

Jesus today

More and more people, especially the young, today are rejecting what, in the past, were regarded as normative: *religious certainties, scientific certainties, cultural and political certainties* – they are in a downward spiral, leading nowhere. Everything is up for questioning – no longer is there belief in what *authority* says [the Brexit mess]. It is the time when one opinion is as good as any other; when decisions are being made on what *seems interesting to me* - the prevailing *sign of the times*.

Our age is the time of reason – which began with the Enlightenment [*European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition;*] it is also parallel to the growth of capitalism. *Progress of science, technology and reason would overcome all human problems*. Religion and morality are side-lined and labelled as for *private belief only*.

This edifice, built on sand, began to collapse early last century with the arrival of irrational and inhuman behaviour in the most developed countries – like Germany with the Holocaust, and in other places where violence and cruelty flourished, and oppression was the order of the day. We have seen the demise of such regimes – only to witness the thirst for a *super power*, to wipe-out terrorism and its cohorts – but ignoring *ecological destruction* in its wake. Progress? No wonder scepticism is rife, as all *isms* are becoming *wasims!* They just don't work. So, where are we?

Religious systems have suffered the same fate – scandals causing havoc in the Church, with religious authority seemingly impotent. There is, however, one spark of interest. In the past, science had no room for miracles. Now look at what is growing today – fascination with the occult, vampires and magic! They may not believe in these, but they are obviously fascinated by them – the popularity of Harry Potter!

All we seem to hear is bad news – wars, murder, abuse, terrorism... along with *natural disasters* like Earthquakes, Tsunami and Pandemics. No wonder feelings of insecurity seem to be inevitable, there is a rush to distract ourselves: *a dread of what is happening to our future stays on the fringe of our awareness, being too fearsome for us to face*.

In the past we relied on *certainties* in our different cultures, which were not questioned, be they Western, African, Asian... These are gone, leaving a vacuum where we desperately search for someone to blame. Some turn to substance abuse, some to suicide, others to wealth and possessions, to sport, entertainment, sex - anything to divert attention from the worries of life. This encourages turning to the past – *the good old days!*

This is where fundamentalism raises its ominous head – return to what seems to have been the fundamentals of the past; where there was *certainty, authority and absolute truth*, offering a fake security in our insecure world.

There is another and more trusted way!

Appropriate Spirituality

Spirituality is seen by some as a form of escapism – true in some cases, but it is a tangible sign of our times, there is a deep hunger for genuine spirituality. The actual sign is not the numbers of satisfied people – but *the widespread hunger* for a spiritual life. The hunger is experienced

in various ways – for some, it is finding inner strength to cope with a busy life; or for peace of mind and freedom from anxiety.

There is a sense of being wounded or hurt, broken and in need of healing; cut off from other people and from nature in general. Young people especially, are feeling the need to be aware of *mystery* – what lies beyond what we can touch, hear, taste and smell. Asking what living is really all about?

The West experienced a need to contact Eastern ways – to discover the benefits of yoga and meditation for example; Christianity pursued interest in *centring prayer* – recognising the difference between *spiritual and mystical*.

Mysticism went through times when it was regarded as something odd – serving no real purpose for everyday living. Today, that has been reversed – see the current bookshelves containing names like *The Cloud of Unknowing, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna* as well as modern writers like: *Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, James Alison...*

Mystics are ordinary folk who take God seriously. They do not simply *believe* in God; they claim to experience the presence of God. The purpose or aim of mysticism [*centring prayer*] is *experiencing* intimacy with God, one that is full and complete. For the mystic, everything else belongs, because of this. They are joyful, happy and humble, loving and free.

One aspect of mysticism is *the oneness* it brings with everything created – everything. For me, St Francis comes to mind – who felt one with his sisters and brothers, human and otherwise; reading his Canticle celebrating creation, he sees *Brother Sun, Sister Moon and stars, Brother fire, Sister Water...* It is not without relevance that humankind doesn't appear until verse 10! As if he is saying *Creation without humankind already has a unity*, simply waiting to be respected, valued, shared and promoted. What is crucial to mystical union is: *it is a religious experience rather than a religious dogma.*

The move from information and knowledge to *experience* has always been part of human history. The demand is always for experience, not ideas. Mystics are renowned proponents of this. In modern times Pentecostalism has come to the fore as an expression of hunger for an experience of God, along with the Charismatic movement – with *spirituality* experienced as the gift of the Spirit. Notice the exuberance of such gatherings; whatever we may think of this, it is obviously part of a hunger for spiritual experience.

The same can be said of *experienced* need for healing. Once again, the significance is not the numbers [which are many] seeking – but *experiencing* the need for healing. Such gatherings proliferate world-wide: The Church has them in Lourdes, Fatima, Knock, Medjugorje... and the like. Felt-need seems to be for *physical* healing, nothing new in that; what is significant is the numbers seeking *something more* than medication; something that will heal body, soul and society into *oneness*.

The practice has been: if you want physical healing, see a doctor; if your need is for inner peace, see a therapist. But now, many are seeking more than psychotherapy. This shouldn't surprise us. As Hebrews reminded us: *with us in mind God planned something more* - Heb.11.40. – not *something more* in quantity, but in quality.

One important modern development has been the separation of spirituality from religion. Spirituality has been with us from our very beginning; religion was introduced only 5,000 years

ago; and will probably disappear, because *spirituality flourishes outside the great world religions*.

However, separating the words *spirituality* and *religion* isn't very helpful in detecting the signs of the times. What is worthy of note is that religious *institutions* become fossilised, legalistic and dogmatic [*as do members within them*].

There is, however, a powerful hunger for spirituality today that cannot find the nourishment it seeks in churches, mosques, synagogues or temples. What is more and more evident, is how the grandeur of God is being discovered in our evolving universe. The searching is for a *practical* spirituality that will let us live fully, and for those who are Christian, to find it in the Church, *because it is there*.

We have a growing number of spiritual searchers willing to try anything – from Christianity, humanism, magic, animism [*a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe*], pantheism [*reality is divinity*] or whatever – sadly, many who honestly seek, are exploited by those eager to profit financially.

Today's youth tends to reach beyond the mechanistic and scientific world view on offer, in their search for the *mystery* that underpins everything; something they haven't found in churches, they say. All they have found there, are authoritarian teachings, empty rituals; where terms like *body and soul* are meaningless to them.

They want a *spirituality* that makes sense of the body and its sexuality. What is common is lack of interest in doctrine and dogma [*places like Taizé attracting many young people*] – there are no sermons or long liturgies. There are long periods of prayerful silence and singing. Whatever we may feel about this – it is happening; a sign of the times.

Individualism

Western society is self-made, self-sufficient and selfish – needing no one other than self. We may consult doctors and lawyers yet retaining our own autonomy. Having our own money is crucial for such independence – hence the pull of career searching. It is an ideal that many live and work for, and are prepared to sacrifice to achieve. Freedom and happiness seem to mean independence and self-sufficiency.

In other cultures – in Africa for example – inter-dependence and reliance on one another are valued and appreciated – *a person becomes a person through other people*; identity depends on family, friends and the local community who inter-relate.

Individualism is not new; what is new is *a growing narcissism* socially, politically and spiritually, along with ecological destruction. The sour fruits of individualism are alienation, loneliness, lovelessness, unhappiness and an inability to maintain relationships.

It was thought that what was needed was to help individuals develop a strong sense of ego; and the results have been disastrous, leading only to self-centredness with both neurotic and psychotic consequences. The self-centred person loses touch with reality – resulting in the fully unhealthy *me-generation*.

Sitting together at table is not primarily to eat – but to *share*. Few people are *hungry* at meal-times. Sadly, table-fellowship is being replaced by trays in front of the telly.

The young claim freedom to do their own thing; to have things *my way*. An individualist spirituality is counterproductive; with the realisation that what the mystics of old have always maintained is too true – we need to move beyond our self-centredness, our individualism – and realise that it is not doing wrong that is the problem, but *insisting that I am right* – latter-day Pharisaism. I am right and if you listen to me, you will learn!

No wonder in Europe, North America and Australia churches are empty; unlike in Africa and the rest of the world, where people gather in churches to support one another in prayer and by singing together. In the West, *the tendency is to find an empty bench rather than sit next to others*.

There is a stark contrast between *a person becomes a person through other people*; and *a person becomes a person by becoming as independent as possible from other people!* The former wants to be together, the latter wants privacy – in this latter case, privatised spirituality inevitably means loneliness.

The concept of human rights has contributed enormously towards a more just society – but it does have an element of individualism. Maybe, instead of proposing human rights, we can foster something like human responsibilities, *the common good?* Which serves the best interests of all.

Individualism in our Western culture is actually threatening the freedom it purports to achieve. Nowhere is this more evident than in our selfish destruction of the environment, bringing us to the brink of chaos. The pollution of rivers and oceans, the destruction of rain forests, the greenhouse effect of fossil fuels... a litany of wanton damage.

Worst of all, it is not some *future* catastrophe, but what is already happening – global warming. The words don't sound threatening, but science tells us it is already causing extreme weather conditions – killer floods, droughts and rising sea-levels.

World leadership, however, seems to be at odds in agreeing on what needs to be done. Yet international cooperation is vital. What part does selfish individualism play in all this? Any leader who proposes the need to change our standards of living in the interest of survival will never get the votes. It is not a matter of blaming selfish people for these troubles, but of realising that nothing will change until we face-up to what ego-culture is doing.

Self-centred ego trusts no one outside itself, and so is open to insecurity through seeking only its own gratification – lacking in both empathy and compassion, and can be extraordinarily cruel. Divisions and conflicts between human beings arise here. Some maintain that selfishness is natural – true in a sense – but nature is not static, it is evolving, up to today's critical and destructive level.

It could equally be *natural* for us to *transcend* the confines of selfishness, to reach beyond self-interest, not by fighting anything we see as against us, but letting that *other longing* evolve – *the natural desire for community*.

Suffering

Nothing brings reality home to us more than suffering – I can have all the wealth in the world and be totally impotent in preventing a loved-one from dying. Indeed, human history is a history of suffering; while history books tell another story – of conquests and of amazing

discoveries and inventions. What is hidden is the horrific suffering accompanying these events; what really matters in history is the suffering of people?

History of warfare is about people wounded and maimed for life; blown to pieces, tortured, humiliated and left to die – children included. The Pyramids were built on the suffering of slaves – the new America founded on genocide and elimination of indigenous people, and on the humiliation of African slavery. Likewise, the Industrial Revolution thrived on the deprivation of people in the mines, mills and factories.

At the same time there is a history in which, amidst so much suffering, we have been moving towards overcoming some of it, with the hope for much more in the future.

Suffering is made worse where there is powerlessness and the inability to do anything about it. There is no way out.

Some forms of religion offered the promise of relief in the life to come, which effectively makes things worse, suggesting that suffering is God's punishment for sin – and a warning that if we did not stop sinning, we will pay for it in the next life.

It seemed to be accepted, that oppressive structures and systems could not be changed – then came revolutions – France, America, Russia... along with numerous uprisings against colonialism and imperialism. They may not have been successful, with new regimes being even worse, but revolution lets us see that power structures *can be changed*. [*It is on record that Lenin on his deathbed said the revolution – though well intentioned, caused even more suffering and bloodshed, when all that was needed was 10 men like Francis of Assisi!*].

But hope was ever present – slavery was abolished; something impossible in former days, when even S Paul, who clearly saw slavery as contrary to the Gospel, thought of it as a worldly structure that was impossible to change – in this life. As for Racism, we have seen the defeat of Nazism, the success of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States – but racism continues. Patriarchy is now being challenged by movements for gender equality. Until now the cries of the poor have gone unnoticed.

In 1945 *United Nations* was established, and has been the voice of the voiceless. This voice is getting louder *outside the UN*. It is not yet loud enough, and has yet to penetrate the corridors of power and the media.

Yet the gap between the rich and poor is still getting wider. There is no place as yet, for billions of people in the economy; they are neither producers nor consumers – just nobodies. The multi-nationals wield the power of money – yet, it is the power of the gun [*and the knife*] that is most oppressive. The world cannot be dominated by money without the weapons to defend wealth. Japan is very wealthy, but because it has no army and weapons of mass destruction, it poses no threat. The rule of the bully depends on weaponry.

A Change

Jesus' spirituality would have been formed by Hebrew Scripture. He lived in the Jewish world. However, we can't presume that everything we find in the Hebrew Scriptures was understood and practised in C1 Palestine, any more than institutions calling themselves Christian today can be assumed to be incarnating the Sermon on the Mount.

Hebrew Scripture embraces many world views and spiritualities over a long period. In Jesus' time there were differing interpretations about what it meant to be Jewish, along with a range of human traditions:

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions... you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that – Mk.7.8,13.

Greek culture was very much present – from neighbouring Greek cities; along with the enforced presence of the Roman Empire. The Greco-Roman life-style was already adopted by the rich and powerful: *Herod, Chief Priests, Elders and Landowners* – lives of luxury and decadence. This is the world Jesus turned upside down with his revolutionary spirituality. *But he was not a reformer.* He didn't propose changes in religious praxis; instead, he turned the world – both Jewish and Gentile – upside down.

He didn't want simply to replace – he wanted something much more basic. He took current values and turned them on their heads. His change was social rather than political, one calling for deep spiritual change [*Social* brings change to inter-personal relating; *Political* brings change to power structures]. Jesus saw himself as one who's mission was to introduce radical social and spiritual change; the dismantling power games will follow on this.

What he said has been collected in the Sermon on the Mount – in stark contrast to everything currently taken for granted: *turning the other cheek instead of taking revenge, loving enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, forgiving more than 70 X 7 times* – Mt.5.38, Lk.7.27.

That in itself would be enough to bring social change – but there is more: *what he had to say about the rich and the poor.* It was taken for granted that the rich had been blessed by God, and were the fortunate ones. Jesus proclaimed the opposite! *Blessed are you, poor ones* – Lk.6.20.

Not that it is good to be destitute and in need, rather *regard yourselves as fortunate that you are not among the rich and wealthy* - Lk.6.24, who are going to find it difficult to live in the future world, where everything is shared. The only way the human race will survive is for the rich to lower their standards and share their wealth. Jesus is uncompromising in his belief in total equality. He refused to see women and children as unimportant or inferior. He asks us to take the lowest place – becoming as little children.

The prevailing spirituality in Jesus' day was Law-based – the Torah. He tackled this head-on: *The Sabbath is for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath* – Mk.2.27. God's laws are to serve humankind, not dominate. We do not exist in order to serve the law – that is idolatry. Which is why Jesus was free to break the law whenever keeping it meant harming people. But his behaviour was seen as scandalous to the authorities, especially:

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." 3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. 5 Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty

in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?

Mt.12.1-5.

At that time, the Law was not only the 10 Commandments, but also a comprehensive system of ritual purity known as *The Holiness Code*. Everything – time, space, people, things – was ordered according to greater or lesser degrees of purity. Jesus saw such rules as human tradition distorting God's Law.

Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God said, 'Honour your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' 5 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' 6 they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules

Mt.15.1-7.

He not only ignored the distinction between clean and unclean food, the ritual washing of hands before eating, he touched corpses and lepers and women who were menstruating – all taboo in the *Holiness Code*. What matters to him is people and their needs – everything else is relative to that.

In Jesus' day people were on *high alert* – waiting the arrival of the promised kingdom. Speculation was rife. Would there be a miraculous divine intervention – would Rome be defeated – would the Messiah march in triumph into Jerusalem with an army – or would it happen some other way?

Jesus' understanding of Law observance was different from what the authorities used, because his awareness of God was totally different from theirs. God was not like an emperor, or those who lord it over others, nor even a benevolent dictator – Jesus spoke of pagans as *those who make their authority felt* – Mk.10.42. For Jesus, God is *Abba!* – a *living experience*, not just knowledge.

He understands *Abba* as the loving father, totally fascinated with his children: *My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found* – Lk.15.31. The elder brother was a son - but not a brother!

The Kingdom would not come down from above, it would rise-up from below, from the poor and the little ones, from the sinners and the excluded – they will become as brethren caring for one another. Even Jesus' understanding of family was different: *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple* – Lk.14.26. He is saying one cannot be of God's family-like kingdom while having a preference for one's conventional family.

See how he lived that: *Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother* – Mk.3.35. It was living by this that caused pagan observers of earlier Christianity to say: *see how they love one another!* Cf.1Peter.1.22.

He is not saying this family-like kingdom will be the whole human race. He speaks of loving enemies, thinking well of those who hate; which is why he sees the formation of the family of God dividing and causing conflict –

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52 From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law – Lk.12.51.

The Kingdom is not something to be hoped for – it is already here: *It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade - Mk.4.31.* This seed is already planted and bearing fruit.

Jesus did not want to be served – he discouraged his disciples from telling people he was Messiah – he wanted to be servant – Mk.10.42. John captures this with his description of Jesus washing his disciples' feet – Jn.13.4.

Jesus' image of Messiah was the *Suffering Servant* – Is.52, never the conquering hero, not victor but victim and, paradoxically, his greatest achievement. The reversal of victor and victim he shows to be the answer to the problem of violence. Instead of sacrificing someone as scapegoat to save the people, Jesus takes it upon himself to be scapegoat, sacrificial lamb.

By the world's standards Jesus was a failure. Nothing turned his world upside down more radically than treating this kind of failure as success. His willingness to fail revolutionised spirituality – his death a triumph! Meaning, he was alive and his executioners were dead: *Anyone who would save his/her life must lose it... whoever loses his/her life will save it – Mt.16.25.*

When we are unwilling to give up our lives for others [service] we are already dead. When we are willing to let-go of our lives, we begin to experience the abundance Magdalen experienced in Jesus' very much alive, risen from the dead.

Right-way up

Far from changing the shape of the world from its original state, Jesus was restoring what had been distorted by the way it was lived-in – by eliminating pride, envy jealousy, self-centredness, self-importance, lovelessness and isolation from one another – as individuals and as groups. He brought God's world to be as God intended.

The real world that he uncovered would have appeared to his contemporaries to be naively impractical; whereas Paul speaks of it as: *Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles... For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength – 1Cor.1.22.*

Prophet

Whatever peoples' views on Jesus, they regarded him as a prophet and mystic. Some said he was a *false* prophet – but he spoke and acted like a prophet; which was how Jesus saw himself: *Truly I tell you, he continued, no prophet is accepted in his hometown – Lk.4.24.* He never

contradicted anyone who referred to him as a prophet. Which lets us assume that his *spirituality* was like that of the Hebrew prophets.

Prophets speak-out when others remain silent. They criticise their own society and its religious institutions – a true prophet doesn't criticise other nations and religions. This causes tension, even conflict between prophets and the establishment. Hebrew Scripture tells of clashes between prophets, kings and priests.

Jesus was well aware of the fate of the prophets: *Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man* – Lk.6.22. He identified the Scribes and Pharisees as the predecessors of those who killed the prophets in the past:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! 33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar
Mt.23.29-35.

The conflict is between system and experience. Prophets are not part of systems or religious institutions. Unlike Kings and Priests, prophets were never appointed or ordained, or anointed by the religious establishment. They *experience* a specific calling from God directly, which is why they say: *Thus says the Lord God*. Jesus was killed because of this. Any attempt to practice the same spirituality would mean facing similar consequences [Pope Francis?].

Prophets can tell the future, not as fortune-tellers, but as people who have learned to read the *signs of the times* [Pope John XXIII – *Humanae Salutis convocing Vatican II*]. It is being aware of the political, economic, social, military and religious tendencies consequent on current behaviour – able to see what is coming and why.

Jesus was well aware of military threats of a powerful empire. The History of Israel is one of oppression by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Rome. Prophets warned against collaborating with power structures, promising that each of them would eventually fall – which they did.

Jesus was aware it was only a matter of time before the Roman armies would destroy Jerusalem - *When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near* – Lk.21.20. For Jews, the destruction of the Temple would be the destruction of their worship, their culture and the nation.

Jesus' concern was not for the temple but for the people of Jerusalem, especially for women and children - *They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you* – Lk.19.43. He knew, as did the Prophets, empires come and go.

He must have foreseen the violence in which the ordinary peasant folk would be caught-up – they would be exploited, not only by the Romans but by all within the power-structures – the Herods, the wealthy land-owners [*have things changed?*] They would try to resist and incur violent repression, which would give way to revolution and even greater repression.

The people were powerless and helpless – *like sheep without a shepherd* - Mt.9.36. This led to an upsurge in religious fervour: new movements, new ideas. They were desperate to know what God was going to do, and what God wanted them to do.

Moved profoundly by what he saw, Jesus seems to have decided that what was needed was healing: *Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor* – Mt.11.4-5. In such hopeful signs Jesus sees the presence of God – and if this is so *the Kingdom of God has come to you* – Lk.11.20.

God's Word

Jesus spoke of God more confidently than did the prophets – he never says *God says...* but *I say to you*. Where did he get the confidence to say this? [*the question asked by the people – Where did this man get this wisdom?* – Mt.13.54] after all, he's just a peasant from Nazareth.

Prophets experience not just a calling from God, but intimacy with God, a mystical experience that enables them to speak for God. Jesus was a man of action: preaching, teaching, healing, confronting... What we do not always notice was that beneath and in support of such activity was a life of constant prayer. So much so that the disciples asked him to teach them to pray *like he prayed*. He had no time for those who stand and pray in synagogues and at street corners – he called them hypocrites: Mt.6.5.

Contemplative

Jesus was wholly contemplative. His life before public ministry [known as his *hidden* life] was, in one sense, the same as his public life, underpinned by constant prayer and discernment about what was to come. As fully human he had to grow and mature over time – *he grew in wisdom and stature* – Lk.2.52.

He learned to read and write, probably in the synagogue; where he listened to theologians and asked questions – Lk.2.41. He pondered what was being asked of him in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, which he would later often quote. At his baptism in the Jordan he *felt* the Spirit descend upon him, and became aware that he had been chosen as a prophet, a servant, or a son of God in a special way.

The Spirit led him to the desert where he remained for 40 days [40 echoes Hebrews' time in the desert]. He spoke of this as a time of temptation, struggling with God's will for him – Lk.4.1, Mt.4.1. Was he to spend his life finding bread for the hungry [*turning stones into bread*]; take power and rule over Israel [*as Satan promised*], do something sensational to impress [*hoping angels would catch him if he fell*]?

See here Jesus struggling with his own self-awareness. The ego gives a false image of self that we can accept or reject. He left the desert and started a new ministry of preaching and healing in Galilee – focussing on the poor and the powerless; this is the result of prayer and discernment in the desert, and a growing awareness of the signs of the times. It was a new time, different from the time of his cousin John.

Mysticism

Mysticism is a word that many feel uncomfortable with – the word isn't in the Bible, but it expresses very clearly what was happening there. All mystics speak of an *experience* of the presence of God – not just knowledge or *information about* God. Are there any clues about such an experience in Jesus' life? From his living, praying and teaching he experienced the presence of God as father-son, as Abba.

Despite so much impressive scholarly erudition – words cannot be found to express the wordless, imageless intimacy of the presence of God – yet we do need to try to speak of this most profound of human experiences. Jesus did it by being intimately with and conversing with Abba.

Such a word was unheard of in his time – yet he encouraged his disciples to use it, a unique way of expressing the *experience* of God's presence. The significance of *Abba* is not that it is masculine, or is a word a child would use, but that it expresses *intimacy* – warm, unconditional and totally dependable. Perhaps more like a caring mother than with a father, though many fathers are equally caring.

Jesus saw himself as the son who learned, imitating Abba, to forgive unconditionally, to be compassionate, to love the just and the unjust equally, including those out to kill him –

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous -
Mt.5.44.

If we struggle to take Jesus seriously, it is because we haven't yet *experienced* the presence of Abba. *Without this it is impossible to understand the why and the how of Jesus.*

We are aware of the tendency to declare *we don't do God*, to relegate religion to the private zone, to ignore its prophetic character. Politics and the struggle for world peace have no place in religion! Some even see mysticism as escapist individualism. Whereas, in Jesus, prophecy and mysticism sit well with his life and spirituality.

Prophets were mystics and mystics were prophets. Any idea that one could be a prophet calling for peace and social justice without some *experience* of God was unthinkable. There is a long tradition of mystics – [*Gandhi, Romero, Mother Teresa*] – speaking fearlessly against the injustices of the wealthy, of political power including Church Leaders. They took Jesus seriously [*even Gandhi*] and became rooted in that same Spirit.

In some ways there are two histories of the Church – the history of its popes and power struggles, its schisms and conflicts, its divisions and heresy-hunting – along with a parallel history of saints and martyrs – ordinary folk devoted to prayer and service and self-sacrifice; a deep love for everyone – no such thing as *terms and conditions apply!*

There is an overlap between the two, but on the whole they run parallel to each other, with no small amount of conflict and tension. It is noteworthy, the remarkable consistency with which saints and mystics found themselves in conflict with the establishment. Saints and martyrs are not *appointed* by any religious authority – their authority rises out of intimacy with God. *Institutional* authority has always found it difficult to deal with freedom of spirit [*note the number of Religious Congregations that have distanced themselves from their founders*].

One *elephant in the room* - the number of women – Catherine of Sienna, Clare of Assisi, Julian of Norwich... who figure largely in the mystical life of the Church, and yet women are virtually ignored by the solidly patriarchal establishment.

Jesus was not a priest or a scribe – a layman, a peasant. Institution was represented by Scribes, Pharisees, Chief Priests and Elders... But he did not reject the Institution – he spoke of Moses' seat: *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you* – Mt.23.2-3, but he rejected the way it was being used: *Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them* – Mt.23.3.

Jesus was no anarchist [*do without any authority structure*] he simply wanted authority to rediscover its original purpose of service; a structure more like family in which those who have authority see it as a privilege of service. When his disciple argued about who was the greatest he gave us a new definition of pagan: *don't be like the pagans, those who make their authority felt* – Mk.10.42.

What about us?

Before Jesus, Prophets were a rarity – now *he opens the spirit of prophecy to everyone*. Anyone can and should read the signs of the times. With this awareness we can speak-out like prophets. The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost and ever after, was the giving of the spirit of prophecy, as Peter says in Acts: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams* – Acts.2.17.

Equally, we all can become mystics! Prophecy and mysticism belong together. Mystical intimacy with God is not reserved for a privileged few – while everybody doesn't have the same opportunities for exploring this, Jesus did not think that he was the only one able to experience such intimacy. He said: *"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" – Jn.20.17*. We can all experience some measure of God-with-us. As Rahner remarks: *The Christian of the future will be a mystic or not exist at all*. How we get there is another matter!

Healing

Jesus was a healer. More healing stories are told about him than about anybody else in the Jewish Tradition. We don't really know what to make of miraculous cures in the Gospel. Do we, today, believe in miracles? Yet it is a fact, Jesus was a healer.

The distinction we make today between physical and psychological [*spiritual*] healing is unknown in the Bible – or in the traditions of Africa. Jesus' healings went beyond the miraculous cures narrated in the Gospel.

His practice of treating people as unconditionally forgiven, had a powerful effect on those who had been told insistently that they were guilty. We hear frequently – *your sins are forgiven... your faith has made you whole...* The Greek word for healing – *sesoken* – meaning healed, made well, is used in the Gospel for what we call physical and spiritual healing.

The holistic character of Jesus' healing is illustrated in the story of the paralytic let down through the roof – Mk.2.2 – he is *healed* by Jesus saying simply *your sins are forgiven*. The healing effect of Jesus' teaching and preaching can hardly be exaggerated. Through parables and teaching he was trying to get people to *see* the world differently; to see it as it really is; and to see God as our Abba. *Seeing* is the word Jesus uses for this new awareness:

*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.
23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light
within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! –* Mt.6.22-23

Jesus experiences God as Abba – a loving Father to each and every human being, who forgives unconditionally – this is how he approached life. He was undoubtedly critical of his society, but never judgemental – never moralising, never needed to find someone to blame. His attitude to the *excluded* and those labelled *sinner*s was radically different from religious leaders of the time, who judged and condemned any violators of the law.

To this day there are people who see religion as nothing more than a system of rules and regulations [*not helped at times by the Institution*]: God makes laws and judges us by them; and the next life is for reward and punishment accordingly. This attitude is equally prevalent among those who are not religious – whenever there is a problem find someone to blame.

Jesus' message is not blame but healing. *He didn't see sin and guilt in others, but woundedness, brokenness, confusion and fear*. Those the establishment called sinners Jesus saw as sick, in need of a doctor: *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" – Mk.2.17. The Prodigal's father doesn't see his son as guilty of sin, in need of punishment – as he says to the older brother – *your brother was dead and is now alive!* – Lk.15.32.

It was not only the poor who lived in insecurity and anxiety. The Scribes, the Pharisees and the wealthy were equally lost – though they would never admit it, as they meted out judgement on others. Jesus was moved to compassion for everyone in need, whatever their pain and hurt might be. His passion was to heal all – not matter who.

In those days it was commonly thought that tragedies were sent by God to punish people for their sins – note how authority asks about the blind man: *who has sinned, him or his parents?* - Jn.9.1. The answer, as always, is no. Jesus refuses to blame or impute guilt. This doesn't mean he refused to condemn injustice, selfish oppression and sin.

When speaking to the Scribes and Pharisees he condemns pride, arrogance and self-righteousness – but does not point the finger at individuals who are to blame. He continues to talk with them, eat with them and teach them – he continues to love them as individuals.

What is more surprising, he did not condemn or blame individual Romans either. They were unquestionably the enemy, and he was well aware of their cruelty. He practiced what he preached – *he loved his enemies*. They too needed healing – we find him healing the centurion's son; most especially we hear *father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing* – Lk.23.34.

Judgement

There are two kinds of judgement: *Do not judge, so that you may not be judged* – Mt.7.1, and speaking of the signs of the times, he says *judge for yourselves* – Lk.12.57. The first imputes guilt, the second analyses right from wrong in a given situation. Jesus was critical of this world – but was never bitter, angry or resentful. He did not blame – he challenged everyone.

Such is seen with the rich young man – Jesus was uncompromising in his condemnation of the system that made the rich richer and the poor poorer; which enables the rich to ignore the poor – Lk.16.19, by believing they could serve both God and Mammon. When he meets a victim of the system, the young man, who is trying his best to serve both – he looked at him and he loved him – Mk.10.21, and sees he is unable to accept the challenge to let go and be free.

Jesus' respect for the dignity of everyone was limitless. He was particularly aware of the needs of women and children – Lk.7.11. Even struggling to Calvary he is aware of this – as he comforts the women in the crowd – Lk.23.28. For him, each individual is a unique expression of Abba – which is why he speaks of leaving the 99 and going after the 1 that is lost – Lk.15.3.

Unconditional forgiveness

Jesus' unshakeable faith was that God loves each and everyone unconditionally, *and therefore forgives sins unconditionally*. Not that he came with authority to forgive sins. He didn't forgive sins himself, he told them that God forgave them unconditionally – he didn't say *I forgive you* - he said *your sins are already forgiven!* He didn't have to go around saying this, his attitude, his presence, the attention he gave, eating with... spoke louder than words. The father of the Prodigal doesn't say *I forgive you*, his open arms welcome is more eloquent than words could ever be.

This is sensitively highlighted in the woman about to be stoned for committing adultery – Jn.8.3 – Jesus recognises the hypocrisy – apart from anything else, it takes two to commit adultery – but who is without guilt of some kind? To his question *where are they who condemn you* – he says *neither do I condemn*.

This doesn't mean that he thought no one was guilty – we are all responsible for what we do – *guilt is a matter for forgiveness rather than condemnation*, which is why he says to the woman *sin no more*. Whatever measure of guilt anyone might have, it is a matter for forgiveness not condemnation.

Jesus healed by loving people – *whatever you do to the least of these brethren of mine – you do to me* – Mt.25.40. Close friendships sit well with universal love – unless they are exclusive friendships. Jesus' friendships are patently not exclusive – being closer to some people than to others is simply a matter of human limitation. It is physically impossible to have a close relationship with everybody at the same time.

Peter, James and John were obviously closer to him than were others – the friends he wanted with him on various occasions. He had friends in Bethany – Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The most revealing of all friendships and the closest was with Magdalen, the public sinner who washed his feet, and with Mary of Bethany.

Magdalen was not afraid to stand with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross. After the Sabbath, at first light, she was at the tomb – which she found empty! According to John she remained

at the tomb, weeping and searching for Jesus. After Jesus-risen coming to her, she tells the apostles, and for this tradition calls her *the apostle of the apostles*. She was obviously very close to Jesus.

Above all, Jesus was influenced by love from his mother. A mother's love is not only special, it is irreplaceable. Jesus' life was free of brokenness and self-centeredness, and his intimacy with God so extraordinary, because he was loved unconditionally by his mother – and Joseph, giving him an initial awareness of how deeply his *Abba* loved him.

Power of faith

Seeing the healing happening all around him, Jesus saw it as the fruit of faith – he didn't say I healed you, or God healed you, he said frequently: *your faith has healed you* – Mk.5.34, Lk.17.19, Mt.9.28. In other words, no magic – simply evidence of the power of faith. So, what does: *by their fruit you will recognize them* – Mt.17.20, mean?

It is clearly faith in God, not only in the existence of God, or even in the power of God, but faith in God as the loving *Abba*. Faith is *the awareness, the experience* of God's love for us; which is why trust belongs to faith. Jesus was able to do what he did because his trust was anchored in God; and is the reason why other lives are transformed by those who join him in this.

So why, with modern faith healers, when people are not healed in the way they expect, do they resort to blame? They suggest, in some way, the person is responsible for the failure – which simply makes the person twice as anxious as before?

True faith means trusting that God always has the best interest of the person at heart, which may not be what we initially want. Remember, at the heart of Jesus' prayer and what he gave us is *thy will be done!* For this to sit well with us, we all need healing as a starter.

Necessary change

So, what can we do? Healing takes time. What did Jesus mean by *be converted and believe*? Like all aspects of life, spiritual life evolves, through inter-action with others, with the environment and what is actually real in the current world. Our *inner* evolving is more like producing a work of art than through step-by-step careful planning. [*no one sets out to produce a masterpiece*] For anything unique there can be no ready-made methodology. A closer look at how Jesus responded to his inner spirit will highlight certain priorities.

An obvious modern obstacle is being *busy*: *Martha, you are busy about many things – only one is necessary* – Lk.10.41. With the exception of having to work to earn a living, there is something we can do. It is said that *time is money – Don't waste time*; even retired people say they are busier now than when they were working.

Busy is a consequence of feeling empty, we need to be concerned about feeling full. Do we honestly believe that being busy is the solution to our inner emptiness? Have we forgotten that God deliberately made us empty to make room for himself when we would say yes to what was on offer? One of the effects of being busy is to miss what is all too real around us. To become aware of reality requires time to *be still and know* – Ps.46.10 [*yes, it is as old as that!*].

Jesus was very busy during his public ministry – he and the disciples often did not have time to eat – Mk.6.31. And yet he needed, and found time for silence and solitude. *Desert time* does

not mean heat, sand and sun. The Greek version – *herēmon* – means a deserted and empty place, where he withdrew from time to time. What a sea-shore, a desert, a mountain top, have in common is there is nothing man-made naturally [*apart from plastic waste!*] there.

If this was a must for him, can we by-pass it, if we are serious about following? There is no fixed way of doing this – each of us is unique, yet we all need solitude, to be alone, not lonely! My room could well be my Sahara – even a park-bench could provide the same. Where neither are an option, we need to be more inventive – I know someone who has quiet time every morning sitting in the crowded underground on her way to work!

Obviously daily time-out would be good, but we need to settle for what is possible, which might mean simply once or twice a week. Searching for happiness and fulfilment only, though well-intentioned, will not do. The truly wise people in our world all benefitted from solitude, hours spent alone with their heart's desire; in that inner silence that quiets our thoughts, images and feelings. How?

Meditation

Meditation is not a mental activity, like thinking about God. It is calming the mind and heart as well as the body, a way to inner silence. We easily have an outer silence, but not an inner silence! Meditation is a way of bring order into this inner chaos by emptying.

Sounds impossible to do, but there is a way. Christian tradition has done this mainly through silence of the heart [*hesychia*] repeating the Jesus prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me* [*often - in tune with breathing*]. Others use *centring prayer*, [*focusing on your intention on God's presence*] the repeated word is called *sacred* – in practice much the same as the previous way. Repetition in harmony with breathing.

What is common to both is focusing on one thing: a word, one's breathing or a sound to escape from thinking and feeling into a deeper state of consciousness, characterised by silence; listening in silence. We don't know how Jesus prayed when he went off into a desert place; what we do know is that his presence points to an inner peace and tranquillity. We never see emotional restlessness in him – he was in harmony with himself, with God and with his world.

Relaxation

Do not make meditation an obligation, which can lead to feelings of guilt when omitted. Regularity is needed, but any form of rigidity militates against this, preventing what should be relaxing and enjoyable.

The mantra we use does not have to have meaning. It is simply a focal point, detaching us from our chaotic thinking and feelings; when these re-occur, simply repeat the mantra. While we are concerned with relaxing mind and heart, the body also needs attention, to release ever-present muscular tension. There are various ways of relaxing the body, but for meditation all that is needed is to relax face and shoulders [*where tension mainly resides*] is to sit comfortably in an upright position.

We live in a world that expects results – interested only in efficiency and practicality, as well as instant solutions – *if it is not useful, throw it away!* *Meditation does produce results*, but not immediately nor in ways that can be easily measured. *We do not solve the problem of busyness by taking time out in order to come back refreshed. Something more is needed. Time spent in*

silent meditation can teach us the value of slowing down, wasting time by doing absolutely nothing – the art of simply being.

I found taking the prayer from psalm 46.10 helpful: *Be still and know that I am God* – and gradually reducing it – *be still and know - be still - be.* *The most profound prayer I can make is to be myself as God intended me to be.* For this I need to discover the face I had before I was born.

God never *began* to love me – there is no beginning or ending in God. God loves me – even before I was born. I need to discover who God saw before I was born. I find this not by looking into a mirror, but by looking into the eyes of whoever shows love for me – God is love, and I am made in that image.

Now

A fruit of the practice of meditation is that when we empty our minds of past and future thoughts and feelings, what remains is *the silence of now*. Jesus taught us not to worry about tomorrow – Mt.6.25; Lk.12.22 – what we might eat or wear, set our hearts on the kingdom [*God's family*], a here-and-now reality. He moved the kingdom from being a future happening into the here-and-now.

We tend to live in the past or the future, our thoughts and our feelings are very much caught up with what has happened, or what is about to happen. Often we are tempted to dwell on the *good old days*, when everything was safe and unthreatening. The past doesn't exist anymore, it is unreal. Or we project to the future, and the kind of world we would like to have.

It is certainly helpful to know about the past, it helps us understand where we are at present; it helps us plan a future – but the only thing that *exists* is here and now. Which means – *the only place we can meet God is here-and-now.* Living the present moment does not mean withdrawing into *my* present moment.

God is present not only in my here-and-now, but in the here-and-now universally. We need to be aware of the present moment of our world. We read the signs of the times to do this, as the only place where God is found.

This is not just a task for our solitude, it is a new way of life, a new way of being a fully alive human being. Interacting with others and with our world needs to be integrated into our lives during our contemplative times -- the way Jesus lived.

Who am I?

One who knows everything else but does not know self, knows nothing – Gospel of Thomas. The true contemplative recognises this as the *sine qua non* of contemplative living. It has been called the *foundation stone of mental health*. Teresa of Avila says: *One day of humble self-knowledge is better than a thousand years of prayer.* And: *No one can know God who first does not know him/herself.*

Jesus was a poet, an artist who painted mental pictures – to illustrate the situation of not knowing oneself, he painted a picture of someone offering to take the speck out of a neighbour's eye, ignoring the plank in his own eye – Lk.6.41. It is so easy to see others' faults – ignoring the greater faults in ourselves. Jesus calls this hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is what Jesus disliked more than anything else, especially in people who have the responsibility of leadership. His challenge was issued not just to Scribes and Pharisees, but to all of us, first to take a good and honest look at ourselves rather than venturing to criticise others.

Hypocrisy is pretending to be what we are not. It is about what is false in our lives – the lies, the contradictions we inhabit daily. He cautions us about parading our virtue – like those who like to pray just to be seen. How easily do the words on our lips contradict what is in our hearts? How much of our behaviour is for show, for public consumption!

When we try to catch someone out with a trick question, while pretending to be really interested, we are hypocritical, probably doing the same thing ourselves. Hypocrisy is a lie. Jesus was honest, truthful and transparent; which is why he is the *way, the truth and the life* – Jn.14.6.

Today's great crisis is the proliferation of individualism – searching for spiritual guidance will never succeed in such an atmosphere. We know how to get to the moon, but we don't know how to get from head to heart; presuming: *I am not like the rest!* – Lk.18.9. How can we face the truth about ourselves honestly?

Without judging or blaming ourselves we need to take note of our behaviour patterns, facing honestly our motivations. An honest look might reveal something neurotic about ourselves. We have varying self-images along with images others have of us – true or false. Too often my ego is convinced of its superiority – which is simply another way of saying *thank God I'm not like the rest of men!* And I might even be proud of my humility!

The more we face-up to our true reality it is possible we might develop a guilt complex, and despair of ever becoming less selfish. It is common for people who have been abused to blame themselves. Of course there is such a thing as genuine guilt. It is important to remember that my ego is not my true self. Self-centred is not our true image – God only creates good. Self-centredness is based on the illusion that I am truly independent and self-sufficient.

The Flesh

S Paul was painfully aware of what he called *the flesh* [*sarx*]. It is unfortunate that the word suggests sexual desire, self-indulgence, gluttony and the like. When Paul says what he means by the flesh, *it is hostility, conflict, jealousy, anger and the like* – Gal. 5.19; what Paul describes as of the ego, not because they are *desires* but self-indulgent desires!

Desire is a gift of God. It is using desire for selfish purposes that is the problem. Our desires for sex, love, food and drink, for comfort and peace in themselves are laudable – *it is what we do with them that distorts*.

Paul knew what he was talking about:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I

want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

*So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? –
Rom.7.14.24.*

He experienced ego as *another* law in him making him do what he truly did not want to do. What he calls *the flesh* [*the law of sin*] we call the ego. It is selfishness rather than desire. Which is why we need to recognise our desires for what they truly are – and act accordingly. Trying to suppress feelings, desires and emotions is not helpful. What matters is we do not allow our ego to misuse them for selfish purposes.

The great challenge is living your wounds through, instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel wounds deeply than to understand them, to let them into your silence than to talk about them.

*The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyse them... But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds into your heart. Then you can live through them and discover that they will not destroy you; because your heart is bigger than your wounds. –
H. Nouwen.*

What he calls *your heart* is your true self.

True Self

There is no way I can overcome my ego. The ego always wins because it is the ego that does the fighting. But we can side-line it! I can remove the beam from my eye! *The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, so will be your body – full of light; if it is not healthy you living in darkness – Lk.11.34.* So, how do we do it?

First, become aware of the ego and its duplicity. The ego's confidence masks its fears, anxieties and worries. Then, recognise it as a false image of self, an illusion. Finally, disassociate from it – stand back from self-centredness and laugh at it. It is important to make an object of it if you are to stop identifying with it. *This is not me.* My true self is me looking at this.

See Jesus in the desert refusing to identify with the false images Satan is presenting. When we experience a strong desire to know the truth about ourselves, no matter how humiliating, this is the true self emerging. When we feel grateful for the many gifts life affords – this cannot come from the ego – the ego is totally incapable of gratitude. However, we cannot get to know ourselves by reading about human behaviour – we need silence and solitude, it will be during quiet time that truth emerges.

Gratitude

Jesus saw everything as evidence of God's loving presence; he was constantly aware of being present to Abba intimately. He saw everything in life as a gift from God, never taking things for granted: *I thank you Father for revealing these things, not to the learned and the clever. But to children – Lk.10.21.* His response to God's love was gratitude [*the proper response to Grace*].

Few things made Jesus angry as does a total lack of gratitude and appreciation, as in the parable of the unforgiving servant – Mt.18.23. The man had been forgiven a huge debt – yet refuses to forgive smaller debts owed to him – which is how Jesus sees any human being refusing to forgive neighbour.

Ingratitude is the hallmark of the ego, ungrateful even to God. Regards self as independent and self-made. Sees others as objects to be used – and randomly discarded. Whereas the grateful person sees everything as gift, everything I have is gifted to me; other people befriending me are blessings, even when disguised. Gratitude is the only way to see reality – fuelled by gratitude is the only way to wholeness [holiness].

Express gratitude – Pray!

To pray as Jesus prayed *is to become grateful*. Not an occasional prayer of thanksgiving – with Paul, *pray without ceasing, to give thanks...* 1Thess.5.17. This is not using *formal prayers* chosen for thanksgiving – but prayers that put into words *the gratitude I am actually experiencing*. We make mental lists of our complaints – which is why petitionary prayer is so popular. There is a place for such prayer – but it isn't primary. What is primary is to say thank-you for what we are already receiving. *If the only payer I ever say is thank-you, it is enough* – Eckhart.

Beware, the ego is expert in making thank-you selfish! Thank God for having enough food – which others don't have! Thank God I am honest – not like others!

Gratitude expressed, is to thank God for all goodness [*not just to me*]. When S Francis and a companion were trudging back home after an unfruitful day on the quest, his companion found himself on his own; looking back he saw Francis sitting on a stone. He went back and asked what he was doing, Francis said I am thanking God. What for, asked his companion – we've toiled all day and got nothing – what are you thanking God for? *For the stone I'm sitting on*, said Francis.

A grateful heart reads the signs of the times, *with an eye for what is best for everyone*, not just for me. A truly grateful person is pleased to see others, outside his cultural or religious circle, able to teach us how to be unselfish. A sad and current anomaly: every year there is a TV Spectacular celebrating children who have overcome horrendous handicaps – the audience give a standing ovation. Yet 80% of that audience said yes to legislation terminating pregnancies when such defects are detected before birth.

What about me?

If I would be on the way to becoming what God had in mind when creating me, obviously gratitude must be part of my daily life. It can change my attitude to life, of others, of God – and of myself. I can't *experience* gratitude and spend my time grumbling, and complaining – how sad if my instant reaction to life is negative; when I highlight the mistakes of others. We hear people justifying always saying no to requests, to give them time to think! [*whoever is asking will probably not give them the chance to express their thinking*]. We need to stop *thinking* God and start *believing and feeling* goodness [Godness], and that I, along with others, are the deliberately chosen recipients of such goodness.

Jesus never criticised individuals, not even systems - but *the abuse* of systems [*all structures must serve life - not the other way round*] - he never highlighted *the mistakes* of the Pharisees,

only that their *goodness* was far from universal. What passed for liturgy [*linking worship with life*] was little more than rubrics: *getting it right according to the book*.

Am I kidding myself in a world with so much evil and selfishness? We don't thank God for what is wrong in the world when surrounded by so much pain and injustice. Where does *pray always* fit – Do we simply play down the suffering or by-pass it? How do we hold *the good, the bad and the ugly* together in gratitude? What is my reaction to the glorious giftedness of life and the horrendous suffering that most experience as their daily lot?

It doesn't help to say: *suffering is good for us!* Neither does it help to become bitter and cynical and hate all who are merciless and cruel. We cannot let evil destroy the spirit of gratitude. So, what can we do?

Once again, have a look at how Jesus [*who knows quite a bit about suffering*] faced up to this. He was always compassionate to sufferers, and denounced all forms of cruelty, he always had a big heart. When we are moved by feelings of compassion for others we are experiencing the gift to *be compassionate as is the Father* - Lk.6.36. Every gift is to be received so that we can become what we are receiving – gift, for others. For compassion to be genuine, it needs to find expression through *prayer [awareness] and action* – both. To become the gift- I have received, is to be intent on sharing it.

As little children

The outstanding comment Jesus makes of true greatness is to become as little children – Mt.18.2. He tells us that the most insignificant persons are the greatest – Lk.9.48. In his day children, like women, had no standing; treated as nobodies. Is he saying to follow him is to become a nobody? His followers are to become humble – women and children had no choice, they were humbled. Jesus is saying make a free choice to be humble when we could be otherwise. *Not be humbled, but become humble*, not passive but extremely active.

This means I cannot become humble simply by deciding to do so – what I can do, is become aware of my pride, my lack of humility, my ego. The ways I retaliate with a harsh word when blamed. Humility is all about truth, *the truth about my real self, not my ego*. This means recognising the futility of comparisons in terms of superior or inferior [*I'm in charge*]. Competition, like rivalry, belongs to the ego.

Jesus obviously saw something special in children that was kingdom-like: *to them the kingdom belongs* – Mk.10.14. He loved them, not because they were nobodies, but because he saw no hypocrisy in them. *Little* children are spontaneously trusting. The *infant's* trust of parents usually continues into childhood, before becoming eroded as the child grows.

Natural trust is pre-conceptual and involuntary, a natural instinct. Children experience themselves as one with their environment, having no *reason* to mistrust. It is when they grow and *experience* independence and meet rejection that mistrust sets in – becoming suspicious of others' motives.

Jesus saw something of his trust in Abba reflected in little children. He has been given all kinds of titles – king of kings, almighty saviour; to be childlike is not to be weak, immature or naïve. It means the trust that began as natural, and instinctive, what he freely took-on as he grew. See this is fearlessness – he was afraid of no one [*JPII had something of this*]. This is not bravado – which relies on one's own strength – his trust in Abba was unshakeable.

It would be wrong to assume that he had no feelings of fear or apprehension – he sweated blood at the thought of being arrested. But he did not allow fear to dictate his behaviour – trusting the efficacy of Abba – *thy will be done*. He coped with fear because of his unshakeable trust in God. But there are other reasons too why he chose children as a model.

Sense of Wonder

For the little child, everything is new and surprising. A baby doesn't look round – looking already has a kind of judgement built-in [*I don't like the look of him*] – a child *gazes* in wide open wonder, which is why it needs protection of parents, to guide towards what is good and what is not [*a tiny child picks up anything and immediately puts it in his/her mouth*]. For a child who has not been deprived of its childhood, life is magical, everyday a new discovery.

Growing-up involves learning to cope with the practical demands of living, and the sense of wonder is gradually lost. Everything is gradually taken for granted – when *instrumental* thinking takes over. This is when our sense of wonder fades, which Einstein maintained that was when we die: *the most beautiful experience is of the mysterious*. There are some who never lose their sense of wonder [*or regain it*] artists, poets, nature lovers and geniuses like Einstein.

The Gospel presents Jesus with a sense of wonder – enthralled by the *lilies of the field*, whose splendour surpassed that of King Solomon – Mt.6.28. The miracle of growing wheat did not escape his notice – in all such wonders he clearly saw the hand of Abba.

It is a hopeful sign that today that some are retrieving their sense of wonder. There is a perceptible change from the clammy mechanistic world-view, to a *natural* world view. *Wonder* is not a way of thinking or knowing, does not provide new information – wonder isn't even a kind of feeling or emotion – it is a profound experience, a form of consciousness. Which cannot be switched on or off at will; much less is it the work of determined effort. We can only *allow* it to happen, and when it does a new sense of awareness arrives.

In this sense *wonder* is useless, contributing nothing to our success in life or to our moral growth. Its value lies in the fact that it rises out of our *true* self. The ego is totally perplexed by wonder – because it is *useless!*

If we would open ourselves to wonder, we benefit from noticing our natural world; from flowering plants to birds building nests. At a personal level, a single strand of our DNA in each human cell would fill a thousand books – my brain is more complex than any human technology – with its 100 billion nerve centres.

Playfulness

Children know how to enjoy themselves by *pretending*. They pretend to be grown-up, to be driving a car – this didn't escape Jesus' attention – he pointed to children playing in the street as they argued about whether to play-act about songs for a wedding or a funeral – Lk.7.32.

There is, of course, a similarity between playfulness and hypocrisy – both pretending to be what they are not. The difference is that the hypocrite is serious, the child does it for fun. The hypocrite is a living lie. Whilst a child, who doesn't know right from wrong, certainly knows truth. As adults we do laugh and joke; few of us would associate this with spirituality, whereas *childlike joy and playfulness* are characteristics of the mystic.

There is a world of difference between being childlike and childish. Being childlike is having the characteristics of childhood *combined with the acquired wisdom of aging*. Childish is the immaturity and absence of learning from experience - *imitating a child's behaviour as an adult*. To trust any and every one irrespective, is childish. Children have to be taught not to trust everyone; not to play with fire...

For many of us there is the tendency to put all trust in God – that God will manipulate things in our favour, *if we ask nicely!* This trust is based on an immature understanding of God; being inactive in unjust situations believing in leaving it in God's hands – *when we are already in God's hands!*

Jesus' choice of the *little* child as a role model presents us with the kind of person we need to become if we are to discover what we are all about:

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do – Lk.10.21.

His message can only be understood in a childlike way – which is why so many see this in S Francis' relation to Jesus – the joyful troubadour.

Let go

The challenge Jesus makes to the wealthy young man – Mk.10.21 – is to *let go* his possessions – which he, *sadly* could not do. Jesus wasn't asking destitution of him: *Sell your possessions and follow me* – becomes part of a sharing community and have the security that comes from trusting others.

Jesus always asks for *detachment*, a willingness to drop their nets, leave their boats and homes – Mk.1.17 – maybe not for life but for long periods while going round preaching. To travel lightly – *no money, no possessions... no worries about food or clothing* – Mt.6.25. It wasn't only possessions they should let go, but also be detached from their reputations:

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets – Lk.22.

Most of all *let go of your lives* – *those who would save their life will lose it* – Mk.8.34. No wonder he tells us to sit down and think about it:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with

twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples –
Lk.14.25-33.

Detachment

Not a popular word today; seems to imply aloof indifference, lacking feelings for others. Which is the opposite of what the word really means. *Detachment* means *inner freedom* – it is the joyful ability to let go, to make room for others – what is meant by *poor in spirit*. Some would say it is more important than love, because without it we cannot truly *love unconditionally* – as with God; without it, we are like the rich young man – we might join Jesus yet *make sure we are self-sufficient*.

Our attachments: food and drink, money and possessions are the most obvious – along with comforts and luxuries. Not that there is anything wrong with these things – it is our clinging to them that enslaves us. Enjoying life is not a problem, nor is pleasure and desire – the problem is my selfish inability to let go when I am challenged by the needs of others: *surrounding property with impregnable fences!*

Unless we are joining a sharing community, we don't need to give away money and possessions; but we do need to be detached from them. The proof comes in our responding spontaneously to anyone in need. If, in order to make such a response, would have I the freedom to lower my standard of living?

I can also become attached to other things – cleanliness, orderly, neat and tidy. Again, excellent things, but do they cost me my freedom to be there for others? So too with likes and dislikes, preferences for food and drink – all harmless, but do they impair my inner freedom to be there for others? I met a family where the front room was kept locked, to keep the children out!

At a more serious level, we can become attached to people – *much of what passes for love today is possessiveness*. We cling to people believing we need them – in today's world *I need you* is an expression of love. Love is not based on my needs, is not possessive, love sets others free to be themselves.

Many are willing to give up anything – except time! Jesus shows us that whoever comes and whenever, comes at the right time. When he wanted some quiet time with his friends, the crowd followed him, and he welcomed them – Mk.6.30. Of course, I need to divide my time among several people, including myself, can I do this freely?

What about my reputation? How much does my good name matter to me? Jesus' freedom included freedom to do what was best for people, even at the cost of his reputation – like eating and being with public sinners. He wasn't detained by *what will people think and say about me? [like Pope Francis]*. We also try to be successful, which is good, but what happens when we fail – would we have the freedom to accept it. Jesus was a failure.

Ideas and practices

Some are attached to ideas and ways of doing things, enough to identify themselves with them – reject my ideas and you reject me! A free person is open-minded – the only commitment is to truth – and Truth is a person *I am the way the truth and the life* - Jn.14.6.

As we move into a world where many of our certainties we took for granted, now have to go – when scientists are now answering important questions with *we just don't know*; where are we? *Obsession with absolute certainty is a form of slavery* – finding security without having to trust in God. Even the search for God is progressive, as again and again we recognise the inadequacy of our thinking about God. We have to have the freedom to let our former certainties go if we are to be God focused and not self-determining.

Such chains include practices as well as ideas – practices which are cultural as well as religious or spiritual. The Saints warn us of becoming too attached to devotions; as long as they are helpful and serve us well we continue, but with the freedom to give them up if need be: e.g. when an act of charity would get in the way of my devotions. This equally applies to meditation when I don't have the freedom to forego, for whatever reason, I am called upon to respond to.

Eckhart speaks of Mary sitting listening to Jesus while Martha needs help! [*It is said of a Dominican lay-brother when someone said of Thomas Aquinas he was so humble he didn't even know how many windows there were in the refectory – replied: he obviously never had to clean them!*].

Letting go of attachments requires discipline [*they are my friends*] it is like giving up an addiction – even when we feel better having done so. What if my attachments are taken from me? I might lose my money through no fault of my own – a close friend might suddenly die – my good name taken away – my ideas exposed as false. This kind of loss we generally call tragic. But it can help us realise that we can actually live without some things – it is a hard way, but might be the only way to inner freedom.

Detachment is not a matter of giving up everything, but a *willingness to do so* when necessary. Jesus was not impeded in his freedom by attachments, not even attachment to his life. He was willing to die if that became necessary. Hear him say when we try to save our lives, to cling on at all costs – *we are already dead*. We tend to live with the threat of death hanging over us – which Paul refers to as *the last enemy*. But if we can learn to embrace death, we too can ask of it *where is your sting?*

Attachment is the work of our ego; because the ego [*false self*] is unreal and empty; so it seeks security in possessing things – even possessing other people. See how attachments become our identity, the true self is side-lined.

None of this is possible without trust – trust in God; without it we are like an astronaut who has let go his spacecraft. *Trusting* God does not mean *attached* to God; not as if we become detached from everything except God, so that we cling desperately to God because there is nothing else to cling to.

There is a difference between detachment and surrender. *We must become detached from God too, to let go of God, so as to feel the free embrace of Abba*; we don't need to cling, as Jesus told Mary on Easter Day, because we are being held – like a child in the arms of parents [*become as little children!*].

There are people for whom God is a crutch, which gradually becomes a prosthetic leg! There is a better way – we can let-go *as we discover God wants to be with us* more than anything else. We have no idea what Jesus felt or thought on the cross – tradition says he felt abandoned by God – *why have you forsaken me?* Which in fact are the opening words of Psalm 22 – which he

was praying; in the end Luke records Jesus saying: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* – Lk.23.46. Becoming free is growing in the experience of *being-one-with*.

Oneness of Jesus

We need to *experience* oneness, not just have theories and doctrines about it. Jesus' oneness with Abba is the essence of his whole life. I find the word *oneness* more eloquent than *unity* – maybe even more eloquent than the word [*not the experience*] love. Jesus was aware of being one with God – he said so: *The Father and I are one* – Jn.10.30. The word *reconciliation* suggests binging back what had been separated; whereas *oneness* implies *we are already one*, and always have been; and it is simply a matter of becoming aware of it, when love arises spontaneously. It is not just one with God, but also with ourselves, with others and with our world.

One with God

Jesus never spoke of God in any off-hand way [*we even use the name of God to swear*]. He spoke of God as an intimate, his Abba.

Today, God doesn't exist for many people; many others accept God, but don't take God seriously, having no room for God in daily living. There is no blame here – the word *God* has been seriously and consistently misused – millions have been tortured and killed in the name of God. Wars, Conquests and Inquisitions have happened for the greater glory of God. In God's name heretics and witches have been burned alive.

Inherited images of God are hopelessly misleading – God, the punishing judge, the supreme male patriarch, the arch egoist imposing his will, who sends earthquakes, floods and other disasters... No wonder many writers advocate not using the word *God*; its use has gone beyond redemption. Others say, despite its misuse, the word carries a very rich history. It is the word that inspired Jesus and his followers – it surely is redeemable.

First, can we know *anything at all* about God? Mystics speak of God as *unknowable*. Aquinas says: *we do not know what God is, only what God is not*. Such negative theology of God, as hidden and invisible, make it impossible to name God adequately.

The early Christian mystics speak of God as *an experience*, happening without words, names or any form of knowledge. [*Traditionally called apophatic mysticism*]. To embrace this requires letting go all our images of God – not that all images are false, but we need to transcend them, to *unknow* them before we can *experience* God.

Theology says that whatever else, *God is not an object* [*cannot be objectified*]. God is not one of the objects in our world – not a *thing* alongside many other things; not even an *invisible being*. Some, correctly, speak of God as *nothing* – *no thing!* We can know *about* God, but cannot know God. What matters is not how much I *know* about God, or whether I can know anything at all about God; but I can *experience* God.

Mystery

Mystics speak of God using the word *mystery*. By definition a mystery is unknown and unknowable. It can never become an object of knowledge without ceasing to be mystery. This does not mean that *mystery* is unreal. We know that it is real, even though we don't know what

it is. What matters is not how much I know about God, but is God *real* for me? *Experienced* as mystery, God is more present than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell.

Surprisingly, it is Science that has brought us back to the reality of mystery; making us more aware than we were formerly, that our human knowledge is limited, we can know and understand things *up to a point*. What lies beyond that point is pure mystery as far as the mind is concerned.

Our minds may develop further in future, along with experiments and discoveries, but the universe will ever remain mystery to us – and we are part of that mystery. *In God we live and move and have our being* – Acts.17.28. God is not *a* mystery – one among many – God is *the* mystery; the mysteriousness of all things.

We experience ourselves as mystery, in that the more we try to understand who we are, the more there is to understand. I cannot *see* my true self – I know it by its fruits. The appropriate response to mystery is wonder – a form of consciousness [*fascination*] that is without words, images or understanding.

It is the essence of the mystery of God to be very near – Jesus' use of Abba implies this. The important change Jesus brought to religious thinking was the conviction that God is not far away – that the kingdom does not belong to the past or to the future. He assures us as does the prophet:

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save – Zeph.3.17. God is closer to me than I am to myself; my being depends on God's being near me and present to me... but we are far from God... God is at home; we are out -
Eckhart.

God is always close to us – even when we don't believe or ignore God. We can be far from God when God is far from our thinking, and are completely unaware of God – but God remains very near, otherwise we would cease to exist, to repeat: - *In God we live and move and have our being* – Acts.17.28. So can we become more aware of this intimacy permanently on offer?

God is not just closer to me than I am to myself – God is already one with me. Awareness of this oneness is spoken of in different ways: *dwelling in me – filled with the Spirit...* In the end, descriptions will always be inadequate – what we can do is what God wants us to do – *enjoy God*.

How can we appreciate Jesus' oneness with God? What his friends found extraordinary about him was not just his calling God Abba, but that he *identified* himself with God: *The Father and I are one* – Jn.10.30. Jesus identified himself – not with *almighty God* [*as commonly understood*] but with a humble, compassionate, loving and serving God. For years afterwards his disciples struggled to find words to describe their experience of a human person who seemed to identify self with God.

Successive generations have continued this through centuries of theological debate. Suffice it for now that we are concerned with *following* Jesus, not explaining him; to discover our oneness with God that knows nothing whatsoever of pantheism.

Jesus tells us that not only is God close to us, but God loves us – each one uniquely [*have nothing to do with the horrendous we love everybody here. I'm not everybody, I'm somebody*].

The mystery in which I *live and move and have my being* is not hostile, and cannot ever be; and I am part of that mystery that gave birth to me.

The mystery is more concerned about me than I am about myself; and if I am one with the mystery there is no place for fear. If the mystery hated me, it would be hating itself – since we are one. As I am challenged to love my neighbour as myself, so can I recognise God loves me as God's own self.

Personal God

Love is an experience between two persons. Jesus' image of God was decidedly personal, his Abba. The Hebrew tradition that he inherited had always treated God as a person, but Jesus did not just follow the tradition, *he stressed it by deepening it* – God is an infinitely loving person, not an object. A better way of saying it: *God is personal rather than a person*. The necessary process of unlearning about God means letting go of our image of a de-personalised God. And one very different from the God we brought with us from childhood.

Evil

If God is in any sense free and all powerful goodness, why is there so much evil in our world, so much unnecessary injustice; why earthquakes and Tsunamis, floods and droughts? This is what makes it difficult to believe in a personal God – a good and powerful person would never do such things. This is where we need to remember we are dealing with mystery – by definition unknowable. Physicists studying *particles* in our sub-atomic world face a mystery that contradicts the accepted laws of nature elsewhere in the universe; indicating this is something beyond human understanding.

We certainly cannot understand *an all-loving God and intolerable evil*. When we expect God to act as we would if we were God, we forget our limited understanding of the vastness of the mystery of God. This is what Job came to realise after grappling with this same issue. *The knowledge of good and evil belongs to God, not to us*. In Genesis we read of Adam and Eve wanting to become like God, knowing good and evil – Gen.3.5.

What we *can* understand is what we should be doing about suffering and evil. We can use science and technology to predict earthquakes and floods, to prevent further contamination of the environment with plastic waste; to make poverty history and dismantle oppression.

Be one with self

We have been given to believe we should love our neighbour but not ourselves. Jesus says *love your neighbour as you love yourself*. It might seem natural behaviour to love yourself, but many people would prefer to be someone else, to live somewhere else, with a different body... they seem to be ashamed of who they are. Self-love is not selfishness. How can I expect to give myself to another in friendship when I can't stand myself?

In reality, selfishness is a form of self-hatred; preferring oneself over another – which isn't love, but prejudice. Selfishness is not love of self, my ego loves nobody, not even me. Genuine love is one and undivided. One of the ways of overcoming selfishness is to learn to love oneself exactly as I am – the way God loves me. How achieve this?

Jesus was obviously at peace with himself- he struggled with temptation in the desert, in Gethsemane and was angry at the maltreatment of the poor and powerless – but he did not

live with inner conflict. He loved himself – so much so that he frequently enjoyed being himself, when he prayed he loved who he was: *beloved of Abba*.

God loves us unconditionally, no such thing as *terms and conditions apply!* We cannot win God's love, no matter how hard we try. Any suggestion that we are not yet good enough implies God's love to be conditional. God loves me just as I am, sinner that I am – God loves me more than I love myself. Jesus' whole life and ministry was to bring us to awareness of this.

My challenge is not to persuade God to love me but for me to love myself unconditionally, the way God loves me. This involves learning to forgive myself – often more difficult than forgiving others. I need to embrace my shadow side, my weaknesses and my shame. Obviously, the first step is to acknowledge that I have them. Resignation in me, perpetuates my inner instability. Accepting *lovingly*, starts the peace process within me.

My body

Many of us do not love our bodies – maybe because it is aging – perhaps unsightly – and treat it as something to be got rid of when we die. I can hate my body for not being what I want it to be – *it is good enough for God to make it, but not for me!* I can even be afraid of it with its often uncontrollable appetites and desires.

Pleasure and pain are inbuilt in bodily life. Pleasure, a gift to be treasured, becomes a problem when my ego enlists it for selfish purposes. Pain is inevitable, and I want to be a pain avoider. It is a mistake, however, to think that life should be all happiness, without pain. *Happiness is the ability to handle pain.*

The dualistic body and soul mentality has been responsible for the chaos in our lives. Body and soul are one reality, one person. My body is not a separate thing that has been attached to me. I am my body and to love myself is to love every aspect of bodily living. It is not just accepting my body as it is – to love my body means caring for it, promoting its well-being. Many can't afford wholesome food; many workers do not get time to rest – yet any idea that spirituality means neglecting the body is very much mistaken.

Desires in themselves are good; it is the selfish misuse of them causes the problems. We know of heroic asceticism and mortification practiced in the past – gradually this faded with learning to love self. For example, Eckhart discouraged such practices, he replaced them with the spirit of detachment. Selfishness is a problem in every area of life; being at peace with ourselves involves loving our bodies.

True self

When we are moved by compassion for someone in need, this is the true self making itself heard; as also when we recognise in honesty a truth about ourselves. These and other similar unselfish experiences are fruits of the Spirit active in us. God works in us, but always through ourselves, when such awareness breaks through and prompts genuinely unselfish living. Life becomes ever more real when we allow fascination to lift us beyond ourselves.

Working with the Samaritans for a short time taught me many home truths – especially how desperate people are not helped by generalisations: *welcome, we love everybody here!* They are *somebody* not everybody. Each one of us is unique. There never has been, nor will there ever be an individual like me. God doesn't make copies. Unique people have unique gifts to

offer. What matters is not whether my role is big or small, or how much time it will take, or whether I'm a leader or an also ran. What I can offer is unique and unrepeatable.

Jesus saw people as the unique individuals they were – which is why he loved them irrespective of labels imposed on them. Even his enemies recognised this: *They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"* – Mk.12.14.

His *experience* of Abba's presence showed him how God's unconditional love embraces each one uniquely. God loves our uniqueness as the reason why we are loved into existence. Where there is uniqueness there has to be diversity, otherwise uniqueness is ignored. Evolution is the creative process that progresses by recognising the ever greater diversity within differing species. Everything created is uniquely lovable.

Individualists see their uniqueness as setting them apart [*not just different*], because they are the centre of the universe. I am unique and everyone else is just an obstacle in my way. But the opposite of individualism is not collectivism. We do not need to surrender our individuality in order to live with others. The development of the *individual* has been of great benefit to humanity. We must never return to the *one size fits all* – everything is said and done in the same way, because that is what we have always done. My uniqueness embraces my strengths and my weaknesses, my creativity and my mistakes, my body, soul and spirit.

Welcome Sister Bodily Death

Though the only certain happening after birth is that we will die, there is a reluctance to talk about it until it is present in a loved one. My ego doesn't want to be told it will die, because its dominance will die with it, my true self will continue in the greater self we call God. See something of this in the reluctance to use the word – *died* – using *passed away... no longer with us...*

Death is part of life – for Jesus to be fully human he had to die. We can treat death as enemy or as friend! S Francis welcomed death as his sister – reminding him that his unique contribution has parameters, that he was given life as gift from God, to become gift for others. Welcoming death is not morbid, it is a conscious willingness to die. Jesus was free because he had already embraced death – death is not the end, but the end of the beginning.

At One with many others

We speak easily about life being in the pattern *love God and your neighbour*. Curiously, the word actually used is not *pattern* but *Commandment*. How can I be *commanded* to love? Love wells up from inside us in certain circumstances; it isn't a matter of obedience or duty! I can politely *respect* another person when commanded to do so, but I cannot love because someone tells me I have to.

Jesus did not *command* us to love God and neighbour. *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.*

Teacher, he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' –

Lk.10.26.

It is not Jesus but the lawyer who uses the word *command*. Though he does use the word in Mk.12.28 and Mt.22.34 – his understanding of love was as an expression of gratitude, obey the command which your need to say thank-you prompts.

In 1Jn.4.19 we see how this happens: *we love because God loves us first* – sadly, many see the opposite: *try to love God and if you succeed God will love you in return!* Love – God is love – always comes first. Our very existence is God loving us. Loving neighbour is different – my neighbour may have no love for me at all [*loving those who love us is no problem*] it is loving enemies that is the issue – Lk.6.32. Can I learn to love enemies spontaneously?

The clue to understanding this commandment is: *as yourself!* If I could learn to love my enemy as a self, like me or as an extension of me, I need a change of awareness in how I see other human beings – friends or enemies [*when friar Reg was in the army in Belfast, on Christmas Day he was crouched on duty in someone's gateway – feeling these people hate me; - the door opened, a woman with a mug of tea said you are some mother's son*].

We start our relationships with those immediate to us: *family, friends and colleagues*. Jesus too had special friends and relationships. Our problem is that our selfish self [ego] treats people as objects – to be used and ignored at will. The ego *never* sees them as *subjects/persons*.

Most people have learned to move beyond self-centredness, though we are tempted at times to slip back and treat others as *things*, to be used or abandoned at will. Though our usual pattern tends to be *putting ourselves in their shoes* – which is recognising that they too have feelings of hope and fear, like us. So many relationships would flourish if we occasionally paused to remind ourselves – here is another human being, like me with his/her own feelings.

When we become aware of someone as another self, we can experience a kind of oneness with them; meeting a friend we haven't met for some time, we immediately pick up where we left off. There is a kind of trust and intimacy that makes us feel safe with the other.

With others

Matthew's version of the last judgement speaks of separating sheep from goats – Mt.25.31. The basic teaching comes from Jesus, but the use of a *final judgement* is from Matthew. None of the other gospels carry this story, though they have the basic teaching of loving God and neighbour. The basic teaching is about how we have treated fellow human beings: no questions asked about our attitude to God, or fidelity to laws. In other words, the focus is on works of mercy – did you feed... help... visit...? This is what loving neighbour means.

Love of neighbour is seen as love of God... *when you did it to these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me* – Mt.25.40. God identifies with everything human, whatever we do, or neglect to do, is done to God. Note: it does not say *it's as if you do it to me*, - you *are* doing it to me. God is one with all human beings, which makes us one with each other.

We normally experience kinship with relatives and close friends: a mother can truly say *whatever you do to my child you do to me!* So too with siblings, about each other. This bond of kinship is the origin of love of neighbour in Hebrew Scripture:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord – Lev.19.18 and: The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God – Lev.19.34.

Jesus extends this further: *love your enemies* – Mt.5.43.

My true self is *being human among other humans* – friend and foe. Jesus is not less human than the rest of us; he was *more* human, in that he was aware of his identity as one with all humans.

The relationship Jesus advocates is best named as *empathy*. Defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: *the ability to identify mentally with a person... and so understand his/her feelings*. It is broader than compassion. Compassion rises when we are aware of suffering; we empathise with people even when they are not suffering. We suffer with those who are suffering, but we also rejoice with those who are happy. We share feelings of whatever kind.

Empathy helps us opt for the poor; not a matter of preferring the poor. *Preferential option for the poor* is a misleading term; the Lord did not say *blessed are those who opt for the poor*, he said *blessed are the poor*. Compassion and empathy have nothing to do with preferences – ours or God's. God doesn't have preferences. To take an option for the poor is to side with them against those *who make them* poor, to side with a just cause.

Empathy extends to all human beings – to feel with people, even with the superficial and/or neurotic, wounded or broken as well as those in good health – we share a common humanity. Sympathising-with is not giving approval, but recognising that *there but for the grace of God are we*. Jesus never blamed nor judged but offered forgiveness and healing. Empathy has us rejoice that there are selfless people in the world, and thank God for giving them to us.

Sharing

Despite the world's excessive individualism, there is a desire for unity, a growing need for cooperation and for working together. Being aware of our common solidarity leads spontaneously [by their fruits] to a desire to cooperate and work together [*trying to foster working together will never succeed without a foundation of empathy*]. Once empathy is present, sharing becomes natural, as natural as feeding our own children. From here, what we know to be *the common good* will become a natural priority; with no conflict between our good and the common good.

A fundamental mistake of modern socialist regimes is *forcing* nations to share when the overwhelming majority of people do not want to do so. It becomes counterproductive and oppressive. Jesus shows how empathy rises – with the awareness that *your* good is *my* good and together fosters the common good.

Jesus lived in such a sharing community with his friends, and sought to foster communities elsewhere. Judas held *the common purse* Jn.12.6.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need -

Acts.4.32-35

Paul developed this to inter-communities:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. 3 And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. 4 But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me –
1Cor.16.1-4.

And again:

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. 12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. 14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! –
2Cor.9.11-15.

This did not last very long, because Jesus' radical spirituality became diluted. The *ideal* has been kept alive [*not without struggle*] in monasteries and religious institutes. Pope Francis urges us to live in ways that will recover the spirit of Gospel-life sharing. Empathy and love for one another needs to be more than an abstract ideal, or warm feelings. It has to become, albeit gradually, an *economic* reality.

What Jesus had in mind was more than simple alms-giving. Sharing means more than giving from our abundance – every attempt to live the Gospel with nothing more than generous hand-outs from spiritual isolation just doesn't work. The begging bowl remains a necessity. *Oneness* means we need each other – no spirituality can survive without our basic need for others – no matter how rich or self-sufficient we claim to be.

Jesus did not confine himself to private conversions or individualistic achievements; he gathered people in family-like communities as seeds of the kingdom. It was in such communities his followers discovered their oneness. In Brazil, Cardinals Arns and Lorscheider [*both ofm*] set-up basic Christian communities – hundreds of them – which still flourish despite authority's attempts to disband them; they flourish because they are working – rich and poor caring and helping one another, where there is a chronic shortage of ordained ministers. Such communities come from people with different roles in life making them decidedly economically unequal, yet one people yet sharing one flesh and blood.

There is only ONE world

Jesus' oneness with Abba is evident not just through his commonality with humankind, but with everything created. His times were pre-scientific, pre-industrial, yet he didn't experience nature as something to be exploited, or as a play-pen to be used and abused. His experience of creation was as *God's creation*. It was never his vision to see creation as something God started and then left it to care for itself:

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? –

Mt.6.26.

He saw humankind as crucial for creation – creatures among creatures, but *able to receive awareness* of God's intent, and be diligent in doing something about it. God's intent - *And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows* – Mt.10.30. For Jesus, God is Abba, but also Abba for *birds of the air and lilies of the field* – to everyone and everything. Jesus experienced himself as part of nature. Jesus' comfort and security passed on to his disciples derives not from knowing hidden mysteries, but from *experiencing* nature's rhythms.

Nobody taught S Francis to love birds and flowers, rocks and forests, wind and oceans, sun and moon, yet for him they were all equally sisters and brothers – a point missed by the author of the beautiful hymn *All creatures of our God and King* – claimed to be taken from S Francis' Canticle – very descriptive of the gifts of nature, but no mention of the reason why S Francis composed it – no mention of brothers and sisters in creation [*Brother Sun, Sister Moon and stars* etc.] how we all *belong* before ever we are aware of it.

This wasn't missed by Chardin who loved all forms of matter, and saw all of us as an integral part of an evolving universe. We are not an isolated species. We are part of nature – the sun really is our brother, the moon our sister and the earth our mother. S Bonaventure gives thanks for *the dust of the earth becoming the body of God*. Being part of nature is our identity – but it needs to be our *experience* not just information. This is increasingly difficult to appreciate for people living in a concrete jungle amid urban crime and fear; deprived not only of food and clothing but also of dignity. How can we find our way back to wholesome living? Simply writing about it romantically is pie in the sky!

We live in a *continually* evolving universe. We are aware of evolution and social structures from people like Darwin – however, there is a supposition that the universe was always there in some stable form. We know that the universe is neither fixed nor stable, it is in process. The universe is not a place; we do not live *in* the universe; we are part of the process.

This makes nonsense of our attempts to tame or exploit nature – in this sense, our industrial world is out of touch with the real world. Jesus knew nothing of such a world. For him, the universe is alive with the presence of God, though he was unaware that everyday activity is evolutionary. But this did not prevent him from being one with creation.

Science, no matter how advanced, is not the same as religious experience, and cannot be used to prove the truth or otherwise of mystical experience. Science extends what we can see, hear, taste and smell as an opportunity for wonder and understanding. Einstein became aware of some form of mysticism beyond the reach of science alone. He saw a real distinction between mysticism and science – and gave thanks for both.

The essence of the universe can be reduced to a trinity: *unity, diversity and subjectivity*.

Unity

Everything has evolved from the *Singularity* of the *Big Bang* – [its uniqueness] – matter, spirit, atoms and stars, chemicals and life-forms, you and me. Chardin pointed out that spirit [consciousness] must have been present from the beginning because there is no matter without some kind of spirit.

Humans are one flesh of one family. As living beings we belong to the family of living organisms that have evolved from one another over billions of years. As individual entities we can trace our ancestry back to that primal burst of energy. We are products of a creative process of developing matter and spirit. We are one with the stars and everything else.

Other aspects of unity are - our interconnectedness and inter-dependence. Scientists maintain that every event in our unfolding universe is connected to every other event. There are no isolated events. Every event is ultimately dependent, in one way or another, on every other event – in a mysterious inter-dependence, in an amazing unity [oneness].

Diversity

The expansion of the universe is through a process of diversity. Atoms, molecules and cells come together in vast varieties; countless millions of plants and animals, insects, birds and fish... This unfolding of the universe is no chance happening. Evolution has an overall general direction.

Darwins' theory of a mechanism of *natural selection* has been replaced through discoveries made in microbiology and genetics pointing to a more complex process of cooperation as well as competition: *the universe is neither determined nor random, but creative*. It is not a step-by-step implementing of a preconceived blueprint – the way we make things through rational intelligence.

What this enables us to say is that the Creator is not like a human manufacturer, but more like an artist. The universe is the ongoing result of artistic creativity. We are not mass-produced. We are the glory of God in an evolving universe.

Subjectivity

Science, philosophy and theology all talk about the *subject* or the *self* – called *subjectivity*. Science talks of *objects*, and what we are dealing with is not just a collection of objects, but of self-organising systems. There are systems within systems, each with an organising principle or self of one kind or another. It is a universe of *subjects* and not just objects. We are here in the universe not as object among other objects – we are subjects who share in the subjectivity of the universe. We are persons.

As humans we experience our own consciousness as subjects, from the inside. All the other levels of organisation in creation we see as objects of our cognition. But, with our own consciousness we do something more, something different from knowing it as an object for our cognition. We know it by *being* it [experience]. Which means our consciousness cannot be explained by reference to anything more simple – we are mystery.

God and creation a seamless whole

Oneness with God, with ourselves, with others with our universe is a seamless whole; so that any attempt to know God intimately while remaining isolated from all else would be

impossible. Just as an experience of closeness to nature that excludes humankind and one's self would remain forever incomplete. A genuine experience of oneness with everybody, however, includes oneness with God, even when we are unaware of God – *whatever you do to the least of these you do to me* – Mt.25.40.

Paul says the same thing differently –

through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross – Col.1.20, and concludes: *so that God may be all and in all* –
1Cor.15.28.

What is the oneness of God and the universe?

Theology speaks of God as simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

Transcendent – the way God goes beyond the universe. But is frequently misunderstood to mean that somehow God is in another world. Outside the universe.

Immanent – God present everywhere inside the universe. *Outside* and *inside* are terms belonging to time and space. There is nothing *outside* the universe because there is no space and time; and because there is no outside, it is difficult to image *inside!*

Despite accepting God's immanence, many believers have been led to imagine God belongs to another world, and so is remote from everyday life. For Jesus, God is very near, God is our Abba. For Jesus God is ever present and active – his ministry and presence was founded on his intimacy with the ever present Abba. For S Francis it caused his outburst – *my God and my all!*

Pantheism – means *God is all things*, there is no distinction between God and the universe. Whereas, with S Paul, we see that God is *in* everything -1Cor.15.28. Yet, to speak of God as *in* – is a space and time word, suggesting that God is some kind of object in each being – whereas Jesus' experience, and that of the mystics following him, is that God is *one with the universe*.

This suggests a *universal incarnation*, God is incarnate in the whole universe – which is like God's body. God is one with the universe as a person is one with his or her own body, making us aware that we and all creation is the ongoing unfolding of God's body. *I am the breeze that nurtures all things green... I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life* – Hildegard of Bingen [1099-1179].

God is unfathomable mystery and should not be thought of as an object of any kind. God can only be *experienced* as a kind of subject. God is not an object or even the sum total of all objects in the universe – that would be pantheism.

We speak of *Mother Nature* – and that nature heals. God is not the diversity, creativity or energy of the universe. God is the self who diversifies, creates and energises. God is not part of creation, but the subject who creates. God is immanently one with the universe, but by being the Creator, transcends all that makes up the universe. We do not have words for this – God is the mystery that can never be named – only experienced and enjoyed.

Freedom

Freedom was of the essence of Jesus' being; and what he urged his followers to strive for. Jesus had the freedom to stand against the assumptions, customs and cultural norms of the

establishment; especially the Sabbath laws. He was free enough to disregard sacred traditions about what was clean and unclean. He was free to love without conditions – to love the poor and excluded as equally as the rich and prosperous – which caused scandal. He was free to incarnate God's will regardless of what anyone thought.

Such complete freedom made him fearless. He threw traders out of the Temple courtyard during the height of the festival season when *authority* was nervous about rioting. When the High Priest questioned him about his behaviour he remained silent. His freedom knew no limits, such was his trust in God.

Following Jesus has to involve our freedom – the ability to let go our attachments and belongings. The fruit of attaining such freedom – something that will take time – is liberation from guilt. Our wrongdoing is never held against us – to believe in the Forgiver is to be forgiven. *All will be well, and all manner of things will be well* – Julian of Norwich.

If this is to be real, it needs trust. The more we dare to trust, the more real do we become. Trust lets us explore new and unorthodox ways of thinking and acting – with the assurance that if trust is primary, all really will be well – even on Calvary! Such *poverty of spirit* helps us move away from the economics of poverty, into the *sine proprio* of Francis – realising that having nothing of my own makes plenty of room for the God I am learning to trust.

Free from what?

Today's people don't want dogma and doctrine, they want freedom from ritual and institution. Sadly, many say the modern world is losing faith – what is more likely is the need to believe inherent in everyone, to believe – [not necessarily explicitly in God, but in life having purpose which is belief in God who gives life] – is not being fed by what is on offer. Such genuine searching is to be welcomed.

In so far as the longing is for genuine freedom – *the truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32 – and not freedom to let the ego be supreme, which is the opposite of freedom, it is to be encouraged as a wake-up call – *ring-out the old ring-in the new! Ring out the false, ring-in the true* – *In Memoriam*: Tennyson. To get rid of the fetters of the past is good, provided we don't leave a vacuum. The mistaken belief that our ego can set us free.

The hunger for freedom is a hunger for a spirituality – able to go beyond what we can see, touch, taste or smell. There is a desire for freedom for everyone – no matter who, what or where. The freedom individualism pursues believes freedom means self-sufficiency, independence [*I'm not like the rest*] – separation from the rest of humankind and from nature. Jesus did not believe that all that was needed was a change of society's structures. He was intent on freeing individuals personally and socially.

Surprisingly, there are many who fear freedom – not wanting to take the responsibilities which accompany real freedom: *just tell me what to do!* They want certainty coming from one in authority. A child takes longer to mature than other animals growing in nature. This is because there is much more to learn – most of what we need to know to become mature adults, comes from culture rather than instinct [*as in the animal world*]. So we need rules and laws. It is assumed that we gradually outgrow this need – but many adults don't. However, this does not excuse leadership intent on treating everyone as children – promoting *infantilism* as a method of control.

The Gospel challenges us to become spiritually mature; to move beyond restrictions of law and custom. How? By placing our trust [*hope*] in God. In Jesus' day, not many were ready for this – many more are ready today, if only they had the opportunity [*be evangelised*].

No one is free until all are free; *Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere* – Martin Luther King Jr. We cannot become free all alone, we need help from others. Freedom is more than personal achievement – freedom is accompanied by healing. Jesus is no exception. He learned from his parents, from the Baptist, from the people he met as well as from the Hebrew Prophets. His mission was to help free anyone trapped in oppressive and negative living:

And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them –
Lk.11.46.

The help they need is to be assured they are forgiven.

A difficulty we experience is to let others contribute to our own freedom. Seeking freedom can easily become self-centred and selfish. Radical freedom includes not having to worry about freedom, or from worrying about not being free enough.

Freedom *for*, not just *from*.

Freedom is always a means, not an end; a means to do something greater – God's will [*never I did it my way*]. *God's will* was uppermost in Jesus' preaching. Christian tradition is summed up by doing *God's will*. Jesus set out to do this, even when his instinct was not there: *Father, let this cup pass from me...*

Doing God's will – sounds like oppressive domination; as if God is *imposing* his will, not allowing us our will. This is, in part, the result of our false image of God, as one with a male ego. My will is from arbitrary choice about what ought to be done – to impose that on others would certainly be oppressive bullying. But that is nothing like what Jesus is talking about.

See *God's will* as the essence of the common good; whatever is best for everyone – no exclusions, including the material universe. We are not isolated individuals. We are part of *one becoming*. A part that exists for the benefit of the whole. Is it even conceivably possible that I could foster such freedom – that includes and embraces everyone and everything, on my own?

Individualism suggests that the common good contradicts my personal good. What is good for the whole society is not good for me. I know best. There is no contradiction between what is good for all and what is good for me. What I may have to let go is not my good, but my self-centredness. I will begin to *experience* my good as identical with the common good when I have started to by-pass my self-centredness and experience goodness along with others – i.e. *God's will is for everyone to be well*.

In no way does this mean we have no *uniquely individual* value. The common good is in the best interests of each unique and irreplaceable individual. We have abused the real meaning of *the common good*. Oppressive regimes [*Church included*] have exercised control in this way. The selfish interests of the powerful are presented as good for everyone:

Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish – Jn.11.50.

[*good for the one man?*]. Only a totally self-emptying, and totally self-communicating God can *be* this.

God's work

In the first place, God's work is the original and ongoing work of creation. Continuing today as the original burst of energy - our expanding universe. Ongoing human development, is visible in the *signs of the times*, the hunger for healing and meaning [*spirituality*], the global struggle for peace with universal justice – the eloquent silence which allows us to hear and heed *the cry of the poor*.

Nature heals [*if we let it*]; medical expertise helps dress wounds and support recovery – we have been active, even pro-active in this, but, in the end, it is God alone who is the *Wounded Healer* – Nouwen; who is small enough to be there for all, through being where God longs to be – *how lovely is my dwelling place!* We have no idea what the future holds – but we do believe in the God of surprises.

Jesus invites us to share in this work, not just be passive spectators. This is not how we normally do things – we see ourselves doing *our* work, with God in the background in case we need help. We have been given the ability to do God's work – if we have the courage to accept such graces. We start by realising that we are part of this work, deliberately chosen as uniquely valuable by God – if we let it happen *according to his Word!*

This gift, this energy is the Holy Spirit who was so manifestly present in Jesus. His complete trust in Abba is rooted here – and we have, on record, some of the wonderful happenings occasioned by him. Francis of Assisi was so weak and helpless, through ill health; unable even to stand. But this never prevented from him letting his *heart's desire* through to everyone.

That's what is on offer to all of us – no one excluded – *everyone welcome at the feast*; Jesus' evangelising – *go out and compel them to come in – show them what they are missing!* God's work is turning the world the right way up; and something is missing if I'm not there!

Most of us are *not yet* people – we are in-transit, moving in the right direction. But the hungry need to eat *now*; poverty and disease need to be eliminated *now*; greenhouse gas needs to be stopped *now*... This is God's work, and it is enough that we are willing *now* to be active. God's work often seems to be very slow – maybe because all who can be active in it do not yet realise it.

It is God's work, and because it is of God, the future is assured. When I die, my ego dies with me – allowing my true self *to be, at last, at home* in God and the universe.