

## Why me?

### Restless

I am born restless! With an impatience that says there is much more to me than what is here now. It is felt most keenly in relationships - I want to belong, to matter to someone simply because I'm me. Nurture seems to tell me that whatever is good about me *comes from outside me* - a good baby doesn't cry during the night - a good little boy does what he is told in school - a good friend...

Is there any innate goodness in me? If I am not brought up within a family, community that does relate to me as though there is, that I am special just because I'm me, then my lack of self-worth is going to grow.

I had a beginning, I began to exist; and yet there is something of eternity already about me. Because God never began to love me; there is no beginning in God; God always loved me; so, what was God seeing before I was born: - *show me the face I had before I was born?*

I can discover see this face through appropriate use of the gift I've been given for that purpose, my life! Not by looking at myself as in a mirror; but seeing me reflected back to me in the faces of those who love me. Jesus said: *I have come that you might live well*. Life is to be *received, accepted and given away in love*. Genesis identifies Adam as lonely, missing companionship, longing for some *other*. This basic longing is in all of us, a longing to give myself freely, and to receive the self-giving of another.

Such is our origin and our destiny, where we come from and where we are going. We are destined to be restless with anything less than everything, since we have an infinite hunger. I am made hungry - and will experience frustration with anything that can't satisfy. The hunger is infinite, and seeks the infinite.

Life as we now know it, seems like a symphony destined to be unfinished; until I am made aware that life begins as a pilgrim experience, living with each other, challenging each other, needing each other... trying not to be lonely in a world growing colder.

A feeling of eternal inadequacy can often take root, until I become gifted with I am born mortal with an inbuilt desire for immortality. This is compounded whenever I try to resolve it by *getting, owning, keeping, using...* anything that does not include giving totally: *give yourself totally to him who gave himself for you, totally* - S Francis.

The days of story-telling are gone - which is a pity, because stories link us to the reason why we experience longing: *But I being poor have only my dreams; I have placed my dreams under your feet, tread softly, you tread upon my dreams!* - Yeats. Missing this we are left relying on the inadequacy of information and the language of the market - *once there was wisdom, then came knowledge, now we have information*.

Inevitably we lower our sights, trivialising our longing, robbing us of that faith anchor that promises what *will be* in the thick of the *not yet*. The result - our restlessness drains us instead of inspiring [the Spirit breathes in us]. This is the arena of faith - *I give thanks that my restlessness is assured*.

When the Gospel speaks of *blessed are the poor in spirit...* this is it! Poverty, in its normal sense cannot be a blessing in any shape or form. But *poor in spirit* is very different - first, recognising that all that I am capable of requires more than my own efforts to achieve - and second, such help is perpetually on offer: *I can do all things in the one who strengthens me!* People who appreciate both of these are truly blessed,

because it removes the frustration of loneliness inevitable for anyone determined to be totally self-reliant. Inner emptiness is not a lack – we are deliberately created empty – infinitely empty – so that the Infinite can fill us full to overflowing.

At one level, life is constricted, yet when its inadequacy is freely embraced, it can become an openness to receive the all of God, who is waiting for me to receive freely. *We are made to receive - not to achieve!* God is gift, and everything from God is gift... life is distorted and abused when we try to be owner/occupiers, at whatever level. This highlights the area for conversion both individually and collectively.

I can either thrive with enthusiasm – seek to become what I am being given through my life - or wilt and die seeing decline as inevitable. The question is always - do I believe this of myself? And, how would I know? Do I open my emptiness to a fullness unknown to me, yet promised with me in mind? Do I really see the fullness yet to come, or am I disappointed that I can't have it now? Have a closer look at this restlessness - the conviction that I do not, in myself, have the wherewithal to achieve my potential - and ask is this a good thing, is this how the best in life is going to happen?

I need to identify my inner restlessness - is this longing for *something* or for *someone*? [Use F's example of wanting everything – then realising that everything was someone not something]. It feels like a frustration at my inability to achieve whatever it is I'm longing for. There are hints! Learn from the toddler trying to stand-up, stumbling and falling, but doesn't stay down! Yet who in their right mind could imagine so much weight being freely supported by such tiny feet? Stay down, it's safer!

Always a push towards the impossible: *for every step my feet take, my heart travels ten-times more!* Left to myself I will remain unfinished, incomplete, frustrated. Yet this is a necessary state, this is the way to cope with real living - *to experience inadequacy as the need for gift that is there for the receiving* – this is the core of our spiritual life. But I need to accept this as real and urgent, before addressing it.

The drives that push me to enjoy my living are gifts God-given, in no way to be shunned or subdued, but to be enjoyed and released, always with me in control [F's asceticism - which he never imposed - *as the Lord has shown me...*]. I cannot be truthful in saying I give myself to another if I do not own myself first! Francis was born a passionate man and remained such throughout his life - only because he took measures to determine who was i/c in himself - was it him or his feelings and emotions? Everything that is in me is God-given – nothing is to be denied but all of it has to be re-announced [renounced]. There is no place in God for *I did it my way!*

My soul is not some vague reality floating around inside me, something to be kept in cotton wool, because it stains easily! *My soul is me fired by the enthusiasm not to preserve life but for more life - with us in mind God promised something more* – says the Letter to the Hebrews. Not something bigger and better, but deeper and more intense.

I am not a done and dusted product. I am being driven to seek; to be alive is to be actively restless for more life - I have an infinite thirst and need an infinite fulfilment. I want someone to know me, I want to matter because I'm me, I need someone to be happy at the thought that I'm around. Also, I need to recognise this reality in others! Someone once remarked – *it is one thing to be forgotten, another not to be remembered!*

I was made to be missed! But the "I" that wants to be missed does have difficulty in making itself known, even though the process is simple - but never easy; total self-

disclosure is never possible - life is always smaller than our dreams. Here again, this is not something to be lamented rather is at a hint of the divine present and waiting in the human.

My life has an almost necessary obscurity, strong as my longings are, yet my address is unknown to far more than will ever know it. I would like to be better known, to have wider experiences, to be noticed as special... it is almost as if my life is too small for me; as if I need to be extraordinary without having to leave being ordinary – *this is what the eternal within the temporal feels like*. It's almost as if life as I presently know it is too small.

Take faith away from this, and there is inevitable frustration, *there is a certain mortality about self-expression*, doomed to constant frustration. Does this real experience have to be terminal? Can it not also be *Paschal*? If I simply *tolerate* my life then decline is inevitable; rather, see it as a challenge to live differently, *according to the vision another has of it [faith]*, when I see an end to competitiveness I will discover what peace of mind means.

This new way of living cost Jesus his life. Affluence and the pleasure principle have eroded life, with their claims to be the only way to self-realisation, it is dying to this passing attraction that constitutes the *Paschal* way.

In no way does this obstruct our creativity, though it does mean living powerful energies differently; it is discovering what *ordinary* really means. What would it take to persuade me that human living at its best is *service*? This is a faith reality – Jesus shows how life lived in service, self-gifted to others, is the way human living is able to be intimately one with the divine.

Put some flesh on this: my early life certainly did not have everything provided, we had to make-do in wartime conditions, and it was easy to see how *mourning and weeping in a valley of tears* became topical in times when being happy was not top of the list! Affluence has changed all that. Gone are those days - some might add *more's the pity!* It was tough going, but if it produced people like my mum and dad it had its pluses too.

To live life with faith intact isn't an endurance test. But it allowed them to be the free and loving people they were, despite all the hardship. By contrast, today's pain-avoiding culture is producing anxious and unfree people. Every hunger does not have to be satisfied. We are temporal, in transit, to what is to come, by living faith in pursuit of what will be, a pilgrim people.

The heroes of drama live happily ever after... we know restlessness when we compare our own unfinished experience of self with some idealised expectations. How hard it is to live in a culture that says none of this can happen until every ache and pain is gone. Fullness of redemption doesn't simply mean I am made for life after death, I am made also for life after birth, life as it is, the *now* with which we are all blessed continually, and *living* can actually tell me that I am all right just because I'm me.

We don't like death coming too close, there is even a resistance to ageing! We are within value systems that are all for the individual but know nothing of God. It fosters and supports truths revealed by God, without believing in God. We are taught that each one of us is unique, yet in a world that persuades us of our insignificance, a world not interested in our story. Whatever the picture of life is now, it isn't allowing me to live pain creatively; it is a pain-avoiding culture.

For some of today's thinkers part of our difficulty is finding room for death; however, a more likely cause is individualism - a primacy of the individual which has no room for God; which inevitably promotes restlessness since anything less than infinity will never satisfy a thirst that is infinite.

What happens when we are told our dreams are true and that we are uniquely special - in a world which, having rejected God, cannot possibly answer our needs? We are obsessed with the need for self-expression, the need to get, to achieve and when this doesn't and we realise that the world doesn't owe us a living - we turn to the blame game. It is only within the voluntary poverty of God that we will find any rest.

On the one hand we believe in our uniqueness, that our coming to be was not accidental, that somewhere there is meaning waiting to be found, that we are loved uniquely by God; and yet this tends to fade when we realise we are but one amongst millions all longing for the same thing. This can bring about that we are simply mediocre, trying to make-out, that we are better than we are.

Why is ordinary living not enough for us? Why do we need to compare ourselves with others? Because we are trying to give ourselves what only God can give - immortality. Ordinary life is enough if it lets us discover we are loved, and that we don't have to achieve.

### **Unfinished Symphony**

We are born incomplete, full of tension and restless. To be fully human is to be energised by the desire for fulfilment - something that seems to elude us. We need someone or something that we haven't yet experienced. What *does* happen is that we are compulsively active, greedy for experience and never feel satisfied. This is not necessarily wrong - what is happening is that there is an infinite hunger inside, and try as we will, we only have finite means. What is happening is we want to be where we came from. Given this desire for the infinite - we will never find completion from our own means, not matter how intense our trying.

Salvation is to let another, a higher other, an infinite other befriend us and fill us full. [the higher power in Recovery Programs]. To imitate Christ is not to say what he said, or be where he was - we need *to feel as he felt*, discover his motivation - his desire for the fulfilment and completion of everyone in one communion of love and peace. We need to inhale the Spirit in order to breathe out the gifts.

Paradox plays a big part in redemption - *in death there is life*. A celibate life considered in isolation is nonsense. Man without woman, woman without man is absurd. When God said *it is not good for man to be alone, he meant it, and meant it for everyone*. To live in celibacy is to be incomplete, a loneliness.

While there is some truth in the fact that friendship does not have to be genital, there is naivety here too; necessary as friendship is it does not offset the emotional demands of celibacy - however deep the friendship might be, however supportive a community they do not satisfy the words of Genesis: *that is a why a man leaves to his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh*. Marriage makes one of two in a way unmarried friendship cannot.

The celibate life has become surrounded by half-truths, in much the same way that married life has suffered from over-romanticism. Both these tend to hide real pain, because in both cases life remains an unfinished symphony; only when this truth is appreciated - both ways will lead to completion if only we don't expect to achieve this ourselves.

Perhaps the most significant change in the Church in recent times has not been through Vatican II - but the re-awakening of the conviction that there can be no spiritual vitality without social justice. Social justice is not an option, no more than prayer and moral integrity.

The full statement should read: Christian means to pray, live a good moral life, and be involved with the poor. Often social outreach is accused of neglecting personal conversion - it doesn't matter whether you pray, hold grudges, worship together, as long as you work for the right causes. Never enough to say - *you are Christian as long as you say your prayers and go to Mass.*

Prayer alone is not enough, social justice is also needed; and yet prayer and social justice together are not enough; too many who pray and seek social justice are angry! There is an absence of gratitude and friendship. A *full* Christian life rests on *three* foundations: *prayer, social justice and friendship.* To pray and be socially just is to be prophetic, but prophecy can incur hostility and rejection - and then there is a slide into anger and bitterness. Only friendship can save us - friends who can warm ice-filled bitterness into challenging belonging.

### **Friendship**

We *choose* those we love - brothers and sisters are *given* to us. One of the emphases Jesus makes is that we find it easier to be lovers than to be friends! *I have called you friends.* Good, open, life-giving friendship is relatively rare. Too many who pray and act justly are angry, lacking joy... friendship is missing.

To pray, to act justly, to love tenderly and walk humbly with God - is to be prophetic. Friendship is the hallmark of salvation - friends challenge us out of genuine concern and have us forego our bitterness. An examen could well find me asking myself - *am I prayerful, am I actively involved in the struggles of the poor, do I appreciate friends who gently move me out of the reach of anger and bitterness?*

Is it really easier to be lovers than to be friends? Does sexual tension inhibit or promote friendship? Deep relationships between male and female cry-out for consummation - it is written into our genes. We must be clear: is there a distinction between sex and sexuality? Sexuality comprises a hunger for wholeness, for family, for community where there is encouragement for creativity; where joy and sorrow have equally free range. Culture, however, defines sex among other things, as being romantically involved. Friendship outlives sex, and provides for wider and deeper intimacies.

### **Emerging**

As a new-born I was helpless, totally dependent and unable to speak or understand - living and growing involves struggle and determination to attain. So why does the Prophet Joel.2.28, make the distinction between the young and the old, telling us the young have vision, and the old have dreams. Is there more to it than saying for one it hasn't happened, for the other it's the good old days? There surely is - to refuse to dream is to settle for mediocrity, to remain partly unborn. Dreams used to be shared - what I dream alone remains a dream, what I share has reality. Pain, isolation and loneliness happen when we have no one share our dreams. In shared dreams the impossible becomes the expected. If that sounds far-fetched read the 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John.

**After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:**

*"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*

### **Jesus Prays for His Disciples**

*"I have revealed you[a] to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.*

*All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of[b] your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by[c] that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.*

*"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

### **Jesus Prays for All Believers**

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

*"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you[e] known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."*

### **Risk**

We have shorthand for Paul's conversion – *the Damascus Road!* We tend to assume that this was something spectacular, unlike our own conversion experience. Every life-changing experience is equally dramatic for the person concerned, otherwise there would be no impact, whether anybody else knows it or not. There is nothing *run of the mill* about it. It is both unique, intensely personal and unrepeatable – in a *language*

known only to the individual. Sadly, the tendency is *if it's to do with me it will simply be more of the same... it's the same for everybody, why should I be different?*

The *only* and *intended* purpose of my existence is for me to strive to become the uniquely, special person as God sees me. We need to stress the *uniquely personal* nature of this – why else did Jesus speak about yeast, and salt and light? Salt is not used to make everything salty, nor is yeast as abundant as other ingredients; neither can anyone see in pure light – each one of us is gifted with a uniqueness able to do what no one else can – and which without us remains undone.

Since this can only happen in the world available to us, we need to love it and enjoy it. Speaking in 1980 S John Paul II: *our culture tends to declare human weakness a fundamental principle, and so make of it a right. Jesus said that every person has a right to his/her own greatness; a greatness unrepeatable, and so a precious gift.*

### **Pruning**

*Nostalgia isn't what it used to be!* There is a clear distinction between nostalgia and the longing for innocence-lost. Nostalgia is the bar on the door denying access to the future, with a preference for fantasy. Whereas the Paschal Mystery challenges us to see death as the necessary pathway to new living.

It is good and salutary to make trips back to where we have been, were we recall being free and happy [often through selective memory], but not to setup home there. We lived it and enjoyed it because when it happened it was the present, not the past – *the call is to be open to life as it is* – not as it was. The value in remembering is not to see the past as the place to be, but to go on facing the present and let new things happen; to learn how to prune what we now know from experience to be inhibiting growth; which might call for heart surgery rather than the more acceptable by-pass.

In real terms, those days were tough: it was war-time, food rationing – including sweets – we had to receive evacuees into our homes and schools, we had to carry gas-masks whenever we went out. There was no street lighting – black-outs on every window; nights spent in air-raid shelters – yet we had fun and celebrations.

I can say I feel blessed in where I lived and grew up. Since then I have literally travelled the world, shared in new responsibilities – experienced rejections – yet there remains a certain un-freedom, a tiredness of spirit, running out of steam. Once eager to go out and forge ahead, curious about what might or even could be – all of this, the good and the not so good, was freely given for me to enjoy! Of this I am certain – all it will take for this to resume is when I become as I was: *a child* albeit now adult, but still dependent – I need to stop doing it my way, to stop providing for myself... as I had to do instinctively then, but freely choose now.

### **Single Life**

Society is fashioned with couples in mind – it has a place for consecrated celibates, but singles are on their own, sharing identity with consecrated celibates but without the support. Few single people feel that they have positively chosen this way – and some are even victimised into it. It is rare to hear of young people looking forward to remaining single. Everything works in pairs, to be single is to be different to a degree greater than we care to admit.

Sexuality figures prominently in self-awareness, yet it is not correct to equate happiness with sexual intimacy. Sexuality is the inner drive towards connection, family... we are happy when we share such values, whether we sleep alone or not. There is something more than biology here. Sexuality and community function well together but are at

different levels. Christ died alone, loved and missed, but alone; even though so powerfully linked to so many. He showed that this too is a good way to die.

### **Intimacy**

How can a single flower be special among a whole bunch – or one book in a library – and yet this is the reality. God didn't create persons, but *this* person, *this* flower, *this* book. But is this true of me, does it speak to me in wonder, or am I left *lonely as a cloud* – isolated and alone? The answer doesn't rest within me, what is within is there for another to release and respect, no matter how I may have hidden or abused it.

Sadly, love and respect are no longer valued in their own right – I have to be seen to earn them - which isn't love but justice. Care and respect are gifts to be given, not judgments made. Tough love is only real when it is obviously for the well-being that is already put there by God, not needing my yes or no. A blacksmith cannot be creative if all he has is a piece of metal, a hammer and an anvil – without fire he is impotent. Sadly, our world is a world of designer boredom – hungry for fire and passion.

Love is necessarily mystery – unknowable in advance. Speaking of his L'Arche experience Henri Nouwen wrote: *Here I am loved by people who are in no way impressed by me*. He instinctively knew he was safe there – where his good name was safe, even when he was not around. By contrast infatuation creates insecurity; restless because in spite of my wanting to be there, there is no assurance that I belong.

Love is going home. This is probably one of the most intense of human experiences – freely choosing to go home after freely choosing to leave. We cannot *go home* from love or friendship – they *are* home. Where, as Nouwen said, *people don't have to be impressed by me to love me*.

Why did Jesus live his sexuality as celibate? In no way to say that there is something superior about such living. He is showing us how the Kingdom is all-embracing – it is God and everything God-made coming together as an all-in-one flesh and blood community. There is a place for sex within this – but *wholeness* has much more to do with the coming together of hearts than the temporary mating of bodies. It is not without relevance that in an age of increasing sexual activity there appears a corresponding loneliness and isolation.

Jesus shows how friendship through love, through celebration and intimacy is the fruit of the coming together of hearts. Sexual genitality has a crucial role in this when it lays the foundation for fidelity and respect. This is never achieved a-sexually – or by setting sex against spirit; which is why Jesus shows warmth and affection within his chosen celibacy. We long for completion, for wholeness, to be set free from loneliness and isolation.

Our sexuality is not an isolated part of us – everyone is a sexual being. There is no human activity that is not sexual – though not genital. Sexuality is an urge to give birth to something, and even to lament its virginity. We grow humanly by allowing our sexual experience to mature into life-giving ways that bring about new births in ways other than procreation.

Both experiences allow us to share God's hunger for the well-being of creation. In a world where issues of social morality – starvation, in a world rich in resources, social injustices, terrorism – we need to go back to basics to rediscover how everything belongs.

### **Keeping the fire alight**

Perhaps subconsciously, yet surely we look for change – *how he's aged... put-on weight*. At the same time, we can spot a sparkle in the eye, irrespective of age. The eyes tell it all. Am I able to be excited still, or am I just tired? Eyes can show affection, enthusiasm – as well as boredom and its cousin cynicism. This is a result of seeing the sameness of everything; and yet desperation is not the result of seeing more of the same.

Desperation comes when we grow weary of joy – the ability to experience life as fresh; never to be confused with pleasure. To live by the pleasure principle is to be on the road to disillusion – and the eyes show it!

I can look in the mirror and not own what I see there. Yet the eyes are mine – no matter how many creases and bags surround them. Bodies inevitably tire, but the eyes are linked to the spirit – whether they are sighted or not. *For those who have eyes, let them see!*

I met a young man who had seen it, done it, been there and remained unhappy. His childhood was gone and nothing had replaced it. Childhood is the gift to be surprised, keen and eager for more. Faced with reality, the child is inquisitive with a desire to be surprised again and again.

We are gifted with a *natural fear* that knows nothing of being frightened; there is room for mystery; a certain *not yet but can be*. We are blessed with a kind of natural chastity – when only trusted people are allowed into our experiencing and there is resistance to intrusion.

All this was gone in this young man. Could it be regained? He had let this natural chastity become disordered by allowing free rein to every possible experience; and falsely presuming to be familiar with what life is all about.

*There comes an hour in the afternoon when the child is tired of pretending; weary of being the bandit or the sheriff. That is when he starts to torment the cat! - GKC.*

So – where is the way back – or forward? Do you believe in Santa Claus? Yes – says the child; of course not, says the teenager – what do the superannuated say? We need to look at familiar things as if seeing them for the first time. It has to be worked at: *wasting time to regain wonder* – letting the ordinary reveal itself, learning to wait in expectation. This is what Jesus counselled – *you must be born again... Jn.3.3.*

Part of this process in honesty is to admit my sinfulness – but in a positive way. My sinfulness is my entitlement to Christ, and so is holy ground: *I have come for sinners*. Not *I have made mistakes ... I have been victimised...* both of which may be true. I cannot get to the conversion point – *I am a forgiven sinner* – without owning my sinfulness. My memories of hurts, betrayals and injustices are ever present, urging justified retaliation. God never promised that life would be fair – but that it would be good.

Resentment won't let me enjoy life. Every hurt, every injustice, every abuse can occasion both wisdom and resentment. I need to realize that I can't free myself from this [this is the wisdom] but I can be set free. This new way was seared into Peter through that glance Christ gave him; and what that felt like was *this is really what I long for with all my heart*. *Come aside and rest awhile* was a regular invitation from Jesus to his friends.

Leisure is not the privilege of those who have time, but the virtue of those who give to each moment the time it merits. Ours is a world of *not enough time* – too little family time, prayer time, enjoyment time – our lives are dictated by the clock.

Time is not ours – it is gift we cannot stop it or change it. We don't sleep, eat, work or relax when we feel like it – but *when it's time!* There can be virtue in this – it helps me arrange and organize life. There is also power involved – I'm told to pray for an hour every day, but circumstances may not allow for this.

After 30 years praying alone in the Sahara, Caretto said his mother, who spent her life raising a family, was more of a contemplative than he was. It is said the contemplative withdraws from the world – so does the mother! Her time is not her own; there is more of the monastic about such commitments: *One who does not have a softening of the heart will eventually have a softening of the brain* – GKC.

The coldness and hardness which seasonally belongs outside us is now within – the world and all within it is growing cold. We need the return of warmth that comes from closeness to the fire; being with God intimately brings familiarity and the warmth of homecoming – a much more appealing way of seeking prayer and quiet. GKC speaks of: *the swiftest things being the softest things – a bird is active because it is soft. A stone is helpless, hard and must go downwards, hardness is weakness. A bird of its nature goes upwards because fragility is energy.*

Our culture is not against solitude and prayer – we are no more malicious than former generations; we differ because we are *busy!* We are surrounded by people rushing here and there, accompanied by noises of various kinds from iPhone to traffic – where do we find a quiet place to become real again? Solitude is not what I need to do – solitude is the opportunity to become aware of life and what it is offering. It brings value, belonging and fosters gratitude: *Be still and know that I am God...*

But what do I do about the things that hurt me? The injustices, the unfairness, the exclusions... Often prayer doesn't help. Or am I not praying properly? It is natural, when I'm hurting, to focus on me and my suffering – yet prayer focuses on God, not me and the crisis facing me. This is not pushing aside the hurt and the anger – but taking myself, hurting and angry, to the one who can help me. Learn from the distressed child – held safely and securely – will gradually settle and sleep because it is safe, held and wanted – that is what prayer feels like.

It is not easy to focus away from self. It is all right to be angry with God, provided I am honest. Am I living my life or is it simply happening to me, with no say from me. I have been seduced; I tried to be faithful to what I promised, but now realize I have missed so much. Anger in such circumstances is already prayer – raising heart and mind to God as it is – angry and distressed. We need to wrestle with God, not be docile sheep.

Refusal to accept injustice and unfairness is prayerful – provided it is honestly how I am. There is not too much of *thy will be done* in the recorded prayers of the Prophets. There will be anger and frustration – and to be angry and resentful with God is to find myself being cared for, being loved, as was the Prodigal's elder brother. I need to experience how I am a winner by losing!

We are familiar with the cynical *in your dreams* comment. There is a difference between day-dreaming and purposefully relaxing. Day-dreams present me with life as good, I'm never taken for granted in my day-dreams. As with most things, excess is the problem – I can easily slip into escapism. To see something as it really is – to contemplate without

much of me in it – and to accept it as real, is to pray; whereas day-dreaming focuses on me as I am not!

Forget the idea that contemplation means starting with a blank sheet – an empty mind; rather is it letting my thinking and my seeing open up to what is really there, not what I would make of it. Dreams and fantasies are me editing reality. Contemplation is reality as it is. I can enjoy myself in my dreams; but enrich myself in prayer.

How do you unscramble an egg? We behave as though we believe that one mistake, one sin, is enough to hang us. This is why forgiveness seems remote – we don't qualify, not even once, never mind 70 X 7 times. I was brought up to call sin - sin. It was uncompromising on most moral issues – arguably preferable to today's moral relativity – which excuses too much and challenges too little. Yet we did not allow for mistakes. We were expected to get it right first time round. If you made a mistake you had to live with it and go through life like the rich young man – who *went away sad*.

This *mark of Cain* has been inflicted on many – from divorcees to single parents – where there was no room for innocence-regained in joy. Grace is not something we've lost, but the awareness that God doesn't give up on us, and he tells us: *there will be joy in heaven over a repentant sinner...* Mistakes are not forever. We are not sinners; we are forgiven sinners. Our faith does not simply show us how to live – but how to live again and again...

But how do we live when what is best in us – our loving and receiving love – doesn't seem enough; when the one I love dies? How did *he descended into hell ever get into our Creed*? Is it saying love will always triumph? Tradition saw this descent as Christ setting free all the good who had died since Adam.

Today, theology speaks of Christ *experiencing hell – the absence of God: My God, why...?* Love respects no barriers – no matter what barriers we erect from our hurts and fears; love will break through. Twice S John has Jesus coming through locked doors. God can help me – especially when I am in the throes of my own helplessness. Compelling as Holman Hunt's *Light of the World is* – Christ can only stand and knock – there is no handle on the door – he needs to be let in; but, he will not go away – as we have seen, he can enter through closed doors, but the heart only allows access by invitation.

It was commonly accepted that suicide is prompted by despair. It is more like a terminal illness, and in no way can be seen as sinful – a mistake, yes; wrong, yes – but not sinful. We are embodied spirits and body, soul and/or spirit can break down. Judas is often held up as prototype of desperation – like Peter, he could not forgive himself; unlike Peter he didn't realize he could be forgiven! If I am brought up to experience that I am lovable, even when I make mistakes, and realize that love is not *earned* – I can be more like Peter.

Notice how Jesus, post-Resurrection, arrives through locked doors – just so, *he descended into hell* shows how he can also enter into closed hearts. Suicidal persons are mostly trapped within an emotional hell – to be rid of unendurable pain. They will meet one who descended into hell simply to sustain them so that, at last, they can know peace. So, what does the cross say to me? It persuades me of the power of weakness to establish community – God-with-me; which is why we call it *Good Friday*.

Crucifixion is intended to establish the triumph of death – the ultimate power. Living faith actually begins where atheism suggests it ends – it must rise out of nothingness. The love in Jesus crucified is not there for admiration but to be received and lived as gift.

Life is organized around the choices we make. Some choices are ordinary everyday predictables – others have life-changing implications. Sin is real – hell is a real option. In past times many believed that the majority are destined for hell-fire; which is to deny the redemptive power of God's unconditional love.

Redemption is not a means to rid us of the alienation we inherited from our first parents. God's love is revealed in the Incarnation and is universal salvation. There's nothing I can do to stop God loving me – we live under the law of mercy, not condemnation. Sin need not be undone or atoned for by us – it is freely forgiven.

Among the great religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam all do not believe in re-incarnation; all three believe in the same God, who does not demand retribution, but can make all things clean – there's no need to keep on living till we get all things right. But how many of us experience the peace and happiness proper to redeeming love?

It is easy to be in hell in this life; not so easy to remain there forever. This is so because in this life there is no one to descend into our private hell to breathe unconditional love into us. God's love has descended into hell – few can resist the attractiveness of unconditional love freely offered. *A man went to hell – friends pleaded for him to be let out – his PP intervened – the gates remained shut. His mother went down and said – "let me in" – the gates opened, unable to resist unconditional love – GKC.*

If this is so – why do many parents, who love their children unconditionally, have to witness them walking away from the Church? Indeed, this a universal experience when a loved one decides to walk away from us. We read *whose sins you forgive they are forgiven* – Jn.20.23. Again *whatever you bind...* Mt.16.19. Much more here than a reference to Sacramental discipline. We are being told when we forgive sin is forgiven.

Hell becomes a possibility when I deliberately put myself beyond the reach of love. *A mother, worried about her son who had left the Church and was tragically killed in an accident, asked "what will happen to him"? He will go to God – there is nowhere else to go – and say "I am Jack" – and God will say "yes I know, your mother has told me all about you"! – to be held in love is equally as redemptive as holding in love.*

Sex outside marriage, missing Sunday Mass are *mortal sins*. Doesn't Trent demand confession to an ordained minister? When I celebrate or take part in the Eucharist I am, with all others, touching Christ – to be open to the forgiver is to be forgiven! How far-reaching is the Incarnation? Does *doing the truth in love* - Eph.4.15 mean there is no forgiveness of sin outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation – and the Sacrament of Anointing?

When I reach out to touch Christ in the Eucharist am I not healed? When we forgive he forgives – he told us so – when we bind he binds. Is it a question of soft-peddling confession or soft-peddling the Incarnation? How tragic at funerals to see not just grief, but fear – when the deceased has been away from the Church. We know this was a good person – doesn't God know this? God *is* compassion. It is when I am morally bankrupt, with hands and heart stained, that I need God most; and yet I feel I must clean myself up first – clean the house before I call-in the cleaners!

What happens when words are not enough? We get frustrated and sometimes even depressed. The good lady in the Gospel reached out and simply touched his cloak. Her determination to do it was not in itself sufficient – she wasn't healed until she touched – believing. This is what happens at the Eucharist – we just don't turn-up, we touch. Picture the feverish child being picked-up and held and gently quietening down; mum/

dad brings peace and security beyond the reach of words. This is why Jesus, after all his words were spoken, made it possible for us to touch – the Eucharist. We come to the Eucharist to let ourselves be held – we don't need to understand, simply believe.

Is the Mass always meant to be bouncy and foot-tapping? Liturgy requires a link a genuine connection with those celebrating – and we differ, not just from each other, but also within ourselves too. I'm sometimes the very opposite of enthusiastic.

We gather to be held, to be fed and so we need much more than someone getting things right – we need someone to help lift up minds and hearts. I bring to the Eucharist me as I am – because that is why God loves me, because I am me. Worship means *worthship* – God desires me to believe *I am worth it*.

I suspect we see more involvement in one who quietly grieves – who genuinely regrets – who silently wonders, than in one who sings loudly and claps heartily. Try to picture Jesus at the Last Supper – certainly happiness at the presence of his friends at table – but what about his awareness of tomorrow? He went from a happy table to the anguish in the garden. *This is my body/blood...* are not simply words to change bread and wine but to affect everyone present. People who come to the table as strangers need to share the meal if they are to leave as friends.

Is there truth in the statement: *it is cruel to talk about death, but even more cruel not to...?* We cling onto life – like Magdalen clinging onto Jesus on Easter Day – the Jesus she *had known!* We see death in two ways – the end of biological living, the terminal view. There is the Paschal view – something precious dies, something even more precious and entirely new, opens up. Dying precedes birthing – like a mother *losing* her child giving birth. Often, when we see people struggling to stay alive, gasping for every breath – it takes someone close to say: *It's all right to let go* – when death is Paschal.

We are dying long before we expire – we say goodbye to youthful vigour and mobility; old age is hell for those desperate to cling onto youth. Yet death gives way to new life. Jesus died but is not dead. Death invariably arrives uninvited. Youth, vibrant health was present abundantly – no longer; and their passing is real dying. When I am 70 going on 20 this can be descent into hell – and makes the Paschal experience more remote. But if I insist on clinging-onto what is – I cannot ascend to new life and miss the impact of Pentecost.

Living faith requires massive trust that God's promise of new life through death is real; and nothing of value is ever lost in the transition. To refuse to let go of my dreams that are not going to happen is to court resentment and disappointment, and I am in conflict with the spirit already planted within me, which yearns for the *something more*; which is always available through accepting life as it is, instead of putting life on hold while I seek for what is not going to happen.

This was something the disciples had to learn after the Resurrection – they *presumed* the old Jesus was back – and huddled away in fear of his enemies, as before. When they do let go they burst out of that locked room – all because they were open to the reality of now. Magdalen, understandably, wanted to cling onto what she knew – yet by doing so was unable to receive what was new.

Notice how we celebrate in advance – Christmas begins in November. This is why there used to be a fast before a feast – now we have the feast before the fast! Our times do not promote waiting in anticipation [Advent] – we want it now.

To appreciate the extraordinary, we need to experience the ordinary. By-pass this and the extraordinary becomes *more of the same*. It might have seemed harsh not to encourage weddings during Lent [and even Advent] – it was part of *less of everything* the fast before the feast. How can Christmas Day be so relaxing and special when we arrive exhausted by so much preparation? There is a natural progression from anticipation to fulfilment. To celebrate Easter without Lent, and Christmas without Advent is like celebrating the special without knowing the ordinary.

Life and the enjoying of it is gift; and my need to achieve, possess or even earn – becomes an obstacle. Freedom comes through realising that whilst there is nothing I can do, there is nothing I have to do!

*I asked for strength that I might achieve I was made weak, that I might humbly learn to obey. I asked for health to do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be free. I asked for power that I might have praise, I was given weakness that I might feel my need for God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I asked for, but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered. I am the most blessed...* Author unknown.

Our lives are shaped around competition – *show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser!* – Life is about getting, earning, achieving – a phenomenon deeply rooted in us; we are aggressively competitive; it's not easy for me to be there for another.. I develop my gifts for me, to show how special I am. There's no *need* to be that kind of special. Every child in a family is special, but in no way are any of them the same.

Jesus is a loser who became less, so that we could become more; I couldn't reach God, so God reached me. Life is never easy, we live perilously close to what we can't control: ill health, unemployment... and we learn to cover it well – thinking no one will notice. This isn't honest living. God knows our precarious state – I need to realize that I am actually feeding my desperation by trying to conceal the very grounds for compassion, understanding and belonging.

When S Paul speaks of *strength in weakness* he is identifying my need for other-than-me – and that other actually desiring to be with me. A frightened child waking from a bad dream doesn't want an explanation, just to be held by someone who cares.

We are not what we achieve, simply what we willingly receive. I struggle to conceal my pain and hurt – because I have picked up the idea that my life is for me to create a good impression – remember Henri Nouwen in *L'Arche: Here I am loved by people who don't need to be impressed by me*.

How futile to set-out to impress – to make sure I'm noticed. With all his academic achievement behind him Nouwen found himself helpless in the presence of simple, genuine affection. He was discovering to his delight what happens when we share our vulnerability.

### **Honesty**

We don't admit to each other how much we are struggling. There's pain and frustration – not much comes easy; fear is a constant companion – fear at many levels, especially fear of failure. Rarely do we share how we really feel; giving the impression that all is well. Which is dishonest, because it is not true.

The simple pathway to love comes through compassion aroused through struggles shared. But this is the problem area. We have been taught that community is grounded on impressing each other. We try to build our own tower of Babel – no wonder we end up speaking different languages with no common ground. Understanding is through compassion, and compassion is the fruit of shared vulnerability. Intimacy breaks-in when we are so vulnerable that it becomes obvious to others that we share a common condition.

God covered us with skin and an incredible capacity to heal. The games, the bullying, the hurts, the exclusions become less physical and more psychological. But a constant remains: more often than not we are not as hurt as we think we are. We are gifted with resilience. When we fall and hurt or cut ourselves – it doesn't kill us; we are tougher than we think. It is when we forget this that we find ourselves far away from the feast and enjoyment God has inserted into life lived. It is good to be sensitive – but not hyper-sensitive, when we think we have nothing left. We need to hear the challenge: *get up from your bed and walk*. We will get hurt, but never beyond the reach of healing.

### **Life is messy**

This is our experience – *life is messy*. But it is the reason why I believe in God. Our lives are anything but ordered. It begins with birth – a messy process which causes pain. All living experiences have mix of joy and sorrow. There is no antibiotic to protect us from this. It prompts the question: *if life is so muddled, why is it allowed?* Since we can't live and love without hurting we tend not live properly at all. We stay away from what might hurt – or heal – us. Life then is plastic, antiseptic clean.

We are not angels, unencumbered by limits of flesh and time; but there is a dignity here – a dignity possessed by a real rose over a plastic one. Flowers are beautiful because they die; beauty without the perishable is dry and sterile. So too we are not meant to be artificial people sniffing plastic roses.

We are less Catholic than in former times. Catholic means universal – its opposite is not Protestant, but a narrow pettiness and lack of openness, parochialism and fundamentalism. Whereas, *In my Father's house are many rooms...* Jn.14.2. This is not *castles in the air* but God's heart has many rooms. Wide-open, doesn't divide things according to *ours and theirs*. If God is wide open like this, does it mean anything goes, we may do as we like?

Fundamentalism is a growing infection in Church and State. Fundamentalism is far more than the commonly accepted narrow and literal interpretation of Scripture. It lays hold of some fundamental value – such as divine inspiration of Scripture, and *makes it the sole criterion* for judging goodness and authentic living. In such a heart there is only one room, where, if you are not in it, you are insincere and misguided.

Fundamentalism is always accompanied by the absence of joy. God's heart is wide-open to everyone, making sure all are invited to belong. This is not to say that *anything goes* provided it is sincere. Christ shows us how to discriminate between right and wrong in the light of divine truth.

Our times are of pain and division; hatred and anger are growing – evil has an increasingly high profile as we see e.g. with acts of terrorism. As Jesus predicted – son is turning against father, daughter against mother.. we are being divided by the ways we have chosen to live. In all issues we are either abusers or abused, or both. We think that because we have been wounded we are justified in hating; and it gets worse.

People are bitter and it is increasingly difficult to defend the reaction of the Church. 800 million Catholics can't live together without compromise, frustration and impatience. This calls for a fidelity underpinned by suffering. We are called to reconcile by feeling the pain – compassion – and letting our pain help because not to be in pain is to be of a closed mind.

It seems that those actively involved in social justice issues tend not to be involved in contemplative living; just as those who are involved in contemplation tend not to frequent the arena of social justice issues. It is certainly true that a division of labour is a good thing – but there tends to be suspicion and mistrust between those who identify with one or the other.

Why are you so worked up about abortion issues and seemingly unconcerned with matters of social justice – the living wage, equal rights? Unless the issues surrounding justice are addressed we won't have a world in which to contemplate and pray. Just as if contemplation is lost we will inherit a world not worth living in. There are signs of healing presence, such as L'Arche, Mother Teresa, Pope Francis... where action and contemplation live well together. Hebrews 13.2 reminds us not to neglect hospitality, telling us that *in receiving strangers some have entertained angels, without knowing it.*

Both Church and State are obsessed with *the project must work*. Classes must be taught, seed must be sown, the meeting must follow a schedule... there is no other way, things must be kept running. The danger in this is we have less and less room for hospitality, the hallmark of genuine Christian living. Strength without compassion is violence; just as compassion without justice is sentiment. Justice without love is Marxism; love without justice is nonsense.

### **Be Faithful**

*Without appropriate anger you cannot be prophetic.* Is this true? A prophet is characterised more by love than anger – we only have the right to challenge another when the other feels loved by us. So, what is normal? What is healthy is normal.

*Church* comes from *ecclesia* – to be called out of something. We are called *out of normal* life, which remains unchallenged. Unchallenged means ruled by preference and even faddism – a good life, a good job, a good house... Baptism is meant to upset that, by leading us at times *into places we would rather not go.*

We see the word *consecration* reserved for special things – chalices, churches... To consecrate something is to displace it from normal use. A chalice is reserved for the Eucharistic celebration. Seen in this way consecration makes little or no impact on everyday living.

Look at it from another angle – you set-out on a planned trip, a meeting or a celebration – you come across a traffic accident – at that moment you are consecrated, called out of your plans, your agenda must be set aside for the time being. That is what faith living is about – setting aside what is normal for something more demanding. Our instinct is to define normal by preference and consensus – this needs to be challenged to make way for social justice and compassion.

Faith in organised religion is never easy. Healing begins with the lancing of the wound – it is hurtful and depressing to hear the real truth about what is going on in some faith situations. It is *our* problem, irrespective of whether we are innocent or guilty. We are one body – and while we seek the company of our saints we cannot distance ourselves from our sinners.

To be of one body is to be linked both to its grace and its sin. Trust betrayed is not easily restored; and many who see scandals in the Church are becoming disillusioned and believe they would fare better without an institutional Church. For the confirmed atheist this helps their conviction that religion is a hoax; that much of the clerical paedophilia lies at the door of imposed celibacy.

Christ died between two thieves. He was innocent, they were not. All that onlookers saw was three guilty men paying the price. To be a member of the Church is to be associated with sin and sinners. Christ suffered this and so will the Church. No apology is needed – Jesus was seen to be there, why should the Church not be found there? Jesus walked with sinners, was accused with them and died with them.

## **Death**

As a child I was taught to pray for a happy death – at peace with God, surrounded by family and friends. For very many people this doesn't happen; there are sudden and unforeseen deaths – there are deaths of people estranged from family. What all these have in common is that death separates them from us – with many things left unfinished; with lots of *if only...* The Church's teaching on the Communion of Saints helps here. We are still in communion with those who have died – we can communicate and the reconciliations that didn't happen can still come about.

Not only is there communication – it is *privileged* communication. We are familiar with the many ways there are of irreconcilable differences in families and communities – and then someone dies. Death brings a kind of peace and a clarity not possible before. Death doesn't change the chemistry of the family, what happens in general happens because of that specific instance of Jesus forgiving the good thief – death washes clean.

I was taught that after death it was heaven, purgatory or hell. The specifically Catholic belief in Purgatory is one of the most consoling teachings – yet has been made something of a horror story. Suffering was as intense as hell, though not permanent. Purgatory is a stage of loving – the initial pain of entering into community – it is not a place separate from heaven – not a sin-bin – Purgatory is what it feels like to enter heaven.

Take the example of falling in love – a truly life-changing experience; but life changes, it doesn't go away. Which is why, when commitment in love is looming many experience the need to say – *there's something you should know about me...* in the presence of so much goodness honesty becomes essential. Why should there be such pain now, when everything is so wonderful? *Pain is honesty asking to be owned.* The powerful light of love left nothing hidden from sight. Purgatory is the redemptive pain of being in love.

Rahner speaks of Purgatory as recovering self-respect. When faced with the love that is God, we see it is all true – God loves me; always has loved me, and loves me exactly as I am. When I realise I have deliberately hurt someone close to me – and discover that my infidelity is not held against me – what happens then? Do I simply smile and say thank-you and continue on? Rather, the generous love offered to me still – irrespective of my infidelity, will challenge me to realise I am not simply forgiven; but I needed to be forgiven.

I need to go away for a time to recover my self-respect and return with gratitude. Face to face with God – with the love that has always been uniquely there for me and is now welcoming me home – I need to go away for a time to recover my self-respect [I'm not sent – I feel the need to go] in order to return with thank-you. [*Your mother has told me all about you...*].

What about praying for the dead? If the person is in hell we can't help; if they are in heaven they don't need help – so why pray for them? This can be said of all prayer – God knows everything; and has no need to be reminded. Yet God tells us: *pray always*. Prayer is not meant to change God's heart but ours!