

## Sacraments

The greatest source of joy for all of us is to be able to communicate. Human beings are a voice – we must speak or die frustrated in solitary isolation. We can endure cold, hunger and brutality – what is unendurable is solitary confinement. Scripture says *It is not good for you to be alone* – it will destroy you.

And yet, in a sense, we are all alone, simply because we are unique. God doesn't make copies. There is *likeness* but never sameness. We do share much in common – what we call human nature, the common clay from which we are all composed. Each of us is born, and each will die.

We are all driven by desires – *for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. We like to succeed and excel, and to reach fulfilment; we like to be recognised and wanted – and to be wanted and accepted requires someone else, who accepts me as I am. Living means living-with. Uniqueness can never mean isolation. This is the magnetism that creates families, clubs, nations – not options but necessities.

But we do not share everything in common. *Human nature* does not exhaust our potential. Indeed the most attractive element in any person is something shared by no one else – *personality*. Nature is the clay – personality is different, it is the inner spirit that draws and attracts and makes for *difference*. *Difference* brings pleasure – it is monotony, more of the same, that repels. There is a healthy aloneness – something essential if we are to flourish. We are born with human nature – the baby in the cot is fully human in its needs for food, warmth and affection. It cries, smiles, wakes and sleeps – it wants company.

In this sense the child is the parable of all human nature – we all have that in common. Human nature is given, personality is promise experienced as being distinctly possible. The child may grow to full flowering and find fulfilment; or it may remain as sterile as stone! Nature and personality are not interchangeable. In the child nature is complete, personality is embryonic, as seed seeking good soil. Promise, is the present reaching out to the future.

The secret of Christmas is the birth of a child of promise. Even our agnostic world won't let go of Christmas. It still engenders the unspoken hope that all will be well; through the birth of this helpless child! The child, human in nature, promising in personality – more of a human *becoming* than a human being. The question mark hangs over the head of every child – will this becoming be enriching or end in frustration? The answer depends on other people, not on luck or chance, but on relationships made or refused.

This is why *choosing* decides every human destiny. Personality cannot be self-realisation. The first 5 or so years of a child's life are years of dependence and could be decisive for the next 50 years! The first and best influence is mother who communicates her own awareness of *real* to her child. The child's world is the mother's world. Maternal communication is communicating life itself; and it is communication largely without speech – speech is not the only or even the most eloquent means of communication – this belongs to touch. The infant that is well cared for but never held will not flourish. The child needs to feel love rather than hear about it.

This is a universal need which never dies – which is why we use the adjective *touching* to describe something special. Touch is the first sign of affection; and why *don't touch me* can be haunting, in these sad safeguarding times.

The language of communication is sign – signs uncover inner attitudes. *Love* is an abstraction that requires mediation. Which means that the key question about life: *is life friendly or not?* Literature and the arts in general all ponder this question. What we call reality, is a mysterious maze that needs interpretation. Is life to be endured or enjoyed? The reality we see is filtered to us through signs. No one has seen pure light – only a lamp or a star; yet we

want to see directly! We see as if through smoked glass; with light dim and refracted. We experience light both as sign and as reality. When Jesus says *I am the light of the world* he is using sign language; yet we see simply a man. When he says *you are the light of the world* that too is sign-language – all we can see is community. And the language of communication is sign – light is used as a sign, and we can't do without them. There is only one sign for the helpless baby that allows contact with reality – mother; who answers by signs: touch. Smile, frown, song or gesture.

In the womb, the unborn enjoys a life of total security – life without demand. But the child is created to be a personality and must be born – which is why birthing is so traumatic, the first experience of separation. We all fear separation from the safe and the undemanding. The new-born child has died to a life of safety and tranquillity in the womb. Paradoxically, dying is the price of being born – both for infant and adult. Growth in personality consists of a series of dying and risings; my real cannot be your real, no matter how much I bully.

Reality is read through signs, a reading which must always be ongoing. This is why Jesus speaks of: *unless you become as little children...* eager to live with a child's eagerness for the future. An animal is endowed with instincts for survival – a chick breaks through the shell of the egg instinctively, and, at a sign from the mother will remain perfectly still if danger threatens. The child has no such instincts. Everything has to be learned. It is not partially dependent as the animal, but totally dependent. It can't feed itself etc. its need is not just biological, it is personal. It needs mother not just for food, but for affection; this mother-child relationship is the basis for personal existence. All other relationships presuppose this foundation.

*Personal* means *the relation of persons by communication with some other*. The new-born demands a relationship that is not animal but personal. It is already communicating by touch – this is communication partly-realised but wholly enjoyed. As a child in the home in Nazareth Jesus learned that reality is friendly, that it is good to be in this place, and life does have a purpose.

There is a competing emotion – fear - and it can become the presiding power; this is why so much depends on those early years. A child who is experiencing love and being loved, no matter how incomplete, will see the world as good and respond accordingly. But it does not know this by instinct, it is not an animal. It learns only by signs, and the primary signs are eminently personal. We cannot see love – it is real but invisible. It is mediated, as is life, by high voltage signs.

The need for this in the child is personal, needing real presence of a person; and this endures through adult life – our great need is for a saviour. Fear causes isolation – we need the other, yet we are apprehensive, and refuse to communicate. But this fear can be dispelled. We can't release ourselves from this cold isolation. Someone must speak, come and touch and love and let light through. We need a sign that there is a *someone*.

Christ is that sign, sent to reveal that God is father and mother, giver of totally self-emptying love. This what he meant when he speaks of himself the *light of the world*. See the life of Christ for what it really is – the total self-emptying of self for the sake of the other – in God there is endless inter-change: totally equal but not the same, yet completely one, through the mutuality of love which we know as the Spirit.

This is where the genius of personality begins to shine through; the genius of totally free and abundant communication. The need for love is universal, but the human heart is not capable of such total self-giving; our loving is good and necessary, but conditioned and fragile. The one loved does not meet all expectations. It might well be that what we desire the other cannot give totally. This is why we must be very clear that *God* is love – only God. What kind of love is God? Jesus' life reveals this.

He is the sign we are looking for. It is not natural to see God as kind and concerned; this has to be learned and communicated. Communication takes two – one who speaks and one who hears. In his divinity Jesus is the one who speaks, and in his humanity the one who hears this self-revealing of God. We can see this and experience it in part, because we are made in that image.

Each of us is called to become the unique reality God intended. At first sight this might seem to be an invitation to detachment for self-realisation. Which is not so – we realise [*make real*] our personality not in isolation but through communication. Relationship is not easily understood – it starts with respect for the uniqueness of the other, as revealed by difference. But I must have due regard for my own uniqueness and the difference I too bring. Both these must be held in appropriate tension of mutual respect.

This is the foundation for relationship, a *marriage* of dependence and independence. Every relationship calls for surrender but never for self-annihilation. Give and take is involved, invitation and response. True relationships never impair freedom; rather do they enhance it. *You must love God or you must love me* are meaningless phrases. *Must* and *love* do not belong together – other than the *must* that starts from within my experience, rather than from an outer imposition.

The lover helps me become myself, and become ever more myself. Difference does not mean incompatibility – lovers rejoice in the difference [*not the sameness*] of the other. Father, Son and Spirit are infinitely different and totally one. Is this rare relationship available to mere mortals? It is only possible with God; but we cannot reach God – *we have been reached by God*; and God's offer is not a message, but a person like ourselves. God becomes like us so that we can become like God. This is the secret contained in *sacrament*. Sacrament takes two – one who gives and one who receives; and the act of receiving is what we mean by faith.

We will appreciate sacrament better when we realise every person is, in some way sacramental. We are using sign-language every day. When I say someone is a warm person, how do I know? How do I know God loves me exactly as I am? Only by signs.

There is so much pain and darkness, evil and crime around – so much death. I need a sign that light really is stronger than darkness; teaching and talking cannot give this. We are persons and persons need *personal* signs – especially a person who has lived the full gamut of human living and dying – born, rejected, excluded and killed – and yet is very much alive and with us; alive in people gathered in his name.

We will never understand sacraments if we see them as *things and rituals*. Only the personal satisfies – such a person is Jesus Christ. Present in the dark world, there is light and someone transcending fear, hatred, malice and death. Christ is Sacrament.

## Sign and Symbol

*No man is an island...  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

[John Donne's words on hearing the tolling of the funeral bell]

*Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind...* words S Paul would be proud to have written; who sees creation in perpetual labour, waiting to be born. The body is a visual symbol of difference and variety, in harmony. Head, heart and hands; nerve, muscle and bone – a model of co-ordination. Which is why it is appropriate to call the state the *body politic*; the Church the *body spiritual* – and all of good will seek the *body of humankind* working in unforced collaboration. This is our oldest dream.

We are familiar with signs – our streets are littered with them – they are conventional, and made by human hands. Signs are facilities, they make life easier telling us where to find the hospital or the underground station... but we can't live just by signs. They operate in a world of things. But *we have an inner world of values and experiences*, and we want more than the real. Signs order, they do not illuminate – illumination is what we need and what we seek.

For the Christian the primary sign is the cross – a cross on a map shows where a church is. Yet the cross is more – long before Calvary we hear Christ say *take up your cross*, and people knew what he meant. It signifies adversity. In the Roman Empire, capital punishment was crucifixion. In his death Christ was degraded and the cross was the sign of this. Early Christians were appalled when the cross became their i.d. since it signified servile status.

The cross became acceptable only when the image of the risen Christ was impaled there; and it became a sign of victory – from a sign of disgrace, it became an emblem of grace; a sign of death became a sign of *life-through-death*. The original crucifix presented Christ as risen, beyond the reaches of death – the crucifix with Christ obviously dead was a C13 innovation.

The cross now is more than a badge [*more than a piece of jewellery*]. It defines an attitude to reality. A sign points to the thing signified; a symbol re-presents the thing signified – makes present. Symbols are deeper than signs and they are everywhere. To read the Book of Genesis is to enter the world of symbol. There is no human being – yet there is God present through the genius of symbol. How can anyone present *nothing* as Genesis does – only by symbol? The primeval chaos, the vast mass of water convey waste and emptiness – an anti-world: no light, no leaf, and no laughter.

Our great fear is annihilation, the onset of nothingness; our strongest desire is for life and more life. In Genesis God's spirit impregnates the emptiness, brings life, life mediated through tangible and visible things, life and water, sun and sky, field and flower; all creations of God, arteries of life. These are not signs – they present and transform. Symbol is high voltage. Without water, bread, oil and wine we cannot live – we speak of *acqua vitae* - water of life, the bread of life. Yet water and bread are not enough. They are necessary, but insufficient. To become what we long to be, we need the Spirit. By impulse we search for life – in fact we are searching for God – for love, and God is love.

Christ seeks to uncover reality. We in the West don't take easily to symbols, we are sacramentally illiterate, seeing reality only at surface level. The farmer sees a field and can assess its fertility, the botanist can classify flowers – we approach reality by assessing components: we refer to water as H<sub>2</sub>O – which makes the question *what is man* unanswerable. Seeing water as a *thing*, sum of components, presents reality as not leading to any other reality. It is equating the real with *thing* that has made religion irrelevant.

We all have inherited this threadbare vision of reality – *real* equated with thing. Is a flower just a thing? What of its fragrance and beauty? Christ looks at the flower and sees the beauty of its origin in God – he sees water as more than a means of quenching thirst. With him we move into the world of sacrament and symbol. Sacramental vision needs new eyes. We can see *with* the eyes but not *through* the eyes. We see the finite, the thing, but the really real we cannot see. For us, the world is little more than a supermarket. Does the good life simply mean an abundance of good things? [*You can't serve both God and Mammon*].

Both are good; only one is God. We see things, attractively packaged, - we don't see the sublime [*the transcendent*]. The way to see the infinite begins with the finite – where the real is mediated through symbols. A caution: there is no such thing as reality plus symbol. Reality is *in* symbol not independent of it. There is no direct route to the Father – *No one can see the Father except through me*. The important word is *through*. To say *it's only a symbol* is to misunderstand symbol. Symbol is not diminished reality; but reality enlarged – not reality minus, but reality plus. Which is why our prayer is always *through Christ our Lord*.

If we would understand sacrament we need to appreciate that. *The heavens proclaim the glory of God* – this is not through *sight* but through insight. We have a disease of the eye so that we only see the surface – good means that which we find useful. The consequence of this is superficiality – life is no longer *being* but *having*. The touchstone of reality, therefore, is utility. You get what you pay for.

Christ has come to enlarge our awareness horizon. He doesn't share *likeness* with the Father, he enjoys oneness. His dominant emotion is gratitude: *I thank you Father...* Praise means appraisal, appreciation of the good. Christ is *the* sacrament – not just a sign of grace, but the means of Grace. The Sacraments are specified occasions when we communicate with him at his ever-present invitation. Which means that in each sacrament we take an active part – *will you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband* – requires *I will*. Like-wise *the body of Christ* requires *Amen*. *Are you willing to be baptised* – *I am willing*.

We do need visual aids – and there is no shortage. Creation itself is one – so also the changing seasons – the Church liturgy – *but above all there is the person* – and no matter how abused these have become, the person, the image of God can always be found there. Christ did not lament the world – he loved it, it was so lovable for him that he died for it. He invites us to see, serve and save humankind; which requires new eyes – sacramental eyes. The Church, after all, is that community whose values are in tune with, and relay Christ's attitudes. The Church can only be understood as symbol – that this world is good, and is God's world; a world where to see death as the end of life, life is futile.

Death is the temptation to disbelief. Yet, the Church celebrates death – not as disaster, but as *the agent of life* a glimpse of glory, for which we need sacramental eyes to see it as a *fertile* extinction; a seed planted in fertile soil to bring new life. This is revelation; and revelation is always hard to receive. So many feel isolated and alone, seeing creation as cold and beyond redemption. The Church is called to convey Christ's vision – *no man is an island* – *any man's death diminishes me because am involved in mankind; therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee*. This is the truth Christ brought!

## **Born and Baptised**

We enter the world of sacrament in baptism, that world is not the next world, but this one. Sacraments belong here, a restless world seeking a sign: that life does have meaning. It looks for the sign that this is so – a person who knows both the way to, and the reality of new life. Such a person, to be credible, must come from the mess of things and undergo the pain, the suffering and dying proper to all of us. While he must be truly in the world, he must in a sense be *over* the world, else malice and evil will triumph.

Christ is such a man, born of woman and with no protective armour. Yet he spoke, as people said, *with authority*. He lives and dies, unlike all others, He is *wholly* possessed by the Spirit of God. He alone can call God *Abba* – he is God, with nothing missing. There is no *private* Christ, no reserved area. He claims not *likeness* to the Father but *oneness* with him. He does what the Father does – loves totally, all giving and for-giving.

His mission is to make the Father known by being himself – his Father's only Son; sent to make the Father known *as our only future*. He does this by revising our understanding of life and death, of male and female, of where we come from and where we are going – and the meaning of the universe. Look first, not at what he says, but who he is. Like all of us he is a personality, which precedes what he says or does. His being determines his doing, as with us; what we say and what we do derive their value from who we are. *Christ is what God would be in all of us*. He is truly human without alloy. He shows that we are born to live with others – he is concentric, we eccentric [*off centre*]; he is the true, we the out-of-true.

We are aware of both nobility and degradation – some speak of humankind lyrically, others despairingly. Are we angel or animal? Christ is the answer. He does not merely reveal what it is to be divine, but also what it is to be human. For example – he reveals we are not human beings but human *becomings*. We are not born human, we become human – or sub-human – the choice is ours.

Christ speaks to us; he reveals what sin is, and isolates the virus infecting every human heart. We each define sin arbitrarily, according to culture, education and parentage. For some sin is a legal matter – breaking laws, some see it as moral failure, while others see it as ritual offence. But we all see something malign, as the *great* sin. The people Jesus spoke to had their own understanding of both sin and sinner. Whole groups of people were seen as damned beyond redemption. They were rejected by us and by God.

Jesus does not subscribe to this. He offends the pious, both by his revelation of sin and his understanding of righteousness. He tells us our consciousness of sin is false, and is in need of revision, as is our awareness of righteousness. He says sin is *universal* – not confined to specific groups. The best are not exempt. He says we are sinful in our origin, and it is not accidental – it is *original* and not simply against law, code or rubric. It is our attempt to disown our origin. Our origin is in God – and we resent this and claim autonomy. This is our Adam-instinct – resenting our creaturely condition, claiming independence of the Creator.

Adam, the creature, envied God, the Creator; and was determined to seek, in his own terms, what is good and what is evil [*imaged by the forbidden fruit*]. Our only origin is in God, but we choose to live on a stolen origin. We still see God, but not as the ground of our being – God is seen over-and-against-us, a rival. God is a rival and is punitive, against whom we have a hidden hostility – experienced as anger and anxiety.

Some think we are sinners because at some point we began to sin. I am not a sinner because I commit sin; *I commit sin because I am a sinner*. Sin lies in my self, separated from my true origin. No human being can ever say *I am sinless*. And yet Christ reveals, in himself, that sin is not necessary. The equation – *to be human is to be sinful* is not true, Jesus is fully human and without sin. Sin is the *sub-human* in us. Jesus is fully human *because* there is no alienation from his origin – he is the *beloved of Abba*. He says *I and the Father are one*. He is at ease with the Father, we are *dis-eased*. Where he is one with the Father we are two!

The opening words of the Good News is that sin is not terminal. The Gospel shows sin is not the prevailing wind in our world. *Forgiveness* is the first reality. Many good folk may never attain to this freedom by letting sin-consciousness become sin-obsession, and cannot experience the joy Paul speaks of as *the freedom of the sons and daughters of God* – Rom.8.21.

What Jesus reveals, we find hard to believe – that my sin is not definitive; I can be reborn and return to my true origin [*as Jesus assured Nicodemus*] – by affiliation with the one and truly human – Jesus, the Christ: *You too can be one as I and the Father are one* – Jn.17.21. Jesus represents us to the Father and represents the Father to us. *Nothing can separate us from the love of God* [Jesus] – Rom.8.31.

This change is slow, and so deep-rooted that Jesus uses the word *rebirth*. Baptism is the Sacrament of the Fatherhood of God, restoring the lost relationship along with the ensuing joy, courage and confidence. We remain forgiven sinners, now free from the greatest sin – *of not believing that God accepts me exactly as I am*; the sin that disables God. Baptism doesn't add something to me, it activates something already there, and experienced as longing [*for something more* – Heb.11.40]. We are born to be reborn, but we are unaware of this without being told - Revelation.

Nicodemus, was a devout Pharisee, was pious – and unhappy! He kept the law, observed in detail the Jewish ritual – yet felt empty. He asked Jesus [*by night*] what was missing – Jesus

spoke about his own spirit, the Spirit of God, and its power to recreate the lost and unhappy; and said it is freely available to anyone wishing to receive it. Nicodemus didn't understand. Jesus was using the language of symbol, and most of us are illiterate in this tongue. We commonly read religion literally. Whereas Christ talks symbols – metaphor not metaphysics.

Nicodemus understood *reborn* literally. Speaking of water and spirit confused him. While we have a pedestrian view of matter – God sees it and loves it – he made it! Flesh is the agent of spirit, which cannot speak to us except through matter. Christ did not see himself as degraded when the Word became flesh. Creation, as Bonaventure says is the *Carmen Dei*, [God's song]. The Spirit imparts life into water, which becomes the tonic of renovation – *by water and the Spirit* – Jn.3.5.

*Sacrament* asks us to see things more deeply and even poetically. With baptism the Creator/creature relationship dies. Every new-born is born for God – neither birth nor baptism can be man-made. God makes the first move – we can accept or refuse. The symbolism of baptism is that of dying and rising; to present it as a washing clean is to diminish it. Baptism is a change of consciousness – from being fear-centred to love-centred. The most compelling symbol of life is growth – and we do not grow easily like trees. We grow through a series of dyings and risings. It is rise and fall, decay and renovation.

The infant is lowered into the water and dies to a life distanced from God and raised to life with Abba. This is when Baptism begins, not ends. It initiates a rhythm of being *really* alive in the spirit of Christ, able to experience as Christ experiences. *Whoever would save his life will lose it* – Lk.9.24. One must die to one life, which takes time, even a life-time, from which a new life is born. [*Something patently evident in the evolutionary process – but here with the ability for eternal life*]. No longer life apart from God but life with God. Life apart from God is sin and separation. Life with God moves into the ways of peace and goodness: *Peace I give you, my peace...* Jn.14.27.

Jesus *died* many times. Calvary was the climax. When he hung on the cross he could see the Temple, where he died to childhood, a process involving hurt. Mary was pained by Jesus' seeming neglect, which she did not fully understand. He had to make this break to become his own man, a person in his own right. This happens when a child realises parents are not God – a real dying! He lost his parents for three days. He lost his *protected* life and gained another and more demanding life. He emerged with a new awareness, the conviction of God as Abba, and his mission to make this known by *being* the beloved of Abba.

His next dying was to a life not touched by temptation; the temptation to abandon Abba and live by the *secular* trinity – *power, prestige and possessions*. What matters is matter; Goodness means goods. He heard the whisper to renounce Abba for an easier future. This reached its climax in Gethsemane when he was confronted by one deadly decision: death or life. He sweated blood over this. What should he do – stay or run? Death always looks like folly; life as wisdom. He chose death and got life. This was the final and most painful baptism. He asked the disciples *can you do this* – be baptised into this? When our world falls apart, when life seems pointless and God cannot be found – this is the fertile soil for faith.

Sacrament is dialogue – not magic or mere ritual. If baptism is just something done, then it is magic; the person is passive. Baptism is personal, it initiates into the *personal structure* of reality - God is Abba, Christ is the Way and the Spirit of love is the energy for all this; which is why we are baptised not in one name but in three powers. In the name of the Father who is our security. In the name of the Son who is our way and our wisdom. In the name of the Spirit of intimacy, courage and maturity. This is a new person, symbolising the way as *birth, death and resurrection*.

Baptism symbolises *everything* but achieves only *something!* Baptism is sowing – it looks to the future; and the seed needs nourishment. Baptism cannot feed itself. Baptism is for Eucharist. Baptism brings faith, but faith is a green and growing thing, it needs nourishment

daily. We are born once, and we need only one baptism. But without Eucharist it cannot flourish and fulfil its promise. Eucharist is meaningless without the Real Presence of Christ, there to be received.

Our Easter Vigil service focuses also on baptism. One part is the renewal of promises made. Why? Because we need to remember baptism did not end on the day of our baptism. The child starts school – a crisis moment when mum turns away [*tearfully*] and seemingly abandons the child to a class-room of strangers with a stranger in charge. The child cries – this is a moment of death and of life. Getting married, starting a new job, taking on new responsibilities – are all baptismal moments, calling for a yes or a no. Baptism is the seed that must die if there is to be new life. What is received at the font is our true self – ours for the becoming – the choice is ours and ever with us.

## **Sacraments of Recovery**

*The rock foundation of Christianity is forgiveness; which cannot be expressed in words or defined. Forgiveness can only be experienced – forgiveness belongs to God. God is totally personal because God is totally for giving [for forgiving]. We are most personal when we are for giving. There is confusion about the Sacrament of Reconciliation when it is referred to as penance/confession – which makes us our own physician and imposes reconciliation on the sorrowing heart. I cannot be my own redeemer.*

Forgiveness is entirely gratuitous – cannot be begged, borrowed or stolen. It is not the reward of confession scrupulously made in number and species. Neither can we know forgiveness through our feelings. Forgiveness is entirely of God. All we can do is receive it, without payment. It is received humbly and gratefully – it is always mercy, never merit. Sadly, for so many, sin is the dominant religious reality – weighing heavily on conscience night and day. Sin does not hold supremacy – Christ's opening word is forgiveness. *Your sins are forgiven, your faith has made you whole* – Mt.9.22, Lk.7.50, Mk.5.34 – calling for our yes.

We don't profess belief in sin, but in the forgiveness of sin. To believe in forgiveness is not easy; perhaps only the forgiven fully believe – like Magdalen, with joy in her tears. Forgiveness is the work of Christ committed to the Church. The Church must not simply say it is a forgiving community, it must be *experienced* as such. Its mood and demeanour cannot be of exclusions, and imposing conditions on our return. Christ did not have to say his heart was full of forgiveness. It radiated from him. Everything about him – his life, miracles, parables and his death proclaim he is totally for us and with us. His work was not to make life grim – *I have come that you may have life in abundance* – Jn.10.10. *My yoke is easy, my burden light* – Mt.11.50.

Forgiveness is not confined to the confessional – which is the *visible* sign of sorrow and of return to the community: *most people who come to confession are already forgiven* – Aquinas. So, from our side what is the experience of forgiveness – genuine sorrow, not sorrow as a pre-condition.

Sin causes pain – but why? We do not want to sin: *the evil which I will not, that I do* – Rom.7.19, there is conflict between what I will and what I do. *I see what is good and I approve; and do what is evil!* Drama is tragedy, not history nor comedy. Macbeth wants to be king – symbol of Godhead; one sinful deed, the murder of Duncan, will achieve this. The witches predict he will be king; the serpent in the garden insinuated Adam could be God – so many tragedies have been variations on this theme.

Sin is deep-rooted; and it is wise to refer to it in the singular, because it is singular. There is the one radical sin – all other sins are variations, sores that reveal an infection. Sin is disorder in me; and I want order because order is peace, disorder is pain. Disorder brings division, dividing me from me and from other people, but radically from my Creator.



There is certainly *group sin*, cleverly insidious. Jesus addresses the Pharisees as a group. A community, school, church can be in sin; often because the group is unaware of it. The Pharisees saw nothing wrong with what they were doing. Real sin is obvious to everyone except the sinner. How I treat those closest to me is the test. Jesus did not see sin solely as an individual act – he points up social sin. For the individual sinner he has tender words [*Magdalen, the publican, the repentant thief*]. Failure is not the issue. The sin that dismays Christ is the sin of the group.

He uses shock tactics – because group sin is often gold-plated as virtue and righteousness. Pope John revived the old title *a Church of sinners* – asking the Church to look to its hidden sin. The Church must say daily *I confess...* and ask for forgiveness before speaking a word of the Gospel. Anybody can preach, it is preaching the Gospel that is hard.

The man most resistant to the good news is the Pharisee – a man who could not be faulted in his observance of the Law. He was his own redeemer, he made himself good by his own efforts, and he didn't need Christ! Forgiveness was irrelevant for he had done nothing wrong. Jesus tackled this with the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican – a parable of truth. Two men disclose their inner attitudes – revealing themselves [*as do all of us*] through a prayer – the Pharisee's prayer is *I, I, I... thank God I'm not like the rest*. Even the Church is at times guilty of this – Peter was appalled when Jesus knelt to wash his feet – how come the Saviour washes the feet of the sinner?

The Publican owns his sin – but his prayer opens with *Lord, have mercy...* not with *I!* God loves us not because we are like him but because we are unlike him! He loves us as we are – and will lead us, if we so desire, to where we want to be. An avowed sinner, despised by many – loved by God.

Sin's genius is its ability to find cover, often in pious disguise. When we pray the Our Father we follow it with – *look not on our sin but on our faith*. Faith is much more than assenting to truth – faith never denies its own weakness – its strength, like the moon, is living on borrowed light. Which is why the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith. Today we have a poor hold on sin, but a strong sense of guilt. *Guilt is sin experienced in isolation from forgiveness*. Sin does not know sorrow, only remorse, which is a corrosive that eats away internally.

The Publican had a strong sense of sin, his prayer rich in faith: *have mercy on me a sinner!* Not easy to accept. Sin covers; revelation uncovers! Sin says *I'm not like the others* – Repentance says *I confess* – and Christ says *your sins are forgiven!* Life is *covering, uncovering and recovering*.

Guilt is isolation, sorrow is believing, knowing that no matter how great the sin God's forgiveness is infinitely greater. Sorrow does not dismiss sin, nor does it dwell on it morosely; it looks upwards to inhale the fresh resurrection air. The underlying mood of sorrow is joy: *there shall be more joy... upon one sinner who repents...* Lk.15.7. How many of us experience going to confession as joyful?

Judas had no sense of sin because he had no sense of forgiveness – he was riddled with guilt, trying to do everything on his own. He took back the money, took his own life – the wages of sin [*unfaith*] is death. Peter also betrayed Christ – and whilst he too could never forgive himself, he realised [*faith*] that he could be forgiven. Forgiveness comes duty-free – all that is asked of us is that we believe it! *Your faith has made you whole* – Mk.5.34; Lk.17.19.

Sin is talent unused and wasted. We all have the same talent in name – but each one uniquely – *personality*. So much in life depends on this. Note Jesus' emphasis: one man uses his talent to make things grow; another hides it to play safe. Where is the sin here? An opportunity presented, but we make excuses not to avail ourselves, just in case... A believer *makes* opportunity, is unafraid of risk, and makes life an adventure not an obstacle course.

Why do we bury this talent? *Sir, I know you are a hard man* – he is oppressed by fear of God. Without the risk of faith there is no ignition for life.

Fear must die in the embrace of forgiveness. The Church is charged to provide this. Reconciliation is a healing Sacrament for all of us, the walking wounded. Illness comes to all of us – and the danger is in not seeing it as Jesus sees. He sees sickness as evil, as something to be overcome. We often have the temptation to *use* illness as a pretext for exemptions. The Sacrament of the sick is evidence of sickness as evil in the world. Not moral evil; more like a cancerous growth. For Jesus, forgiveness of sin and cure of disease are closely linked. Seeking the Sacrament of the sick in faith, seeing illness as something to be overcome. This needs courage – which is why oil is used, the symbol of strength. It points to Eucharist and fullness of life.

The response to illness is never resignation; even when the illness is terminal. Christ heals the sick, heals, and forgives – faith in God is faith in healing: *even though you die, yet shall you live...* Jn.11.25. St James writes: *bring in the priests of the Church* – the sick person desires to be restored to health within the community. Christianity is to do with forgiveness, which is vastly different from cancellation. It is who we are – am I a forgiving person or am I unforgiving? Faith asserts there is a stronger power than death in our world: *your sins are forgiven your faith makes you whole.*

### **The Bread of the Baptised**

The baptised do not live alone, they are not loners but lovers. Unaided, such a life is not possible. No one can live on Baptism alone. Baptism is a birth, and the born need bread; which is why Jesus says: *I am the bread of life* – Jn.6.25. This focus on Eucharist is neither obvious nor easy. Jesus speaking of this in John's Gospel [*Chapter 6*] finds himself rejected. Most of his contemporaries could accept baptism; only the few could accept the Eucharist.

Seemingly, many pious people seek isolation – where religion becomes a private affair and Prayer is secrecy, conduct is observing the rules. They certainly accept *thou shalt love the Lord...* but have problems with *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* Exclusions are plentiful – Babel remains contemporary – discord and absence of sharing.

We live by communication – not just with God but with any and every other. Yet *individualism* is natural; it is communion that makes demands. In the Pentecost story, we see people who speak different languages, yet understanding the preaching of the Apostles. The Spirit speaks only one language which invites everyone, without exception, to be open to God and neighbour. It is interesting that adults have difficulty in communicating where there is language difference; but children don't seem to have the same problem!

Christ brings a new language, a new literacy; which takes a life-time to learn. Why so long? Because it is a language of sacrifice. *Sacrifice* has acquired a bleak inflection, seemingly at odds with what we understand as love. Love suggests a summer of content, sacrifice a wintry and bleak outlook. Are they incompatible? His life was a blend of love and sacrifice, of beauty and severity.

So – what is sacrifice? Some turn to the barbaric story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, the devout Jew, obeys without question, even though Isaac is the joy of his life; he will live-on through Isaac and his posterity. What God asks will not just destroy Isaac but Abraham as well. This story is not easy reading, it has a point, because it is not in any way rational, but has revelation.

Isaac didn't die – there is no bloodshed; but there is sacrifice. Sacrifice is not something, but someone. On that bleak morning Isaac does not die, but Abraham does! If Isaac was to be himself, Abraham had to let him go – this is love/sacrifice. Abraham died to a love that was imperfect because it was possessive. His sacrifice was not negative, he said yes to God when

every instinct urged him to say no. Abraham did not lose a son, he lost a satellite. He gained a son and lost a servant. Isaac was born of sacrifice; a free person, no longer a possession.

To whom does Isaac belong – not to Abraham, not to God but to himself? God is the one who lets us be exactly as we are. God invites, persuades, attracts and calls but cannot impose. We are free to say yes or no. This helps clarify the meaning of love and sacrifice. Love is uncompelled, never forced – what cheapens it, is possessiveness. God does not possess me, God lets me be. Jesus' task was to set us free: *I do not call you servants, I call you friends...* Jn.15.15. If God loves me exactly as I am, what should be the consequence? At first glance S John seems to get the answer to this the wrong way round when he writes *if God loves us*, after which he doesn't say the expected *we should love God* but *we should love each other!*

Love is indivisible – so the test of my love of God is grounded in the way I relate to other people. This is the new wine looking for new wineskins. So too for sacrifice, which was not just one incident in Jesus' life – his life is totally sacrificial from crib to cross. Life without sacrifice is life without purpose – ask any parent. God is the giving God and so is familiar with sacrifice.

The *natural* rhythm of life is uneven. *My ways are not your ways* – Jesus says; why do we resist so much of what he says? He calls us to repent and believe, to change and trust. Belief is born of change. Whenever we see change in someone familiar to us – we do ask *what has changed*. The call to change is not always congenial, it cost him his life. Fear of change is in all of us; *sameness* is the sedative that seduces us. Which is why intransigence is simply fear in disguise.

As with all races, the Jews also believed in a Golden Age. But unlike all others, the Jews saw it, not in the past [*the good old days*] but in the future. They understood it politically, with the Jews the master-race and the Gentiles the slaves. They believed this but didn't use the word gold, they spoke of wine. Wine overflowing was fullness, the imperfect age is the water age. When Jesus turned water into wine in Cana it was seen as a sign of the new times arriving. They knew their history, and what Jesus was claiming.

Miracle is not the sensational designed to prove and impress – miracles reveal, they don't prove anything – *if someone were to come back from the dead they would not believe* [*Dives and Lazarus*] – Lk.16.19. What does Cana reveal? That Jesus is the way to intimacy with God on equal terms [*can't have love with inequality*]. Left to ourselves we have devised a variety of ways of access to God – through philosophy, law and even magic – Cana says these are cul-de-sacs. God is personal, and Christ is God with skin. He is unswerving in saying that he is God accessible to all through the genius of symbol and the glory of sacrament.

Changing water into wine reveals that there is no life without change. God provides the wine – but needs new wineskins. There's the rub – we want the new wine, but in the old way! Not possible – new wine needs new wineskins. We too must change. *I am the vine, you are the branches* – vine and branches are the same; the vine has no trunk like other trees, the life of vine and branches is one.

We are in the realm of sacrament – *how can this man give us his flesh to eat...* There is only one answer -through sacrament. The final change was not water into wine, which is physical – but wine into blood, which is sacramental. The change is not chemical, wine remains a sign – the reality is Jesus Christ, real and making real. His Eucharistic presence is not physical; it is more, it is personal.

Jesus who wined and dined in Galilee could give those at table with him his words and wisdom, giving hope to those who broke bread with him. But this is incomplete, a limited communion. There is distance between them, whereas Christ risen could impart his life

totally. The price of Eucharist was a change, a death – he died to a life of limitation – was raised immortal, imperishable. Christ-risen, is available through the genius of sacrament.

We communicate through signs and symbols – but there is a grading of symbols, from the simple smile or handshake to the most spectacular of rituals. Ritual conveys meaning, though even the simplest *thank-you* is sacramental. We all need to love and be loved – and this is expressed through signs and symbols to communicate love – all expressions of love are sacrificial, freely giving away. On Calvary Jesus gives himself totally, as he is the one totally himself, with no restricted areas. He is the total human being totally divine; the universal man. Nothing in him is for Christ, he is totally for.. Whereas we are but partially for.

He did not die for his family or his country – he died for the world, to bring to it release from sorrow and sin. Not to see Jesus crucified as the tremendous lover is to miss the whole point of Calvary, Resurrection and Eucharist. So, how is this love conveyed? How do we have access to forgiveness? The only answer is *sacrament*. The most compelling symbol of love shared is the meal. The meal is a gesture of acceptance, where the lonely find company, the silent find words and the sad begin to enjoy.

The Mass is a sacrificial meal where the love of Christ is communicated through sign and symbol, where symbol and reality are one. In Baptism we receive the *power* of Christ, in the Eucharist we receive Christ in person. Eucharist remembers the past, makes Life present, and looks to the future when all will make one body – we receive the Body of Christ to build the body of mankind.

It is wrong to see the Mass as a remembrance of something in the past. The Mass is remembering the past by making Christ present. It also looks to the future, until he comes. Another mistake is to see the Eucharist as for me, rather than for us. Sin shows its violence through division, love in communion. Calvary is past, Christ died once and for all. Easter is contemporary. We receive the risen Christ – who Easter us slowly until we become Christified through his real presence by receiving the food of our future.

The Eucharist challenges us to become what I was born to become, a son/daughter not a servant. It is an ongoing challenge. Christ died and was raised and challenges – but we are resistant to change. The real resistance is unfaith. Refusal to believe that, with God all is possible, the power of the Resurrection is infinitely greater than the effect of sin. Christ invites everyone to the meal, many do not come – choosing other paths other ways; while some have yet to hear the invitation.

Peace happens when I accept myself as cherished by God, despite my feeling of being unacceptable. It's not easy to believe in a God who does not make conditions or ask for payment. Why do we say *Lord I'm not worthy*, when God never asks us to be worthy – he simply asks us to be willing, willing to receive the free gift of himself, so that we can be together on equal terms: *Lord, I'm not worthy* is a statement of fact; *only say the word* is a statement of faith. *And I did sit and eat!* [*Love bade me welcome: Herbert*].

Faith can be about mood, whereas true faith emerges from action. The Mass is action, making Christ really present. History cannot hold Christ; he is never the dead hero, but with us always – risen and fully alive and eager to share this life to anyone, no matter who, willing to accept. No such thing as conditions apply. His presence is not just for presence, it is for communion. God makes the offer *the body of Christ* – we reply *Amen* – let it happen. This is how God and human kind meet and marry. We are asked to go out, by becoming what we have received – *body given, blood poured out* – to feed the hungry and impoverished world.

At the root of everything we want peace – peace in our hearts, in our homes, no more hunger, no more fear – it is this peace, *which the world cannot give*, that will warm the world into the new of being alive. *Go in peace to proclaim the Gospel by the way you live for and with others.*

Jesus tells us *blessed are the peacemakers* – not blessed are the peace-lovers! Peace lovers are ten-a-penny, peace-makers are rare, and the salt of the earth. This is the *why* of the Eucharist, so that all can share in what we have been asked to receive, precisely to share. *I pray that my joy may be in you and your joy be complete.*

The key question in Matthew's account of the final judgement: *I was hungry – did you feed me? I was thirsty – did you give me a drink?* Nothing whatever to do with worthiness! Remember – *when you did it to the least, you did it to me.* When Jesus sent the apostles out, they didn't have any doctrines to preach, no catechism to learn – he asked them to go out and share what it was like *living with Jesus risen from the dead.*

That mission never changes – it is ours also. Some have said, it was all right for them, they had the experience of being with him before the Ascension. So have we! In the very opening chapter of John's Gospel we are reminded that we have received the Spirit, and can know God as *Abba*, which is precisely what Jesus made flesh – what it was like to be *the beloved of Abba.*

Love of God is sacramentalised through love of neighbour – my neighbour is any and everyone who is in any kind of need. Such a task is impossible for us – but with *God-with-us*, all is possible, which is why we have the Eucharist, which always carries mission. What we receive is intended for the needy of our world – we start our Eucharist with an admission of weakness – *I confess...* and it ends with strength – *Go in peace to love and serve.*

### **Sacrament and magic**

Ours is a world of things. Cars, computers, gadgets... They are good things. Gold is the oldest symbol of power over things. We are persuaded to see this as the god who delivers good things. Gold becomes divine; the finite becomes infinite and the secular becomes sacred. And if god is money, then we must accumulate.

Such a world is a world of magic – magic is more than trickery, it has a serious side, which we experience every day through advertising. There is honest advertising – the hard sell; and dishonest advertising when even the best are conned.

Magic promises release from distress by finite means. It promises what Jesus promises – life and even more life; however it cannot handle life, freedom and love. It pretends to manage life, promising salvation through finite means – this car/carpet will change your life, making you the envy of your neighbours. We all say we are not fooled by adverts – the advertiser knows his trade and knows human weakness. He knows that a rural scene in the Cotswolds sells bread, no matter what its quality.

Magic builds on a false reading of reality – on something untrue but attractive. This does not appeal to faith because faith respects reason. It appeals to *credulity*, the irrational. The enemy of faith is not scepticism but credulity. Most of us are credulous – which every con-man knows. Magic is a religion called superstition, when the secular poses as the sacred.

Life can be oppressive, and anxiety is unable to contain it. Fears and phobias lead to depressions too dark to endure. The quack medicine makes fortunes for the manufacturer – just as the quack religion has its devotees because it promises instant salvation.

But magic does not keep its promises! Gold is the symbol of the impersonal god, and magic is its system. The true God is *personal*, with Christ *the real presence*. Magic seeks to evade reality, by manipulating the finite. Christ does the opposite – leads *into* reality and empowers us to contend with it. The cross is hard and heavy.

How does Christ see the finite? He has true regard for it, and a love for common things. Through the Incarnation he accepts the limitations of the finite, fleshed in weakness. Magic sees the *thing* as self-contained, nothing but a thing. Such a vision sees the world as a warehouse of utilities, a market. Christ sees the infinite through the finite, from secular to sacred. Like the world, the finite is not self-sustaining or self-explanatory. Christ answers not *what* but *why!* Why the world, why people, why life, why death... why is there something and not nothing? Magic evades the why – asks only *what*, living by charm not by virtue.

Christ's vision is sacramental; and does not deny that the finite has value. Bread is nourishing – wine uplifting, oil renewing, water refreshing. Christ sees bread both as it is and what it signifies – a finer nutrition. He speaks of *living bread*. He sees water as indispensable for daily life – but also as a symbol of renewal and regeneration.

Sacrament starts with vision – asking for eyes that see the sacred through the secular. This requires imagination, which some resist and reduce sacrament to magic when *matter* is the only reality – the world is but a compound of clay. Such a vision asserts that to be good is to be useful. Life is dominated by economics, with salvation attained by productivity. The balance of payments is the key to salvation with individuals valued by their wage.

The principle of utility became a philosophy, which contains much truth, and brought hope to the poor and under-privileged. But it is based on materialism. This philosophy saddened many, including Wordsworth, who pitied the utilitarian – *A primrose by a river's brim/A yellow primrose was to him/And it was nothing more!*

The primrose is useless unless it can be turned into cash. Such myopia makes *sacrament* difficult to understand, and makes liturgy drab and wearisome. No wonder R.E. became the problem child of education. But the need for the sacred never disappears. We will always seek the sublime – or a substitute in magic! The magic of money, of food and drink.

The miracle of the loaves was not understood; it was seen as new magic. It had no meaning apart from providing an answer to a physical need. Jesus sought to show it was not magic, just *amazing grace*, revealing God as the single source of supply. He saw bread both as thing and as symbol. The people saw only bread as a thing.

Likewise with the woman at Jacob's well, where the two visions collide. He asks a favour – he's thirsty and has no means of getting water up from the well... and then, *if only you knew what God is offering you – you would be the one to ask and be given living water. You have no bucket* – still the human reaction. Christ's reply is that life is more than biology – it is interior, dwelling in the heart.

For her, and for all of us – water is finite and necessary for daily life – but recognising this, he adds water has the ability to satisfy a real and much deeper need. Christ sees the finite not as a closed reality *but as an agent for the infinite*. The primrose is not just yellow, it has beauty. *Beauty is truth speaking to the eye*; precious but never to be priced. The *one thing* necessary which cannot be found, even in the most pricy shops.

The best art is always sacramental – revealing truth through finite agencies. Magic is functional, has no time for beauty; its aim is pragmatic – to bring salvation from whatever without any need for God. Magic sees only power in the thing – we live in a world of things. Christianity is good red wine, but it can be soured by superstition.

The health of the Church is in proportion to its sacramental awareness. When the Church is in decline, magic may intrude into the sacramental system; whereas the Church, at its best, has a sure and certain grasp of sacraments. Beauty and truth are the twin lamps of liturgy and preaching. Truth is a person – *I am the truth* – but Christ cannot be personally received, except through sacrament. The Mass is action. The Mass conveys the truth that there is life beyond work and worry – Christ gives himself totally, body, soul and divinity.

This cannot be conveyed in words, it can only be acted, and the Mass is that specific action. In magic, power resides in the ritual; *Sacrament goes beyond ritual, reaching a higher reality – the power of the person, Christ really present inviting communion.* Faith in Christ is fortified by the Mass, whereas magic requires faith only in the ritual.

We thirst for the real, and in the Mass Christ is really present. In the Eucharist, symbol and reality are one. Christ is fully present in person, ready to be fully received. This is often missed when we separate the elements – seeing them as magic things – *fear of biting the host, or letting it fall on the floor.* The Mass is not primarily about the elements – about communion, not consecration is the climax: *do this in memory of me.* We are not spectators, but active participants. We are meant to receive and give what we receive to others.

Truth cannot be presented without beauty – they are as inseparable as sun and light. Great drama is truth, mediated through beauty – beauty is not additional to truth, it is how truth communicates. Beauty is personal, a truthful person has beauty – which attracts.

The Church, in recent times, abolished Friday abstinence because it had lost its meaning – people confessed eating meat on Friday when they thought it was Thursday. That is magic. There is no sin there. What had happened is that the law had become a taboo. [Taboo is irrational].

Magic is the religion of the irrational – and it is this irrationality that holds power to terrify. True religion can never frighten. All we seek, is a little knowledge, a little power and a corresponding love. But the Spirit, who is love, cannot be received directly, we are not spirits but simple human beings. The Sacraments are the divinely appointed agents of the Spirit.

The Spirit of God precedes sacrament. The Spirit is for us, but we only live through common things like bread and wine, oil and water. These ordinary things can be seen as independent of God. *They can also be mediators of the Spirit.* The daffodil and other plant life can be seen simply as subject matter for the botanist. Or they can be seen, as Christ saw them, as images of the face of Abba, the sacramental view.

This is the view that gave us artists, musicians and poets. Where are they now? Art, poetry music and religion decline simultaneously – when the world is no longer *charged with the grandeur of God.* The first Sacrament is Christ – revealing divinity in humankind. We all seek access to Abba, but there is no direct means for this – *no one can come to the Father except through me.* That is sacrament – the invisible through the visible – God through God-man.

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

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

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.*

*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*

George Herbert