no way we can avoid its consequences. Jesus reminds us: *by their fruits will you know* – every attitude, every way of life and encounter produces fruit – wholesome or otherwise. This kind of familiarity really does produce contempt.

We do not confess our belief in sin, but in the forgiveness of sin; likewise, we do not profess belief in Christianity but in Jesus the Christ, truly God truly man. We need, and we have authoritative guidance to direct and focus our searching for Jesus, who is the God of our Salvation – and nothing other than him. This path is not as clear as it might sound. When Pope Paul VI issued authoritative guidance in *Populorum Progressio* many within the Church were scandalised by his uncompromising preaching of the Gospel as it is, the ministry of service to which he was called.

The Gospel recounts incidents in Jesus' life when he was not just up against *the opposition*, but even his own family, who wanted to have him put away. As he reminded those *who have ears to hear* – sometimes your enemies are from within your own communities [*as with opposition to Pope Francis*], and we too make ourselves enemies of truth by insisting on *my way and no other*.

Family, parish, community are, at times, no more than the people we have to live with, and we often reserve our affability and cordiality for people elsewhere and of our own choosing. Jesus warns us that it is not the choosing that is wrong, but deliberately being selective when I profess, through my Baptism, not to live this way.

To move away from routine and slavery to the expected, will ever be a temptation. Longing for freedom is strong, and it is life itself that summons most insistently. People who are victims of abuse as children often cope with the horrors of this by relegating the experience to the realm of the forgotten; children cope by blotting things out. This is to build lives on insecure foundations, because this most sinister experience is not part of it, though it remains very real in its after-effects, but now has no name and erupts randomly in anonymous traumatic experiences. With the passing of time, when memory begins to return, and the full reality dawns more vividly, what happens to that world and that self built on sand, a world well-constructed but without reference to this now remembered violation?

For liberation and freedom to be genuinely experienced at the personal level, it must be seen as both desirable and possible, something that doesn't happen simply by waiting long enough. It isn't by any means universally correct to maintain that history is the great healer. Healing begins when the inner longing for peace of mind and freedom for association sees something of hope, of being able to trust, even just one other person. The Church has the responsibility, through its prophetic presence, to ensure the individual is listened to, heeded and believed. This obedience is of a special kind. Not obedience to law, but attentive listening to the Spirit.

We are all allotted our *three score years and ten*, time and space for a specific purpose. We have the wherewithal to discover where we are from and where we are bound. This most precious gift is life itself which, when lived in pursuit of the goodness from which it emanates [*God's DNA*] will draw us ever closer in intimacy to God who is now perceived more and more as Abba. It is a call to reach out to the full nobility of a realised self: *I have come that you may have life, life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. The actual way this happens, is through the *quality of presence* with which we present ourselves to each other in our everyday living. We can brutalise each other, or we can sanctify each other. When Jesus spoke of the abuse of power over the young, he said it would be better for a mill-stone be put round the neck and cast into the ocean, rather than come before God: see Mt.18.6.

Such is the nature of Grace that whilst we can be instrumental in depriving others of Grace; by definition, we cannot cause Grace to be restored. This is salutary for those forced to believe that what was stolen from them through abuse, must in some way be returned by the abuser, and because this cannot be, the abuse is seemingly prolonged indefinitely. Only God gives Grace, what cannot be given by others can be given by God. Indeed, the one responsible for its removal can become the channel the Lord may choose to use, but only through being summoned to it through personal conversion.

Children are important teachers with regard to the need for transparency, especially in their readiness to accept things as they are. Sadly, we tend to silence them in the name of good manners – *children should be seen and not heard* – when in fact they are seeing inconsistency [*hypocrisy*] and rightly questioning. They ask not because they see something wrong but because what is being said doesn't add up. Jesus sees such silencing as hypocrisy, and urges us to become as children, uncomfortable with inconsistency.

Sadly, not every child starts life within care and compassion, which is their birth-right; but even an abused child has no difficulty in accepting that mum and dad can do anything. Every child is full of questions and will believe the answers. A child is ready for faith, ready to believe what is heard, seeing how one thing follows from another. The child talks to everything it uses, the quality Jesus has in mind when he urges us to let go of attitudes acquired in *growing-up*, allowing room for this once more – this time as adult children.

We have to tell the child it can't believe everything it hears – sadly, this is true, but not because of the naiveté of the child but because of mendacious adults. Whereas Faith requires that we hear and heed the Word, with the assurance we can believe everything we hear! The child is willing and ready to talk and listen to anyone, to say it like it is. I recall asking a young boy – *who is the best footballer in your class?* He told me a name I did not recognise, and then tried to describe him, in terms of height etc.... but not once did it occur to that child to tell me he was black.

Indeed, we do have to protect children, but it is not because of their credulity, but the duplicity of adults. Jesus, the adult Son of Abba, says we can believe everything he says, and if we can recover our instinct for faith, we discover that in him our trust is well placed.

Why has the Church moved away from its early days? We moved from simple, uncomplicated beginnings into the anonymity of the large organisation. We need to win back that respect for family which is the basis of all life together, and where that Priesthood in which we all share – *able to make the connection between what is transient and the fact that everything is holy*. Far too often our Ministerial Priesthood seems to connect people to the Church rather than to God present in everyday life.

God comes through the medium of lives-lived as well as through Church ministry. After all, the material world becomes *significant [literally]* of the sublimely sacred in things as ordinary as bread and wine, in a given

context. Nothing can be profane if there is a Creator, since all else is created – equal, but not the same. We either see God's presence everywhere or nowhere.

From such very real and humble beginnings, how did we get to a Church of *hierarchies, Excellencies, moral majorities, whereas the Lord spoke of himself [and presumably of those who follow him] as salt, seed, yeast, light* – see Richard Rohr, ofm *Hope Against Darkness*. How have we moved from free association into unhealthy selectivity and occasional exclusion? It seems astonishing that a Church with the express aim of – *that they may all be one – communion* – found it expedient to invent excommunication!

Even the Gospel challenge *to be poor in spirit* has been compromised, albeit with the intention of laying emphasis where it should be. The Church speaks of *the preferential option for the poor*, which Jesus didn't say – he tells us that Gospel poverty is not an option when he says plainly – *blessed are the poor*, not simply those who opt for the poor! Here again we can learn from the child, who readily lets go of things for people with whom it feels safe, letting us know there are other priorities than *to each his/her own* - fine sounding for those who have, but simply more of the same for those who have not.

The effects of Original Sin are a long time disappearing! It did not take long for *interpretation* to intrude. For example, the precepts for living a Sabbatical year are clearly laid down in Leviticus 25 – when debts are remitted, wrongs pardoned, prisoners freed, exiles welcomed home... so that all might know Yahweh as Father. This soon came to be seen as being a very costly affair, and, through interpretation, was safely relegated to how things will be in the end times. It is not without reason that we hear Jesus proclaiming – *now is the acceptable time!* – Mk.1.15.

The fact that individuals, groups, races... do not get on, that tribalism is rife, dividing and excluding is hardly news. Even when, after laborious negotiations, compromises are reached, they seldom reach incarnation, when *legitimate* ways to breach sanctions are ingeniously devised. All this happening within a people who have publicly [*Baptism*] renounced such ways, all because what is happening *out there* is the fruit of absence of personal conversion and commitment to one's given word.

Never has there been greater need for a healthy sense of sin, and an awareness of the duplicity that isn't found in the child. We need help and guidance, informed correction, not from on high – the handing-out of rules and regulations promises no more than a printing bill. What is needed is the tangible presence of obvious concern, whether expressed as legitimate anger [*you are a bigger person than this*], or through tears and pleading – preceded by being picked-up and held safely before ever a word is said or even implied.

Jesus assures us that nothing is insignificant to God – indeed, *God has no grandchildren*, we are all first-born. And it is our mortality that holds the key to the mystery of life – *whoever would save his life must lose it* – Mt.16.25. How can something essentially mortal live forever? Our faith says we have never had a purely natural end. There never has been a time when humans were born, lived and died, and that was it. We are specifically created to inherit eternal life, yet we are mortal.

We imagine our bodies die, return to the dust of the earth - while our souls remain alive and become immortal spirits. Not true! We are not separate parts of body and spirit stuck together, which come apart at death. We are embodied spirits, spiritual bodies who create ourselves by our experience of living. When we die, all of us dies. Otherwise the Resurrection is no more than another botanical stage of life.

It is often said that when the Gospel recommends our *dying to self*, it means dying to our bad self - to pride, anger, lust, greed... This is true - all evil hinders growth. But these little deaths are only metaphors, analogies of real dying. We simply must die.

We must - because it is in this dying that we gain new life. In losing our self that we find our self. We are not *absorbed* into God, we retain our individuality, a unique person alongside God. God is not an ideal, not a perfection - God is Person, Relationship. You cannot love an ideal - like Perfection, or Goodness - you can respect and admire them, even obey them - but Love demands person to person. If we were absorbed into God there would be nothing left for God to love, and nothing left of us to love! Both God and us retain our separate selves, precisely so that love can happen.

The grain of wheat must die to become more than it was, and we must lose our self to find our self - a self that will know nothing of pain, anxiety, suffering, death... No wonder Paul shouts this out when he says - *Now death, where is your sting?* And Francis sings in his Canticle - *welcome sister death! As no one can see the face of God and live - Scripture says; - if death allows me to see God's face - then welcome sister...*

Jesus-Risen assures us that this too is our destiny. When God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening - Gen.3.8. Where was God the rest of the time? [*There is no time in God*]. Whatever was being experienced in Paradise, they were not yet fully in the presence of God. *Something more* [cf. *Hebrews 10.14*] is needed, a *positive experience* of mortality. Out of the ultimate in disintegration, which bodily death was seen to be, Jesus makes the pinnacle of love: *Greater love than this there is not... than you die for another.*

Paul writes that *the wages of sin is death* - Rom.6.23. He is focusing on this very issue. There is no question, that even prior to sin there would be an *end to biological* living. However, having chosen to walk *other paths, other ways*, rather than the way of the Lord who is life, there is nothing else for us but death! Sin meant we lost the precious gift of being able to die into eternal life.

We need Jesus, not simply to live a good human life, but to die a good human death. With his life, death and resurrection, death is no longer the ultimate separation from God, but the greatest gesture we can ever make - to die for another - Jn.15.13. Jesus did not simply restore life to us, but gave us back the original Grace of dying. After our birth, nothing matters more than that we die well.

Living close to the Olympic site for 2012 it was impressive to see how this vast enterprise was taking shape. At first glance it appears to be a bombed-site, everything levelled, seemingly no method, no obvious plan apparent. It seemed like an exercise in do-it-yourself excavation. Earth was lifted from one place and seemingly random dumped elsewhere.

Seen from a different perspective, shape and form appeared, all the necessary ground-work laid and secured... just like life! We are like flies walking across the roof of the Sistine Chapel, there but unable to see it all. We opt for interpreting what is real so much as what we can actually see. Life contains different realities: there is my life, there is our life and there is *the life*. All three are valid; all have their place, and all need to be integrated. It is the nobility of Revelation to serve this purpose.

Creation happens with Christ in mind - *before ever the world was created we were destined to be one with Christ in God* - Eph.1.4. There was an exercise carried out between primary school-children, and a group of academics. Among other things, they were asked to assemble a complicated jig-saw puzzle. Some of the children soon got bored, and, as is their wont, started playing with the pieces only to discover there was

something on the other side – the face of a well-known person. In no time at all they had it assembled and turned it over for completion.

Creation is a bit like that, full of oddly shaped pieces that only make sense in conjunction with other oddly shaped pieces, yet all of which carry something of the imprint of the face of Christ. To recognise Christ is to learn how Creation fits together. All these oddly shaped pieces are not just *falling sparrows*, along with ourselves, they include earthquakes, tsunami, famine-dealing drought, not to mention our own inhumanity – even with such jagged edges, the face of Christ is not distorted.

It is said that Franco Zeffirelli originally intended the film *Jesus of Nazareth* to end on Calvary, until it was impressed upon him that without Easter Day Good Friday is pointless. Good Friday was not the last word God had to say about Jesus. God is not mocked, evil cannot thwart God's plan, which is to make real just how much we and all creation are cherished, loved and desired by God. There cannot be *safe* settings for love, only the gentle strength of the lover to remain constant no matter what.

The problem with evil is that it is not a problem! If evil were a problem, we could set to and resolve it. Evil is mystery – who can make sense of the free and deliberate choosing of evil over good, fear over peace of mind and heart, death over life?

Since by man came death, by man came also the Resurrection from the dead - 1Cor.15.21. History of recent times contains the demise of tyrannies and the fall of despots, and along with it the survival and resilience of the longing for good of ordinary folk – *where sin abounds Grace abounds even more* – Rom.5.20. Nowhere is this more evident than Easter Day. Evil carried out its most cruel and lethal onslaught on goodness on Good Friday, its ultimate attempt to destroy.

In the Resurrection the ultimate passivity of evil is uncovered in the presence of undisguised and naked love, finding itself totally impotent. Jesus lived his death so fully as to make of death no longer the ultimate in disintegration and falling apart, but the peak expression of total communion – *greater love there is not than you give your life for another* – Jn.15.13. Notice how all the darkness in the world is so passive as to be incapable of extinguishing the light of one, solitary candle.

The Resurrection does not permit negative passivity in full living. We are graced with the ability to make relationships – with ourselves, with God, with each other, with our world... This is how Salvation happens in everyday life. Clearly, without God there is no Salvation; what is not always evident is that without our cooperation [*no passivity*] we cannot be saved. The Spirit is poured into our hearts through Baptism, but we still have to decide to live by this Holy Spirit. In us, is that very power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, in us so that we too might live through death into eternal life.

It is not uncommon to hear comments like - *If I had all God's power I could have made a better world than this!* Maybe another question needs to be asked first: *what would I do if I had God's Wisdom?* We randomly use the expression *Almighty God* in our public and private prayers. What does *almighty* mean – for God? We have the answer in Phil.2.6 – *he did not count equality with God as something to cling to, he emptied himself taking the form of a servant;* and elsewhere Paul reminds us that emptiness of itself, like poverty, celibacy or any other discipline carries no virtue without the intent – *he became poor so that we might be enriched* – 2Cor.8.9. Francis summed it up so beautifully when he said *almighty means a helpless child clinging to a human breast.*

Chapter Sixteen

But is it true...?

We hear frequently the expression – *the poverty of God* and celebrate it especially in the Incarnation and Redemption Mysteries, but do we realise what this means? Logic is familiar with movement from lesser to greater in terms of perfection, from imperfect to perfect, from mortal to immortal. This is the very core of legend and myth. Whereas movement the other way does not make sense. To move freely from wholeness into the *not yet complete*, from full knowledge and wisdom to the uncertainty that characterises human searching does not make sense. The God of our understanding lacks for nothing and, logically would appear to know no needs. So what of a God who freely chooses to have needs?

Revelation makes it clear that God always intended creation to become the perfect expression of God, outside the Godhead. God's relationships are characterised by freedom; for creation to be its authentic self, such freely enjoyed relationships are crucial. Jesus did not simply come to die for us, but to love so intensely that he had no option but to love us even unto death. We are neither mass produced nor made in haste, and we know, again from Revelation, that whatever is said about Jesus, is saying something about us – as he is the first-born of many.

It is through familiarity with the Word, total familiarity, that brings us our true identity, of the kind that Jesus spoke of when he said – *I know where I come from and where I am going* – Jn.8.14. The infectious challenge into fullness of life has us not so much praying words as becoming the words we pray – for us too, the word [*our word*] must become flesh.

To pray *Our Father*... as Jesus urges, is to seek to become more and more aware of what we are about. The first part of this prayer is petitionary, petitions centred on God; with what follows focusing on our needs. May God's name be hallowed, God's will be done universally, the Kingdom established... But before any of these, there are two words commanding attention *Our* and *Father*. To begin in this way is not trying to attract God's attention. *It is meant to be a confession of faith* in what Jesus has revealed to us: that he is the beloved of Abba by nature, and has come specifically to make us aware that we are called individually to become this too, by Grace. When Jesus prayed, his friends didn't so much hear him say or do anything, as see him being someone – the beloved of Abba. To pray in this way is to seek to become aware of being loved by God as if all were a first-born.

Perhaps we can learn from the Prodigal, and discover what this truth actually feels like! He had opted out, lived riotously and irresponsibly and was now desperate and starving. His articulated motives for returning were certainly not of the best, but no matter, *since they brought him home*, he doesn't get the chance even to begin his apology, which is swept away by the ecstatic welcome [*there really is great joy over conversion*], along with the realisation that all that was needed was to recognise the truth of his belonging, to let his father be father. It is interesting to note that nowhere does his father say *I forgive you!* The forgiveness is the celebration! *There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents!* – Lk.15.7.

Is this what Jesus had in mind when urging us to become as children? A child who is cherished and held and enjoyed, has no cares or worries, but gets on with the serious business of playing and chatting with everything and everyone, real or imagined. This is just as true, and maybe even more needed *by adult children!* It is in this light that *thy will be done* fairly shines out. *We are God's Will*, and God desires nothing more than that we enjoy the unquenchable love God has for us. In as much as I can say – not *I believe in God*, but *God believes*

in me, to that extent can I become an access point for others to enjoy this of themselves too. Living the truth of *Our Father* sends us infallibly towards each other.

This is a crucial point for establishing the Kingdom, since Jesus identified the world as being unaware of God. *Father, the world does not know you* – Jn.17.25. The way Jesus made the Father known was by being himself, his Father's Son. Those who accept the invitation to know God as Abba must seek to do likewise and in the same way – being adopted daughters/sons of Abba, in Grace. Only when *Our Father* becomes normative for life will the world be challenged to let-go its ignorance of God, and this through *the Spirit poured into our hearts* – Rom.5.5.

So too with *give us this day our daily bread* – we must first receive this living love in order to become it for each other. This *living love* – Jesus Christ – is our Eucharist. We receive his body given, his blood poured out, and this so that we can become body given blood poured out for each other, and like Jesus himself, empty ourselves in service, discovering that we too are here not to be served but to serve.

Forgive us as we forgive – a daunting prospect if it means *only forgive us as we forgive!* But it does mean that! Forgiveness is not something we do for each other; *it is who we are for each other*. Only God forgives, forgiveness is gift. To forgive means first to be forgiven. We receive forgiveness and then attempt to *become* what are receiving, for others. If our relationship with God is real, then we are constituted by it as forgiven sinners – that is who we are, and who we should be for each other. In this sense, forgiveness is simply being truthful; we are forgiven sinners and must live as such.

We cannot decide to forgive anybody, we cannot even desire to forgive as if from ourselves. Forgiveness happens to me as gift, and I begin to experience this as real when no one has power over me anymore: e.g. having been sinned against can cause us to be angry, resentful – in terms of what might be called *natural justice*, such feelings and emotions could be deemed appropriate, yet whether they come as a justified reaction or not, the net result is that I am unfree, and the one who has sinned against me still has power over me, to affect me in this way. In as much as I believe in *the truth that I am forgiven*, and become a forgiver in my turn, I experience what the Gospel refers to as – *and the truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32. Feeling good towards my offender is not an integral part of forgiveness, it might be present or it may not.

God's justice is forgiveness, and it is the basis of the relationship between God and us. To be open to God is to begin to accept the truth that I am forgiven, and to become aware, maybe gradually, of the challenge this carries, to try to become what I am receiving. We have misused this precious gift frequently, by attaching our own conditions to something which is totally of God – e.g. you have to forgive to be Christian. What if I am pathologically incapable of this at any given time?

Meanness is the ever present predator of mutuality, seeking to plunder Grace. God creates for us, and as creatures made in God's image, our creativity is primarily for creating environments in which others can flourish freely and without fear. When Francis' Biographer commented on this responsibility, he quoted Francis speaking about being friar/brother - *one in whom zeal for prayer is a close friend... available to be stormed by all... does not commit the foul sin of favouritism... and in no way brings down the fabric of justice in his eagerness to protect status* – [Thos. Celano – Second Life - 185].

Many use the cry – *get a life* – as personal criticism. But all of us need to inhabit the real world, not the world of convenient abstractions. There is no such tangible reality as fidelity, honesty, goodness, fraternity... only flesh and blood people who are faithful, honest, good and fraternal in their relating in everyday things. These are people who have an instinct, that the appropriate response to Grace is always gratitude, and show

willingness for others to share in such well-being. *Taste and see that the Lord is good* – Ps.34.9 – is not just a good idea!

Generosity is the fruit of awareness of our origin and our sustaining as gift. Again, Francis relished his newfound identity, not simply as friar, but as friar to friar Christ, who desires such fraternity to become universal. This is born of Grace, Grace that reminded him that if his Lord and his world were to meet in this way, he would have to become the locus. He is not simply *to be known* as friar but *to be friar*. He urges with words like – *you are all mothers of the Lord, you have conceived through Word and Sacrament, now bring him to birth by the way you live* – [Cf. 2Letter to Faithful].

When what is happening every day actually coincides with that to which I feel myself drawn [*vocation*] self-awareness increases. But it takes the stillness of the contemplative to hear *the sounds of the times* and be drawn to respond. There have always been *real* people, incarnations of values-cherished. Recall that anonymous student in Tiananman Square facing a phalanx of tanks, the unsung bravery of ordinary folk in dismantling the tyranny of the Soviet empire, forbidding injustice to go any further. It is in hearts like these that the urge for word to become flesh is paramount, when the idea of the lion and the lamb lying down together does not seem too fanciful.

The hallmark of such creativity is in *the reconciling of opposites* and the fashioning of unity from the raw materials of diversity. The variety of diversity is living testimony to authentic service, saying, among other things, that we are not mass produced, that we are *imago Dei*, redeemed and capable of being totally diverse in person yet one in love, as is Father, Son and Spirit.

Deuteronomy 5, asks the people to *remember* all that they have lived through: the slavery, brutality, hardship, being taken for granted, the unnecessary bereavements... *Remember* that because you know what all this feels like, you must never knowingly inflict such experiences on others... what unity from diversity this will produce!

When we see this fully enfleshed in Jesus, we realise that all who accept the promised *power* enabling us to know God as Father – Jn.1.12 – must allow this incarnation to continue until it saturates the earth. *This tells us that we do not have to forget in order to forgive*; but must deliberately remember if we are not going to allow this to happen to others. Grace respects indelible memory, making it possible for real debts to be cancelled, removing the power the abuser wields through ongoing feelings of injustice.

Conversely, we know how we have wanted others to feel what they have made us suffer, perhaps even to make them more sensitive. More often is it to ensure that if we have to suffer so should they! Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom cannot be in such places. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the storm-tossed lake, he called out in his customary spontaneity [*not always well placed*] – *tell me to come and I will* – Mt.14.29. To his credit he actually climbs out of the boat in response to Jesus' - *Come!* Realising what he was doing, he panics and begins to sink – *Lord, save me!* Jesus could have let him experience his parlous state, teach him a lesson, let him get a mouthful of water – the kind of reaction we would tend to have when we have been ignored. The text says – *Jesus reaching-out instantly...*

This has something to say to us when we would canonise the negative, insisting that it is good to make things tough, even bleak in the name of fostering goodness. How long before we realise that goodness is self-diffusing, that much more good comes from goodness than from any other source? Zest for life, and the enthusiasms needed to promote it is the very stuff of the Kingdom: *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10.

From the Old Testament we have access to God, as it were, from the outside, letting us discover God through the many signs in creation. With the Incarnation, Jesus lets us know God from the inside. He is Love incarnate, and has come with the open invitation for anyone who believes [Cf. Jn.1] to receive *power* to know God as Abba and self as beloved.

Within the communion of Love there cannot be a solitary, there cannot even be two isolated individuals, there would have to be three – the Lover, the Beloved, their Mutual loving. Communion through difference, unity in diversity. We are made in this image, and it shows: we need to love, to be loved and enjoy the environment that lets both happen. Jesus identifies himself as the *beloved*, and his mission as showing us that what is his by nature is open to us through Grace. Aware of it or not, we are loved! The core of life in the Spirit is to grow in awareness of this, and to become what we are receiving, for others.

Bonum est diffusivum sui - Goodness is always self-communicating, passing comfortably and fluently from one to another one. Wherever there is goodness there has to be someone and someone else. *It is goodness in God which is responsible for plurality of Persons* – [Alexander of Hales, *ofm*]. Elaborating on this, he reminds us that Goodness in God is of both of nature and of will. God *proceeds generatively, eternally begetting* the Eternal Word; Goodness of will is the totally intimate quality of this mutuality between Father and Son – Holy Spirit. God knows who God is, and God enjoys being God.

Theologians tell us that the *distinction* between Father and Son is rooted in the communicating of the divine essence, with the distinction between Spirit and Father and Son the quality of this communion – enjoyment within the Trinity. This should come to mind when we speak – often glibly – of *God's Will*. Love always requires simultaneously the harvest of nature and the liberality of affection – nature and will.

To speak of God's love as self-diffusing needs the context of authentic discipline in us. Authentic, because there are many look-alikes that miss the point completely – making of disciplinary praxis an end instead of honouring it as a *means*. Discipline is a consequence, something has gone before. Discipline means – *the art of the disciple* – described better by the word enthusiasm. Enthusiasm arises through experiencing goodness, or its possibility. Once enthusiasm [*en-theou* – *God within*] takes hold in a profound way, all else – no matter how good and worthy – is experienced as getting in the way of following the heart's desire. For Francis – *Il Poverello* – poverty was never simply *being without*, but what he deemed to be necessary for him if he was to *be with* his heart's desire – friar Christ owning God as Abba.

Missing the quality of intimacy proper to such enthusiasm led to states of life in which making things tough failed to make things good. We can learn a little from what are called pain thresholds. Some seem able to sustain pain more than others. But actually enduring pain can never be seen as needed to produce goodness, even though there is a depth to goodness that pain can never reach, though for the recipients of the sharing of such goodness, suffering can serve well, as darkness sets off light.

Pain is often understood in terms of suffering physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually... but it enjoys a positive dimension too, when pain is endured directly out of love for another [*childbirth*]. This tells us that to seek to excise pain indiscriminately could damage our ability to experience the abundance of good living, to see the worthwhileness of genuine being.

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts his hour upon the stage / and then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by

an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing –
Macbeth V.17.

Is this a plea for a life of *grin and bear it*? A true believer sees no more virtue in suffering than does any other person, but believes that *because* of the suffering, dying and Rising of Jesus, all is of value when seen in the context of life's only purpose. I had the good fortune to meet a lady who had a crippling and painful debility for years, and after a visit to Lourdes said *I am healed* – though the debility was obviously still present. *My situation is no longer a problem for me, my resentment has gone, I am now content to be me, just as I am – the way God loves me!*

We have a *now* of life to help us know God, through Jesus whom God has sent. To be happy to be me enjoying my *now* is well and good when all things are bright and beautiful, but requires, progressively, more effort in *normal* circumstances. It is the transformation brought through Grace that makes it possible for us without having to deny that we would prefer to have things happen differently – *if you would be perfect, take up your cross daily* – Mt.16.24. Not so much *take it up* as willingly accepting *the things I cannot change*. There so many happenings in everyday living that qualify as not being at the right time.

Jesus' death was not a private matter between him and God. In dying he is in solidarity with what being human means. So too the Resurrection belongs to all who belong to him in faith. In his own person he is the healing for yesterday and the hope for tomorrow, and both of these are able to be experienced now. Not every negative experience is the fruit of human malpractice. There are earthquakes, Tsunami, droughts and famines. For each and all of these there can be no explanations that will satisfy the angry, the perplexed, the disillusioned, even the well-disposed. Meaningless death, the deepest of all absurdities, is no longer so for those who believe and hope, no matter how tenuously. Jesus embraced injustice and unfairness right through death into new life, and promised *where I am you too will be* – Jn.12.26.

This allowed Paul to assert with total confidence that we have already died and risen in him. Is this reassuring? All too often we mark Easter with celebrations that are more to do with the end of Lent than with the joy of new life. It is a special week-end, but back to normal on Tuesday! Even our liturgical books have a place for *Ordinary Time*. The key is in that word *ordinary*. Holiness is very well presented as *ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well*. Of such are Easter People.

Nothing is more ordinary than that we will die. As people of faith we are becoming aware of this, not as *the end*, but the prelude to life in joy forever. Here too do we need Ezekiel's heart transplant to move us out of our *sensible* but limited mind-fix. Resurrection, like the Real Presence, makes no sense – *but is it true?*

Easter is infinitely more than a Remembrance Sunday. Easter is ongoing, and specifically through Jesus Christ is now the most *ordinary* and proper eventuality for everyone. We are Easter folk much more than once a year - but does it show?

Education and Formation are geared to bringing about change; but Conversion is crucial for reaching full human stature. In this we must remember that Catechesis is not a substitute for Evangelisation. Chesterton boldly claimed that *any word that does not impel to action is an evil word!*

We need to ask: *what does it feel like to be someone in the process of growing and becoming?* What does Conversion feel like? What is the point of interminable projects, plans, courses that, far from promoting zeal for living every day, simply seem to add to an already crowded agenda of things to be done? So much is ingested, so little ever becomes enfolded. Where is the flesh and blood evidence that we believe in One God

in Three Persons? That we really do believe that we are all equal but not the same? Where are the signs that we believe that unity in love comes only through diversity of persons being honoured, celebrated and respected?

Where is the evidence that through the Sacrament of Reconciliation I am not just passively forgiven, but actively challenged, to become the forgiveness I am receiving? Above all, where is the evidence that we are a Eucharistic People? We come together to hear the Word, to receive *body given blood poured out*. How is this translated into service, love of neighbour through our conscious efforts to become what we receive for each other? *I have come not to be served but to serve* – Mt.20.28. Have we the courage to accept John's test – *we know that we have passed from death to life* [People of the Resurrection] *because we love each other* – 1Jn.3.14?

Our Faith rests not in Christianity but in Jesus the Christ. Christianity is the gathered wisdom and the impact faith in Jesus has brought about: *You have faith and believe that there is one God. Excellent! Even demons have this kind of faith. As the body dies when there is no breath, so faith that does not issue into action is, likewise, dead!* – Jas.2.19. Ask, do I believe in someone or something? What do you expect to happen on the last day – *When Christ, who is our life is revealed* – Col.3.4? The writer continues - *...you too will be revealed with him in glory.*

Jesus promised that those who believe will receive power to know Abba, and as a consequence – *no child [of Abba] commits sin, because the divine seed remains in him, indeed cannot sin because of being God's child* – 1Jn.3.9. What has this astonishing revelation to say to us about our sin? The Kingdom is the gathering together in wholeness [holiness] of what began with creation, when everyone and everything is handed back to the Father, in Christ – in whom we are all [adult] children of Abba. *On that day – holy is the Lord – will be inscribed on the horses' bells... every pot in Judah will be holy to the Lord... and no longer will there be traders in God's House* – Zech.14.20

We mustn't dismiss *traders*, in this context it means *sin*. We barter not so much God's Word – that would be too blatant – rather do we barter God's meaning of God's Word. We choose to remain *undead* and therefore incapable of Resurrection. To live and die with Jesus is to believe that *I live now no longer I, but Christ lives in me* – Gal.2.20 – and Christ is Risen from the dead. Jesus said *I have come that you may have abundant life* – Jn.10.10. – where are those who profess: *of his abundance we have all received* – Jn.1.16? He told us that what this looks like is hidden from the wise and clever and revealed to mere children – Mt.11.25.

No one saw the Resurrection happen, and the empty tomb *doesn't prove* anything – but *it reveals* everything. The only evidence of the Resurrection is Jesus' presence, not as one back from the dead, but one who has lived death fully, into a new way of living. Where are the signs of this today? There are examples in abundance of change and decay, of things that once were coming to an end, loved ones taken from us in death. Surrounded by this seemingly built-in obsolescence, where is the Risen Christ today?

Where can you see evidence for the Resurrection today? It is not just in promises, but whenever lives are changed by opting to live differently. Here is the evidence, you and me, all of us together, simply trying to become what is being said when we hear those familiar words - *this my body given for you, my blood poured out, for you...* Does it ever occur to us that perhaps it might not happen, maybe he won't turn up? Why not? Because *he said* he would be here.

Wherever you find good, honest folk trying to be as reliable as that - there is the evidence. For this we will almost certainly have to let go of things as we see them, even our own very best and generous dreams. The Resurrection *is the only way* to look at the cross, just as the cross tells us all about the Resurrection. Look up,

look at the cross - what does it say to you? Possibly - *that's what we did to him, that is what my sinfulness has done...* Then stop, and listen to him and hear the true meaning, listen to him say to you - *you will be lost over my dead body!*

Have I the courage to lift my eyes higher than my own horizons? Notice how everyone in the Resurrection stories didn't recognise him at first - locked into their own expectations - had they been realised they would have found a corpse! Why not try living each today from tomorrow instead of yesterday? After all that is what Easter means - remember tomorrow, not yesterday!

Chapter Seventeen

The art of the disciple...

It can be enlightening to reflect on what the words we use on occasions actually mean. For example, we are familiar with the word *vaccination*, but where does it come from? When Professor Jenner addressed the Smallpox epidemic in 1774/75 – he discovered that what was known as Cowpox rendered sufferers immune from Smallpox – and he injected the Cowpox into patients – this came to be called a *vaccine* – [vaccus is Latin for cow]. Likewise, with *Credo* - which many freely interpret as *I believe*. It actually means *I pledge my heart!* [Again from Latin *dare* – to give, and *cor* – the heart].

Credo is not in the business of ensuring adherence to doctrinal orthodoxy through impeccable observance – there are other structures for this – I pledge my heart has more to do with truthful living – this is truly what I long for with all my heart. I want to be with Jesus Christ as much as he wants to be with me – what Paul refers to as *putting-on Christ* – Gal.3.27, means realising that this is why I am alive, to enjoy life abundantly, and forever.

The mind has its own specific task to perform in all this, sifting through experiences, sorting out priorities. It discerns steps needed if we are *to become* the truth we profess in our Credo. This requires every bit of the considerable energy the mind has, reaching out ever further, seeking to order and control whatever falls within its scope. Not least of its tasks is to help situate enthusiasms appropriately, though its tendency to err on the side of caution needs to be recognised if all creativity is not to be stifled. If we regard the appropriate *discipline* – again respecting the origin of the word – as it should be – *the art of a disciple* – it will have much more room for enthusiasm than for limitation. How disheartening and deadening always to meet *No!* as the first reaction to requests for affirmation.

Most of our daily decision-making is fairly easy and almost automatically done within a personal rather than an intellectual context. There is such a thing as objective reality, but we tend to live within our own subjective take on it. That means we react to felt needs, and respond more readily to story than to principled exhortations. We speak of *our Faith* as if it is a reality distinct from us. We even refer to it as *the Faith*. Faith belongs to a different order of reality, those places where love originates and flourishes.

Though there is a truly intellectual dimension to Faith, there is no more *the Faith* than there is *the affection*. There are simply *faithful* people, *affectionate* people. There is ever the tendency to slip easily into abstraction – *the Church, the family, the parish...*and whilst they do have appropriate significance, they *really* all represent different ways of our being together. Unfortunately, we can belong to all of these categories at the merely abstract level, owning no real flesh and blood belonging.

The fruit of living at the abstract level is creating artificial barriers to genuine communion and belonging, the things we are unable or unwilling to share, the apartheid situations we are ashamed to own. We know of the distasteful feeling when we hear about nimby [*not in my back yard*] protests against *safe houses, bail hostels, immigration centres*, being set-up in the locality – even though we too have to *keep your distance* [*social distancing!*] - attitudes in given areas, within our safely sanitised belonging. All of which allow no more than a shallow belonging within safety zones, precluding all forms of unauthorised access, and thus any possibility of the inclusive intimacy needed for genuine belonging.

There is autonomy proper to each one of us, made as we are in the image of the Trinity, one which is real in unity through diversity. The differences which constitute our not being the same form the basis for communion when they are respected and welcomed, making us *equal but not the same* as with the three persons in One God.

This means that we enter into faith living when we own first-person language for things like *I believe, I love, I am angry...* When this happens, the words become symbolic – *I love you - I believe in you* – imply an already existing relationship, compelling such a claim. *I believe...* daring to accept that God loves me, just as I am, because he said so! To be a person of faith is to risk living my life according to this vision, which another has of me. Faith alone provides the trust necessary for me to do this – in complete freedom.

From this it is clear that becoming a believer is precisely that, a becoming process, allowing this underlying conviction to take hold of me at every level of my life. To be faithful is for me to invest myself in what is being freely offered, a relationship of equals – though not the same. The oxygen proper for faith-living is intimacy rather than orthodoxy. Along with openness to believe, I need guidance, encouragement, correction but most of all the attractive presence, there - for me; a way of life that resonates with values like peace with justice, with welcome and celebration.

The fruits of faith living do not guarantee absence of pain or the resolving of problems, but more vibrant and intense living that looks forward to opportunities for real commitment of one to another. Such intimacy will be at times expressed through happiness, at times through anguish [*at times simultaneously*] – whereas to be offered superficial niceness is betrayal, since it is at best patronising and at worst an untruth.

By nature, we are pain-avoiders living in a world inclined to worship at the shrine of hedonism – *I will stay with it as long as it feels good*. It has even devised a pseudo-morality to justify this, dispensing with any sense of *ought*, if it can be done without hurting anybody, then do it!

The highest form of human living is faith living – being able to live freely and happily relying on the trusted word of another – *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer...* a willingness not simply to endure, but to live fully whatever is implied, because of the commitment to the other. The Gospel urges that we live with all our heart and soul, mind and strength whatever we have committed ourselves to *with all our heart*. Isn't this the real meaning of *Credo* [*I pledge my heart*]?

We do not have 20/20 sighting of God, and our hearing is not too good either, but we shouldn't overlook the fact that we have each other – *as often as you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to me* - Mt.25.45. We are told to love each other as heartily as we can – Mt.19.19. – *and so come to know God*. John makes us a little uncomfortable with his take on this: *If you say you love God whom you cannot see, and despise your neighbour whom you can see, you are telling lies!* – 1Jn.4.20.

Creation is well-suited to faith living, since that is its purpose. We are not expected to live in it for a time as if in a prison, or as a play-pen for our delight. The Gospel gives us a hint of what a world properly lived-in looks like. If God is nothing else but love, then there is healthy tension between the well-being of self and all that is not self. The health of the tension, is sustained by a life that is focussed beyond self. It means heeding [*not just hearing*] the cry of the poor, hearing what is oppressive and what impedes the fullness of life that is everyone's birth-right, and to be industrious in being-with so as to remove barriers where possible, and to remain-with, when such cannot happen.

This is the only way peace with justice will be attained, by *acting justly, loving tenderly, walking humbly with God* – Micah 6.8. This shows us that the first step is an inward step, made possible in Grace, to recognise ourselves as gift from God. Because of the ways of culture and historical formation we construct an identity for ourselves, acquired through our relational experiences giving rise to desire, and so be prompted to seek to become what is so desired. Such is the *norm* for maturation and growth, yet starts from a misguided premise. My identity is simply that I am gifted to myself by God, to be surprised by what can happen, if I live within this fidelity.

The Incarnation portrays this perfectly, with Jesus knowing himself as *beloved of Abba*, holding no one in disregard, able to absorb injustice and violence without needing either to pass this on or to react to it. The Paschal Mystery shows us Christ as dead and alive simultaneously – *the Paschal Lamb slain yet alive!* This incarnating of God's love empties creation of death, opening up our human destiny into what God has always desired – eternal life.

The first inward step is to recognise this truth and own it with the confessing of Jesus as Lord [*giver of life*]. It is worth noting, that while even the evil spirits knew who Jesus was - *you are the holy one of God* – Mt.1.24; Lk.4.34 – they could not speak of him as *Lord*, because to do so requires personal conversion. To own Jesus as Lord can only happen when he is *my* Lord. Both SS John and Paul speak of testing the Spirit in us, *to see if it confesses the Lordship of Jesus* - 1Jn.4.3; Rom.10.9. Such confessing is not simply uttering the words, but living in the manner of Jesus Christ, with similar fruits to show.

In this way we establish ourselves within faith-living, through Grace, a life characterised by accepting responsibilities rather than vigorously pursuing rights. Indeed, we instigate all this through the enabling of Grace, yet we have to accept responsibility for this being ever fresh and *always new* through our frequenting the many opportunities for experiencing Grace directly. It is with this in mind that we can say that God doesn't so much ask us to be faithful to God's Word, as to be faithful to our own given word in response – *let your yes be yes, your no be no* – Mt.5.37. – God's own language is: *and the Word was made flesh!*

This is *belonging* language, accepting that everything that is, comes from the one Creator God who is *Abba*, and so already *belongs* through being loved into existence by the one supreme and faithful Lover. When we need to set priorities and goals we do violence to our God-given identity when they are set with self first, a complete contradiction of the self-emptying God in whose image we are fashioned. We cannot lose that image, we can and we have lost our *likeness* to God through sin. It is salutary to keep in mind that *it is not sin that turns me away from God, but that turning away from God is sin.*

Sadly, even within the Church, the Sacrament of Christ to the world, violence has been done to right priorities. What else are the thinly veiled threats which in effect say – *mend your ways or else! Be good and enjoy compassion, persist in your folly and you are on your own!* Gaze upon the cross, gaze don't *look*, looking has its own agenda, whereas gazing is wide-open to whatever *is*. Instead of hearing, saying this is what my sins have done to him, listen attentively and hear what he is really saying – *you will be lost over my dead body!*

All that is given by God is given *for others*, not just our talents and gifts, but even life itself. A good image of this is the River Jordan, which branches out into two rivers, Galilee and the Dead Sea. One is teeming with life, the other putrid and stagnant. Water flows into the Sea of Galilee, on and out, whereas the Dead Sea has no outlet, it keeps the water to itself! Life that is not received as gift and then incarnated to become for others what it has first received suffers similar fate. There is more than enough such goodness as gift for everyone, though not nearly enough for the greed of one person! For anyone *with eyes to see*, we are surrounded by so much giftedness in creation, we are summoned to gratitude if we are to be in any way credible witnesses to the self-emptying God.

Jesus tells us expressly: I have come so that you may live well – *that you may have abundant life* – Jn.10.10, and to do this in such manner that others are enabled to do the same, precisely by the way we live with each other. It is the graciousness proper to Grace-received, that facilitates this, without it no amount of sophistication will ever even begin to attain to this. If there is not Good News for everyone then we are miserably deceived, with the chasm between *have* and *have not* is growing ever wider; and because there is no response to Grace, there will ultimately be violence and exclusions.

This is why it will not suffice simply to make sure that we are individuals, equal under God. Revelation shows us that we are created to be *inter-dependent*, with abundant opportunity to provide for the well-being of each other, to foster surprise rather than shock, to allow fascination to reach out through affirmation and mutuality. Life is to be pro-active, not content with passive availability – [*which means we have to be asked*] – but genuinely obedient [*listening attentively*] through anticipation and all forms of genuine inclusiveness. Faith asks of us, not just to trust, but to do so willingly, kindled by real relationships. Jesus speaks of such friendship in words like – *I have called you friends because the Father has told me all about you!* [see Jn.15.15].

This world of so many *others* is the intended meeting place for us to get to know God, through Jesus whom he has sent. But it is a *faith* reality, not cognitive. I am what I believe, what I believe is not a statement but a real presence, I belong within the priorities of another, having no logic to it other than self freely and unconditionally offered. No wonder we hear that *Hope springs eternal* – for anyone daring to believe. By contrast, the Gospel tells us that Jesus could do nothing in his home town, could not even be himself, because of their lack of faith - Mt.13.58. We too have known the clammy hand of impotence where there is no welcome, no trust, just dishonest good manners. It takes just one person to have faith well-placed for everything to change. We can imagine, sadly, and all too often, it is only in imagination, what the impact would be of a community actually trying to live this.

The confident claims of Science are to be genuinely applauded wherever the quality of life, and respect for life at every level is fostered. We need to recall that this too is concrete evidence of the Graciousness of God, who not only created the skills and insights, but also prompts the generosity in service of others. Whilst there is talk about the Laws of Nature, as if they are of our own fashioning, we need also the humility to remember that we are only able to adjust and occasionally alter the sequence of events in a world established in its own right by a Creator.

We trust the sun to rise and set each day, our environment to contain necessary elements in due proportion. We do all this within the confidence that Truth cannot contradict itself, and so where there is conflict it will certainly be of human making; and so require genuine dialogue in humility and mutual concern for Truth – not just for truths – *I am the way, the Truth, the life* – Jn.14.6. We must continue making choices and decisions, aware that we are stewards within a given reality, who have to live with the consequences of our behaviour.

Trust is the surest way to accommodate the unpredictable. Sadly, we impede the proper functioning of such exciting risk-taking by attaching less and less importance to any congruity between what we say and what we intend. This erosion of the grounds for trust is gaining momentum, no longer can trustworthiness be presumed – we need to test the spirit in us to let it tell us of its provenance, to see if it allows us to hear the cry of the poor as a priority, so that we can do something about it.

Where there is no trust, caprice has free reign, with whatever strikes our fancy becoming the flavour of the day. Loyalty cannot be real without trust, and the happy memory that trust is more often well-founded than not – *do this in memory of me* – 1Cor.11.24. Trust is to faith as oxygen is to life. Crucial as a trustworthy environment is for the well-being of the ordinary of every day, it is a *sine qua non* when the very purpose of living is involved.

Something far more daring and risk-demanding than the providence of our universe, or indeed the reliability of friendship can cope with. It outreaches finite and limited living, daring, through faith and hope, to open wide in charity to welcome that *only thing that is necessary* – but few things are needed—or indeed only one. *Mary [of Bethany] has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her* - Lk.10.42 as being eternal and truly possible.

Where can we find helps to reassure this often wavering hope? The Lord remains faithful to us, and with us through the Mystery of Church. It was the obfuscation of this that prompted Pope John XXIII to bring the Church together in the Second Vatican Council. Like all things human, if left un-renewed, descends into a formalism more to do with observance than with enthusiasm, with self-preservation and maintenance over mission and evangelisation. This tended to oust intimacy, to be replaced by orthodoxy, a betrayal of our birth-right – each one uniquely, and all together called to accept the free gift of being beloved of Abba. We are reminded, by that Council, that structures, especially the necessary ones, must always serve the life.

We were also reminded of Old Testament teaching, where the People of God were identified as *hearers of the Word*, the precondition for intimacy – genuine obedience – *to listen attentively to...* [as its Latin origin suggests – *ob-audire*]. This gift is to be fostered and nurtured with the help of Institution and structure, so that it may flourish and be handed on without diminution, decay or descent into orthodoxy alone. *Hearers of the Word* are not meant to become simply keepers of the rules.

But, there is more. The reminder that when the Word became flesh, the very Law that was God-given to ensure a primacy for the hearing of the Word, was actually invoked to silence the Word on Calvary. This is not yet finished. In our unredeemed selves we still do this – *whenever you did this to these the least of my brethren, you did it to me* – Mt.25.40.

A society that stands for nothing falls for everything! [Basil Hume, OSB] This is very much a critique of today's world. Having taken to itself to be arbiter and ruler of all aspects of life, the supremacy of convenience over principle is guaranteed. Commitment is virtually a forgotten value. Words proliferate which should suggest a continuity between word-spoken and life-lived. Performance seems to take little note of what was said, and promised. Indeed, words are often framed deliberately to mislead.

It is an ailing society that must tell its children that they cannot believe everything they hear – which has to be done to protect children. As we have seen, a child is ready for faith – that is, ready to accept at face value what is said. Which has to be countered by – *you mustn't believe everything you hear*, when the Word of God says the opposite, you can believe everything the Word has to say. The need for such behaviour is often put down to the naiveté of the child, whereas it really belongs with the mendacity and ill intent of the adult.

Commitment needs both the ability and the possibility of trust, in faith; maturity on the one hand, responsibility on the other. Life calls for commitments at every level from embryo to full maturation; without them, quality living is severely impaired. We don't just decide to commit ourselves. We are lured into commitment through our longing for value, most especially for value to be ongoing, made real in both the giving and the receiving of the giving. Wherever persons commit themselves to each other both our God-given origin and our gifted destiny become tangible.

Wherever God is involved, and that is everywhere, the experience of gift is never just benevolence but, and incredibly, evidence of the esteem in which we are held by God, as one always *worthy* in God's estimation. Our first step at self-worth, as we have seen, is the inward step to appreciate self as a unique, and in every way an unrepeatable gift of God, first to self and then by accepting and celebrating it, for the well-being of others. No place for coercion here, simply the magnetism of being desired – by God.

This is no game of Trivial Pursuits. Commitment properly belongs only between someone and someone else. It is devalued and out of place wherever other motivations are posited – like *the cause*, or *the system*, whether of Church or State. Commitment properly issues from an alive, free and intelligent of one person to another. This because only a person is capable of the intimacy that hallows experience. It is not just a declaration of intent, but a pledge to seek the integrity needed to make God present by the way we are present to each other. To be with God is to be fully alive, not just to exist. It is to *be aware* of being cherished and finding oneself also wanting to cherish – gift without mortgage, simply love's imperative.

For Christian life, this begins in and through Baptism, the free choice to accept living differently, and in a manner which lends order to all other choosing as we meander through life towards *that one thing necessary*. The call is the same for everyone – *come and see* – Jn.1.39. – but the hearing is different in every case, to try and become the person of one's word in accepting freely God's given Word. Jesus did this ordinary thing *extraordinarily* well. In so doing he brought about creating the *new heaven and new earth* by the ways we live with each other in our world. This is why the Psalmist is eloquent with: *the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God* – Rev.12.10.

We are summoned by Grace to live our lives to the full, once redeemed and enlightened; it is an invitation into the way Jesus lived, a complete restructuring of our freedom, involving a complete heart-transplant – *I will take away your heart of stone and put within you a heart of flesh* – Ezk.37.26. This it was that enabled Francis, confronted by the Gospel call to poverty of spirit, to recognise the *surgery* with *this is what I long for with all my heart!* Life is a journey, and it is God's desire that we enjoy the travel. Indeed, life's purpose is not so much to get from A to B as to enjoy the journey and the company along the way.

Our native indigence, our unquestioned need for salvation, tends to make us one-sided. Such poverty of self makes all kinds of statements about needs and capabilities, but it says nothing about how God is situated in my story. Whatever my own view, I am in a position of strength with God, not weakness. I am fickle and prone to betray and hurt others, to the extent that if God had to rely on the constancy of my loving to sustain our relationship, then it is doomed from the start.

But the foundation of this belonging is God's love for me, not my love for God, as John reminds us: 1Jn.4.10. I am *free* to ignore, forget, dismiss my word of commitment to God – but God cannot do this to me! This is why faith is better expressed as *God believes in me* rather than *I believe in God!* I exist because I am cherished because I'm me! I can and I do trivialise my given words, but the Word made flesh is utterly certain: God loves me, God will never stop loving me, and God loves me just as I am.

This is not easy to accept, particularly when I don't love me as I am, and patently, neither do others. The gift of me to myself is an embodiment of God's love, with nothing to pay, nothing that I'm supposed to do. I would feel more comfortable if tasks, duties were expected of me in consequence. Sadly, this is apparent in attitudes that reduce the enormous gratuity of God's love to a routine: *going to Mass, making my Easter duties...*

The Parable of the Prodigal shows us how hard it is for us to let ourselves be loved gratuitously. All that was needed was for him simply to let his father be a father. It seems that no amount of reassurance will make it any easier for us to accept gracefully: *The Lord does not delay in keeping this promise. Rather does he show generous patience, since he desires no one to be lost* – 2Pet.3.8. Truthful living will always require change because of the false self we have been inhabiting, a reshaping of our value system. Love loves the lovely, and since Love can only create lovely things, then all creation carries loveliness, whether we see it or not. Life is given in order to affirm loveliness, to remove whatever impedes it, and to bestow it freely wherever it is missing.

Our world is pain avoiding [*as well as pain-inflicting*] and is adept in providing unwarranted opportunities to ensure this. It certainly cannot cope with death, even though we are surrounded by it at every turn. The Mystery of Christian life consists very largely on how we live our death. Nothing is more certain about us than – 1) we are born; 2) the whole of life will become my past by passing through the present; 3) I will die. What is mysterious is how can this be, when faith tells we are born and will live forever?

An animal dying is a purely natural process - life, like a piece of music - comes to an end. Not so for us: we are not adequately catered for by simply following the rhythm of nature - birth - mature - fade - die! We have a story - our lives are not just a cycle, they are a story, an unfinished story...

The one we are grieving for, made something of the gift of life, through decisions. making a difference by life-lived, life doesn't just happen - each one of us has a unique take on life. When an animal dies nature is simply taking back what it lent. When we die, nature is taking back far more than it gave. This is why we feel distress, bewilderment even anger.

This is why, at the heart of the world lies the Cross, underlining the freedom love needs if it is to flourish. Love evokes sacrifice of a kind that empties out even death itself: *greater love than this there is not than that you give your life for another* – Jn.15.13. But how does what happened in Jesus come to happen in us? Following Christ is not mimicking him. [*Interesting to recall again that nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus say worship me, simply follow me!*].

We are not asked to go and look for crosses, but to have his priorities – captured beautifully in the Serenity Prayer: *Grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* There are more than enough crosses already in life, and what we are being asked is to take away from them the power they have over us by freely accepting what we cannot change. It is invigorating to meet genuine people who refuse to be dominated by handicap, illness or any disabling situation. Something which is bred solely by enthusiasm and zest for life – *I have come that you may have abundant life* Jn.10.10. – no matter what the conditions within which it is to be lived.

Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life* – Jn.14.6. and attentiveness to him, the Word made flesh lets us share the aims and purposes of life to the full. This also tells us what our sin really is. We have compromised death. Death's God-given mission was to imprint the seal of eternity on the values we enjoyed during life. We have

emasculated this sacred task with our insistence on being totally self-explained, and self-directed through life.

Our faith in Jesus, the way, truth and life, by contrast, tells me that the gift of my life is not for me to live my life as I see it, but as others need it. It is a salutary thought that it takes hardly any effort at all to miss the target, whereas to score gold calls for total investment of self.

By the Word of God, we are fashioned, we are, as it were, the *sound* of God's voice, and the real self is forever attuned to it even though for considerable periods of time we are deaf to it, by choice or otherwise. Yet the Word is ever there, inviting us to enjoy life to the full by letting life happen according to the Word [cf. *Annunciation*], and what this actually feels like is the filling full of our deepest yearnings for intimacy to be real, and for universal peace with justice. Be our allotted time the proverbial *three score years and ten*; it is there for us to accept this wonderful gift; to become what we are receiving for each other. The Spirit alone makes this possible – enabling us to know God as *Abba*, as John tells us in the very first chapter of his Gospel. The Spirit, faithful to his mission – *will make clear everything I have told you* – Jn.16.13.

Our first tentative steps along this given way will show us how the very ordinary happenings of everyday, the things Zechariah speaks of: *On that day holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar*- 14.20, will be seen as *holy to the Lord*, opening life wide to care, compassion through joy given, shared and received. In this way is chaos seen to be ordered, and opposites reconciled: *wherever you find goodness, celebrate it; wherever you find goodness damaged, repair it; wherever you find goodness missing, bring it with you* – Bonaventure.

We need to get back to basics, to trust the promise of Genesis, that we truly are in the image and likeness of God who is nothing else but love; and through Grace we can make this real in our world, simply by the way we are real. This asks us to be faithful to the energy we have been given, to the longing for meaning that refuses to go away, and gives purpose to our striving. Through faith like this – *God believes in me* – hope becomes real – *we are destined in love through Christ to become one with God* – Eph.1.4.

We need to be courageous through our doubting and our confused anxieties – even at times, our desperation – [*my God why...? Screamed Jesus*]. Such is the bread and butter of prayer, our efforts to try to situate ourselves with the relationship God claims with each one of us – *a beloved of Abba*. It is not asking for miracles, or even the chance to start over again, simply the courage to trust that life as we know it, the only life we have, was specifically chosen by God with each one of us in mind, as being the way best suited for us to live and love abundantly.

Such living is nurtured and sustained through gracious relationships encouraging us to believe that God will never disappoint us. Kingdom values enable us to trust in the infinite worth of ordinary things, shared by ordinary folk in extraordinary ways, unspectacular in themselves – owing nothing to *celebrity* living – simple ways of real peace with real justice and gentle strength.

We do have the will for this, and our sincerity in owning it is genuine more times than not. Yet it is a tough and daunting task. We have our enlightened moments when God breaks through to us, moments when fascination is real. Our times of darkness and doubt are not so much crises of faith as of conviction – the temptation of wanting to *know* rather than rely on the awesomeness of faith alone. What we *know* and what we truly *believe* can be very different, but we are getting there. It is always reassuring to remember that the Church has always believed far more than she has understood.

So, let us welcome each other, frequently to enjoy and celebrate the many aspects of life calling out for this. Celebration helps root out the hollow and the merely routine by encouraging us to see each other and our wonderful world as gifted by God – whether apparent or not – and to be good to ourselves together. Grace teaches us to be grateful [*its very purpose*] for life, for the world in which life is lived, and especially for the company we enjoy along the way.

Remembering, that whilst it is never possible to find one companion with a full house of all ten attractive qualities, it is much easier and more realistic to seek and find ten companions with one gift each. Maybe that is why there are so many of us around.

Mycheal Judge, ofm, a friar from New York was chaplain to New York Fire Department, and was killed trying to rescue in the 9/11 disaster. Mycheal {*listed number 1 of the dead on 9/11*} spent a sabbatical year with us here in England, and he shared what he called his morning offering – said every day: *Lord, take me where you want me to go; show me who you want me to meet; tell me what you want me to say, and keep me out of your way!*