

Fully Alive

Before ever there were twelve apostles, there were two. Before Christ sent out the twelve, the Son was sent by the Father; and the Spirit by the Father and the Son. Why?

God's eternal desire is to share all that is God - the totality and intimacy of Creative love - with all that is not God; Creation is that promise kept. The presence of Christ in creation is integral to this plan. Christ is never to be seen as a kind of afterthought, when things went wrong he was brought in to put things right. *"Thus he chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love..."*¹ before there is any mention of sin we are there destined to be one with God in Christ.

God always intended to become part of creation. The one effect of the Incarnation which absolutely demanded it, was the perfection of creation, that it should reach its destiny. Redemption, sanctification, the gift of eternal life... could all have happened without Incarnation, but eternal destiny – [intimacy with God as equals] - of creation could not.

Creation has already achieved perfection in Christ, where there is profound communion between what is not created [divinity] and what is created [humanity]. What has happened in Jesus has yet to happen in the rest of creation. This surely is the fitting place to begin a reflection on being fully alive.

Jesus is the self-awareness of God given to us, the whole desire of God that creation share intimacy, made flesh. He is the invitation [he did not come with a message]. The invitation was rejected, comprehensively turned down on Good Friday. This is when the Church became necessary.

*"So it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do."*² Isaias reminds us that the offer made in the Word made flesh will never be withdrawn, but for it to be present, it must be available in the way Jesus made it present - through the quality of his presence and in his relationships. This is when the Church became necessary.

Jesus knew himself to be the beloved of Abba, and his mission to bring this same experience to *"all who believed him"*³ This is what it means to be Church, to allow and provide the greatest possible access to the Word breathing the love Abba has for everything created, through the Holy Spirit: *"as I have loved you..."*⁴

This is Mission for the whole Church. For it to happen there is the need to know, there has to be access to the Word and nourishment and courage to become what is first heard. This is the role of the ordained ministry, to bring forth [midwife] a reality from within. To uncover the thirst for the

¹ Eph.1.4.

² Is.55.11.

³ Jn.1.12.

⁴ Jn.13.34.

infinite proper to every human being and evident in myriads of ways. It is the role of the ordained ministry to serve the priesthood of the people of God: to make life in all its aspects whole [holy] by the way we "*live and move and have our being*".⁵

This suggests the need for an appropriate balance in the ordained ministry between "*according to the order of Melchisedech*"⁶ and according to the order of the "*Good Shepherd*".⁷ the need for such a balance is readily appreciated, if we keep in mind that ministry is not located in ordination but in baptism. There is certainly a distinction between lay and ordained ministry, but not a separation. Ordination is not a dispensation from Baptismal ministry – i.e. to make the Lord present by the way we are present. The ordained ministry finds its full flowering within the wider context of Baptismal ministry - "*fellowship in the Spirit*",⁸ by which we are all constituted "*servants of the Mystery*".⁹

Priesthood originates in Christ, the one Mediator,¹⁰ the Word which enlightens, flesh which nourishes. The Church is "*the Body of Christ*".¹¹ *The Church is the real presence of this two-way reality* - God's total self-offer and our perfect acceptance - in the world. This is real presence, available for us to *experience*, and not just know, quality community living; sharing the fullness of Christ. The ordained ministry is to be so vibrant so that, as S Paul points out, what happens in community is as it *should be*.¹²

The whole Church is summoned to ministry, to serve the Mystery. Some are called to be representatives of the whole Church in those duties which require an appointed person.

The Church was founded to serve the Kingdom, wherein everything will be in the proper ordering of God. Creation is still unfolding, and for it to become Kingdom it needs to be creatively served and enabled. It is a social unfolding process, requiring a *dynamic* ministry from the Church [not static].

To this end the Church needs to receive, to listen, to be attentive [obedient] to the Word, and then, through the Spirit of the Risen Lord, *to become what is received*, for others. The Good News is that Jesus, the Christ, is risen from the dead. God has shown what creation is and what it is for in the Mystery of Jesus, the Risen Lord. We are intimately [sic] involved in this new living [Nicodemus¹³].

⁵ Acts.17.28.

⁶ Heb.5.6.

⁷ Jn.10.11-14.

⁹ Eph.6.19; Col.4.3.

¹⁰ 1Tim.2.5.

¹¹ Rom.12.5; 1Cor.6.15; 11.24; 22.19; Eph.4.12.

¹² 1Cor.14.12.

¹³ Jn.3.4.

Redemption crucially involves recognising that death is not just something inevitable, that terminates life. It is integral to life, present from birth - this is what mortality means. The new way Jesus brought involves walking fully within our mortality, right through death into eternal life. The invitation to immortality is not an assurance that I will not die, but the promise that I will not remain dead, and that the very process of dying - and only this - issues into such living.

Mortality is not caused by sin. Sin efficiently shuts off the vision, making life and death enemies, enough for S Paul to refer to it as "*wages of sin*".¹⁴ When S Francis was converted it was said of him that *he returned to the state of natural innocence*, which among other things made him aware that even embracing death [sister bodily death] is the God-intended way to immortality.

There is much more to this than heroic stoicism, it is the Grace to see how life comes from death. For instance, there is no hint in the biographies of S Francis that he believed in immortality simply because the Resurrection had happened to Jesus. He was fully aware of the importance of the Resurrection, rejoicing in the assertions of S Paul. And like him rejoices in the Truth that since God is Abba, and loves us with the intensity of the Beloved, death cannot remain forever. This what "life in Christ" implies.

Redemption is the Grace to live differently. We are gifted with the ability to reflect and to discover the difference the Gospel makes. To decline this is to be prone to fundamentalism and open to romantic superstition. The gift of new life must unfold in every dimension.

This new way is first given, to believe not simply in God but that God believes in me, and life is the way to experience fully this offer from God, to praise God by becoming fully alive.¹⁵ God finds me desirable, and my existence is proof of this creative love. Creation is what happened because God loves other loves which spring from Love.

Creation is not a finished product, but able to make itself by the way it is lived in. The Word becoming flesh reveals all this to us, not simply passively but through the invitation to become co-creators, and to enable the whole of creation to praise God.

*"Deep calling on deep"*¹⁶ happens primarily within us before ever we are aware of it beyond us. The depth of life in Christ reaches to the very origin of life itself, speaking to us of our origin. This is way beyond the capabilities of our own unaided striving. *"To all who believe in him he gave power to become..."*¹⁷ to become the beloved of Abba and thus discover what life is about: *"I know where I come from and where I am going"*¹⁸ is the way Jesus describes his authority to be with us. This is the

¹⁴ Rom.5.21.

¹⁵ S Irenaeus.

¹⁶ Ps.42.7.

¹⁷ Jn.1.12.

¹⁸ Jn.8.14.

faith of the Church, which ministry is to serve. The secret hidden for generations is now fully revealed to some in Christ, but intended for all. To move from one to the other is the role of universal Christian ministry.

Fundamental Option:

Providence is bound up with the truth that God's love takes priority over any capacity we may have to reject it. God's love is eternal, and it finds historical ways of arriving to visit us where we are. But more is needed than a sympathetic God. There has to be not just God-with-us, but also us-with-God. This is technically known as "Habitual Grace".

We are a network of relationships embedded in biological, genetic, social and cultural realities. No one is a tabula rasa. We arrive already fashioned by history finally arriving in us.

We do not relate simply by being with other people in random fashion. We belong in groups: family, school and the socio-economic environment. We also relate to nature in the way we seek to humanise it by the way we inhabit it, modify it through science, harness it by technology. These relationships are not automatic. They are active, conscious and historical.

This has to be kept in mind when we reflect on the fundamental option. Yet there is the inviolable centre, we are not simply the sum-total of our conditioning. Each one is a new beginning, and cannot be understood by anything that has gone before, but only on the basis of individuality and interior freedom.

Depending on how this freedom is embraced the individual can attain full self-realisation or complete frustration. Nothing outside me either demands or justifies my existence. The reality outside me can and does affect me, but I am not a robot. The question is how to sustain the proper tension between my reality and all that is not me. How can I evaluate me all the while aware of the proper place for what is not me, how can I regard reality outside me from within my own distinct identity. There is the temptation, often succumbed to, to submerge the one in the other - e.g. evaluate the person according to how he/she fits! This gives imperial status to structure.

At the other extreme is the temptation to identify human being with personal ego - individualism - which sees the individual as totally free, without fetters. Such beings do not exist: individuals must eat, sleep and submit to the daily round. The land already belongs to someone else, life is governed by constraints imposed by others.

There is a story that can be told and there is a story that can never be narrated, the history of inner personal living. There is an absolute presence among and within us, and that presence is tangible in all creation. There is something we see and touch and fashion, and something we cannot.

My life is not the summation of my actions considered as isolated acts. They relate to the structure of me, the person acting. I am an enfleshed spiritual being who fashions my own world. There is a reality "out there", which I inhabit by living "in here". There is a unity of purpose. There have been and there will be ruptures and even contradictions between where I am going and how I am actually proposing to get there at any given moment; yet there is an undercurrent running one way.

This undercurrent has been called the "fundamental option", something which somehow sums up what I am about, linking my individual Acts as in a chain. Often, perhaps most often, it is not at the level of conscious awareness, yet it is producing a gentle and unmistakable flow.

It originates in my deepest longings, hinted at by personal preferences and inclinations. It comes more to the fore through formal education processes, where learning and encounters have a great impact on our orientation. The dreams of childhood, the conflicts of adolescence, personal experiences all help or hinder this project. Since we are not isolated, but in relationships by essence, these too impact on our option.

The fundamental option does not have to be spelled out in a specific way, indeed to do so could be problematic since the option is prior to any embodiment of it. It is more like an environment within which the option happens - a world-view, a life-style. None of the acts which result from this option is definitive, none are irreversible, however good or bad they may be. As long as a person is living no individual act can define that person definitively. We can change and decide to set out on a different road, no one is fated.

Obviously there will be acts which seem to contradict the option, if not even undermine it. What should be kept in mind is that we do not first work out a blue-print and then follow it like a map. The overall option is being fashioned as we live.

Where is God in all this? What about the option that revolves around an individual wanting to be with God? This is what Western Theology understands as the area of Habitual Grace. Jesus describes this as loving with all one's self - heart, soul, mind and strength. This is an unconditional commitment to love for every area of life. It is to opt to believe everything God has said about us and about where we are from, and where we are going. In practice it is going to seek for its own renunciation and sacrifice [like any option].

This option is alive and can develop throughout life moving closer towards harmony and communion: *"the life I now live is not my own, but Christ living in me [at my invitation]"¹⁹.*

It is not necessary to articulate the name of God in order to have an authentic option. It is enough to be committed to the highest values of human living: truth, justice and openness to transcendence. The ability to live out such an option is what is meant by living in a state of Grace. There is a permanence about Habitual Grace which persists even though occasional acts may deviate. But such acts must not strike at the heart of the fundamental option, either by destroying it or replacing it. The habit of love remains so long as there is no substantive break with God.

What about *Merit*? Merit is Grace considered from the response and collaboration of human beings with God. We are co-creators. Merit is not a precondition for supreme happiness, it is the joy of that happiness already present. Good works are not "reserved" for heaven, they translate what is meant by "heaven" into the here and now.

Effects of Incarnation:

¹⁹ Gal. 2.20.

We must be clear about the place of Grace in this. Grace is not something that we once possessed and then lost. On the contrary, it is a gift to which God has called us right through history, but to which we have consistently failed to respond. Our sin is our inability to communicate creatively either with each other or with God. It is "originally" sinful because, prior to any personal and moral involvement of our own, we belong to a world which has rejected God's Way.

This is not to deny a first sin, but that there is, along with this, an accumulation of all sin committed by individuals and by sinful structures ever since then - the sin of the world - what we understand by Original Sin. Unfortunately, catechesis tends to isolate the issue of a single sin at the beginning and the resulting sinful condition of each subsequent person, without any reference to the mediation of sin through human relations and structures.

Let us move on and ask: what are the reasons for the Incarnation? But first we must enquire as to the effects of it, and which of them if any, *demand* of themselves that God become flesh of our flesh.

We can enumerate them:

1. set free from sin and its consequences.
2. graced with supernatural destiny.
3. God is glorified.

What could be called the "majority" Catholic opinion picked up from Scripture is that our Redemption is the primary reason. A minority view insists that the Incarnation is primarily evidence of the love God has for creation. Redemption is certainly necessary, but sin does not determine the fact of the Incarnation, simply the manner of it. This doctrine of the primacy of Christ has its great defender in John Duns Scotus, who places everything in perspective. He is not detained by the hypothetical "If we had not sinned would Christ have become man?". Rather does he address the question we have posed: what is the main reason for the Incarnation? There is no problem in asserting that we could have been forgiven our offence against God without the Incarnation:

"If God had willed to free us from sin without any satisfaction [there are those who hold that an infinite offence demands infinite satisfaction!] God would not have been acting against the divine nature" [Aquinas - Summa III. q.46. Art.2. ad 5.].

The Incarnation primarily reveals that God intended creation to reach its perfection by becoming part of that creation. Creation happened with Christ in mind. God intended humanness to sit down within the divinity and be at home. In Jesus the Christ, creation has achieved its purpose, the end has already been anticipated. The most perfect form of creation is the humanity of Christ and this is totally one with the Divinity - Jesus Christ, true God, true man. But what is in Christ has yet to happen in the whole of creation, and this will only come about when the world is inhabited by all who would accept this new way which Christ made possible through his Resurrection and the sending of his Spirit.

Once again human solidarity which Paul outlines in Romans 5. ensures that because of the Incarnation a human being rooted in the very dust of the earth, is one with God: "*like us in everything save sin*" - Heb.2.17; 4.15.. The reason for this: "*God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might become adopted children of God*" - Gal.4.5. The Word is inserted at the heart of creation for this purpose: "*...for it has pleased God that in him all fullness should abide, and all things be reconciled,*

whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of the cross" - Col.1.18. What Christ is by nature, we are invited to become by grace: equal to him, though not the same.

Original Sin:

It helps to keep in mind that in Scripture, freedom from sin is not a negative process, not an amnesty, not a cancellation. It is positive, creative, transforming. The only way God pardons us is by making us like God, God does not simply wipe out sin, but gives us the Holy Spirit who inwardly changes us from being creatures into adult children of the Father. The Greek tradition of the Church and the Liturgy virtually shouts to us that the Spirit - "*ipse est remissio peccatorum*".

When we first appear into the living world it is out of an environment in which everything has been sheer delight, floating in a sea of goodness, where there is tranquillity and all kinds of potential. Being born and moving on into life strives to make this a conscious experience - that is when the problems start! Be clear, it is not an early consciousness succumbing to disillusion, but the arrival of *consciousness* for the first time.

With the arrival of possibilities there appears also to be a withdrawing of the promises offered. This happens when the uninterrupted communion and identity with mother is no longer real. This happens either through realising that mother has another identity independent of me, or the awareness that I am "*separate*" in my own right.

The effect of this is that my independence appears to be taking away from me the experience of life as delightful, suggesting that I, as an individual, must therefore be less than delightful. The insecurity I feel is because the "*light of my life*" [already experienced] is being taken away from me. This coincides with realising that I am individual, I am separate, I am not identical with what I have, so far, experienced as wonderful living. My first sense of "*I*" is less than secure and affirming. It is not so much that "*I am not much good*", but that being "*I*" is not much good!

Notice what is happening: beginning to see self in the context of other[s], rather than appreciating self as innately valuable. The bid for love arising out of my own worth becomes a no-go area. Some maintain that this is where evil enters in, what we make of ourselves after repressing our own worth. Which overlooks the fact that in repressing our passionate self, we discount our own attractiveness, as loved. As a child I am growing up in a world of people, leaving behind the bliss of original life.

There is no dualism in us between good and evil, there is not a good me and a bad me! My true self is good, so the only way to avoid being my good self is to deny it! This is sin. Why deny it? Traditionally, Original Sin = the first denial, the very first time! But before there can be such a denial there has to be a feeling which prompts the denial. Why do I have such a handicapped sense of my own goodness? What makes me desirable is the fact that I am desired; a desire so great that it actually gives being to what it desires.

My healing will be experiencing myself as desirable, as I truly am in the sight of God. This *experience* is Grace; the given ability to let myself be loved by God; a process whereby the act of creation is actually being experienced by me: "*and God saw that it was very good.*"²⁰. This is the *New Creation*,

²⁰ Gen.1.35.

which is found whole and complete in Jesus, who listened to and became what he heard: "*this is the beloved*".

I am introduced to the ability to become self-aware in the same way through Baptism; what is Christ's by nature is mine by Grace, both the awareness that I am loved by the Father, and have the ability given to me to become what I have received. This is the content of Christian Hope to become aware that I am the will of God, and it is possible for me to become this reality at every level of my being, through Grace.

Original Sin = desire cannot be trusted, because I doubt my own desirability. My sense of personal worth is no longer trustworthy: "*as it was in the beginning*". I do not feel good with anything like unshakeable conviction, and so I do not do good! Not feeling good gives rise to sin of not doing good - the sin of my origin, my Original sin. It is very easy to blame absence of a sense of well-being for letting me down, and so Original Sin came to be understood as feeling good = pride, hedonism... whereas the truth lies in the opposite direction - feeling bad!

When therapists rightly highlight our bad self-image as the culprit, we often counter with remarks like: "*yes, but don't forget Original Sin*"! Moral evil is so varied that it is hard to pin it down with any precision. How does sin start? What immediately precedes it? A reduced sense of personal worth. I feel less and less of the total desirability I felt prior to consciousness. My zest for living is repressed, and I have received all the conditioning and bias of society, creed and culture.

From God's point of view I am totally desirable, that is why I exist. But how am I to know this unless I am told - Revelation/Incarnation. Sin is the power which resists this activity of the Spirit. It is an attitude which takes on the negative and presumes that this is how it is. I am not desirable; my desire for fuller life experience is illusory; I am a bundle of prejudices, and all of this is normal.

Sin is a reluctance to grow, resisting the Spirit. Human nature is prevented from changing by this sin at our origin, the conviction that things cannot change: "*you can't change human nature*".

The difficulty is that actually interpreting original Sin has taken over from the Doctrine. Interpretation says: "*there will always be war*" as it once said "*there will always be slavery*". Which is no more than a sinful statement masquerading as Doctrine.

Doctrine of Original Sin: there would not be a doctrine were it not for the experience of "*new life*" the disciples communicated to the early Church. Doctrine of Original Sin is what life was like before the new life became possible. Only after they had been lifted up by Christ did they realise where they had been²¹. "*Where they had been*" was away from God - though God is never away from us. Exclusion from God brought separation from each other and general disharmony within creation, this is Original Sin. It is much more basic than any expression of structured sin: separation from God which crept into the human condition from the very beginning.

It is symbolically expressed in Genesis, in the drama of Adam and Eve, portrayed as representative of humanity prior to the advent of the Christ-centred community.

²¹ cf. Romans.

Why did it all go wrong? Interpreting questions like that is the role of theology, not faith! There have been many explanations using the tools of language and culture relevant to the given times, and there have been many cultures between the advent of Christ in the Incarnation and the present day.

None of these, including what I am trying to do, is Doctrine. Prior to the Scientific era folk were content with the notion that the whole race began with a single pair, who were presumed to have the level and state of awareness we have. They committed an Original Sin, which was passed on to their descendants. This *explanation* became, in practice, the teaching of the Church. Theologians have always been aware of the problems inherent in this: how can a *state* of sin be inherited? [Pelikan -Lutheran theologian - claimed that Augustine regarded OS. as kind of spiritual VD!].

Theory of Evolution has had its impact: made traditional theory [not Doctrine] of Original Sin untenable - hard to see human beings as perfect when nothing else was! It suggests that Original Sin is concerned with the trauma of the emerging of the human from the animal, moving into self-awareness, into the awareness of good and evil. In this explanation the unity of the race is kept, with each new life re-enacting the whole human and original drama. So, we have a new explanation of the original Doctrine which the Church has held from the beginning.

In the former teaching the infant was held to be in a state of sin, and dying in that state meant no salvation; the monstrous idea which gave rise to Limbo - which never was Doctrine, simply a logical consequence of an explanation of Doctrine.

What is the human condition we know as Original Sin?

My earliest memory of myself is of trying to live up to expectations, seeing myself in terms of others, measuring myself by them; and this has persisted and is reinforced by culture, that we refer to a norm outside ourselves. Yet I am unique and unrepeatable, unreflected anywhere else. I am not determined by my parents or anyone else; not by creed or culture. I am a unique reality way beyond all these. I need to learn "*to put away the things of a child*"²², to become myself, one whose only allegiance is to the Mystery responsible for my being.

What a step! I certainly resist, and cling to the way things were, reluctant to grow. When you realise that this reluctance and resistance is human race wide you realise the pervasiveness of Original Sin, my deep-seated refusal to become fully alive within my own right. From this state of arrested development other insanities follow, the myriad forms of self inflicted inhumanity.

The Good News is, incredibly, that this condition is curable. The healing consists in remembering and receiving the one who stretched his life beyond all such limits and is, in consequence Risen from the dead, that ultimate limitation.

Origin of destructive energy in me is deeply rooted. It resists growth. I want to feel well, but resist attempts to let this become my life. This resistance is a refusal to understand, a kind of not wanting.

²² 1Cor.13.11.

Normally I am aware of wanting or not wanting *after* I have *already known* what I want or do not want. here I am concerned with a resistance which *prevents understanding*.

Trust normally means putting self at risk for the sake of another. But there is another type of trust: a mercenary kind, where we have to have trust in order to have something else. This is important, because the former understanding of Original Sin makes trust impossible; the latter explanation merely has me "*saying*" that trust is impossible. The reality of the *Doctrine* of Original Sin actually warns us against this false voice within us. The Doctrine should not be identified with the voice [like saying that warning against infection is the infection]. Fundamentalists who argue, wrongly, that human nature cannot be changed actually do an about turn and claim that Jesus has actually brought about a change.

"We abused our freedom at the very start of history. We lifted ourselves up against God seeking to attain our goal separately... What Revelation tells us is confirmed by our own experience. When we look into ourselves we find that we are drawn to what is wrong, and we are sunk in many evils which cannot come from God. Because of this we have upset our relationship with our destiny; as well as upsetting the right order which should reign within and between us. We are divided in ourselves. As a result: life, both individual and social, is a struggle, between good and evil, light and darkness"²³.

The difference Baptism makes is not that God is present to the baptised and not to others, but that God is doing *explicitly* in the Church what he is doing *implicitly* in others. There is no "natural" world cut off from God. Everyone knows that goodness is preferable to its opposite. Christians know this explicitly: where it is from and why. Others know it implicitly in the moral demands of their consciences. To the extent that they follow their consciences they are growing in Christ's life.

When Jesus said that we must "*lose ourselves in order to find ourselves*"²⁴, he is telling us that we must lose the way we have resisted growth, the way we have been reluctant to be fully alive. Former thinking suggested that death would set us free from the tyranny of the flesh. Jesus points out that the way we have been living actually separates us from ourselves, and that death will reunite us with our bodiliness, and with everything else with which we have affinity.

The story of Jesus is the story of a human being waking to life at its fullest, one free from the shackles of Original Sin. We can be alerted to the news that life is good either *indirectly*, by encouraging and challenging each other, focusing on being attracted by each other. Or, *directly*, by God, being awakened within myself to my own attractiveness.

The impact Jesus had on his friends during his life-time had to be *indirect*, he got through to them through their being attracted to him; and because he is sinless, this happened at the highest possible level of person-to-person contact. This collapsed with his arrest and execution. There could never be

²³ GS.13.

²⁴ Mk.8.35; Lk.9.24.

another, when you have had everything there is nothing more. There could be no one after Jesus. Unless - there could be a *direct* awakening!

The whole value of the Christian message rests four-square on the fact of a series of encounters they had with Jesus after his death. This began *direct* awakening. There could be nothing after Jesus in the flesh, except Jesus truly God. This is the new humanity. This new life allows me to know myself as of God, desirable because I am desired. No longer knowing myself as defined by others - parents, culture, race, creed, sex...

What happened to the disciples, what did all this feel like, how did they know it was happening? Fortunately, we do not have to speculate. This evidence is recorded for us.

"He was in the form of God; yet laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names..."²⁵.

This is evidence provided we remember that it is recording the *experience* they had of Jesus, not yet a worked-out Christology. This text is originally descriptive, not doctrinal, concerned with how people *felt* about Jesus.

The crucial question is what is implied by: "*he made himself nothing*"? Traditional exegesis suggested it referred to the descent from Godhead to humankind. But the original text suggests it is the descent into the horror of the cross.

But from where was this descent? The "*equality with God*" is interpreted generally as being without sin. This rose out of an anthropology which is no longer credible, one which suggests that because Jesus is sinless there is no need to die.

There is no question that Jesus *chose* this way. This is obvious from the disciples' reaction when he was determined to go up to Jerusalem. Jesus is truly described as "*the one who chose to die*", and the disciples could not cope with this.

It is not an imperfection for something that is mortal to die. Original Sin, as we have seen, is the arresting of human growth, a fashioning of a reality that imposes a distrust of life resulting from our initial experience of independence being something less than good. By our setting our own limits, we build a fence around reality - leaving death on the outside.

Who can cope with death? Jesus shows us that the only setting for death is a fully and abundantly experienced human life. We do not live at anything like abundance, we stay within our fences, and far beyond that fence surrounding our own limits is God's limit imposed on us, death; which is the beginning of God's direct embrace.

²⁵ Phil.2.6.

The task of the Spirit, who is "*poured into our hearts*"²⁶, is to open us up to this truth, and then inspire us to embrace it as a way of life. What is involved in stepping beyond our own fences and freely "*choosing*" the death that sets us free? We do not know, but it is reasonable to suggest that such a person would experience death differently, set free from the fear of death.

We are not free when death comes upon us unwanted. Our sinful condition represses the fact of death, making us aware that death is the symbol of our wretchedness, something undesired that we cannot avoid.

To find someone who actually "*claimed*" death as the ultimate in love, is to face the Mystery of life. Freely choosing to be with us in what we see as unacceptable, is remarkable love. This is the Christian Mystery wherein the unwilling sufferer can reach out to the sufferer who understands, in such a way as to receive from the experience of death [and what goes with it] what the one risen from the grave made possible.

This in no way seeks to explain or justify suffering in a divinely ordered creation, but it does show that the *experience* of death which is universally rejected, freely chosen in love by Jesus, dramatically changes the experience of death, no matter what it does to logic. What makes death the ultimate disaster of a heartless God is our own distancing of ourselves from death. In the presence of the love that freely enters into what we have rejected, not only eyes but hearts are opened to a new way. Dare one say that *only when this offer is accepted*, whether or not it is understood, will the world not be too evil for God to be good?

The heart of Salvation is the capacity in Jesus to do this, a concern in him for that deepest place in us where we reject all this: "*He loved me and delivered himself for me*"²⁷, says Paul. Similarly with:

*"It was while we were still helpless that, at the appointed time, Christ died for the wicked. Even for a just man one of us would hardly die, though perhaps for a good man one might actually brave death; but Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God's proof of love towards us"*²⁸.

The essence: being unjust and died-for. There *is* someone who freely chose what we can't cope with. It has always been claimed that Jesus is without sin, and this has never been contested; an extremely provocative claim, met by silence on the part of the critics.

"*Sin*" is the name given to the negative, anti-life, anti-growth tendency in us, long before psychological terminology appeared. Schools of Psychology have recognised the presence of this tendency, so much so that to say Jesus is sinless is to make enormous psychological claims. That there is a human psyche unimpeded by the universal inertia with regard to change and growth.

²⁶ Rom.5.5.

²⁷ cf.1Jn.4.10.

²⁸ Romans 5.6-8.

There is someone who, instead of denial, is totally open to his own basic goodness - "*the Beloved*" - who is free from self-contradiction, who can reach out towards infinity and acknowledge death as the only limit. But because of this freedom, death appears very differently. It will not be tragedy, but access to life without limit. *Death becomes the necessary process for all desire to reach its proper end.*

Such a way cannot be solitary. The very question that is on virtually all lips: "*what will happen to me?*", is not asked of death, but of our inadequate vision of death. It is one which makes us strangers to each other. The one who sees death as completeness, is in a different relationship to what all others see; since this completeness is the unity, the universality this new way brings about. We have a common origin and destiny in God, to whom death now allows uninhibited access.

Why was Original Sin so irreparable? Why could God not take it all back and start again?

The plan for creation centres around Christ and is not conditional on whether we sin or not. Indeed, redemption is not so much a hiccup in an otherwise perfect running order, but it actually throws into relief something of the enormity of God's love for us:

"...for it has pleased God that in him the fullness [of love] should abide, and through him all things will be reconciled with him, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross"²⁹ "If, when we were still God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life?"³⁰

Love, by definition, is unconditional. The powerlessness of Jesus in the face of evil bursts out into vibrant life when death has done its utmost, for it cannot reach beyond the grave. Jesus accepted evil's ultimate threat and lived it so fully as to change it from being the ultimate in disintegration and separation to the highest expression of love: "*greater love than this no one has than to give your life for another*".

God could not have created beings equal to God, but in becoming "*equal*" to us, by emptying himself, Christ claims equality with us in such a way that we have equality with him, through intimacy. God's presence is throughout creation, but only in the human heart is this presence able to be *experienced as intimacy*. Mercy and justice have met, peace and goodness have embraced in a way infinitely more profound than simply seeing it as "putting things right".

Love loves the lovely, the love which is God gives rise to other loves whose sole purpose is to lead everyone to experience God as "ours", as Abba:

"In the first place, God loves himself [love loves the lovely]. In the second place, God loves the himself [other loves] in others, and this love is holy. In the third place, God wills to be loved worthily by one who is not God. Finally, God sees, independently of

²⁹ Col.1.18.

³⁰ Rom.5.10.

the Fall, the Hypostatic union of this human nature which was to love God in the most perfect way possible."³¹

As exemplified in Adam and Eve, human beings enjoyed a daily encounter with God who walked with them "*in the cool of the evening*". This fullness of life [to be with God forever] Jesus claimed to be the purpose of his mission and it is achieved solely through total openness to life itself, through the quality of relationships.

There is, on the one hand, the stupendous truth that God is offering us an equality of love; but, on the other hand, there is something even more remarkable, the discovery that *only someone as infinite as God is big enough to realise the full human potential*; that we are capable, through grace, of intimate union with the living God. In Jesus the human and the divine are completely one, without either being denied in any way.

This is the golden thread running through Scripture, the promise that humankind will be restored, in a manner even greater than before, to intimacy with God: "*I tell you, among all who have been born, no one has been greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he is*" Lk.7.28. The kingdom which Jesus inaugurated is the bringing of everyone and everything into the real ordering of God, wherein every human being is as a first-born child, and the world is enabled to praise God precisely by the way it is lived-in.

The OT writings are accounts, not of relentless struggles for survival, but of the resilience of the human spirit in pursuit of goodness. We need to cherish and to be cherished, our capacity for *fascination* must be let do what it is meant to do, to take us out of ourselves, even momentarily, the God-like quality of self-transcendence. OT is a history of people who had the courage to believe in *something more*, that excess [Heb.11] which their own values demanded and who would not settle for anything less or for a compromise.

Experience of Grace:

What does this "excess" actually feel like?

"Lord, do not remember only people of good will; remember also those of ill-will. But do not remember their cruelty or their violence; instead be mindful of the fruits we bore because of what they did to us. Remember the patience of some, the courage of others. Recall the fellowship, the humility, the fidelity and the greatness of heart they awoke in us; and grant that the fruits we bore may, one day, be their redemption."
[Words on a scrap of paper found in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp].

Such resilience of spirit is meant to be available for all and so cannot reside solely in such extraordinary happenings. In 2Kings 5.1-15. we are told the story of the cleansing of Naaman, the leper. He was a well-to-do man, with everything going for him: power, wealth, status, privilege... except that he was a leper. He had tried everything.

³¹ John Duns Scotus. Reportata Paris III. d.7. Q.4. n.5. Ed. Vives XVIII p.303. [cf. commentary on this: Clergy Review. Sep./Oct./Nov. 1972. by Eric Doyle ofm.].

His Hebrew slave-girl commended her God to him so, armed with letters of commendation, he went in search of the Hebrew king. The king was outraged at the thought of being asked to work wonders which were proper to God alone and was for dismissing him. The prophet intervenes, asking that Naaman be sent to him. He recommends that he bathe in the river. It is now Naaman's turn to be indignant, having come all this way, with hopes high, merely to be told to have a bath. His own servant intervenes: why not try it? If you had been asked to do something difficult you would have agreed.

We know the outcome, but notice the three interventions: the slave-girl, the prophet and the servant. What they have in common is that *none of them had to do what they did*. They simply acted purely for the well-being of another. This is how divine providence works: ordinary folk, doing ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

I remember the close of the year 1988. It was marred by one train and two air disasters. Angry people as well as cynics were asking questions like: where was God in all this, where are all these so-called Guardian-angels he has sent to watch over us? Later, a survivor was interviewed and she told how she was trapped in her seat, upside down, drenched in aviation fuel and terrified of being burned alive: "and then I felt myself being sprayed with foam, and there was my angel, wearing a fireman's helmet, and others in nurse's uniforms".

Two thousand years ago Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes to feed hungry people, and walked across the lake to comfort frightened people. Now, that same spirit of Jesus "*which has been poured into our hearts*", is present in all those millions of angels who *Run the World, support Comic Relief, Save the Children, Help the Aged*. May this divine assistance remain always with us, for what else is this but love at its best?

People have searched for the elusive God, picking up hints in so many ordinary events, but also in more significant ways too: a bush ablaze without being consumed, a lone cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky, a pillar of fire in the night, the parting of waters, food in desert places... until there appears One who claims to have within himself intimacy with God as an equal, which we get hints of as being the one thing alone that is capable of satisfying the infinite thirst for meaning we all experience.

The spiritual life is not founded on depravity and sin, even our creeds say this: we believe in the forgiveness of sin. The spiritual life is not synonymous with penitential discipline, nor is it flight from the world, but an enthusiasm which requires discipline, [the artful fashioning of a disciple], if it is to be creative and successful in enhancing the given awareness of the presence of God.

Once again we must beware of the intrusion of our needs which distorts the subsequent reality. How many people have embraced green issues simply because we will be in trouble if we do nothing, whereas the environment merits respect in its own right. It is not so much that creation has rights, rather that there are expectations of human beings who have responsibilities.

Creation is full of sacraments, clues for all who would discover where genuine goodness abides. This is why it is crucial that we heed the lesson of the Fall. The allegorical language of the fruit tree whose fruit we may not eat, is urging us to realise that it is not for us to decide what is good or evil. Only God is good. Only God is capable of coping with goodness, it is far too vast for us, we devalue it with

our partialities. The constant demand of Scripture is that we stop calling evil good, the goodness which God alone is, has become flesh and blood in Jesus.

We exist because God desires to share the intimacy of love outside the Godhead, on equal terms. God is faithful to this intent, the Word of God, which is God's own self-awareness and the total communication of God, has become flesh of our flesh.

Among other things, this should point up the awesomeness of freedom. We know that we have chosen rightly and we have chosen wrongly, but have we always chosen honestly? In one sense we can say that provided we choose honestly, we may not be right but we will not be wrong. If I am honest, and I have made a mistake, there is a next step... I can only continue being honest if I change: honesty confronted with truth = conversion, as we see e.g. in the life of S Paul. All this honest man could say on the Damascus road was: "*what would you have me do?*"

Increase and Decrease of Grace:

Increase is all about the mutuality between what God offers and how a person responds as a consequence, it is openness to God. Decrease happens when the human project diverges from the divine offer: "*I hold this against you, you have turned aside from your early love*"³².

Obviously, continued deviance will result in total aridity; though no human option can be considered to be definitive or irreversible. There is always room for conversion. The Resurrection was not something which *followed on* after Jesus' death, but is the manifestation of what happened when Jesus died, "*The Resurrection is not the next event after the passion and death. It is the manifestation of what happened in the death*".³³

He did not embark on a second life, it is the one life he lived seen now with God's eyes. This is why death is decisive. Death provides the occasion for synthesis, and this last synthesis is definitive, here there is the possibility of an absolute loss of Grace. *It is not the result of an evil act.* It is the outcome of a whole human project that was gradually frustrated and eroded. In this sense we could say that there is only one mortal sin, severing completely the relationship with God, from the point of the receiver.

There is no certainty about damnation or salvation. We are suspended between the two possibilities. Scotist thinkers at Trent [who were not condemned] said: "*from the evidence of their own experience human beings can know their own good inner dispositions in receiving the Sacrament of Penance and thus arrive at the certain conclusion of having received Grace*"³⁴. It is one thing to know that I am in Grace, it is another to say that I always will be!

Value:

³² Rev.2.4; 3; Gal.3.11; Heb.10.32; Is.3.15.

³³ "Theological Investigations IV". K.Rahner. DLT.p.128.

³⁴ J. Alfaro.

The love we are invited to share is for free enjoyment and cannot be fully appreciated either through obligation or through mortgage. No one can demand love, and God is prepared to wait until life itself confronts us with the crucial place of love. This strength of God is in no way dependent for its efficacy on our weakness, but on the fidelity of God. We belong in our world through a network of relationships which we are constantly building and re-building in our search for purpose and meaning, so much so that life really does centre around the way we organise our choices.

Anyone who would search seriously after value must, ultimately, ask the question: is there one value beyond which there is no other? In facing this question we discover that we do have a priority, there is a hierarchy of value already in us. There are some things which we could not care less about, there are others of concern to us, and maybe there are some which we feel we would never entertain compromise over, though we might be in for a shock when we eventually face the challenge. But where does such a hierarchy come from?

The search for value centres on seeking after the one which gives value to all, and gives purpose and direction to living the lesser values in pursuit of the greater.

However, to see value as something external to us can throw all this into confusion: some things like power, wealth, status, privilege, health... certainly carry value, but they are valuable as means, not ends. But what is the end? Value is personal, since it is all about the enhancement of the experience of being alive, we all experience life, each one, uniquely.

When we are confronted with life's major moments: a birth, a death, an accident; when we are confronted by love which asks us to risk the challenge of commitment... our response is not greatly helped by what we call our "valuables" [possessions] since it centres around our felt experience, the anguish and hopelessness of grief, the wonder and mystery of ecstasy... within which we are, albeit temporarily, immersed.

When we are taken outside of our own coping, and literally experience that we are totally unable to save, especially when we are involved at the level of what is most powerful within us, our love, and at the same time appreciate the appropriateness of salvation, then do we have the chance to discover that if there is salvation, it must come from beyond us.

How should I choose, how do I discern value, are there any guide-lines? From what we have said it is obvious that such guide-lines are never adequately expressed in terms of things to be possessed or systems to be followed and to which we must conform, but within relationships which gradually set us free to live without fear, through being filled with hope.

Such a search is both internal and external, internal by situating us consciously within our feelings, knowing how we feel and not just what we think; it is external in the challenge to transcend self and move into the life-giving relationships that open us up more and more to the wealth of genuine reality.

The spiritual life is all about choosing relationships, setting priorities, discovering the one value and its appropriate means; to identify the mismatches between a chosen goal and living by means proper to another goal [not necessarily sinful, but certainly inappropriate].

We are made in the image and likeness of God, the image we will always retain, I can never get outside the fact that I am made by God; but I have lost the likeness! It is through organising our relationships, *enlightened by grace*, that we have a chance to have our likeness to God rediscovered to us, to be challenged to receive it back, and then to strive to become what we have received. If we would know the sincerity of our spiritual search, look no further than for our enthusiasm for life.

Enlightened by Grace:

Life's fundamental option is shaped gradually, step by step. It has to be born into life through our engagement with living; though there are many impediments which may need to be overcome. If I am not a properly integrated person, I will encounter problems in fleshing out my fundamental option for God.

Behind so many actions which might appear objectively evil there could well be a healthy option. Not all the acts of the just are just and not all the acts of the sinner are sinful. Indeed, do we not find it easier to see evil in actions of others rather than seeing good?

In so far as actions harmonise with the option, we can speak of *Actual Grace*, which is *Habitual Grace* made flesh. Our fallen state means that we are always under the shadow of basic alienation. The option is occasionally stifled though not suffocated. We undertake to be totally open to God and then realise that we cannot live up to it. We need pardon from God and understanding from each other.

Social Structure of Grace:

The working of Grace is not confined to God and the individual; as noted, we are essentially social as well as obviously unique, and the whatever we are about is intimately bound up with the project emerging through cultural developments.

Our mutual belonging has much more than a psychological foundation, something which rises out of experienced needs, when individuals actually begin to form groups. *Our social dimension is prior to the individual willing it.* Either I am social or I am not a person. Even the isolated individual has to co-exist with self and the environment, which is done by objectifying self. There are not two awarenesses - one 'I' and another 'we'. This is why Individualism is false.

This calls for a relationship between the individual project and the overall project of a given culture. The individual shares in the effects of the cultural project, which both opens and closes up God. Vigilance is needed to welcome the former and avoid the latter. Culture offers a way of living socially, politically, economically and religiously. The effects produced are legitimised by structures and institutions.

Some ways of organising human beings are not good, since they are based on inequalities and privilege. People living in such situations are already pre-determined.

Attitude to property and good things, establishes a way of organising life. A society may well place power to rule in the hands of the few, with the rest taking orders. An ideology emerges which is taught in schools and expected from society. It is apparent how such values will intrude into the personal project, producing an equally false foundation where there is no critical spirit active.

The cultural ethos that began to emerge C16, accompanied by the new scientific age, arose in Europe and has filtered its way round the world. It proposes a human project along with its own logic. It has produced the awesome results of science and technology, seeking to dominate the mechanisms of nature.

This culture is now in crisis, with humanism, social structures and the ecology in serious tension. This has happened largely due to the fact that underpinning such achievements is a voracious will to power, made evident in seeking after profit and security at all costs, most especially by use of force.

Knowledge is power. Excessive concentration on the *scientific method*, efficiency and productivity, along with the exploitation to these ends of all that can be known are the obvious signs. Western Capitalism and State Communism are both framed within this ethos. Communism is no alternative to capitalism, since it has adopted the same style of reasoning, producing a predominantly economic view of reality.

The holders of scientific knowledge and power are just a few nations, which maintain others in a perpetual state of dependence and oppression. The needs of the affluent must be fed and paid for by the poor.

Initially, Christianity rejected this new power structure, though for conservative reasons, looking back in nostalgia to the glory days of the Church. Leo XIII instituted dialogue, and it reached a stage when it was difficult to see any relevance the Church could offer which would effect this tidal wave of power.

At Vatican II. the Church took a stand, moving beyond the narrow confines of reactionary thinking, towards progress into elaborating a real alternative life-style. It offers an understanding of people and society from a faith basis, insisting on the basic equality of everyone. This is not a salvage operation, attempting to make the most of a bad job, but a revolution.

It seeks to provide a new horizon, recognising the intimate bond between the human and the cultural project. The parable of the wheat and the weeds symbolises this, with Habitual Grace present wherever there is the will and determination for change, enfleshing it in specific acts [Actual Grace] and structures. Sin is still around, and will be ready to intrude for its own ends, we will always need the pardon of God and the compassion of each other.

God's love [Grace] awakens a desire to be free from whatever is oppressive and for whatever is liberating. The most obvious presence of this was the Incarnation when Jesus, literally, produced a new way of being a human being [Salvation].

Change always implies leaving something old and acquiring something new. The cul-de-sac of sin is challenged. Grace provides alternative ways, inviting us to take a stand. It is the invitation to experience humanness for its prime purpose, to know God intimately and thereby to transcend death.

Grace never wholly abandons human beings, nor does evil take control completely. From the depths of the hell created by some; others long for deliverance. More than any other age ours has refined

and planned evil virtually to an art form. Despite this, our solidarity with what Christ represents is stronger than the opposite, there is an inexhaustible capacity for good.

If ill will had supremacy there would be no room for Redemption. To speak of Redemption is to maintain that not everything about us and our world is irrevocably lost. There is a core of goodness which can be got-at and set free. God can transform the old into the new, the sinner into the saint.

This is not another creation, *but a new creation out of the old*. Human beings can recover their identity before God, and it is Grace which enables this. This recovery is not "at a stroke". It requires the painful process of liberation. This process is not simply preparing for Grace, but is Grace itself.

But there is disorder. In the Midst of Grace there is disgrace, there is sin; the wrong way which equally has its own harvest. Not so much that we do not love, as that we do not love in the proper way - there is disorder, partiality, estrangement. All compounded in being caught up in a culture of wrong choosing and disordered loving.

We are lifted out of the vicious circle through Grace in Baptism, but we have to live it. It is supremely active, never a passive experience. Salvation is Christ-given, Christ-received and Christ "put on". This is a direct invitation for us to become what we have received.

It assures us that we are not alone, not tumbled randomly into creation, and it does this by convincing us that the love we find compelling as the explanation of life, is well-founded. We are being shown the purpose beneath the surface, we can know where we are from and where we are bound. It is a given energy which is in no way coercive, but eminently persuasive.

Such a calling is too much for the individual, indeed the very act of opening up to the Spirit actually brings us together, since the mission of the Spirit is identical with the essence of the Spirit - one Person from two Persons, to reconcile opposites, *to make of many one*.

For the Church to slip into a self-preservation mode is to neglect the kingdom, and to become weak [as opposed to vulnerable]. To become preoccupied with Institutional matters offers starvation rations to the community, the symptoms = *more ecclesiastical than ecclesial*.

Trent did not spell out this process in historical terms, so we must push further, starting from the Doctrinal basis. As long as history goes on, the liberating process will be under threat from within and from without. S Paul insists that Salvation is not assured, we have the awareness, we have the offer the Spirit, but we still have *to live the experience personally*.

To maintain that we are "*simul oppressus et liberatus*" [Luther] is not describing a static situation, as if we are closed-in from Salvation. It signifies an ongoing process; a free person now, is not the oppressed person of before. But we cannot stand outside history, we are still open to a future that can be lived either way. Though our option may be fixed on God, individual acts can be at variance with this. "*In hope we are saved*",³⁷ means in a way which is within the historical process, we are still open to grace or disgrace.

³⁷ Rom.8.24.

We are disposed to setbacks through concupiscence, which [the Franciscan school has always maintained] is basically something good. It is the basic energy by which every aspect of a human being strives to realise itself in the most intense way. At the dawn of humanity, we possessed original justice, this energy was harmonised totally towards good, even though there were tensions. We felt we belonged to God and to each other.

Sin destroyed this harmony, ensuring that every human passion now seeks its own fulfilment, irrespective of all else. It is only with effort now that we can allow passionate expression to be consonant with the human project. What is something originally good and powerful, is now experienced as disruptive, with Trent referring to concupiscence as "fomes peccati" [sin fuel]. Sin did not produce concupiscence, but destroyed our ability to handle it properly.

This means that any Salvation won must be continuously affirmed: *"If we say that we are free of the guilt of sin, the truth is not in us"*.³⁸ This is why our liturgies begin with asking for pardon. As long as we live we need Salvation. But the freedom Salvation offers is real, we are different because of it, and able for "more" Salvation.

When Grace reaches into the reality of a human being, something happens [forgiveness of sin], we enter into a conversion process - spelled out in the struggle the Prodigal had immediately before returning home. Sin is not a wrong act, it is a wrong disposition, a wrong attitude. Grace replaces this with another. The evil acts remain "done", they cannot be undone. What is pardoned, undone and destroyed, is the fundamental project which repeatedly generates such actions.

This happens within inner conflict, the habit of sin is long standing, the new disposition to goodness will have to be engaged patiently, calling for involvement of will. This forgiveness is *from* something in the past. It is equally important that we receive freedom *for* [Sanctification] something. It is freedom for a new fundamental option, aimed at the future with implications for the present. Thus the whole Grace project affects past, present and future.

Sanctification is not equivalent to doing good works. Evil people can do good actions. Something is changed. The individual is now orientated differently. This is what is meant by holiness [wholeness]. Everything is whole in as much as it is related to God. Sin disrupts this relationship. Baptism expresses this new relationship, transforming the roots in which relationships are embedded, making it possible for everyone to live a whole and integrated life, as present in the Incarnation.

Virtue:

There are implications: the old moralistic approach was satisfied with doing, detached from the fundamental option. We must seek for a person-based morality. As Eckhart expressed it: *"Think less about what you ought to do, and more about who you ought to be"*. Actions are simply *"being"* made flesh. There is only one ray of light which comes from God, enabling us to respond; but it is made up of a spectrum of colour.

³⁸ Lk.11.2; Jn.1.8.

Faith: *openness to the supreme Mystery of our existence*, embracing it lovingly so that life is changed because of this. It is to live in openness to the Absolute. It is also active as well as passive, it means accepting and living what faith communicates. We are sensitised to hear differently within the signs of the times, and to recognise what has already happened in the recorded history of God's presence among people, reaching its climax in the Incarnation.

Hope: we do not simply exist, we are a web of possibilities, each with its own intensity clamouring for notice. *Hope focuses me on tomorrow, with a view to discovering meaning and purpose.* It is the future already present and anticipated, though not yet fully realised. Hope is the reality of creation, not just what human beings can plan and construct. It is the nature of creation to move towards communion with the Absolute, never to be satisfied with what is. The planning and the historical hopes which we construct are the ways we pick up this utopian element in nature, and which prepare us for it. We encounter God in our hopes for a better life [more abundant].

This was the basis of S Francis' understanding of Poverty. Despite the name Poverello, he was not a man who wanted nothing, he wanted everything. His discovery was that anything less than everything was in the way, so he gently sets aside the wonderful gifts in order to be with the Giver.

Love: *we are not just made able to relate; we need to enter into communion continuously with our reality.* Love is the capacity freely to communicate oneself to another who is different, to accept the other within self, and to become involved, in some definitive way, oneness with the other.

It receives many names: eros, libido, friendship... even big enough to reach enemies.³⁹ It is much wider than sympathy, which tends to be more selective. It is the capacity in human beings to be totally present to total reality. Perfect love is not a love which loves everyone for God's sake, but one that loves because of discerning the lovable of everything as the actual presence of God's love. We have an historical inability to live this fully. This means that we encounter two aspects of love - a basic need, and, because it is not realised fully, a basic lack!

Faith, Hope and Charity are to be found in NT.⁴⁰ *But they are not three virtues, simply a single principle operating in three directions: openness to some absolute meaning = faith; which it celebrates as the encounter of two freedoms and two self-communications = love; open to a history that has a future that is not yet but certainly will be = hope.*

Prayer:

It is not hard to find definitions and descriptions of prayer which have all been put together from systems and methods that have proved helpful. But as with anything that employs system [and that is virtually everything since we cannot operate effectively without it] there can also be a problem. There will always be *the temptation to believe that fidelity to the system will lead to the acquisition of value.*

³⁹ Matt.5.43.

⁴⁰ 1Cor.13.13; 1Thess.1.3; Gal.5.6; Rom.5.1.

Why is there so much concern about prayer? Why is it that the moment we get serious about the spiritual life we are told that we must pray? Here again, the same problem arises: there are many who rightly insist on the primacy of prayer in everyday life, but often forget that many people are hearing this as *a statement*, but are not, through no fault of their own, as yet able to appreciate it as *a value*. It is only when we are able to *experience* life with people who are *living prayer* that we will begin to experience something of value; otherwise it will be seen as a duty, even as an important duty, to be undertaken along with other duties.

A new impetus was given to prayer after the Second Vatican Council, such was the popularity of it that any course, lecture, seminar on prayer could be guaranteed a full house. But that changed within a few years, and *people no longer wanted to hear about prayer, they wanted to pray*, to be with praying people; and so Prayer Groups replaced talks about prayer. Not only was prayer something we were told was important, we began to appreciate the reality of it more and more for ourselves.

Someone said: "*whatever prayer is, we do it badly*". More than likely this is so because we do tend to regard prayer as *something we do, or ought to do*. This means that prayer will inevitably take the shape of other things we do. Our activities are goal-oriented: to provide a meal requires shopping, preparing, cooking, presenting, timing... so that some end-product may result, and our enthusiasm, or lack of it, will determine the quality of that product.

Prayer does not belong to such a model. It is not something done for something else, in fact it is closely allied with the need to say "I love you", in so many different ways. As a relationship develops, the need to articulate what is happening will become irresistible, one will say to the other "I love you". This will then be said a thousand times one to the other, but without them ever repeating themselves, since love can never be expressed definitively.

If you asked why they actually say "I love you" the answer would be because this is who we are, this is how we are experiencing ourselves in the context of each other, it is not what we are doing, it is who we are. We are simply articulating what is happening within us because of our relationship.

We should note very carefully that it is not the saying of the words "I love you" that creates the relationship, there is a growing awareness of a relationship already happening which now compels us to externalise it. The words spoken are not intended for any other purpose or goal, love is not "used" for anything. The words are simply the ultimate phase in what is happening within a relationship.

This is a perfect model for prayer. We must leave aside the notion that we pray to achieve something. There is certainly a right and proper place for Prayer of Petition [as there is room for request within a relationship], as we will see later.

It was not unheard of to receive the advice that if things were tough and we were floundering around getting nowhere, we should pray all the harder. The implication was that since our faith is weak we must try to bolster it up through prayer. Reasonable as that might sound, it tends to get things the wrong way round. Certainly we must always pray for an increase in faith, but we actually pray because we believe, no matter how weak or inadequate our faith might appear to be.

Just as saying "I love you" cannot establish a relationship, neither can simply going through the motions of prayer create the environment of faith. Something more is required [as we have seen "*something more*" is how the writer of Hebrews describes grace].

Prayer rises out of *experiencing a need to belong* which, in turn, comes from our *being* giving evidence of its origin in a longing for meaning, and discovering that every meaning which is finite and limited is not enough. Prayer is actually given to us, as S Paul tells us in Romans 8., "*we do not know how to pray... the Spirit prays in us*". Prayer actually rises out of the relationship Gods claims with us, even though it is not initially experienced as such. This relationship is the reason why God created us, and we have different ways of being in touch with it, without ever adverting to God or even if there is a God.

In terms of *felt* need God comes second. We experience the need for something. Life must have purpose and this purpose must have qualities. It is only in actually engaging in the search that the inner, anonymous yet very real need can come face to face with the explanation, origin and fulfilment of that need in Jesus Christ. The gift of self, the growing awareness of a need requires the other and outer gift of God in Jesus if the anonymity is to be removed. Being involved in this process will result in all kinds of articulations and expressions, and from within certain experienced moods ranging all the way from anxiety and anguish, through frustration and anger onto incredulity and even ecstasy - and back again!

We certainly know when we have prayed from our very depths. We have a need for the transcendent, since we become more and more frustrated by the inadequacy of limitation, especially when this limitation appears to infect what is most treasured and most personal, when I discover that my love does not appear big enough, at times, to save either me or anyone else. Who has not felt the anguish of such impotence at the bedside of someone special who is dying? At moments like this we are actually experiencing a need for something bigger than ourselves, for the transcendent.

The text from Romans 8. actually goes on to describe the language of prayer, telling us that the Spirit prays in us "*using God's own language*", and we know that this language is Incarnation - the Word became flesh. In terms of prayer this means that all those inner movements, searching, experiences that cannot easily be expressed in words, are picked-up by the Spirit in such a manner that we find ourselves not so much praying as becoming a prayer.

We pray best from within experienced needs: to say thank-you, to plead, to protest; from within the loneliness which makes us cry, the happiness that needs to shout, the emptiness that is frightening. How could any of this be adequately described as "*saying prayers*"?

The Pray-er is the Prayer:

Most things which happen during the course of a day do not seem to have any specific rhyme or reason as to why they happen, and we use expressions like *c'est la vie* to say so. But when, within these everyday things, there are moments when we are overwhelmingly aware e.g. of the giftedness of life, especially of our own life, how do we cope? How do we say "thank you"?

When we do voice our gratitude, or complaint, it is the conviction that we matter enough for there to be an answer that is crucial. Grappling with this and sorting it out is prayer. To pray is to situate ourselves within a love which is essentially greater than we are, and one which is active in promoting

our well-being. It is being convinced of this that makes "thank you" appropriate, just as it makes "why should this evil happen?" an honest cry from an anguished heart.

This is not a request for unresolved problems to be sorted out, but for ourselves to be assured of the experience that no matter what may come, all manner of things shall be well. In this way we do not so much pray as become a prayer. As the saying of "I love you" entrusts self to another, so does prayer express the desire to entrust ourselves to God, to believe in the love God has for us, and gradually to believe in our own loveliness, since love loves the lovely.

What gives quality, value and tone to our living? *Involvement* and *commitment* are the qualities best suited to faith and trust. Each time we commit ourselves to another in some form we are taking steps in faith and trust, we are actually investing ourselves to live differently because of what we are experiencing in this relationship.

What is best in life emerges *tangibly* the more we accept what we are discovering and take steps to become what we are receiving. It is obvious, therefore, that to be faithful does not require that everything be sunshine and roses, but that I go on believing in the love that is assured in the face all the evidence to the contrary. As we have already seen, the Good News is not that everything is all right, because it obviously is not, but everything is not all right, and that is all right!.

Just as the *activities* of love cannot be separated from the value they seek to express without prostitution, neither can prayer be real without commitment to believing in love, and desiring, in some way, actually to become what we believe.

Prayer is not an attempt to make up for personal inadequacies, nor is it a mechanism to redress injustice. Prayer does give meaning to all the disorders by the way it actually situates the self within them, as one convinced of being loved with a love that is alive and active within the heart of everything. To accept love in this way is to become lovely [faithful], the first-fruits of the abundant life Jesus came to bring.

Of all the things lovers do together, none can be singled out as the one vital ingredient of the relationship. What makes behaviour appropriate, is the *relationship* which underpins everything else. Likewise, when faithful people engage in the activities of faith there is no one action which validates their behaviour other than the underlying relationship involved in hearing the Word, believing it and seeking to become the love that is thus received.

Praying involves revealing self, articulating who we are from the depths, keeping things simple, risking the saying of who I am as worth it in the presence of one I believe has my well-being as a priority. This means that the persuasion involved in prayer is not to make God aware of me, but to make me aware of me as loved by God.

Christian contemplation involves much more than simply looking at God. Looking at someone special, as from afar, can have the daunting effect of emphasising the difference between us. But when, in looking at God, I discover that God is already looking at me, distance evaporates. *We pray badly when we do not see our own well-being as God's priority.* This is not the product of wishful thinking but of Revelation.

God who is nothing else but love establishes prayer through presence, often made poignantly evident through absence. To strive to accept love is to believe, and prayer is seeking to articulate self within the relationship God claims with us with all the implications proper to such growing awareness: the need for sorrow for infidelity, the need for gratitude for gift, the need to be angry... the need to question... the need to believe when all the evidence is to the contrary. Prayer intensifies the loving awareness of the presence of God.

This asks all kinds of questions, since we do "use" prayer for our own needs and "for those who are dear to us". How do we combine the truth that prayer is non-functional with Jesus' insistence: "*ask and you will receive*"?

First, we must have a look at our expectations. We speak easily of "almighty God" and of "our Lord". What are we saying when we do this? What is the almighty power proper to God and the Lordship proper to Jesus? What power are we actually addressing when we "petition" God? No matter how well-motivated our intentions might be, to use prayer in an effort first to predicate coercive power to God and, secondly, to seek to harness this power towards the achieving of something is doomed, since there is no coercive power in God. But we do ask and we have been told to ask!

Expectations of Prayer:

When Peter asked Jesus: "*what about us, we have left everything for you, what is in it for us?*", Jesus answered: "*you will have the hundredfold, even in this life...*". What is the hundredfold and is there any evidence that they received it? There certainly is evidence. The difference in them after Good Friday and prior to Pentecost and their post-Pentecost living is remarkable. The fear that compelled them to huddle away lest they be discovered is now gone. Whether they realised or not in this particular way is open to question, but what they were doing was developing their relationship with Jesus; they said so - we have left everything to be with you.

The heart of such relationships is to claim an identity of value and priorities with one we seek to be with. Jesus' declared purpose about his own values was clear: "*I have not come to be served, but to serve*". The difference the Spirit made was to set them free from their own expectations ["*let us sit on your right and left...*"] and to enlighten them as to what Jesus had said - this is the role of the Spirit - that they would also have his priorities as one wishing to serve, to be aware of people in need of service: "*the poor you will always have with you*" - the hundredfold. If their desire was like his, as they said it was, there will always be enough poor people around to ensure their heart's desire! Prayer always involves actually realising what it is we are seeking - and saying.

We too have expectations and many of them are direct consequences of how we actually organise our understanding of reality. We have spoken already about how we think in terms of "things" and how this helps us differentiate one from another; what we cannot identify in this way we tend to call no-thing. Having differentiated, comes the need to select, to have a hierarchy among things, and this tended to be established in terms of power.

The more power a person has the more important the person. Plato's adage that "being is power" is still alive and well. Then comes the obvious corollary: how much power? And we end up with distinctions like: animal/vegetable/mineral, living and non-living, rational and non-rational - which are all variations on how much power. Thus did God become "almighty God", the "Supreme Being, infinite in perfection". There is nothing wrong with this, as long as we understand what kind of power

there is in God. This is not as obvious as it sounds. Whilst the message of the preacher has tended to be "*God is love and nothing else*", the treatise from the theologian interpreted this power more coercively than persuasively.

This presented us with the truth that God's love is ever faithful and always for us... but that if we failed to keep the rules we would go to hell. We were recipients of noble ideals and challenging values, but underlying it all was an energy of coercion well-suited to generate fear. The God who is love is very definitely almighty God.

At face value there is nothing wrong with the notion of using power to achieve something, but it certainly does make a difference what "power" we are talking about. If we are talking about the application of energy to produce results, to make changes, then the concept is valid provided the nature of power is being respected.

There is not a lot of difference between sophisticated abuses of power and brute force simply to maintain control. Domination, indeed any kind of "power over", neither requires nor seeks agreement or consent. Coercion is the imposition of one's will over another through use [and abuse] of authority. Parents use it with children, protesters seek to harness it, the Judiciary depends on it. From the point of view of the recipient it certainly appears to be true that might is right.

This has had a predictable effect on authority models, both prince and pope enjoy power over and "*freedom of the children of God*" came to mean freedom to obey. Not that there is no place for coercive power, but that its structure is inimical to freedom and the appropriate experience of equality. Coercion treats people as things, affording the right to the one in charge to make all kinds of decisions which will affect the lives and the well-being of others, and with little or no accountability - other than one which is controlled and favours the system, with predictable consequences and negative impact on self-esteem and self-value.

We are not related to God in this way, no matter who tells us to the contrary. Those who have experienced God as very near, the people who met and talked with Jesus and those who live in his Spirit, all testify to the truth of his words "*I have called you friends*". God's power is never power-over but *the power to be with*, no matter what the cost. God is real presence, being there for another. The experience of this is one of personal worth and actually living by this worship is what we mean by worship: "*God is praised when we are fully alive*" – S Irenaeus.

We are unique individuals with an innate need to belong, to be with and who need others to be with us. To this end we have to organise choices towards the one value which we perceive to be above all others - whatever we deem that to be. We have enough experience to show us how fascination can open us up to wonder and the crucial part *presence* plays in this. Experiences such as these help widen horizons and remove boundaries, provided that we allow the conviction of faith to remove the illusion of escapism. But the point here is that we respond more convincingly from persuasion than from coercion. Constraint denies a proper place to creativity and co-responsibility.

Prayer of Petition:

Finally, what does all this say about Prayer of Petition? We began by asserting that love is not for anything other than itself; and that there is an appropriate place within such a relationship for petition. What is it?

When I undertake to pray for someone I am offering to make space within my relationship with God for that person to be the subject of our conversation. This means that if I do not have a place within me for the person or the particular need, then I cannot pray in petition.

Petition does not mean making God aware of what is going on and what is required, but taking myself to God as a person changed by what I have made space for, a person concerned about what I am praying for, to such an extent that, if needs be, I actually can become both the prayer and the answer to the prayer, since life in grace always results in heightened sensitivity to the needs of others.

Eucharist:

Pre-eminently the summons to remember. But how do you remember something you have never known? To remember someone special requires no stimulus, other than the presence which has lived itself into us and which memory makes permanent.

How do we remember in the Eucharist? Do we need the extras to sustain flagging interest? Isn't this the area which suffers from accusations of "boring"! Without the dynamic vitality of the experience of real presence is it possible to remember and not simply be passive observers?

More than likely the disciples, after Good Friday, told stories. shared memories, even visited places - to remember. Jesus gives us the Eucharist to remember - it is real presence-celebrated, in such manner as to provide a real encounter with God; made possible through his death and resurrection, an experience too profound for words and too mysterious for symbol.

Eucharist transcends every area of our experience, it cannot be captured; letting us believe far more than we understand. We must approach the Eucharist as we approach a treasured friend. It is not an *event* to which we are invited, but a *real presence* which has its own attractiveness.

Sadly we take for granted a human quality which is well-suited to such an experience, our ability to be *fascinated* by something irresistible. Eucharist is the invitation to become intensely aware of being held close by God and to feel compelled to share it. This is why the symbols proper to Eucharistic celebration should be respected: bread for hungry people. Never forget that the human experience which unites me creatively with food is hunger.

Hunger is a problem for the Western world, and an evil for the rest. Our world does not know hunger for what it is. Maybe having more than enough has jaded us. We have the regular option of missing a meal without giving it a thought. There is no such thing as meal times for the hungry, simply the need to eat. When hunger is abused, eating together is lost through the fear which drives me to get for myself in case there is not enough.

Hunger is a blessing, it is a gift of God. It is good precisely because along with hunger God gave us so many wonderful ways of satisfying it. Abandoning the way of Grace for sin, separated the two - another example of *what God has joined together let no one put asunder...* - whilst there is more than enough for all the hunger in the world, there is not nearly enough for the greed of simply one person.

Hunger is special because it intrudes, it stops us and reminds us that we are in need of something which we neglect at our peril. It only becomes a menace when the means of satisfying it are not as freely available as the hunger itself.

Hunger engages the whole person. There is no point in seeking to interest hungry people in anything other than food. It is infinitely wider than food and drink. It widens out into every aspect of human need: for warmth, protection, companionship, affirmation, affection, reconciliation... It is in this total sense that Jesus offers himself as *the bread of life*.

Wherever the means for satisfying hunger are either missing or deliberately withheld, hunger will brutalise, reducing persons to conditions less than human. The only deliverance from hunger is either eating or dying. We seldom satisfy hunger directly from nature. There is the need for sowing, reaping, marketing, buying, presenting... and eating, especially eating together. Eating together has many functions, but should always contain [grace] an element of celebration for everything that contributed to this occasion.

We seek to get rid of hunger in vain, nor should we if we could. Rather must "our hunger be assured" through daily bread. In places where food is still harvested immediately before eating, where water has to be carried and kindling foraged, everyone appreciates that the satisfying of needs requires cooperative effort.

Where there is independence there is little awareness of the lot of others, of where "it" all comes from [from the fridge!]. There is no appreciation of effort, no gratitude for creative love.

Creative love brings dignity, its presence alerts me to the truth that I really am worth bothering about. This is abundant living Jesus brought. God is nothing other than creative love. Creation is the way God communicates all that is God with all that is not. Most especially is this so with the Incarnation, and which is prolonged through history in the Eucharist - the creatively abundant response to total human hunger.

The preacher says: *we do not live by bread alone, but only the hungry can say "I need bread"*. How is Jesus this bread? One becomes sustenance for another in rescuing from meaningless living, whatever that might take.

The "memory" of Passover is of a tough time, one in which people had food, no class distinction, everyone worked together. Bread becomes bread of life when it is equally and freely available. When Philip had apprehension about not having enough, if they were to share, Jesus transforms the negative into the positive. It is not how much can I get but how can I give. If everyone is so motivated no one will be left out, since no one's well-being is pursued at the expense of others.

If we understand "bread of life" within the context of "Paschal Lamb" we quickly realise that lamb becomes food only when it is killed [not when it dies]. Bread of life means life for others - "eat my flesh and drink my blood". It is in living his death for us that Jesus becomes bread of life, and it is by involvement with his dying that we have our hunger satisfied.

As Sacrament the Eucharist is given to the Church, but intended for the world. It moves from one to the other precisely through celebration. We are offered the chance to become what we receive. We are invited to come and be served by God, to let our tired feet be washed... precisely so that in becoming what we receive we too can serve others, become Eucharist for the world.

Early Eucharistic communities were simple, but not destitute. Their renunciation of current values never degenerated into denunciation. Indeed to satisfy hunger the wrong way simply compounds the problem.

Eucharist happens within the context of Jewish Grace - a blessing. Blessing first appears with God wishing creation well, bidding it recreate itself generously for others. The Seventh Day blessing is in place to help us remember what life is all about, to relax and to enjoy. The Flood is the complete antithesis of this. God blessed Noah with a covenant which defined limits. God blessed Abraham so that he could bless others. Blessing is a creative act: something changes. We are blessed with good health, good fortune, good gifts, so that we can bless others [birthday/Xmas presents].

All recipients of gifts should also bless. Parents pre-eminently should bless their offspring with their own fruitfulness, calling them forth into fuller living through their freely shared love.

Eucharist is blessing, we are blessed with the death of Jesus. Standing there, yet to die, he blesses his friends with his death. He said that this is the highest expression of love, and there are many ways of loving service. But how does the brutality of Good Friday become a blessing?

It became obvious to Jesus that he was on a collision course with the authorities. To avoid it meant either to over-throw it, or to back-down. He neither expected nor wanted brutality and injustice to be his lot, but it became obvious that this was to be *if integrity means anything*. Confronted with his offer of a new way, one which the people without power found attractive, the authorities panicked - giving reasons we have all used - self protection, not yet, be careful, it will mean change...

This is why Calvary exposes sin for what it is, complete disregard for anyone but self - God included. Our coping mechanisms make it clear that, given the circumstances, even God is not safe with us. He prayed: "*Father, forgive them, they do not know*".⁴¹"They do not know how to live in your creation".

Eucharist does not allow us to go on not knowing by letting us experience the fullness of that prayer "Father, forgive them...". It becomes real through our willing participation, open to receive so as to become what is first given. Eucharist inserts us into the heart of this, blessing us with Christ's death, enabling us to evaluate without the need to hoard, making some of the means for satisfying hunger abundantly present. Aware that structures, even holy ones, because they are implemented by sinful folk, will always carry evidence of this. That is all right, provided we are willing and alert to spot and remove injustices whenever they appear, and are not deterred by a false primacy given to preservation.

We bring many impediments with us when we come to celebrate. Are we simply present at an event, performing a ritual? We can no longer plead that we do not know! This is why that word "remember" is so cogent. "*Let your experience of your own living remind you that the world is still unfinished, and requires courageous people willing to bless it with our living and our dying, as we are so blessed*".

Eucharist is meant to make a difference, to bring change. Eucharist constitutes us as Church, it is the summit of Initiation, marking the fullness of sharing, identifying us for each other as community, with

⁴¹ Lk.23.34.

specific fruits. There is only one covenant between God and all that is not God, but there are thousands of ways of participating in it. The covenant is known in a variety of ways, through the many hungers prompting the search. The covenant is not between individuals and God, but between humankind and Godkind. It is as community we are in relationship with God, it is through community that individuals flourish into abundance. Our experience of community, left to ourselves, is less than impressive. Noah, in the face of such treachery, gathered a like-minded group around him to search for new beginnings.

Jewish tradition has no problem coping with the paradox of Abraham and Isaac. Jewish history has many examples of injustices heaped on them precisely because, like Abraham, they sought to retain their God-given identity. In fact, Paul universalises this in Galatians 3. He says that to enter into a covenant of Faith within the culture of the world, will cost; but therein lies salvation.

The "new" covenant in Jesus did not replace the old [there is only one covenant], what is new is the intensity of intimacy now manifested by God through Jesus. Salvation is a new way of being a human being. It appears that Jesus had no chance with the forces of evil ranged against him, yet he even gives us this – his death! We are not spectators, like the people who saw the multiplication of loaves. To accept the bread broken and the cup poured out is *to accept the death of Jesus as new life*.

Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the true purpose of sacrifice. The involvement of death is not as an agent of destruction, but the means by which we "pass-over", just as eating forms part of communion with another. To sacrifice and to eat an animal is not much different from praying together, since an animal cannot mediate and the alienation is not removed.

With the sacrifice of Jesus there is a new dimension in the one who willingly *passes-over* to where God is. His opponents see him thrust out of life. During our life-time on earth we occupy space and time in a way which precludes others from occupying it while we are there. We live side-by-side. Total communion is not possible physically. By passing-over through death Jesus is now unlimited, unrestricted, unimpeded, taking with him the full human experience of living and dying into the heart of creative love.

The Resurrection confirms this has happened. Faith in the Resurrection asserts that Jesus was not pushed out of life, but that he passed-over into unlimited living, from where he gives us the same Spirit so that we can live in the same way, by the same means. The Spirit who confirms God as Abba for him and himself as the beloved, is now poured into our hearts.⁴²

In the Eucharist we are invited to be present at his once only passing-over. To accept, to listen, to eat and to drink makes us able, even now, to live the unlimited, unimpeded life of Jesus-risen, in order to become the bridge for others to pass-over into fullness of life.

This demands much more than sitting in pews. I come with my own life-style, where I have been and where I am, I will never reach where I am eternally meant to be without passing-over - Eucharist means willingness to change.

⁴² Rom.5.

Power in God:

The only power in God is the power to be with totally, and not to be deflected from this consuming desire. The cross represents what this actually means in practice. The principal reason for the Incarnation is to enable creation to reach its specific goal - that creation should manifest God perfectly outside the Godhead. This was always the purpose - creation is Christ-centred. There is no validity whatsoever in seeing Christ as an afterthought, a repair man coming to put things right. Creation happened with Christ in mind. This makes the reason for Christ's presence solely to manifest how much God loves creation, and that nothing would dissuade him from this task - and how we tried!

Made in the image of God we are bound to find the power of persuasion more attractive than coercion. Exposure to value is the only way to attract. No amount of discipline will inculcate value; just as experience of value will indicate the need for discipline in order to allow the value room to flourish and to saturate us. Persuasion attracts by calling us out of self-imposed securities, alluring us through the genuine value of the real presence of peace, harmony, creativity and freedom.

Goodness is always attractive, it is characteristic of being human to be attracted by it because it is characteristic of God, in whose image we are made. We know the danger of trying to establish our own versions of goodness, we know that we are not big enough to decide what is good for everyone without exclusion, we know through faith that only God is good and that this goodness, which is universally attractive, is completely offered to us through the real presence of God in Jesus Christ.

Creative choices come through freedom rather than coercion, they are from strength rather than weakness, aware of real alternatives within which we are free to choose. Following the right and proper way does not, thereby, guarantee a trouble free life. The purpose of integration is not to get rid of problems but to ensure that, come what may, we are able to be ourselves within the situation.

A mother will not willingly go without food or sleep simply for the sake of it, but if her child is critically ill in hospital such necessities will be set aside without a thought. We strive in value not to achieve something but because we want to be alive and know it, we are persuaded by goodness. One of the most insidious traits of the manipulator is to withhold goodness in order to coerce.

There is no coercion in love. We fall in love attracted by quality and the desire to be with - real presence. Love is appropriate when loveliness is more alluring than the strong pull of our self-centredness. The quality proper to such living can never be the minimalist reaction to coercion, but the eagerness moving towards total commitment. *The only true measure of life is our enthusiasm for it.*

When S Francis listened to the Gospel being read at Mass he became aware of something compelling him to say: "*this is what I have been longing for with all my heart*". This was the initial experience, what yet had to come was to match his life with his words, he had to go out and live it.

Wholeheartedness is synonymous with a commitment to becoming in the flesh what has been voiced in words. Far from pushing towards the fantasy of unreal romanticism this requires two feet set firmly within reality. It is made up of the very ordinary stuff of everyday and how our attitude within all this changes in the light of what we have said. Assess the open and trustworthy person not by the sound of words but by the experience of real presence.

Our God is helpless in our power games of life, when knowledge is withheld to give the impression of control [bullying] and access to freedom is limited to ensure the power of the one in charge. Images abound in Scripture of God pleading, persuading, arguing and even, in Jesus, going down on his knees and washing the tired feet of his friends [the hall-mark of Christian authority]. No coercion is present, simply the gentle attractiveness of "*come and see*".

To be made in the image of God is to be explained solely in terms of self-surrender, and to be capable of receiving the self-surrender of another. Only a free person can cope with this, and a free person is reached solely through persuasion. Fear and coercion fly in the face of everything freedom promises. There is no coercive power in God, no threat, no tempting with bribes. God is not law and order, not the seeker after revenge, not the angry God waiting to be placated, not even the justifier of moral rectitude. God is nothing else but love.

What is at issue is rather: are we big enough for this? It is easy to write this down and even compelling to listen to it, but where it matters is in the ordinary of everyday. What will it cost to let God be God? Do we need some other security to fall back on? Do we need another reality, like coercive power, when love is not enough for us? Does God have to have force to protest love?

Unfortunately, we do know that we have to have reminders of the priority of God. Because of our sin and self-centredness we need rule and direction, *but this ought never have us presume that this is the way God deals with us*. It is very unsafe to proceed from the experiencing of need to presuming fact. We do tend to live by ways which owe more to manipulation than to self-giving, we are insecure, arrogant, occasionally confident, often defensive and because we know that we are this unruly mix, we justify needing more than love to live by. Then we make God fit that image.

The weakness of grace is the mystery of love, it is the poverty of God. The cross speaks to us from the heart of impotence in the face of the power of dominance and coercion. Love cannot respond in kind to aggression or violence, nor can it exact punishment from those who live like that: "*Father, forgive them, they do not know...*".

The cross is not simply a sign that God refuses to resort to the kind of power we understand only too well, that would simply be stoicism. The cross is evidence of God's fidelity to me. There is nothing whatsoever that I can do to stop God loving me, there is no mortgage on love. No wonder Jesus had to go on and on saying things like: "*let those who have eyes see... let those who have ears hear...*". The cross is literally Jesus telling me that I will be lost "*over my dead body*". And how I tested him!

If we reflect on this we are not simply being asked to accept the fact that God loves us, *but to accept ourselves* as loved by God with a unique and undying love.

Well meaning customs have had us search out the Scriptures for sayings, words, ideals... which we can harness as commands and imperatives which can help us through observance, or encourage us as markers of progress. But what did Jesus mean when he issued commands, which he certainly did?

"*A new commandment I give you, that you love each other as I love you...*". Can love be commanded? Can we love to order? To an audience all too familiar with commands, Jesus speaks of another command, another type of command. His whole demeanour and presence urges us see in this new command *an invitation rather than a coercion*: "*come and see... what would you have me do for*

you?.. take and eat...". To which the appropriate response is to accept because we are being exposed to the attractiveness of value, to the security of fidelity, to step out in trust on the given word of another. This is something we have always longed to live by, but have been led by our mutual infidelities to become sceptical of and even frightened to believe. The only quality present within the simplicity of genuine presence is attraction and persuasion.

God's will is a familiar phrase, but *accepting it* is far from familiar. God's will is that we accept the love that is offered unconditionally, with something of the wholeheartedness with which it is offered. The difficulty is not finding what God's will is, this could not be more clear. The problem is our believing it and then gradually moving towards becoming what we believe: we believe that God is love, we believe that God only creates lovely things, we believe that God created us, we believe that we are...? Or do we?

The wonder of the Spiritual Life is that it only involves accepting the invitation to "*come and see*". I cannot see, I cannot hear if I am not there. Abundant life is not a reward for doing the right things, it is moving towards believing the given Word, the Word which speaks of peace, compassion, forgiveness as leading towards the life which is as appropriate for me as it is for God.

There is no pre-written route map for this. The only way is to step into life as it is in the ordinary everyday things, to take God's Word for what it is a Word breathing love; to receive the Word that is offered and to respond using the same language - with words that become flesh.

This is why it is pardoning, feeding the hungry, comforting the frightened, in allowing ourselves to be forgiven - and believing the forgiveness - that we too will know that God is as truly present with us as with the Word who first showed us this new way of living. Holiness [wholeness] is the passion one has for life.

Death:

When the talk is of death - deep down we all fear it, not necessarily the process of dying, but the idea of life finishing. This is not the same as the natural resistance to death common to all creatures, which against the odds ensures that life goes on - the irrepressible weed! The fear of death has more in common with fear of the dark - one writer: *it's like the instructions at a road junction - "don't enter the box until your exit is clear"*

NT speaks of Jesus in a sweat of blood - "*my God, why..?*". Many try to cover death up, suggest that it is no more than a special kind of falling asleep, or passing-over. The fact: *human life does come to an end.*

Paul initially struggles with this:

"And in this earthly state we do indeed groan, longing to put on our heavenly home over the present one; if indeed we are to be found clothed rather than stripped bare."⁴³ He would like to keep what he has and add to it! But he realises what is involved: "... realising that as long as we are at home in the

⁴³ 2Cor.5.3.

body we are exiled from the Lord, guided by faith and not yet by sight;...then we long instead to be exiled from the body and to be at home with the Lord."⁴⁴

His after-thought is based on the revealed understanding of the death of Jesus. At first, his death seemed to spell separation from God, in whom he was grounded in his *life*. It was only after profound reflection that the disciples saw this for what it really was, the moment of his profound intimacy with God. God had not abandoned him, as he had feared, but had endorsed him as manifest in *the reality of God in flesh and blood*. This led into seeing him as the perfection of human living, the beginning of a new humankind.

His death was more than the death of just another man. It affects all of us because it was deliberately done on our behalf: *"this is my body given... my blood poured out"*. He did not die instead of us, as if to release us from our own need to die. His death *includes* mine. When he died, I died, entering into a new order of things. I am to be no longer at home in the past order of things, but within what his death opened up:

*"Again we are saying this not to commend ourselves to you, but simply to give you the opportunity to take pride in us, so that you may have an answer for those who take pride in appearances and not inner reality. If we have been unreasonable, it was for God; if reasonable, for you. For the love of Christ overwhelms us when we consider that if one man died for all, then all have died; his purpose in dying for all humanity was that those who live should live not any more for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life. From now onwards, then, we will not consider anyone by human standards: even if we were once familiar with Christ according to human standards, we do not know him in that way any longer. So for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see."*⁴⁵

I commit myself to all this when I ask for Baptism. The symbolism of the rite shows me stepping into Christ's grave, showing that I believe that he includes my death in his:

*"You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptised into Christ Jesus, were baptised into his death. So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life."*⁴⁶

Notice how Paul already regards his death as in the past! What will happen to him when he dies in a few years time has already happened. The grave is behind him, not in front. His death is not in the future but in the past and present, in as much as he tries to make his baptism real. His future death will probably frighten him, but since it can be no more than the corroboration of what has already happened, it doesn't carry the threat it once did: *"death, where is your victory... your sting?"*⁴⁷

⁴⁴ 2Cor. 6-8.

⁴⁵ Ibid 14-17.

⁴⁶ Rom.6.3.

⁴⁷ 1Cor.15.55.

Having openly owned his fear of death, because of Christ he adds something more. In what he has seen in Jesus' death he knows that his fear has been coped with; death is now a door to new living. Death remains death, final and conclusive. If this were not so there could be no resurrection. Whatever resurrection means, *it is not the resumption of life after a brief interruption*. It is a new creation *ex nihilo*, out of the nothingness of death. For Paul, death remains an impenetrable darkness... a darkness full of the Creator God.

Resurrection of the Body:

It is important to hold onto the truth that death should not be referred to simply in the future tense. It is in the past and present. So too with Resurrection!

Christian faith is in the Resurrection of the Body. Yet for many, the most they hope for is *that their soul will be all right*, they are not at all sure about what happens to the body. This is no more than the result of theology and homiletics. It is the product of splitting us into body and soul. Because the body is temporary and the soul permanent, a lot of bad press has been heaped on the body. This encouraged despising the body in favour of the soul: the anger expressed by Nietzsche - *"...full of hatred for the impulses towards life, full of suspicion of all that was still strong and happy. In short, a "Christian"*.⁴⁸

No wonder he was angry - after all, Paul describes the body as the *"temple of the Spirit"*. Scripture does not present us as having a body but being body. This means that union with God cannot be conceived of without the body. If the body is not saved then we are not saved.

Jesus aligned himself with Pharisees in belief in bodily Resurrection.⁴⁹ John expands this.⁵⁰ Paul becomes eloquent.⁵¹ Belief in bodily resurrection is not in the crude resuscitation of a corpse. When we speak about resurrection of the body - the word "body" is used more in line with the way we use "somebody" or "anybody", rather than this physical entity. *It is the whole person with a network of relationships*. This is an interesting thought, adding new meaning to *"some will be saved yet so as by fire"*. If it is the person who is saved and made whole, then everything that is part of that wholeness [friendships and intimacies] must surely be part of it, else the person is not whole!

My inability to live up to my wonderful potential is not because "I am only human", but that I am not human enough. It is not my communication with others that is the problem, but the limitations of such communion - the yearning is to be 100% bodily. The world of the Risen is not a world simply for tomorrow. It arrived on Easter Day, and I can inhabit it in as much as I am willing to live "in Christ", named as the first-born of many.⁵²

⁴⁸ "Twilight of the Idols" trans. Hoolindale.p.56.

⁴⁹ Matt.22.30; Lk.14.14; 20.35.

⁵⁰ Jn.5.25; 5.28; 6.39; 6.54.

⁵¹ 1Cor.15.26; 6.14; 15.22. 2Cor.4.14. 1Thess.4.14. Rom.8.22. Phil.3.10; 20.

⁵² Col.1.18; Rom.8.29.

*Christ is the Resurrection.*⁵³ The only one, we are risen in as much as we are "in him". My resurrection is guaranteed, not as something strange that will happen to me, but the inevitable flowering of Baptism, when Christ's victory over death becomes mine, because I am now totally in Christ.⁵⁴

Hope is not expressed in individualistic terms. We are "bodily" by nature, we are tied - body and soul - to the rest of creation. My salvation is related to total salvation. But there is more, not just a future bonus but a present reality. The Risen Body of Christ into which I am incorporated through Baptism, is held in my hands now.

The Church is not separate from Christ, is not guided by him as from a distance, it is his body with us now. The Church is that part of creation set free from the corruption of nature. This stresses the importance of providing the outlet for the Spirit of the Risen Lord to "get at" our world - our hands, hearts and voices are needed, with all the integrity they can muster.

Indwelling of the Trinity:

*"Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him and we will come and make our abode with him"*⁵⁵ *"The proof that you are children is the fact that God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of the Son which cries out Abba!"*⁵⁶

Many of the traditional attempts to explain this teaching seem to forget that they are trying to explain an *experience*. We must be careful that we do not simply add interpretation onto what is already interpretation; let us try to get back to the original drama.

"Indwelling of the Trinity" is meant to be an expression of the most basic Christian experience. Obviously not an experience like any other, as if God were around like anything else waiting to be experienced. We must look to come to terms with this profound reality not through intricate reflection, but in daily living.

What does *God is one in nature, three in persons mean?* God is revealed and experienced by human beings. God who lives within us, as the Mystery that gives rise to everything, is called Father. Insofar as God opens up and communicates the truth about who God is, *as Father*. This makes us want to know more, and even to respond, *God is Son*. Insofar as we *experience* the environment which holds us and brings us together in communion, *God is Spirit*. Indeed it is the Mystery of the Trinity that gives authenticity to a human being.

We emerge as mystery to ourselves, a unity seeking to become. One that knows, thinks, feels, is open to dialogue and communion. What is happening is that we are seeking *to present ourselves truthfully*,

⁵³ Jn.11.25.

⁵⁴ Rom.8.9-11.

⁵⁵ Jn.14.23.

⁵⁶ Gal.4.6.

and to communicate lovingly, all the while aware that the whole experience, our very existence, is gift. As gift we are living evidence of the Giver.

Did we not say that "Father" = God known as the Mystery *who gives rise to all else*? Doesn't this correspond to you? Are you not aware of being whole, real, yet totally given to yourself? As a human being is it not important to you to express yourself truthfully and to communicate lovingly, through a mind that knows and a heart that desires?

Doesn't this experience defy all limited attempts at expression? The Word/Son is God in communication, in Spirit and Truth. Doesn't your attempt to be present in like manner correspond to this Mystery? Did we not say that the Spirit is the mutuality of Father and Son, One Person from Two Persons? Doesn't this correspond to the felt need for a proper environment in which being fully alive can happen?

In this way we have the true reference point for being fully alive, made in the image and likeness of God [this reality of God is not gained from human experience, rather does it show where we are from and where we are going].

Having expressed the presence of the Trinity in our thinking, willing and living, we are equally mindful that this indwelling *does not depend* on our thinking, willing and living. Even those who know nothing of God reflect the Trinity in their humanity.

But there is a personal dimension too, for people who allow themselves to be fully within this abiding presence, seeking to intensify and simplify it. The path to wholeness [holiness] is precisely this. Minds are attracted more and more by honesty and truth, and wills by love, care and compassion.

This is not a duplication of the presence of the Trinity, but an intense experience of the One God truly within me. The impact of this is to see and see again, to hear and hear again, *how everything in fact can and does* speak truly of its origin.

In so far as we are led to open ourselves up to the wonder of our own being, we are heading for direct encounter with the Trinity. *Whenever Truth is important to us, enough for us to seek after it, we reflect the eternal generation of Truth in the Father, i.e. the Word. The love through which we desire to belong with others, reflects the flow of mutuality between Father and Son, i.e. the Spirit. We are truly sharers in the Divine Nature.*

The Trinity is community, and this is reflected also in human community which seeks to do the truth lovingly.

"O Lord, you search me and you know me; You know when I sit and when I stand; You understand my thoughts from afar... Behind and before me, you hem me in and rest you hand upon me. Such knowledge is too much for me; too lofty for me to attain

Where can I go from your Spirit? From your presence where can I flee? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall guide me, and your right hand hold me fast. If I say: 'surely the darkness shall hide me,

and the darkness be my light' - For you darkness is not dark, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are the same.

Truly you have formed my inmost being; You knit me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; Wonderful are your works!" Ps.139.1-14.

Sharers in the Divine Nature:

Awareness of this rests on experience when we completely surpass ourselves. We do not find fulfilment in the factual, only in the transcendent.

Certainly to be sharers in the divine nature is not a typical yearning of today's people. We seek not divinisation but complete humanisation. But human beings are human to the extent that they commune with something different from self. The more they move out of themselves, to that extent do they become personalised. To be able to reach out to the totally Other [God], is to become totally oneself. It does not matter what name it is given, what is happening is that personalisation = divinisation.

Being a person = means living in communion, open to others within a network of relationships. *To love is to let God happen in ones life.* This is a day-to-day process of loving with its demand for fidelity and total involvement.

Intimacy with God is born of intimacy with self; human beings alone experience God as intimacy.⁵⁷ Christ became like us in all things save sin. The Resurrection convinced the early Church that Jesus is the Son of God.⁵⁸ To say that we are his sisters and brothers, children of God, is to say that our mission is also the same. As Jesus is the Beloved, we are called to believe the same of ourselves, to know and be known by God as Abba.⁵⁹

The Incarnation inserted the Word into the limitation of space and time. The Resurrection universalised this experience, prolonging and fulfilling the Incarnation process. The human situation is no longer the same as before the Incarnation; a latent possibility, as yet unexperienced, has been set free. The Word is with us and in its most tangible form is present via intimacy, the prerogative of the human in creation.

This filiation happens variously, but its basis is secured within the Mystery of the Trinity. In the totally going out of self and revealing self [Father], God is called Son. The Son is the full expression of both Father and Creation. So, because creation also reveals something of the Mystery of God, it also possesses a filial character.

Obviously, the person of Christ is not the person of individual human beings. We are not children of God directly in virtue of our own personhood, but by union of our person with the person of the Son

⁵⁷ Mk.3.31; Matt.18.15; Rom.9.3; Acts.14.2.

⁵⁸ Rom.1.4; Heb.1.6.

⁵⁹ Rom.8.17.

["adoptive"]. Baptism is grounded on this filiation, immersing the baptised more deeply into the Mystery of Christ. By the fact of creation all are children of the Father in the Son. By the fact of universal Redemption this filiation is restored to its pristine state, which had been violated by sin. The crucified and Risen Christ is present in the world and in the Church. Baptism [and the other Sacraments virtually contained in it] accomplish this, making the Church the community par excellence of the children of God.

This is not simply information about ourselves, it requires a corresponding way of living: *"it is like being born into an entirely new way of living"*, Jesus told Nicodemus.⁶⁰ This implies three things: 1. no one is a child without a father, and nurturing this relationship is what intimacy means. 2. the child relationship is personal, not causal. The difference Jesus Christ makes is to show us that we are not simply creatures of a Creator but children of the Father. 3. "child" does not = "youngster". Child = adult child, one who has come of age.

Experiencing the Spirit means seeing and hearing things. and then witnessing to what is seen and heard.⁶¹ Thus the presence of the invisible Spirit is experienced through its impact, via fascination and wonder... All forms of fascination, even the most secular [sports, art...] reveal an ardour proper to the Absolute. The more fascinating something is the more intangible does it become.

From the moment of creation the Spirit is in the world. Jesus brought the full manifestation of the Spirit in a permanent way.⁶² In Jesus the Spirit is incarnate. Everything Jesus says and does flows from his own power. He is not led by the Spirit. He lives in the Spirit.⁶³ This is why he is "fascinating".

The resurrection reveals the full extent of the Spirit in Jesus. Prior to the Resurrection Jesus had a fragile, carnal and mortal body. After the Resurrection he has a body which is spiritual, incorruptible, full of divine energy.⁶⁴ The Risen Christ is transformed into pure spirit.⁶⁵ Not the third Person of the Trinity, but the manner in which Jesus now exists. He is free from the fetters of time and space, of flesh existence, full of power and the capacity to be totally with. Paul provides us with parallels: Christ

⁶⁰ Jn.3.1-9.

⁶¹ Acts 2.33; 22.15.

⁶² Lk.1.35; 4.18; Acts 4.27; Matt.1.18; Heb.1.9; 1Jn.2.22; 2Cor.1.21.

⁶³ Lk.4.14.

⁶⁴ 1Cor.15.44.

⁶⁵ 2Cor.3.17.

dwells in us,⁶⁶ and so does the Spirit.⁶⁷ We are justified in Christ,⁶⁸ and in the Spirit.⁶⁹ We are sanctified in Christ,⁷⁰ and in the Spirit.⁷¹ Christ dwells in us,⁷² and so does the Spirit.⁷³

The Holy Spirit is the enduring presence of Christ in the world for it to reach its completion. The Spirit does not replace Jesus. The Spirit makes Jesus' presence real and recalls his words to mind.⁷⁴ The Spirit does not exist independently of Jesus. He is sent by the Father and the Son.⁷⁵

In the era between the Ascension and the Parousia [second coming], the Spirit is sanctifying creation and reuniting it. It was reflecting on this truth that prompted the early Church to identify the Spirit with a Person of the Trinity, who is distinct from Father and Son; having his own personal mission to bring about in creation who the Spirit is in the Trinity.

Experiencing Grace is nothing other than the Spirit, making his presence felt. S Paul distinguishes 3 stages of God's relationship with us in history:⁷⁶ 1. sinfulness before the law - Adam to Moses.⁷⁷ 2. Sinfulness under the law - Moses to Christ.⁷⁸ 3. And life in Grace.⁷⁹ Sin was in control until Christ came, now Grace reigns.⁸⁰

⁶⁶ Gal.2.20.

⁶⁷ Rom.8.10; 2Cor.3.18.

⁶⁸ Gal.2.17.

⁶⁹ 1Cor.6.11.

⁷⁰ 1Cor.1.2.

⁷¹ Eph.4.30.

⁷² 2Cor.13.13.

⁷³ Rom.8.9.

⁷⁴ Jn.14.26; 16.14.

⁷⁵ Jn.14.26; 7.37.

⁷⁶ cf. Rom .Chapters 5-7.

⁷⁷ Rom.5.13.

⁷⁸ Rom.6.14.

⁷⁹ Rom.6.14.

⁸⁰ Rom.5.21.

There was sin before the law; after the law sin was identified as rebellion against God. Now Grace and Redemption are present in Jesus Christ. But this does not mean that there was a time when Grace was missing. Grace is now present in history in a new way, in the Spirit of Christ Risen: "Now we have been released from the law, for we have died to what bound us - and we serve in the new spirit, not the antiquated letter"⁸¹

The Son was sent to free us and creation by taking on our nature and living and within creation in the desired way. Bound up integrally with this mission is the mission of the Spirit, sent as the Spirit of the Son.

The mission of the Spirit is different from that of the Son. In the Incarnation all creation is reached by the Word made flesh. In the sending of the Spirit it is principally the world of persons that it touched and sanctified. As the Son became Incarnate in nature, the Holy Spirit is personalised in the persons of the just. In the Trinity the Spirit is one Person from two Persons, the mutuality of Father and Son. This is the role of the spirit in creation: to make of many one.⁸²

Purgatory:

At first glance Purgatory is not an easy notion to come to terms with, mainly because of our image of self as unworthy, reprehensible and destined for punishment. With this background, Purgatory will inevitably be seen not simply as a place of painful purification, but also one in which the pain is seen as something we have brought upon ourselves. It is only when we understand God's proper purpose in creation, and our own proper place within that plan, that we will come to a better appreciation of Purgatory and to see it as it really is, evidence of the tremendous sensitivity of God.

Sin is a conscious betrayal of love. Forgiveness means that my sin is not held against me, that the love I have betrayed is not withheld from me, even though I knowingly and deliberately moved away from it. This love uniquely for each of us, is always there, only now its expression has been made all the more painful, though no less freely and totally given. Without sin it should have been possible for God to be with us as Lord of Creation, in a manner of joyful celebration. Sin did not remove God's love from us, but made the expressing of it painful crucifixion.

What happens to a person who is aware of betraying love, and who is being offered forgiveness? It is not possible to wipe out the past - that I needed to be forgiven remains; I am going to need time and space to come to terms with such love, I need to go away and cry. I cannot accept forgiveness all at once. Purgatory is just such an environment, one in which I can recover my self-respect, enough to say *thank-you!*

This where the Doctrine of Purgatory shines out like a beacon. That death really makes definitive my freely matured basic attitude, and this by the Grace of God, since goodness is Godness-given, and cannot be manufactured. But I am of many parts, and not all of them achieve perfection

⁸¹ Rom.7.6.

⁸² 1Cor.15.28.

simultaneously, there is a full ripening *after* death, as this basic attitude permeates the whole of my reality. If I am on the road to goodness - I will certainly reach the fullness of it.

I reach personal maturity through an intermediate state [known as Purgatory]. Purgatory poses the question as to whether there can be an *increase* in perfection for the dead. Rahner, clarifying the Church's teaching that this does happen, reminds us that this purification is first of all by God's grace. We do not make a new fundamental option in death, but the style of life that precedes death ripens fully. Rahner suggests that this continues after death, and it is this process that benefits well from the prayerful support of others [Theol. Dictionary. Rahner Vorgrimler p.426].

Praying for the dead:

What effect do I expect my prayer to have on *anything*? Quite often prayer seems to be asking that night should not follow day, or that $2 + 2$ should not = 4. We cannot pray for a miraculous intervention to change the course of events; or for special treatment for ourselves and ours. Those who pray are not divinely protected from the misfortune that falls haphazardly on all. So, what do we expect from prayer? It is reasonable enough for me to pray for myself to become more sensitive and attentive, I can actually do something about that. But what about my prayer for you - especially if you are dead?

If God were simply a relay station, receiving our requests and passing them on to the appropriate person, then it would not matter whether the person was in this world or the next. God is not the God who rearranges creation prompted by prayers.

Praying for the dead has an effect - on us! It extends us beyond self. It is blasphemous to suggest that if we do not pray for the dead their sins will not be forgiven. So, why do we do it? Ask lovers why they go on asking "do you love me?". The words "I love you" do not come as relief to a person who did not know the answer. They are the affirmation which provides energy for love to flourish.

To ask God whether he forgives the dead is to hear again and again the reassuring "Of course I do". This is what makes Purgatory so vital and vibrant - not a place or state where the dead are detained - but the head-on and painful experience of the real contrast between the total and unique outpouring of God towards me, and the meanness of my response.

To speak of Purgatory is to offer information about what is going to happen to me, it is the attempt to express my awareness that if I am going to become as human as God wants me to be, it is the work of a life-time involving many painful arrivals into new areas of self-respect. If that is so now, what will it be like when I see face to face?

There is a good story which teaches us a lot about a truly biblical perspective on life and death and life after death. In a town threatened by an imminent tidal wave - the Catholic priest urged his flock to go to confession - the Vicar urged his people to ask pardon of those they had wronged and to make amends - the Rabbi told his congregation "you have 3 days to learn to live under water".

Christians tend to think of surviving death in another world, the Jew boldly thinks of surviving death in this world! What they long for is life after life... in the only world they know. Indeed, the eschatology of the NT is not a map of the future, but the criterion for living in the present. If I have not met death in my present experience, and resurrection, and hell, and judgement, and heaven, and

purgatory... then how will I ever understand what is to happen in the future? Can a person who has never known love in any form whatsoever have any idea of a God who is nothing else but love?

Why can we not be in contact with the dead? This is not because they are separated from us. We are still *in* time, unless there is some special miracle of revelation as e.g. Easter Day. If the reality of the dead were to be transposed back into our concrete world, they could only be here as *we* are, not as *they* are since their reality now *is only possible outside time*.

It is not the dead who have the problem but we who remain. This is why, so often, when we hear about the dead speaking, they are in some kind of waiting state, waiting to be set free, because we cannot meet them as they are *now* intimate with God - since *time* does not allow this - but in their, as yet, unredeemed and confused past.

We meet the living dead when we open ourselves to God, to the presence of Goodness in which they live now, not by calling them back to where we are, but by our momentary rising to where they are, summoned by Grace, finalised through death.

Heaven:

The idea of eternity as time going on and on makes no appeal to me - sounds more like hell than heaven. And yet, if heaven is such a good place, why are people so sad about going there? The problem is, of course, that our terminology for describing whatever it is, belongs to our experience of time. Everlasting, eternal, perpetual...

When we employ all the negatives to describe the life of God - unlimited, unbounded, immortal, infinite, imperishable, unending... What we are saying is that it is not like ours, limited, finite, perishable...

God does not fit into the category of time at all; it is not that God has much more of it than we have, an infinite amount. Time simply does not enter in - no past, no future.

Do not think of *eternal life* as how long it lasts. The word is about quality not quantity. It is life free of all the restrictions we are all too familiar with. Not just those of time, but incompleteness, mediocrity, shabbiness. Life in God is full, rich, deep and free.

This is the kind of life we long for. But we couldn't long for it if we had not, in some way, already tasted it. Those moments of fascination when time becomes irrelevant, in fact the experience is not made up of a lot of time, usually just a few moments. We realise that we can live in a dimension not made up of hours and days. The first taste of eternity is of timelessness. We managed, fleetingly, to live entirely "now".

The Good News is that this brief experience can become definitive. It gives it many names - heaven, glory, eternal life, kingdom... A heaven that still lies in the future features strongly in NT.⁸³ In other places Paul seems to imply the opposite - saying that the age to come has already arrived, on Easter

⁸³ Matt.13.43; Lk.20.34; Mk.10.30; 2Cor.4.7; Rom.8.18.

Day. People realised that there was one in their midst who, a short while before, had been living a mortal life like their own, but now... the future life evidently had already arrived.

The persistent dream of the human race is for a time of happiness and peace when the pain and agony of human history will be overcome. In Christian theology, heaven is determined by the Mystery of Christ. It is not a pre-existing place but the final, fulfilling relationship between God and ourselves, something already achieved in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, a condition waiting to be realised in the rest of humanity. The **Ascension**, the return of Christ to the Father = creation of Heaven. Heaven is total communion with Christ and with everything and everyone proper to Christ.

It is impossible to give a detailed picture of how a human being will experience the divine life. Scripture uses imagery intended to show depth, fullness and abundance of life. These should not be seen as definitions of heaven. At best, we know moments of fulfilment now, when we rise above the ordinary - experiences of love, joy and other creative insights. We should remember - "...it [the world] shared in our fall and must share in our redemption" - ["The World to Come" - Robert Gleason. 1958]. Rahner comments: "It [Beatific Vision] is the direct experience and loving affirmation of God... the ecstatic raising of cognition, without suppressing it, to the level of love" - when we will know as we are known.

Our future is a human future, and it requires both the resurrection of the body and a glorified life in "a new heaven and a new earth". If our ultimate fulfilment does not contain both spirit and matter then it is not *our* fulfilment [Rahner]. "Material" = we are inserted into the world and are in relation to it. We cannot lose this relation without becoming something other than our nature presently makes us.

Christ's second coming means the glorification of material creation "which is brought to participation in the perfection of the spirit" - [Theol. Invest.2. p.212]. The material world will not disappear but be transformed. The Kingdom = symbolises the ultimate relationship between God and the world. This is a future community of human beings with God that transcends social and political categories. It cannot be identified either with any plan we can evolve for ourselves or with any specific institution or event in history.

While there is no precise information about all this to guide us, the attitude of Jesus remains crucial for believers - radical trust in life-giving God. At one level Hope is passive, we are given our future as gift. But the gift of life requires an active response, what we make of ourselves through Grace is crucial. Hope challenges us to this in the presence of death, a life that is to be lived between cross and resurrection, in the power of the Spirit.

Paul sees the Risen Christ as the beginning of a new creation.⁸⁴ At last there is a human being truly in the image and likeness of God.⁸⁵ Jesus is not a one-off, he is the "first of many". The whole human race is destined to follow what has begun. In the Church, the Body of Christ, we have already entered

⁸⁴ 1Cor.15.45; Eph.2.15.

⁸⁵ Eph.4.24.

the new creation. Heaven is not the antithesis of earth, as if it has to be destroyed for heaven to appear. Earth gives way to heaven, not by disappearing, but by being transformed.

We need to shake off the idea that Jesus directs us towards a God who is not here but elsewhere: "*Serve the Lord; the pay isn't much but the retirement benefits are out of this world*". In his parables Jesus presents the Kingdom as living as we ought to live now, not at some future time. John substitutes "eternal life" for Kingdom, not life going on and on, but living in a way characteristic of God, now.⁸⁶

How realistic is this? Is not talking of heaven on earth a bad joke to those whose lives are empty, who know nothing of freedom or justice; who are diseased and starving; oppressed and persecuted, or just simply cannot cope? What sort of answer is it to promise them jam tomorrow, to say that love will eventually heal, when they have never experienced this healing love now?

A believer is one who faces this situation head-on, accepting responsibility for changing it now. "*Why doesn't somebody do something?*" - I am somebody! To believe in the Kingdom is to believe in life, not in half death.

To believe is to face the evil and misery of our day, and to show that the power of life is stronger. It means accepting the task to summon life out of so many moments of death. The basic imagery of heaven and eternal life, even in the poetic language of the Apocalypse, is not an escape to another world, but the transformation of this world, by living in it in the way the Resurrection makes possible for "those willing to become". For some this world is already heaven, for many it seems to be hell.

Judgement:

There is plenty of textual evidence both in OT and NT for seeing God not just promising good things, but also of punishing us if we do wrong.⁸⁷ There is a "judgement day". Are judgement and condemnation the alternative to salvation?

Judgement is not in opposition to love. A God without judgement is trivial. Can God who only loves and never passes judgement be taken seriously? Where would be the burning passion proper to love - the reality that there is nothing the lover will not endure for the beloved - even death. How is this essential quality to find expression? Without judgement all sense of holiness is lost, as well as all sense of the enormity of evil, presented as if it didn't really matter in the end since all is forgiven.

The Prophets looked forward to such a day of judgement, when we will have to render account. Matthew too is full of such references.⁸⁸ So too with the NT Letters. Indeed NT insists that judgement is for everyone, not simply for disbelievers. Matthew's account of the Last Judgement [25] is clear

⁸⁶ Jn.3.36; 6.33; 10.10; 1Jn.5.11.

⁸⁷ Ex.22.21; Jn.3.16-18.

⁸⁸ cf.Matt.3.7.

about this, when all will have to render an account for squandered talents. Judgement Day is never far below the surface in NT writings.⁸⁹

But we also have the clear declaration: "*God sent his Son into the world not to judge... but to save*", "*I judge no one.*" "*I have come not to judge the world but to save it*".⁹⁰ If Jesus does not judge neither does God, for he shows not how different he is from God, but how alike.

What Jesus preached was that the Day of the Lord has arrived. The "end times" are already here. Judgement has been passed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The fearful retribution has been avoided *because Jesus has delivered us from it*.⁹¹ Condemnation is not something imposed by God in response to our unbelief. Unbelief is itself condemnation: "*...whoever does not believe is judged already*".⁹²

We declare ourselves by our acceptance or rejection of the reality of Jesus. The death of Jesus represented the final rejection of him. Good Friday was the world's judgement day.⁹³ Judgement Day is not in the future, it has happened - the way that our world has opted to go is contrary to Life. To refuse the way of life, whether it is called Christian or not, is to opt for the opposite. N.B. we pass judgement on ourselves each day according to our own, personal option. This is where Jesus Christ is supremely relevant as Saviour: "*It is for judgement that I have come...*".⁹⁴

Jesus is forgiveness. If we were to sit down and work out God's options to our sin, we could come up with 4. 1. Extreme anger, bent on revenge. 2. Not so extreme, a controlled anger. 3. More generous than angry. 4. Total forgiveness.

Reaction of most - judging from history of Catechesis - rejects 1 as being repugnant, but equally is 4 rejected as being too incredible. So, we tend to veer between 2 and 3, even though NT totally repudiates both! If God forgives *because* we have repented, we have *earned* our forgiveness. Such a concept of "works" is alien to the doctrine of Grace. Forgiveness is what it says, *given before*, gratis, unearned. We are forgiven not because *we* are good but because God is good. God loves the world before it repents. Even with us, do parents stop loving a child who has done wrong?

So, where does this leave God's Justice? If God does not condemn sinners, how can God be just? What greater injustice can there be than to acquit the guilty? God is certainly not just in the way we understand the justice [*our honest reaction to 11th hour workers?*] – Mt.20.9.

⁸⁹ Heb.10.26.

⁹⁰ Jn.3.17; 8.15; 12.47.

⁹¹ 1Thess.1.10.

⁹² Jn.3.18-19.

⁹³ Jn.12.31.

⁹⁴ Jn.9.39.

Our understanding is of fair play, setting the balance right, to each their due, their pound of flesh. In fact the biblical word justice means the opposite! Justice is not the antithesis of mercy we tend to make it. Justice and righteousness are interchangeable: "*the Lord loves righteousness and justice*".⁹⁵ We misunderstand God's justice if we equate it with our own. God is not just when acting in accord with an external norm, but in accord with who God is. It is the nature of God to forgive, to save, to come to the aid of the needy. God is not loving *and* occasionally just. God is loving because God is always just.

So, what about the *wrath of God*? There is a proliferation of texts pointing this up. Interesting to note how things have developed: originally it was God who was angry, and we were shielded from it by Christ, then it seems that Christ's patience was running out, and it became Mary who is the shield... What happens when her patience runs out?

It is tempting to identify our enemies as the enemies of God. Yet there are texts which focus on God's anger, and it would be unbalanced to focus on mercy and ignore anger. Can they be reconciled? The term "anger" is metaphor, God does not wreak vengeance on the sinner. God's only response is to love sinners back towards life, only asking they do the same.

Hell:

Hell is considered to be the fruit of God's anger, it exists to receive the victims of this rage. God's anger features both in OT and NT, and NT probably outshines in developing the theme of punishment. It is a contradiction to suggest that love has limits, it is equally absurd to suggest, as preachers tend to do, that the dire warnings referred to are spoken in love!

What are we to make of the hell texts? The hell-fire texts are presumably trying to say something about the seriousness of God's love, because that is all there is in God. God loves everyone uniquely and individually, that is why they exist. Love does not have a big stick, just in case! But we can and we do punish ourselves, and we fool ourselves if we think that lack of love in our living, and betrayal of loving in our relating will do anything other than diminish and destroy us as persons. We cannot simply drop talking about hell, or even dilute it. It must be taken seriously as the reality of the frightening things we can do to ourselves. There is no place or a state where certain people will be excluded from the presence of God. But we can so de-sensitise ourselves as to be unable to experience the love into which we are certainly going.

The eternity of hell is often queried. Hell is what most certainly would be my lot if God does not rescue me from my self-destructive tendencies. The Good News is that God has always and will always break the chains with which we would bind ourselves. I will always be free to oppose God, but the enmity is entirely my own doing.

There never will be a time when I am not big enough for God. Faith means believing that love will eventually overcome the most obdurate, not by any suggestion of coercion, but solely through persuasion, since love is stronger than the most violent resistance - such is the Resurrection.

⁹⁵ Ps.33.5; 89.14; 101.1. etc.

Hell-language, like judgement-language, is more about the present than the future. It describes not what will happen to people after death but *what is happening now*, and who would question that. Julian of Norwich, accused of heresy for questioning the official line that some - like "the perfidious Jews" - were consigned forever to hell, simply repeated what the Lord said to her: "...but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well". She was convinced that, whatever theologians might say, even the pain of remorse for sin could not last for ever, and that love must ultimately triumph.

What does this say about the devil, if there is no literal hell to preside over, is he redundant? The devil plays little part in OT but had acquired quite a grip by end of NT era [mentioned 67 times]. He is mentioned as the source of disease, tempter, destroyer, liar... who has gained control of the world. Jesus concludes the Our Father with the plea not to be delivered to the evil one.

In the context of contemporary interest in the occult, it would seem that, for many, Satan is a safer bet than God. Undeniably the word Satan stands for much more tangible experiences than does the word God. We are familiar with "*God is in his heaven and all is right with the world*". Everything is not all right with the world, that is obvious. That is also the Good News!

Everything is not all right, but that is all right. There is a vast network of evil for which no individual or group can be held responsible, and is much more than the sum total of personal sin. Sickness affects the just and the unjust alike. The power for doing harm is far greater than personal malice.

There is a corporate evil from which not even the innocent can escape. It is part of the cost of being of the human community. The new-born inhales it with the very first breath. Even Jesus could not evade it. It is to this radical evil that we have given the name Satan - "Adversary". The dramatic personification underlines the fact that we experience this as a kind of personal malevolence. Yet this evil is not embodied in an individual. The reality is much more fearful.

In no way should we abandon talking about the devil. It is a salutary reminder of the superhuman forces in which the world is trapped. We cannot deal with the demonic in the world simply by converting individuals from personal faults. Our predicament is not just the product of individual sin. The trouble lies deeper and can only be dealt with by creating a new way of being human, one in which collective goodness predominates over the "sin of the world".

The *Good News* is this is what has happened in Jesus. In his life and self-giving a new and liberating image of God is present with us. We need no longer be prisoners of our past. The Resurrection proclaims that no power can resist what is achieved in human beings through the Spirit.⁹⁶

To sum up: themes of judgement, wrath, devil, hell are part of God's message to us. They are shadows thrown by themes of salvation, forgiveness, love, heaven... Without the shadows the themes would lack substance. These shadows do not qualify the themes, as if God saves, loves, forgives... up to a point. Judgement, wrath, hell, devil... are not held over us to ensure compliance. The Good News is far greater, judgement has already been passed, the wrath is not to come, hell has been emptied and the devil overcome. In Jesus God is revealed totally as the undeviating forgiver of sin.

⁹⁶ Lk.10.18; Jn.12.31; 16.11; Matt.28.18; Col.1.13.

Evil continues to be a dimension of history, even in the lives of good people. It has the power to reduce our world to the chaos out of which the Creator originally rescued it. This creative act is the foundation of hope. The love that overcame the primal darkness, drawing a new living universe from it, which brought the living Christ from the tomb, is stronger than all contrary powers. The lovelessness of hell is a perfect image of what we can achieve unaided. But it can never be a description of any sort of reality that will actually come about, because there is no place in it for the love that is there before it started, and will remain when it is all gone.

Statements about Hell require the full context of the Gospel. Central to the Gospel is the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus in which God is revealed as the saving God. The word *Heaven* is metaphor for this reality accomplished. *Hell* expresses the real possibility that a person can close self off from this. Most theologians see the possibility of such definitive rejection as bound up essentially with human freedom. But it remains an open question as to whether any human being has ever taken that option.

Despite the enormous authority of S Augustine, the Church has never accepted the doctrine of a double predestination. The conviction that some have been saved is reflected in the cult of the saints, there has never been a negative conviction parallel to this concerning the real damnation of any individual.

Rahner deems it inappropriate to see hell as vindictive punishment, the sort used by societies. Yet the possibility reflected by use of *Hell* must be maintained. That this will be eternal springs from human stubbornness grounded in human freedom.

Eternal is not the endless duration of time after the history of freedom, but is the definitive fruit of history. Rahner maintains that hell is not a punishment added on, a kind of arbitrary punishment - God is *active* in Hell only in so far as not releasing the person from the fruits of free choice, even though this is contrary to God's intent for that person. If freedom is freedom to love, it must inevitably include freedom not to do so.

Rahner reflects the common majority opinion among Catholic Theologians re the possibility of hell as eternal separation from God as a necessary conclusion from human freedom. This is the majority view - from the time of Origen there has been a minority who believe an *eternal* hell to be repugnant to a God of love, and that eventually all will be saved - a doctrine known as *Universalism* - which Rahner rejects as *presumptuous*. He says that freedom does not mean that we can always revise decisions - freedom is the "*the possibility of positing the definitive*" [Theol. Encyc. p.604]. He believes that death is the moment of final and irrevocable decision, and that eternity is the definitive fruit of history.

In death each person either ratifies or reverses the fundamental choice carried through life. Can a human being really and finally reject love? Human experience offers many examples of people who seem capable of this! A weakness in the *Universalist* argument appears to be that it does not see God deliberately choosing to be dependent on the historical response of creatures.

Christ will come again:

Every Advent we are confronted with *Maranatha*, and it seems to have little impact! Paul urges his friends to be faithful "*until Christ comes*". It was reasonable for the Christians of that first era to be

at fever pitch for the coming of Christ, they were within hearing range of the original promise. By year 60 it was wearing thin, and it was gradually disappearing from Paul's writings. So, what about us? What are we to make of *Maranatha*? Some reluctance is explained by what was reflected on re judgement. If Christ comes as judge, then my enthusiasm will be tempered by my track record.⁹⁷

When Christians started calling Jesus "Lord" [OT title] they looked for the "Day of the Lord"⁹⁸ as the realisation of hopes and dreams. The supposition seemed to be that the first coming of Christ had fallen short. The promises would happen with an unambiguous coming of Christ in glory and power.⁹⁹ The sense of immediacy was obvious.¹⁰⁰

This forms the basis for the Second Coming as part of Christian Faith. Our Father speaks of the Kingdom to come, the Creed professes that Christ will come again in glory - *Maranatha* [Aramaic = "Come, Lord..."].¹⁰¹ The first day of the week became the Lord's Day, to mark the fact that Christians met to anticipate the Day of the Lord.

Parousia is a familiar word. It means "arrival" or "presence". It meant the visitation of the Emperor in Roman times. The Christians of the early Church expected this to happen so imminently that they lamented that those who had died had not lived to see the Day. Paul wrote 1Thessalonians to comfort them. So fired up were they that he wrote the Second Letter to calm them down. They were giving up work and simply sitting back and waiting.¹⁰²

In fact, though early NT days focused strongly on Parousia, there is very little by way of information. Indeed Paul, initially so enthusiastic, gradually drops the subject from his later writings. It is to be expected that, as time went on, expectations would change. But what about 2000 years later? Today's Christians who hope for the Day of the Lord, do so very much in the Jewish spirit of the advent of the Messiah, which appears to be going on forever! [It is said that the Rabbis refused a pay-rise for the Watchman of the Lord because of the permanent nature of his employment!].

It stands repetition: Paul gave up his earlier hope of the Parousia in Our Time. His later theme of a Coming of Christ in the present was *not placed alongside* his earlier theme of a Future Coming. It was not one balancing the other, but one replacing the other.

⁹⁷ Amos.3.2; 5.18.

⁹⁸ 1Cor.1.8; Phil.1.6, 10.

⁹⁹ Mk.13; Matt.24-25; Lk.21.

¹⁰⁰ Rom.13.11; 1Cor.7.29; Gal.6.10; Phil.4.5; Heb.10.25.etc.

¹⁰¹ 1Cor.16.22.

¹⁰² 2Thess.2.1-15.

The heart of faith in the Parousia is the conviction, not about a future that is unknown, but about what is being experienced as present. It is belief in what was ultimately true and decisive as available now.

Christ is not a distant goal but a present reality, the soul of everyday living. In the life of Jesus of Nazareth God has said all that there is to be said, there is nothing more to be said in the future. In Christ, history has already achieved its purpose. No matter how long the world has to run we are already in the end-times. The end of the world is not speculative - will it, wont it - it is achieved. In Jesus Christ the created humanity and the uncreated divinity - which is the purpose of Creation - is achieved. What is in him *can be* in the rest of creation.

Christ comes not when life comes to an end, but when he is met in the thick of life now. The Second Coming is not a fixed future event, it is a reality everyday, a resurrection which takes place now rather than later.

The Last Things are not in the future, but realised in the present ["Realised Eschatology"]. The most powerful evidence for this is S John: "*The hour is coming, and now is...*"¹⁰³ According to John we do know the hour. It happened when Daniel's Son of Man was glorified on the cross, and continues to be present wherever the cross is embraced through the challenges of life.

The promised day will indeed dawn, but it is the day when individuals find themselves confronted by Jesus Christ face to face.¹⁰⁴ And the accompanying response to this encounter constitutes the judgement.¹⁰⁵ Jesus will return, and very soon after his departure! They did see him "*in a little while*". The trumpet will sound, it is the call from within life to respond differently.¹⁰⁶ And the dead will rise into eternal life, but it happens while people are still alive and recognise Jesus as their resurrection, realising that eternal life is seeing God as Christ sees God - God is Abba, and he/we are beloved.¹⁰⁷ The Glory of Jesus is already present in his life and most especially on the cross.¹⁰⁸

The most significant of John's re-modelling of the Last Things is his account of the Last Supper. The other accounts look to the future. John's account makes no sense if it is not present now. By this time it had become obvious that Jesus was not about to come again. John is not correcting Jesus' promise but changing earlier interpretations [Gospel] of it. The parables indicate this: a harvest ready for

¹⁰³ Jn.4.23; 5.25; 16.32; 17.1. etc.

¹⁰⁴ Jn.8.56.

¹⁰⁵ Jn.3.18; 9.39; 12.31; 16.11.

¹⁰⁶ Jn.5.25; 11.43.

¹⁰⁷ Rom.8.15; Jn.3.36; 5.24; 6.47; 14.6; 17.3.

¹⁰⁸ Jn.7.39; 17.1.

reaping - *now*; a dragnet pulled in - *now*; a treasure findable - *now*; an employee under notice of dismissal - *now*!¹⁰⁹ There is no doubting that *now is the acceptable time*.

Then what?

If now is the acceptable time, what about the future? A universe governed by rigid scientific laws has little if any room for a resurrected life. We obviously require a healthy non-conformism, but is it justified? No one has returned from the grave to tell us all about it, or indeed has come back from the future to let us know that all will be well. For all the inspiration of the poet, which often exceeds that of the theologian, we end up with mystery.

Theology requires metaphor for expression, such is the limitation of language. We cannot speak of God literally. But this does not mean we cannot say anything, though what we do say will be symbolic and inadequate. It is no more literally true to say that after death we continue to exist than to say that before birth we pre-existed. In literal fact each individual existence has an end, just as it has a beginning. Eternal life does not simply follow-on, taking over when historical life stops.

With no factual information, simply figurative language, what can the writers say in the Scriptures? They use their present experience to picture [project] the future as on a distant screen. They had to do the same in order to come up with a picture of the beginnings, about which they had no factual information either. The picture they painted was the result of seeing their *present* in the context of God, and ran this experience back towards beginnings. Creation as they knew it was always in God's hands, and humankind has always struggled with God for control of it. Though the texts seem to be talking about the past they are talking about the present.

Likewise the texts about the end times seem to be talking about the future, whereas they are talking about the present in the future tense. The writers had no information about what happens beyond death. What they did have was their present experience of God's loving presence, and the *certainty* that, not only was it stronger than death, but was constantly creating new life out of the nothingness of death.

The conviction that this was not just spasmodic, but persistently and eternally so, could only be conveyed by projecting this present experience of love into the future. Such a vivid picture might create the impression that the future is where it will all happen, but the hoped-for realities are in the present. Life's purpose is not dependent on an unknown future. The whole of it is on offer now as an *experience*, not information.

Look at the Apocalypse - image after image of good conquering evil projected onto the future, the final salvation of the blessed and the triumph of God. Try to read it against the background of Paul's understanding:

"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised,

¹⁰⁹ Jn.7.6.

*who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*¹¹⁰

Paul is not talking about what has been revealed to him from the other side, but *his present experience* of the presence of God. His conviction is not based on privileged information but on his own experience: the love of God as he has witnessed it in his life through Jesus Christ. This is what enables him to make predictions beyond death.

Whatever the future carries it will never invalidate the one reality he *knows* to be true. He has already had a taste of life after dying through the many deaths he has already endured. Ask him head-on what is going to happen to you when you die, he would answer: *"I do not know, but God has never disappointed me yet. What I do know is that I shall be held within total love"*.

Fine! But what does this *feel* like? What form of existence will it take? A guess-work answer would be preferable to nothing at all! We have something a little more secure than guess-work! Let us look at the different ways people live-on after death: In the memories of friends and relatives, tenuous it might be but it is more than nothing! Such remembering does produce effects: how often do we hear *"we owe it to his/her memory..."*? Yet memories fade, and those who remember die themselves.

Is there not a more lasting way? People live-on in the impact they have left on the world, as someone remarked even moving a stone changes the environment, so what must be the imprint left by people? e.g. the inventor of the wheel! People live-on in their offspring and disciples, how often have you read: *"the one we lose is no longer where he was before; he is now wherever we are"*¹¹¹ Were it not for the power of the dead to live on in their achievements each generation would have to start afresh. People live-on in the wider community in which they played their part...

In a more speculative area... Christ's Resurrection is misunderstood if it is seen as something added onto his death. *"The Resurrection is not the next event after the passion and death. It is the manifestation of what happened in the death"*.¹¹² It is not a second life he embarks upon, but the one life he lived, now seen with the eyes of God - i.e. now revealed for what it eternally is.

The Resurrection we look forward to at death should not be envisaged as another life added on to this one, like moving into a newly built extension. It is this life seen finally as God sees it. To hope for

¹¹⁰ Rom.8.31-39.

¹¹¹ John Chrysostom.

¹¹² "Theological Investigations IV". Rahner. DLT.p.128.

resurrection is to hope that the life I have lived will be raised before God, and recognised as contributing to the Kingdom.

Through death we enter into a new dimension. Instead of being insulated from the world around us, we enter into it through deep communion, totally one-with. Does this cause disquiet? Is there something pantheistic here, the individual swallowed up in the whole? Can I really look forward to losing my individuality?

My true self does not consist in individual separateness, as is the case with "things", but in my ability to communicate. Personality is real only in the context of others, in relationship with others; if that relationship is able to extend to all, then personality is enriched and not diminished. If I desire to share all of myself, willing to surrender my separateness, holding nothing back, this is the epitome of love. Is not this the description of God, in whose image and likeness I am made? Truly, in losing my life will I find it?

Does it sound like pious jargon to speak of living-on after death in the mind of God? It is meant to point out that beyond that which comes to an end, there is not simply nothing. There is God. We do not die into nothingness. As a believer I am not someone who knows what lies beyond death. I am someone who is convinced that the God who had the first word that started me, will also have the last word that completes me. I believe that the God who called me from nothing into being, will go on calling me from the many experiences of nothing, most especially the nothingness of death into the fullness of life he created me to enjoy. God is God of the end as well as God of the beginning - Alpha and Omega.

As long as I am living in this world, I experience a tension between the mystery of evil and its redemption – I experience myself both as crucifier and crucified [*sinner and sinned against*]. It is through *the cross that my sin becomes my redemption. Christ was made sin for us. 2Cor.5.21*. It is in embracing my sin that God gets through to me – loving me at my very worst [*Christ crucified*] removing all possible doubt that I am truly lovable. The power that we call *almighty* is not the ability to do everything, but *the ability to give self away totally for the sake of another*.

Redemption is coterminous with life, growing in an ever-greater awareness of the reality of God - not just our version of God. It is already in us, created by God, we have God's DNA. The Word has to become flesh. Which is why Paul says our salvation is not assured - *For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins* – Heb.10.26-27. *You have conceived through Word and Sacrament – bring him to birth by the way you live* – S Francis.

So much of popular fiction ends in *redemptive violence*, when *apparent* good is more violent than the vanquished evil. The hero starts out as Francis of Assisi and ends up as Rambo. We need vigilance if we are not to confuse redemption with redemptive violence. Peace with justice doesn't come through deciding winners and losers, but through fidelity to the new way of living... The Gospel insists we seek peace with justice, it doesn't say we have to be *winners!* See redemptive violence in the Inquisition, the Crusades, wars waged in the name of God, people burned at the stake!

Redemption crucially involves recognising that death is not just something inevitable that terminates life. It is integral to life, present from birth; that I will die is the only thing certain after birth; - this is what mortality means. The new way Jesus brought involves walking fully within our mortality, right

through death into eternal life. The invitation to immortality is not an assurance that I will not die, *but the promise that I will not remain dead*, and that the very process of dying - and only this - issues into such redemptive living.

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

[Words on a scrap of paper found in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp].

To speak of Redemption is to say that not everything about us and our world is irrevocably lost. There is a core of goodness which can be got at and set free. God can transform the old into the new, the sinner into the saint

We feel a natural guilt about our past sin when we contemplate the cross. I would like to be rid of my sinful past. But, I cannot do it by myself! And yet the idea of an innocent person carrying my sin - suffering and dying for it... is something I am trapped within. Until - I become aware of what redemption really does mean. It is through his death on the cross and in the Resurrection, when Jesus has gone before me into my future, without my sin. Waiting for me, urging me to focus solely on the reality, where Christ is, carrying nothing of my sin, simply the love which God has always had for me and which he simply asks me to believe.

The Redemption he brought was *the way he lived and died a full human life*. With his final words, he hands over his own Spirit, the very love-life of God, so that we can live like him, live differently, become fully alive.

Life is openness to relationships, splendid in harmony exciting in possibilities, linking everyone into that unity that depends as for its essence on the diversity of each being honoured, desired and respected. All equal, but none are the same. This is redemption. Redemption is what Salvation feels like! A unique, and tailor-made way of enjoying life. *I have come to bring abundant life* – Jn.10.10.