

Jesus Centred

Ask only one question - *who is Jesus for me?* Whoever he is, he didn't ask me to adore him; he invites me to follow him; to be with him long enough for this to become attractive to me, to let it make a difference to me.

What kind of difference?

Before anything else [*Church, Doctrine, Commands...*] let Jesus come first, invite him to ask you the question *who do you say I am?* Not a question I can answer about anybody, if I don't know anything about them. I need to be there, but first to listen and hear the astonishing truth that Jesus is God saying to me, about Jesus - *this is who I am for you!*

It is rightly said that we can't take too much truth, nor do we find it easy to trust. Trust is the fruit of something often neglected. My body cannot lie! I can lie, but my body can't. It is put together for that purpose, so that what is within can find true expression through communication. I might protest that I am OK - when I don't want to admit otherwise - but my body is never deceived.

This is the importance of Jesus' words - *this is my body given...* again, *the Word was made flesh*, incapable of deceit. What does the Incarnation mean for me? It was always God's intention to become part of creation, the creation we were invited to name for God, so that it could become the God-chosen setting for the Word to become flesh, and creation become the most perfect expression of God outside the Godhead.

The reason for creation is God's eternal desire to share all that is God with what is not God; that there should be one created, who can receive totally and respond completely to this outpouring of love.

In Jesus there is something created [*humanity*] and something uncreated [*divinity*], completely one. In him creation has already achieved its purpose; now, what is in him, is to be for the rest of Creation - *Jesus is what Abba would be in all of us!* The manner of his coming makes this possible - *to all who believe he gives power to know God as Abba...*

All this happens through relationship - the relationship he first claims with us, showing us where we are from and where we are going - Jn.8.14 - as children of Abba, making us sisters/brothers before ever we know each other.

A story: *A little girl, frightened by dreams; to calm her down Mum holds her tight and comforts her. She tells her: you are not alone, God is always with you - I know that, she said, but I need a God with skin!*

Do I have this problem? Don't I need a God with skin? That is when I need to recall: *as often as you did this...* Because the Word is made flesh - God with skin - very real - every encounter with reality assures me of God's presence. But I need to be *real!* The Incarnation is not a one-off that lasted for 33 years. It is on-going - becoming a fully-alive, skin person, continuing God's presence, who is now as visible and accessible as the next reality I allow into my experience.

He made Abba known by being himself, his father's son; which is the call to be *Christ-like*, to be myself, to encourage you to be yourself, to live in creation letting all things be

themselves – *Christ-like* - the *me* God sees from eternity, with the face I had before I was born! *God is praised when I am fully myself!*

But first, I need to let Jesus be himself, let his body be as mortal, sexual, subject to tiredness and restlessness as mine. Look for the real meaning of *the Word was made flesh*. Look at Jesus at the Eucharist [*this is my body*], at the *body* of believers... The Incarnation began with Jesus and has never stopped. The Ascension did not conclude the Incarnation. At the Ascension the physical body of Jesus left the earth, the body of Christ did not.

Christ is not a surname - it is a title identifying God's Messianic presence. Scripture has 3 meanings for *Body of Christ*: 1. The historical Jesus. 2. The Eucharist - his physical presence among us. 3. The body of believers - *we are the body of Christ* is not metaphor; Paul does not say that the body of believers *replaces* the body of Christ, nor simply *represents* - *we are his body*.

How literal does Paul mean? Does it mean as in a corporate sense - I am a *Franciscan*? Does he mean we are like a physical body? This latter is what Bible scholars tell us. We are the body of Christ, in an organic way, like the Eucharist - it is him!

What does this say about our role in making God present to our world? We maintain God's presence as Jesus did, as Teresa of Avila says *Christ has no body, hands/feet/heart and presence other than yours*.

The word Christ spoke, to be heard in a world increasingly hard of hearing, has to be proclaimed by the community. As God acted through Christ, Christ acts through those conformed to his image, whose behaviour reflects his.

What difference does Jesus make? Isn't it enough simply to believe in God? A *theist* believes in God who is in heaven, a *Christian* in God who is everywhere. *Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find...* sounds like an infallible contact is promised! So, why doesn't it always work?

Plenty of stock answers! [*C.S. Lewis suggested we would probably spend eternity thanking God for not answering*]. Why not listen to Matthew? Prayer of petition needs to be linked to community action in faith. We pray *Through Jesus Christ our Lord...* and God responds *Through Jesus Christ our Lord* I.e. through the Incarnation, a form of human involvement... *Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.* .not simply a formula, a convenient ending to prayer. We are praying through the body of Christ - Jesus, Eucharist, body of faithful. We are not simply petitioning God; we also charge ourselves with some responsibility to answer.

This is a major difference between Christian prayer and theism. Our prayer needs skin on our petitions - someone told me of a confrere who was losing touch, unhappy... and asked me to pray that he find the Grace to persevere. He eventually left, and his friend did pray for him, but never thought to tell him how much he was valued... He didn't involve himself in bringing about a response... God needs hearts and hands and voices. The woman with the haemorrhage was healed by touching the body of Christ, reminding us that, as the body of Christ, we are to respond to *touches* for healing.

This is a crucial point - how are my sins forgiven? Catholic tradition teaches sins are

forgiven through confession to a minister; Pastoral care argues that genuine contrition before God is sufficient. Both stress something important - the primary channel of forgiveness is somehow touching Jesus, in faith. We are healed somehow through contact with the body of Christ - the Eucharist, the community.

A common experience: storming out in anger, upset, speaking harshly... then comes the need to return, just to be around again, a lot is being said without words... touching the hem of Jesus' garment [*which was when the bleeding ceased*].

See here an example of Reconciliation - we are forgiven through being in community as the body of Christ. St. Augustine, preaching an Easter homily to new members told them that *when they stand together round the altar in faith, sins are forgiven*.

What do parents do when children give up the practice of their faith, and do not follow the Church's teaching on moral and sexual matters? Hold onto them in love, this is how the Lord is with them, through your love, you are part of the body of Christ. Remember Jesus' words: *whatever you bind...* Hold them in love and they are held by God. *He descended into hell...* he didn't seek to get people released, he went in to bring them out.

Mary anointing Jesus' feet: we anoint by visiting the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned, the dying, to convince them they are worth being with. The Incarnation has empowered us immensely in the area of compassion [*he came... to set us free*]. Am I saying we can forgive sins? Surely it is Christ who forgives?

This is not saying we forgive sins, that we set each other free... God alone has the power to forgive, and the Incarnation means this is channelled through the body of Christ. In the birth of Jesus something has changed, we have been graced with the vocation to keep each other from hell.

What about *confession*? If I can be forgiven through *touching the Eucharist* is there any need? This does not in any way downgrade the Sacrament, in fact it affirms it. What is crucial for the Sacrament is not whether God forgives me. We do not need explicit confession to a priest to have sin forgiven - Scripture and Tradition assure us of this. Trent didn't define that sin is only forgiven by such confession [*that would be to impose limits on God's freedom*], the Council insists on the *necessity* of it - which is not the same thing as saying it is essential.

Going to Church and receiving communion is not a moral statement of my worthiness to do so. When I am in sin of any kind, this is when I need Grace most. Somehow we seem to feel that we need to get ourselves sorted out before approaching the Sacraments. What is crucial for the Sacrament is sincerity and contrition in receiving the Eucharist.

In the story of the woman with the haemorrhage 2 things happen - *touching* Jesus and explicit *confrontation* with him. The face-to-face exchange completes something, part of one whole process. It is to the Sacrament what an apology is to healing. Actions speak louder than words, reconciliation happens through action, yet the words are important.

Any victim will say that there is something unfinished until there is an apology. Just so those in recovery programmes say it is crucial for healing to own sin in the presence of another. When I believe myself to be healed by touching the body of Christ, it is the start of a process that will require a one-to-one as a necessity.

To understand this, I need to appreciate the unity between Jesus and the community - *I am Jesus and you are persecuting me!* Paul had never met Jesus. Here we have *honesty + truth = conversion*. Paul didn't receive precise instructions, but was asked to let himself be led by another to the community in Damascus.

In seeking reconciliation, we need to look not just to God in heaven, but to what Jesus meant by: *this is my body given...* Like Paul, I need more than God in heaven, I need to touch the body of Christ. God doesn't speak through séances or mystical visions, the incarnate God has real flesh, and speaks to us as he promised he would, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This highlights the importance of community, as of the essence of Christian living. Jesus began his life in popularity, climaxing in the feeding of the 5,000; then came the downward spiral, he begins to talk more deeply - *unless you eat...* and they left en-masse.

The word Jesus used is translation of *sarx* - customarily used pejoratively of the body: e.g. as prone to illness, sin etc. To speak of the body as good, healthy, a wonder of creation - *soma* would be used. Jesus uses *sarx!* He is telling us that his body is not just the glorified Easter body, but also the less-than-perfect body of Christ here on earth - us! We cannot relate to the invisible God and ignore the visible.

You come into a parish, enter-in as best you can, find yourself welcomed. Disillusion comes when you find the squabbling, the finger pointing, the judging... here as anywhere else! So you walk away - away from *sarx*, the way Christ's body on earth will always look! This is what he meant by *unless you eat my flesh... you will not have life*. I can't by-pass the dysfunctional family here and simply relate to God-in-heaven. Jesus tells us community is non-negotiable, since God came to this earth and has never left it.

I can pray just as well on the golf course as you can in Church! Yes, indeed, but do you? A good theist statement, but not Christian. It is of the essence of Christianity to be together in community, never an individualistic venture. St. John tells us that one who claims to deal with God ignoring community is lying! - *love God and love your neighbour*.

The incarnate God is found not in mystical meditation or retreats - though God is there - but first and foremost in everyday living - and we need retreats to send us back appreciating this. Wherever you find family, community and the give-and-take of life, God is in the heart of it - such realities are there to allow us access to God's presence, more domestic than monastic.

God's reality is one of shared existence - a community of three who are totally one. Why do we travel far and wide on pilgrimage, and miss out on *being still and knowing...*? I can enjoy God with me as I am, because that is my reality; I am me because God loves me, to be with me is to be where God's love is. Why travel to see the wounds of Christ in one person when he is wounded all around me?

Pilgrimages are so obviously good and worthwhile, and this because first and foremost God is with us wherever we are. Why long to see something special, and never get up to see the sun rise? That is what God does. To be involved in everyday living, flawed as it is, is my willingness to be open to the Spirit.

The God who became flesh, able to be experienced, still has flesh and can still be experienced - *as often as you did this...*

We are invited to put skin on our own words of promise. Ministry is not handing on teaching but *transubstantiating* God, very much the way we do with food. We digest food to allow it to become part of us. So with mission, we need to digest the word to let it become flesh of my flesh. This is what is meant by us proclaiming - *this is the Gospel of the Lord*.

Experience needs individuality, uniqueness - *the face I had before I was born*. The first moment of mission is silence, seeking to hear who I am in order to become what I am receiving by being fully alive, in order to give it in gift.

The impact of the Incarnation is universal, nothing is untouched by it, even the *after death* reality. Moving-on from the interior missing and hurting by the loss of someone special in bereavement, into the way the Lord showed us how to go on belonging. How do I relate to family and loved ones who have died? I am helped through the ways their words were made flesh, by enjoying as real the goodness they embodied.

On Easter day Mary M expected to find a corpse - and heard those strange words - *Why look for the living among the dead?* Cemeteries aren't places to find the living. When we visit graves, as we should, we too will find ourselves sent to look elsewhere. Where? I will meet those I can no longer see or hold by being in those places and situations in which they flourished as real persons. They have gone to God, whose presence they enfleshed through so much goodness. Both my mum and dad were committed to helping in the local community, and when I get involved in similar ways, there is a real presence.

Sadly, the converse is also true! When I am too selfish to frequent such situations, when I am less generous - there is a very tangible absence! *Why look for the living among the dead?*

Every good action allows God to be felt. If I would go on knowing someone who has died, I must frequent places uniquely theirs - the ways I experienced their goodness. My mother had great compassion for the needy - that's where I'll meet her - as long as I go there out of compassion for the needy, and not just to meet!

We are part of the Word made flesh [sarx]. *Happiness is not what makes me grateful, rather does gratitude make me happy!*

If Jesus preached the Kingdom, why do we need the Church? *People aren't leaving the Church, they just aren't going!* Many who don't go wish to retain the link, and even look to the Church for rites of passage - *births, marriages and deaths*. They want the Kingdom but not the Church we offer!

The Church is people before ever it is institution or buildings, bishops, priests, liturgies... there is first a community of real people. Jesus gathered this community around him, gave shape to it, and promised to be there always.

What is *not* Church? Not simply *a meeting of minds*, and is not caught-up with a compulsion to have to like each other. Those first disciples learned the importance of loving each other, whether or not they liked each other. To be Church is to be with

unique people, every person is unique and therefore different. Is there space within today's Church for that to be honoured? People who are unique called to share things in common - break the same bread, transcend divisions, allow difference too foster unity.

While the disciples herded together in fear, they were not yet community in mind and heart. Pentecost changed this. Don't confuse Church with family. Family is where all kinds of intimacies and belongings are shared and celebrated - not the role of the Church. The Church is where everyone belongs as of right and requires a universality not suited to family living.

Likewise, common mission, needing a team to serve it, is not Church. So, if Church is not for like-minded, shared fears, common mission... what is it? One thing only! Being with JC and sharing his Spirit. When we meet to celebrate the goodness of someone we respect and love, we will be an extraordinary mix of people, since the goodness celebrated is never selective. Left to themselves many would not like each other but wouldn't dream of showing it while the *good* person is present. As Church it is the real presence the Jesus that unites us.

Scripture speaks of his Spirit, given to us, in terms of being able to be charitable, joyful, peace-making, patient... as something infectious, as long as we are aware of that real presence with us. Those who venture to experience this find themselves already belonging. We cannot be Church without Christ - how we have tried!!

Some have interpreted this literally as sharing all in common, there have always been *religious* communities. The majority live in the truth that common life doesn't always mean one roof, one purse... though there has to be real life-together, praying together, celebrating together - we need always *to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly...*

To be baptised means being a displaced person - what is often seen as Peter's baptism has Peter being told - *the time will come when another will bind you and lead you into places you would rather not go* - Jn.21.18. Baptism does that, leads me into the pain of life simply because it is there, it is real. When I look-out from my reality and see something incompatible with the way the Spirit wants me to live, my Baptism leads me where I would rather not go - *ekklesia* - *to be called out of* what is normal into a healing attitude.

In this sense it is true to say e.g. that parents are baptised by children, until children arrive they are there for each other, now there is change. Wedding days, Profession days are epitomised by Paul - Acts 9.8. - He got himself up off the ground and freely walked into an unknown future, with eyes wide open, seeing nothing!

Unless you eat my flawed, sinful flesh [*the body of believers..*]. Community radiates Grace in incomplete ways, sin and selfishness are growing side by side with grace and virtue. Anyone standing on Calvary would not have dreamed of making distinctions about who was guilty...

Human belonging is dysfunctional, it is simply a matter of degree. Is God to be found in a Church that authorised the Crusades and the Inquisition? In a Church that numbers paedophiles among its ministers? The Church is always God hanging between 2 thieves.

It has carried Grace, produced saints, has morally changed the world; to be associated with Church is to be in the same place as war mongers, torturers, child molesters,

adulterers, and at the same time to sit down with really good folk. Where there's the greatest sin there is amazing Grace.

Catholic is not the opposite of Protestant! The original *protest* was not so much against Church and Pope, as a protest *for* God. *In my Father's house are many mansions...* God is open hearted, without discrimination. The opposite of Catholic is *Fundamentalist* - a heart with only one room!

To be Church is to be loyal to many things... where anyone can sit down with everyone and feel at home. *Where are all the bad people buried?* [*a child's question reading the inscriptions on grave stones*]. We speak well of the dead, what a pity we can't do the same for the living.

But why go to Church? We are social by nature, and our searching for reality should be consistent with who we are. The two commands are linked - love God and neighbour, but in the end we go to Church for the same reasons, that we celebrate things like Xmas dinner and Thanksgiving - for the joy of it!

Paschal Mystery - our critics tell us the Church is very good at making happy folk miserable, by focussing on suffering pain, sin and death, on waiting for jam tomorrow! Like most half-truths there is something in it. All ways of life have to cope with ever-present mortality.

Christianity insists that our mortality is crucial for eternal life. It has the answer, seldom appreciated. What is it? The Spirit is not a generic gift, but given personally and uniquely to each one, in a way that *fits*. The paschal story is about how I, after some form of dying, find new life - *unless a grain of wheat...* Jn.12.24.

We need to distinguish: terminal death and paschal death. Terminal death ends life and all its possibilities. Paschal death is equally real, but while ending one kind of living opens up another precisely through the dying. Equally, 2 kinds of life - resuscitated and resurrected: when former health is restored [Lazarus] - and radically new life [Jesus]. The Paschal Mystery is about Paschal death and Resurrected life.

We should also be clear about *life* and *spirit*. After the Resurrection the disciples were given new life in Christ, but only at Pentecost were they given the way to live it. The Paschal Mystery involves new life and new spirit held in appropriate tension.

It starts with dying - loss - real grief - bereavement, when it is appropriate for us to let go of what was, we receive new spirit: *Good Friday* dying; *Easter Day* new living. *40days* for readjustment, mourning, letting go. *Ascension*, letting go of the old, refusing to cling. *Pentecost*, receiving new spirit for a life already being lived.

This cycle does not happen simply at the end of life, but continuously throughout life - I need only reflect on the truth of this in my own life: *loss of youth* - despite my feelings I'm no longer young; *death of wholeness* - when part of me simply fades and dies - e.g. an abused child. No treatment or therapy can undo that. She has been crucified, but is not dead, looking for an ascension - to grieve appropriately for what has died, and then to let go, let it ascend so that she can receive a new spirit to live differently.

It is not the severity of the trauma, nor the efficiency of therapy, but in *ascension* and *Pentecost* Jesus gave his disciples 40 days to grieve, sometimes it takes 40 years! She now walks peacefully, fully alive as one abused, like Jesus.

Death of Dreams - not those nocturnal visions, but life-changing dreams, especially when the fulfilling requires yes from another, who always says *no!*

Happiness and contentment - everyone's birth right - cannot be out of my control, cannot mean *making it to the top*. Ascension is crucial - handing over - and Pentecost - to receive the spirit, tailor-made for me - *beyond* my dreams.

Not to face-up to my need to ascend, no matter how long it takes, is to transfer my anger at my incompleteness onto whoever... my unfulfilled dreams rob me of life.

Death of my notion of God and Church - the God and Church of my youth have gone! The Church is not dead, simply my version of it.

I need to grieve appropriately, in ways that help me, otherwise my hurting, losses, life's unfairness... I will live with increasing anger and cynicism, like the older son of the Prodigal Father... living in his father's house unable to enjoy its spirit; unable to name his brother - *this son of yours!*

Life is not fair! I am misunderstood, judged unfairly, rejected insensitively. In youth there are other compensations, other enthusiasms to distract. As time passes my being cheated by life intrudes more and more.

Magdalen was told not to cling, not because she had lost him, but lost how she had had him in touchable flesh. We too want to cling to what we had and enjoyed having. If she were to cling, he couldn't ascend, and she couldn't receive his Spirit.

Power without compassion is violence! Compassion without justice is sentiment. Justice without love is atheism. Love without justice is fantasy. Keep in mind: *Act justly, loved tenderly, walk humbly...* Micah 6.8.

In what ways do justice and charity differ? How can I help victims without further victimising? Private charity freely, helps the victim, but doesn't pursue why he/she is victimised. Justice gets involved with background realities, what causes the victimisation, not the misdeed of another person but institutional injustices. *When I gave them bread they called me a saint; when I asked why they have no bread, they call me a rebel.* - Romero.

God creates all equal, but not the same; gifts not property. The quality of faith is determined by its justice - the Gospel names 3 groups for us who are always at the back of the queue - *widows, orphans, and strangers*. Jesus reinforces this: *when I was hungry...*

Peace - non-violence: peace movements seem to make little progress in dissolving hardness of heart; possibly because under the surface, such efforts can also be unjust. So-called *righteous indignation* is often an excuse for violent reaction; providing the *indignant* with licence.

S. Francis wasn't an *anti*- person. *Anti* divides, he was always a *pro* person, motivated by being-with, not dividing. Non-violence is the basis for the new order. *The rhetoric* of non-violence often cloaks the desire for power. Non-violent peace-making doesn't try to subdue or defeat, never coerces, always persuades. Scripture speaks of *enduring all things*.

The overcoming of the power of death is at the heart of faith; we don't have to triumph over death all over again, we are people of hope not anger or indignation.

Look at Jesus dealing with the woman accused of adultery - Jn.8.3. - and Daniel -13 - the stories have different endings, one in peace, the other in violence. Nobody dies in Jesus' way and all are enlightened by truth in humility.

So much of popular fiction culminates in redemptive violence, the *apparent* good is more violent than the vanquished evil. The hero starts out as Francis of Assisi and ends up as Rambo. We need vigilance if we are not to confuse redemption and redemptive violence. Peace with justice doesn't come through deciding winners and losers, but through fidelity. The Gospel insists we seek peace with justice, it doesn't say we have to be *winners!*

The gift of being able to gaze on one's children is the offer to feel as God feels, eager for another's life to be more important than my own! This God-given energy [*sexuality*] is to create life, and also allows us too to see that it is good. This is why my sexuality is crucial for my spiritual maturing.

Sex - comes from *secare* - to cut off! To be sexed is to be cut off, which is how we arrive in the world, not serene and peaceful, but crying, experiencing being cut-off from the womb, where we belong. This energy prompts us to seek to re-connect; alone we are incomplete, experiencing ourselves separated, longing for union [*Jung compared it to separating the yolk from the white of an egg*]. Sexuality is much more than *having sex* - two distinct realities - sexuality and genitivity.

Sexuality is the all-pervading energy, the drive for love and communion, achieved through friendship, belonging, family, marriage... *it is not good to be alone* applies to everyone and everything, it is the constant energy resisting falling into loneliness.

Genitivity is a particularised aspect of this, it is physical consummation, bringing together a variety of erotic energies. Sadly, many spiritualities downgrade genitivity as being too earthy for spiritual values - this has led to a distortion of the value behind celibate living also.

Genitivity is, arguably, God's greatest gift to the planet, offering the possibility of the highest form of intimacy this side of eternity - remembering that *having sex* is not thereby intimacy! Indeed, it is an all too common mistake to believe that genitivity can carry all the things sexuality is meant to provide.

We are sexually healthy through family, friendships, affection, care... the genuine joy experienced in voluntary self-transcendence. There is a lot of indulging in genitivity without any of these qualities being present - *it is easier to find a lover than a friend!* Sexuality is good, a powerful energy, God-given to be enjoyed and experienced in every aspect of life, an irrepressible urge to overcome incompleteness, to recover the goodness of being able to be naked without the need to run away and hide - like Adam and Eve.

This and all the other intended hungers is meant to be experienced in harmony, so as to allow us to become co-creators of our world, to look at it and see that it is good. With this in mind, what does healthy sexual living look like? Look at a new mother, not an atom of selfishness there, totally caught up in the other; a grandparent so proud of the grandchild; an artist, a care worker, someone enjoying the fun of living, a celibate full of care and compassion, a group standing beside an open grave, Christmas dinner... anyone who sees life as good. So good as to cause anguish in bereavement.

What is wrong with sex outside marriage? Sexual intercourse is total giving of oneself, needing trust and permanence. To enjoy simply the physical without the real, is to pretend to give a gift, without doing so.

Knowledge has no power to save [*Augustine - who had 2 conversions, one in his head and one in his heart*]. After experimenting with various philosophies he was persuaded [*aged 29*] that Christianity was *it!* But not until he was 34 could he bring his moral life into line. He needed both heart and mind.

What do I do when I am too tired to read Scripture, too agitated to be at peace with my thinking, too depressed to look beyond my own experience, simply disillusioned? The Church urges me to look for the signs of the times: living in a post-Christian culture is living in a culture that doesn't carry faith for us, as formerly. A believer today is morally isolated, unable to go along with the flow. It is no longer enough to have been born into a Christian family, baptised into a Church community. See how many simply drift away. It is easier to have faith in Christianity than to believe in a personal God.

Like Augustine, I need to make a personal act of faith. The resistance to this is not any overt form of Godlessness, but anything that deprives me of the oxygen of prayer, that makes self-giving and compassion subject to convenience. All of these demands, in themselves seemingly insignificant, collectively conspire to rob me of genuine vitality.

Prayer and Personal Faith - is the oxygen of life, and deprived of them I will experience real breathlessness - anxious about me and mine, rejecting interdependence for spurious independence, even though my sincerity remains intact.

To be fully alive I must have a life-line! I must be in contact with God. Prayer shows me the fine line between depression and inflation - habitually depressed or perennially obsessed with my own ego.

What I see as my time apart is not a time to experience God as close-by. It is full of distraction, restlessness and fears. Yet the simple fact of being consciously in God's presence, and showing how I feel, think... without hiding anything, must be good. It is seeing myself as God sees me - and *God saw that it was good!*

Somewhere within me, even though I don't feel it like an embrace, nor hear a voice, or see a smile... yet God assures me, looks at me, loves me... when I am still unable to notice it. *Pray always* - means what? [1Thess.5.17]. *to ponder* doesn't mean in Scripture what it means for the philosopher! They believed that the unexamined life is not worth living.

It meant reflecting on life as it is being lived, rather than going with the flow. In Scripture it means not so much a process of thinking as *holding in ones heart*. Mary at the foot of the cross, nothing she can do can save him, she knows who he is and yet can

do nothing - she holds this tension within herself. There needs to be a willingness to carry tension when it is appropriate. When temptations assail me, I can give all kinds of reasons for giving way: *its not all that wrong etc.* yet I **know** I'm a better person when I do not give way, and carry the tension of the moment, rather than give way, even if only to resolve the tension.

There's an interesting episode Emmaus when Jesus says *was it not necessary?*- Lk.24.26. Is there not a necessary connection between carrying tension and remaining faithful? Unless I am willing to sweat blood in honour of my commitments, it is difficult to see how my faith can be sustained.

But why do it? Whilst it is obviously a good thing to carry tension rather than seek to resolve it prematurely i.e. this what *respect* is all about, letting you be yourself no matter what it is doing to me, letting God be God! There is a deeper value, as Mary stood at the cross, as Jesus sweated blood in Gethsemane, the opportunity came to reconcile opposites.

Jesus was hated, met by anger, killed by jealousy, yet he was jealous of and hurt no one. He was on the receiving end of violence and aggression, yet never passed them on to others; and was somehow able to transform them into compassion and forgiveness. Only one who has already sweated blood in order to remain true, will ever be able to say - *forgive them!*

Almost everything within our culture persuades us to get rid of tension, even at the cost of shedding nobler ideals. Today's people find it difficult to stay with tension. It is a maxim of spiritual maturity not to panic and seek to resolve things prematurely, simply to get rid of tension. Only by staying with it for the appropriate time will we ever know how to turn aggression into compassion, and hurt into forgiveness.

Say it like it is! Many are dissatisfied with themselves in some aspect or other and try to be different, either through personal dislike of self, or fearful of the opinions of others; and yet this is me, I can be no other! This even applies to God, when asked God says *I am who I am!* And so are we.

Jesus promised that whenever a group gathers in prayer he is there with them. The early Church took that literally on every presenting occasion they would gather to share the word and break bread, and let Jesus make his presence felt.

Christian life is not sustained by private prayer, acts of justice and the practice of virtue. It is sustained in community by gathering ritually round the breaking of bread and hearing the Word. This is not simply a social duty. The ritual gathering brings that normal social gatherings cannot provide transforming energy beyond the normal physical, psychological or social dimensions. Let's have a closer look.

We no longer have a strong sense of need for ritual. As products of the Enlightenment we tend to be ritually deaf, mistrusting anything that reason and logic cannot explain. Ritual suggests something of magic! We seem to have lost e.g. an appreciation of ritual cleansing, something that does work and does not submit to rational explanations. Ritual works in much the same way as a genuine kiss works. It takes the language of former times to come to our aid here. Something does happen in real ritual like baptisms, marriages, breaking bread.

When I joined the Order we had a daily practice of meditation a.m. and p.m. What was happening? In silence we were encouraged to try to focus on God rather than self, in this sense we were a community, each trying. This helped forge a bond between us for that half-hour we were together, and this did something much more than a meeting of minds could ever achieve.

Why do so many ordinary and very different people want to go to daily Mass? Because they feel they would fall apart otherwise! They probably wouldn't say that if you asked them why, yet deep down there is a sustaining energy in all this; ask an alcoholic why he/she needs to attend meetings, where everything is predictable, they know what will be said but if they don't go they will fall apart!

Interesting that daily Mass-goers don't want something long and protracted they want a simple, clear and predictable ritual.