

Things Hidden

[Thankyou Richard {Rohr, ofm}]

What our world needs today is ordinary folk who do ordinary things extraordinarily well. People who are very ordinary, yet unique. People who have learned from life that it is freely given as gift of the Giver, who has a few suggestions as to what we can do about it. A wise man said *people with all the answers rob us of astonishment* – truly our God is always surprising; if we be still long enough to know this – Ps.46.10.

The Bible is an anthology of books and letters – and left to itself remains a perpetual source of astonishment, because *it is for change not intellectual satisfaction*. Ideas are never a problem – they can be easy come, easy go. Experience is different. Experience changes us, but we are not too keen to change! Revelation, God's self-revealing is the offer of a unique experience. Sadly, we have made the Bible a reference book, ideas to ponder and quote. Revelation is the invitation to see reality from God's point of view – a completely different way of seeing.

The 4 Evangelists, along with Paul, use a special name for it – *Gospel*; which we commonly understand to mean Good News. The word isn't new – it was first used in a war-torn world, where it was a message home of victory in the field; something good for the winning side. Obviously, Jesus' message is Good News – with a difference – no winners or losers, simply good news for all.

For this to be so, he told us that we need to hear it as with a child's mind, meaning with the eager curiosity of a child. If we remain locked-into concern for ourselves and for those like us, if we are seeking an insurance policy, there will be nothing new in the Gospel for us. This is when Gospel becomes religion, something we have come to expect rather than be surprised or astonished. With this in mind, some have said Jesus came to end religion – it's probably nearer the mark to say end religion *as it was* – an attempt to reassure us that nothing new would happen; telling us which buttons to press to keep God predictable.

For the greater part of history God wasn't *likeable* – which is why every time God breaks through our history it starts with *do not be afraid*. Why? Because we have always been afraid of God – and afraid for ourselves as a result. When God appeared on the scene for most people it wasn't good news. There was always *who is in for it now* about it. Even today many feel we have to earn God's love – *Lord, I'm not worthy* – to which God is constantly saying *so what?* God is hoping for genuine willingness – which he found more among the sinners than among the righteous.

On reflection, it seems the majority of believers still are apprehensive in approaching God – after all, God has all the power! *The only way this will change is for God to change the power equation that has dominated for centuries, by inviting us to be with him as equals, and with God sharing our vulnerability*. This power change is Jesus. This unthinkable equality relationship is already implanted through the Jewish understanding of covenant love.

Ancient religions sought to appease/control God through human sacrifice. Around the time of Abraham this matures into animal sacrifice to appease the vengeful God. In more modern times there has been a shift to various expressions of self-sacrifice, because we all know something has to happen to win God for us. We don't believe that God can love what God created – which brings overwhelming shame to a guilt-ridden Church.

By contrast, Revelation shows God to be totally other than our thinking. *God is not only stranger than we think, but stranger than we can think!* God really is Good News, is consistently merciful, forgiving and steadfast in love – full of surprises. It has taken generations for this to reach faith level: *knowing it to be true for ourselves* – is gift for those who genuinely seek, pray and often suffer. Otherwise words like *mercy, forgiveness and steadfast in love* are little more than pious ejaculations. Without this inner core religion remains ritual, moralistic and doctrinaire – for unhappy folk.

The written text itself doesn't just give answers, but it does contain hidden meaning, which brings freshness and something ever new when we take time to be still and let them sink in. They have nothing to offer as proof texts for external religious practices. It is salutary to remember that neither Pope nor Bible-quote can substitute for my personal responsibility. We often wish the Bible was a ready-made book of answers. Just give us the answers and not so much books like Kings, Leviticus and Chronicles and all the letters written by Paul – what can out-of-date history and science help us with?

The wonder of revelation is that it doesn't just give answers. It gives the process to get there; and authority to trust the process. Like living, Scripture-living is three steps forward and two steps back: i.e. it gets to the point and then loses or doubts it. Our task is to see where the forward-steps are heading – invariably towards *inclusive* living and forgiveness – which puts our steps-backwards into perspective – revenge, exclusions and various forms of pettiness.

To experience this is to see how God is working in life – and stops us substituting the text for the inner spirit: *who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life* – 2Cor.3.6. If we believe in inspiration, the trust that Spirit is leading and guiding yet *through a glass darkly* -1Cor.13.12 – we will follow his lead, and arrive where we have never been before, among the great themes of Revelation.

When we get to Jesus risen from the dead we *see with new eyes* there is nothing to be afraid of in God – as he is *after he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained* – Jn.20.20-23. It is not God who has changed. We slowly start to believe in God as God is. Do not pray the Scriptures searching for specific conclusions, this simply affirms our false self in its safety-first.

It takes some reflection time when reading to have us move beyond our ego-centric self which is accusatory and has need to blame – but the text will eventually respond to both mature and immature reactions by letting us appreciate the difference. Life is not a straight line to God. The seeking involves getting and missing the point, but God is present to all of it and evidence of mercy and steadfast love will emerge once I am still, in order for this to get through.

I will recognise the hackneyed moralisms and pieties at surface level – all hear and no head – it is nice and sweet, but isn't going to change anything; then there is the awareness of not so much loving God as talking about God, when formula replaces inner authority. We need a place between these two that indicates an inner value and where humility is needed, to keep us away from ready-made answers.

Einstein said the crucial question is: *are we related to something or not?* Revelation says we are *essentially* related to something infinite; we cannot appreciate the full meaning of life until we see we are a single strand in a larger tapestry – today's astrophysicists and social biologists are saying the same. The Bible says we are part of something infinite, and we become aware of this in an ingenious way – what we understand as Grace. God always comes as one who is *totally hidden yet perfectly revealed!* It is never forced upon us, and we do not have to see it if we do not want to.

Generally speaking religion had us expect to come to God by discovering spiritual locations, right ritual and appropriate words. Correct behaviour would bring us to God, or God to us. In this sense God's love is always contingent, with the *clever* always seen as the winners – find the right answers and God will love you. By contrast Jesus tells us what we seem to lose as we move into adult life is *poverty of spirit*. We come to God through the actual *now* of life. The Bible moves us from the sacred place [why the Temple had to go] or sacred action [why Law had to be relativized] or belief systems [why Jesus had no preconditions] *I am with you always, even to the end of time* – Mt.28.20.

The now of life reveals the ways of Grace. Moving from preoccupation with getting it right – from perfect action to *naked presence* [they hid because they were naked – Gen.3.7.]. *Stay awake* are some of the last words of Jesus to the apostles. You don't have to be in a certain place or even be a perfect person to experience God's complete presence. God is always present to those who know how to be present themselves. Our experiences transform us if we are willing to stay with them all the way.

Reading Books like Kings, Chronicles, Leviticus, Numbers and Revelation, we hear about sin and violence, intrigue and deceit – the sad events of daily living. These books are telling us that *God comes disguised as our life*; sadly, for most of us this is a disappointment! We prefer going to Church. God's presence is always concrete and specific. Revelation is not something to be measured, but someone to meet – the mystery of Incarnation in an ordinary-looking-man named Jesus.

It is not so much as becoming more spiritual as becoming more human. The Bible says we are already spiritual, but don't yet realise it. The Bible lets us in on the secret of God revealed in the ordinary. Jesus came to give the lie to our tendency to separate what we call spiritual and non-spiritual. The

Incarnation proclaims that matter and spirit have never been separated – these two seemingly different worlds have always been one.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone – Eph.2.11-20.

In the Bible God picks up wounded lives of ordinary folk who would never stand the rigours of the canonisation process. Moses, Deborah, Elijah, Paul and Esther were all complicit in murder; David an adulterer and a liar; we have neurotic prophets [Ezekiel, Obadiah and Jeremiah] a plethora of evil kings and warriors – yet God works with all of them. The Jewish people only had their faith in Yahweh guiding them – Biblical faith leaves us vulnerable with no place to hide. We prefer abstractions over the actual – we can hide behind them; the Incarnation leaves us exposed and invited. Once I agree to live my experiencing I discover that God is always found in the actual – provided I experience the negative as well as the positive experiences. Notice how Jesus does this when tempted for 40 days. There is always some level of attraction and conflict in temptation.

The Jewish people kept the negative as well as the positive in their Scriptures – they kept their evil and arrogant kings, their over critical prophets inside their Bible. They read about them publicly, and still do; passages that didn't tell them how wonderful they are, but how terrible they were. Reading the Scriptures this way provides the capacity for *self-critical* thinking. Critical thinking is typical of the Western mind, producing scientific and industrial revolutions, as well as the Reformation.

Self-criticism keeps religion from its natural tendency towards arrogant self-assurance. The Jewish people had an uncommon power to stand their ground, alone with God, before any negatives. *They made religion out of their worst moments, which is why they have survived, even after the Holocaust.* But we need to realise just how courageous this was. Imagine Moses telling them when faced with the

Red Sea – *remain still, Yahweh will be fighting for you* – Ex.14.14. *No one who has trusted in Yahweh has been put to shame* – Ps.25.3. Much of Christian history has been unable to do the same, while considering itself superior to Judaism.

We are constantly tempted not to trust in God, *but to trust in our faith tradition of trusting in God*. They are not the same. Faith is often in our tradition in which we talk about saints and theologians who have trusted in God – a clever way to avoid the experience itself, to avoid frightening encounters with God, avoid the ongoing Incarnation – *now is the acceptable time!* We trust the past for its own sake, as if God came to earth to protect our traditions – Mt.15.3 says otherwise: *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition* – Mt.15.3.

Tradition is the way of surrender to the ever new mystery of God-with-us, and, therefore, is always a tradition of not knowing [*cloud of unknowing*] – which is true faith: *the freedom not to know because I am known more fully than I know or need to know* – 1Cor.13.12. Sadly religion has turned this biblical understanding of faith to mean the very opposite, into a tradition of knowing with complete predictability about God. We know what God is going to say next – God is no longer free, but must follow our rules and expectations. If God is not free we are in trouble, because forgiveness means what we want it to mean.

Israel did not distance itself from the contradictions of life, from the horrors of human history – which became the cross in Jesus. They had faced all this in stories like Job, their own experience of exile and constant occupation by foreign forces. They must have felt like saying what Teresa of Avila said: *If this is the way you treat your friends I would hate to see your enemies*.

The genius of Scripture is that instead of giving us *seven habits for highly motivated people*, it gives us permission to take ownership of our own story. We can *take our own* lives seriously, the good and the bad, because God has already done it. We are not trapped inside our culture, or in our pain and hurts. We belong to the big picture, where nothing is irrelevant and all is employed to bring us to life. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God. Everything *small* about us looms large within the big picture: *Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own* – Phil.3.11.

Our hurts and wounds take on *real* meaning when seen in the context of *the* story. The Christian tradition reaches its climax in Jesus crucified when human pain and suffering find true and positive meaning – such is the theme of *Song of Songs* [Chapters 42-53], along with story of Jonah and Job. The story of Job is both the summit and *summary of OT faith* response to human suffering. The story of Jesus is like the story of Jeremiah, who speaks out but is not appreciated. Jesus is Job – crucified.

Pain needs us to go down before we realise what is up. Suffering seems to be the only thing strong enough to destabilise our arrogance [*suffering has been described as whenever I am not in control*]. If religion cannot find a meaning for human suffering we are in deep trouble. Religion shows us what

to do with the absurd, the unjust and the unfair: *if we do not transform our pain, we will most certainly transmit it*. If we cannot make our wounds sacred we become negative and bitter. The hurts, betrayals, disappointments all pile up and leave us helpless.

If there is no way to find God in all this somewhere we will close down. The natural instinct of the ego is to protect itself from being hurt again. Biblical revelation is about this transformation so that we do not keep handing the pain on to the next generation. Jewish faith believed that our smaller stories have a bigger story that holds them together. How?

Genesis, by no means the oldest book, holds our creation story. Some people have creation happening by spontaneous combustion, or even by a violent act. *Our creation story* proclaims we are made in the image and likeness of God. This is our foundation. If it is true that our human family origin is divine, and God saw this as good – then our origin is original grace not original sin. We do have a place to go home to. *Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is* – 1Jn.3.2.

To live the Gospel we must get things right. What is the *self* I am working with? Is my DNA divine? The task of religion is to communicate unity, belonging – not worthiness. The Bible calls lack of unity [apart] sin. The word *sin* has many unhelpful connotations. For most of us it is not alienation or separation, it is simply bad behaviour and personal unworthiness. Which are merely symptoms. Disconnected people do stupid things; but what has to be addressed is our presumed autonomy, any life *outside the garden*. We can never get worthy, but we can reconnect to our true origin.

Sin is the loss of any *awareness* of who we are in God. This “who” I cannot earn or buy; it is nothing I can work up to – *because I already have it!* Revelation is awakening rather than accomplishing. *We cannot get there, we can only be there*. However, the ego is a problem making religion into a worthiness contest. Whereas intimacy with God is more about awareness – conversion through not a little humility. It is not *if* I am moral, *then* I will be loved by God, but I must first experience love and being moral will naturally follow.

Reading Scripture inspirationally helps us realise ever more that we are the beloved of Abba. The written words are inspired insofar as they inspire [*change*] us – they *breathe* into us a larger life. Many believe in inspired texts that are lifeless, without the breath blown into the nostrils of Adam – Gen.2.7. *They approach me only in words [lip service]* – Is.29.13; Mt.15.8. God is not afraid of mistakes – for everything can be turned into good – where Grace is concerned there are no dead-ends. We can eat of almost all the trees: *For freedom Christ has set us free* – Gal.5.1.

God's problem is how to give away God! To which we say – *Lord, I'm not worthy... I prefer a religion achieved by my own efforts*. Notice in the Annunciation narrative, Mary doesn't say she's not worthy – she asks for clarification – Lk.1.26. She asks *how* because something more might be being asked of her – she never asks *why*. She is able to say an unquestioning yes to an utterly free gift.

Original shame

The first act of revelation is creation. God initially speaks through what is. In the Biblical account creation is done over seven days, almost intuiting evolution. Creation happened over time and the Biblical assertion is that God started it all. The how, when and where is not its concern, only *that*. Genesis makes no claim to be a scientific account. It is a spiritual account of the meaning and source of creation. But dualistic thinking needs an either/or; knowing through differentiation; unable to see the whole, only the parts.

On days 3-7 God sees it as good – but this is not said on days 1 and 2. Day one separates dark from light; day two separates heaven above from earth below. The Bible doesn't say it is good, because it isn't. The rest of the Bible will be about putting those seeming opposites – dark/light, heaven/earth, flesh/spirit – back together in one place. They have never been separate, but sin thinks they are. The Franciscan message – all things mirror and reflect the Creator – in creation spirituality.

The human ones will be where angels ascend and descend – Jn.1.51 – where creation will come to free consciousness. The humiliation that we all carry is that we are a mass of contradictions. We are, before all else, a blessing; but we are well aware it is a mixed blessing – Original Sin, a doctrine many dislike – whatever we call it, we do have a sense of being inadequate. The word sin implies culpability, which is not what the doctrine wants to say! The precise meaning is that we are *not* culpable for it, but that we are wounded by it. It names my inner conflict so that I will not be shocked or surprised when it shows itself.

Adam and Eve – simply act out the mass of contradictions we all are: *So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man* – 1Cor.15.45-49.

Paul sees both Adam and Christ as summaries of humanity. What happens in them must happen in all; not *just then* but always *now*. If you know you are a mixed blessing, filled with contradictions, a mystery to yourself, you won't pretend to eliminate all that is unworthy, but heed Jesus' advice: *let them both grow together until harvest time* – Mt.13.30. But without humility we become zealots: on the left for communism and on the right for Nazism.

Jesus told us not to pull out the weeds – Mt.13.29 – lest we also lull out the wheat; sound spirituality [and psychology]. In Gen.1.26 God says *Let us make humanity in our own image* – note the use of the plural form, as if intuiting the Trinity, *God as relationship, the perfect mystery of total giving and*

receiving. It is interesting that physicists, molecular biologists and astronomers are more in tune with this universal pattern than Christian believers.

God isn't looking for servants or contestants to play the game – God is looking simply for images to walk around the earth. There are two major manifestations of the divine image – *male and female he made them* – Gen.1.27. This is as if God is saying *all I want is some out there who will communicate who I am, what I am about and what is happening in God: Is.43.10 says you are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he*

All morality is simply the imitation of God – *not those who do it right go to heaven, but those who live like me are already in heaven*. God wants us to carry the mystery – the burden of sin simultaneously with the assurance of glory, people who can hold the paradox of incarnation – flesh and spirit, divine and human, joy and sorrow simultaneously. Only then will creation be good again – including the first two days. Forgiveness is the one event carrying three graced experiences: God's totally available goodness; the deep-down goodness of the one you have forgiven and the joy and peace of your own goodness experienced through doing this.

The story of Original Sin is in Genesis 2 – where it doesn't look like sin at all – surely wanting knowledge is a good thing? Why would that be a sin? What was Jesus warning us against: *Do not judge, so that you may not be judged? For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get* – Mt.7.1-2. When we start from our judgment love seldom happens – the mind is master instead of servant. This becomes seeking to control. This is why God said don't do it! He is trying to save us from our need for certitude. This is what we have done to faith – *demanding to know, insisting that I know I am right* – which is its exact opposite of faith-living.

As Jesus shows, *real* humanity is being able to live with ambiguity and inconsistency – instead of dividing into good and bad guys, which leads inevitably to persecution and violence. Sadly, the mistaken view of religion has been the justification for so much violence throughout history. Whereas not-knowing and not needing to know is a *deeper knowing* that leads to compassion – it is a different form of knowledge that emerges from within *the cloud of unknowing*. Perhaps this is why false moral certitude is presented as Original Sin, as it prevents the way to love: *And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love* – 1Cor.13.13.

So – what is the fall? It is not something that happened at one historical moment to Adam and Eve. It happens at all moments of life. It will happen to all of us. It is in falling down that we learn what matters spiritually; as so many parables say: you have to lose it before you can find it and appreciate it properly. All of Luke 15 is worth reading on this [*lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son*]. In Genesis the Evil One makes Eve suspicious – suspicion starts the unravelling in all relationships.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you

covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask – Jas.4.1. Suspicion always finds evidence for what it suspects. When Genesis says their eyes were opened – 3.7 – what they saw was a divided universe, which always happens when we see ourselves over and against things; no longer able to see likeness or belonging – simply objects out there.

We start life with a unitive consciousness, until the split happens – and we eat from the tree and suffer the wounding of knowledge, and alienation has set in: *They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden – Gen.3.8 – doubting one another and God.*

There is no remedy for this shame, just *someone* who knows me and loves me anyway. It is God who says to them: *who told-you you were naked?* – 3.11. God creates a doubt too, but in the opposite direction. When God says you are good, you are good indeed. Anyone else can say it, but you will always doubt it, even though it feels good for a time. Salvation is only secondarily the assurance of eternal life; what is primary is first giving to you of that life – which slowly becomes certainty. If God accepts me now, just as I am – clearly unworthy – why would this change later? God is presented as sewing together leaves to cover their nakedness – 3.21.

God takes our shame away by giving us back to ourselves – truly in the image and likeness of God. This dance between Lover and beloved is the theme of the whole Bible – described poetically in the *Song of Songs*. But the next Chapter of Genesis brings the murder of Abel – and so begins life outside the Garden, and the emergence of what will become *sacred wounding* because God never forsakes, not even on the cross!

Think of the many God has chosen – *Moses, Abraham and Sarah, David, Jeremiah... Israel itself, Peter and Judas*. God is always choosing, not for a task, but to be himself in the world. To start – the chosen need to know they are not alone. After the standard opening words – *don't be afraid* – come the final words: it's only me and I love you. *But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain – Ex.3.11.*

Chosen doesn't mean God likes us more than others; being chosen is for purpose, to communicate chosenness to everybody [*the story of Jonah*]. In Chapter 11 of Romans Paul tells us the Jewish People have been chosen once and for all; a choice that is never withdrawn, but it is for the sake of the Gentiles and the whole world: *all the branches are holy if the root is holy... it is the root that supports you – 11.16*. What at first seems exclusion is, in the end, fully inclusive

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after

they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" – Gal.2.11.14.

But God has to second this before Peter gives in:

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane. This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say. So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in

the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say." Gentiles Hear the Good News Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name - Acts.10.943.

You have no ability to affirm or communicate to another that they are good and special until you know it convincingly yourself. Only beloved people, who no longer have any need to be always centre-stage, can pass on being loved, and promote other's empowerment. Chosen means able to communicate the same to others. Seeking my belonging is now good news for others, whoever they might be. Instead of God wasn't attracted to you and didn't choose you because you were big and important—the fact is, there was almost nothing to you. He did it out of sheer love, keeping the promise he made to your ancestors.

God stepped in and mightily bought you back out of that world of slavery, freed you from the iron grip of Pharaoh King of Egypt. Know this: God, your God, is God indeed, a God you can depend upon. He keeps his covenant of loyal love with those who love him and observe his commandments for a thousand generations. But he also pays back those who hate him, pays them the wages of death; he isn't slow to pay them off—those who hate him, he pays right on time -

Deut.7.7-10 and the whole of Romans 11.

Yeast is not the dough, salt is not the meal and light illumines something else. Read Scripture and see God's constant invitation to intimacy, God choosing us before we choose back. The outstanding symbol of this is water – crossing the Jordan – Josh.3 – the Baptist's initiation rite – Mk.1.5 – flowing water from Christ's side – Jn.19.34 – the living water which Jesus is – Jn.7.38 – and what he offers the woman at the well – Jn.4.1. Water is an invitation to something more, that things are bigger inside than outside.

Look for the mention of blood – symbolising *the dying before you die*. The price of newness is death to oldness. Flowing blood we dislike and want to avoid, yet it images the death of the false self and the death of illusion. See how through Scripture we move from shedding blood to

appease God, to God shedding blood to love us. To be a Levite meant being a butcher for a demanding God – one shedding blood in sacrifice – which led to the atonement theory.

Jesus says once and for all blood sacrifice is over. *Somebody* had to be given to God because God was not on our side. Jesus turns this round – to God spilling blood to get to us. As long as we think God is after our blood instead of *a circumcised heart* – Deut.10.16 – we miss the whole point of the Paschal Mystery.

Look also for bread. The nurturing of religion. Start with the Manna – Ex.16 – in every case [*feeding prophets, widows...*] the text is about life-giving strength and not just for security. Bread is God feeding us, our *daily bread*; an abundance rather than an adequate sufficiency. *Do this in remembrance* – becomes the defining Sacrament, look for Eucharist and find mystical rather than moralistic worship.

We have water, blood and bread in Scripture inviting us into deeper intimacy with God and giving us, little by little, a different awareness of self. My life is not about me: *I live now not I but Christ lives in me* – Gal.2.20 – a gradual awakening that I am not just living my own life, someone else is living in me and I am part of a bigger reality than just me. This is what conversion means; and like Paul, it takes time for the scales to fall from our eyes – Acts.9.18. *He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love: having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved: in whom we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace* – Eph.1.4-7.

Face to face

Scripture tells us that God doesn't just want images or ideas, but persons with whom intimacy is desirable and possible – he is creating friends for himself – with Jesus being the one who is totally accepted, lived and enjoyed this relationship: *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him* – 2Cor.2.14.

Such a relationship can never be fear-based – *I call you friends* – Jn.15.15. God is making possible a kind of equality, letting us see the face we had before we were born. God never began to love me – there is no beginning [or ending] in God – so who was God seeing before I was born? He gave me the gift of life that I might make this discovery – by accepting myself as gift, to become gift for others. Slowly but surely this reveals to me the face God desires – the face who is me.

The Biblical tradition, and Jesus, praise faith even more than love. Because faith is that patience in the face of mystery allowing us to let God lead through periods of darkness, where God knows and I don't.

Love is the true goal, but faith is how to get there, with hope the willingness to live without resolution or closure. What 1Cor.13.13 speaks of as the *three last things*.

Moses on Sinai – *show me your glory, I beg you*. To which Yahweh replies *I have compassion... I show pity... but you are not ready to see my face* - Ex.33.18-20 – *no man can see me and live*. Mature relationship with God is not yet possible. By the end of the Bible we will see face-to-face, but it takes time to get there as each soul is as unique as each face. Yet we seem to avoid intimacy – it makes strong demands, that I accept myself as I am, and risk giving that self to another without any guarantee that I will be accepted as I am – even though it is true God loves me exactly as I am.

At first, as individuals, we are not ready for presence; we are tribal, and settle for what is the done-thing. So God starts by giving the whole group a sense of dignity – a *chosen people: You will be my people and I will be your God* – Jer.32.38. God begins with a people *consecrated as his very own* – Deut.14.2. The group holds the Mystery together, which becomes the meaning of *Church*. Membership becomes a gateway to [but often a substitute] for personal experience.

We could say: *In the beginning was the relationship...* like the Trinity, yet the relationship is between the group and Yahweh. How we relate to God is how we relate; how we relate to people is the best indicator we have of how we relate to God. And *how we let God relate to us*. The whole Bible is a school of relating revealing its best and worst qualities.

The word *trinity* is not found in the Bible – it is simply how we see God as a communion of persons, perfect giving and receiving; the Bible helps give us a face capable of receiving divine dignity, and even daring us to love God back worthily [Read Chapters 13-17 of John]. What is exciting is how Quantum Physics is changing how we see things – showing that the elements of the known universe, from atomic particles to galaxies are in an orbit/cycle with one another. It does not see autonomy in the universe – seemingly any kind of self-sufficiency is illusory – which is what we mean by the *general theory of relativity*. Everything is in flux, unless we have an Absolute Centre, which is what Scripture promises.

You shall have one God before you – Ex.20.3. Monotheism assures us there is but one coherent world. At any given moment in life we seek a *constituting other* as a foil for seeking our own identity. We find out who we are through relating to another. We either grow *from someone mirroring* us or wither from negative mirroring. This is why we are first defined in families, why most are called to marriage, which sets the stage for relationships to happen. Outside relationship we do not know who or why we are.

By putting one God before us we were placed in a coherent world, with one centre, one way of meaning. No wonder the Hebrews spoke of being saved by Yahweh – who saw all as good *and lets his face shine upon you* – Num.6.25. Without a *significant other* claiming us by name we remain scattered, without focus, even promiscuous. Our centre changes minute by minute, with every new

celebrity TV show – if we have no anchor. If you want to see the impact of the real presence of a significant other, look at a young mother with her baby. For the Jewish person there was but one face looked for – the face of God.

Having *a constantly changing* reference point is to be insecure as a person. Sadly, this is what is happening in our celebrity obsessed world. Moderns don't like the notion of being *possessed*, however it simply means when there is *an unhealthy other* defining me; when negativity has taken hold and become residual, consciously or otherwise, the only cure for negative possession is positive repossession – which Jesus was continually doing, repossessing people for God.

Many people have been possessed in this way simply by allowing, by trusting someone *to mirror them positively*, replacing the abusive mirrors of negativity. Which, as Jesus constantly says *your faith [trust] has saved you* – e.g. Lk.7.50. The Bible is always presenting us with our positive God which takes away our own negative "I" letting me see myself as beloved of Abba.

We could almost define sin as living my whole life in terms of an *I-it* relationship, never experiencing the *I-thou* which affirms me in both my origin and destiny. Truth is found not in abstract concepts, but in meeting otherness.

Jesus defines truth as personal –

I am the truth – Jn.14.6 and tells us why – that he is in constant relationship with Abba – *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full* – Jn.14.9-10 and in the Spirit who is related to both Father and Son - *and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.*

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you – Jn.14.16-18. The world of religion is removed from arguments over ideas and concepts into a world of experience – the presence of the face of another that changes everything.

What is the mystery of presence? Mystery is not something we cannot understand, something that is *endlessly not understandable* – so pregnant with meaning as to admit of no closure or resolution. Paul offers wisdom to those who have reached maturity, not in philosophy, but in the hidden mysteries of God. We do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.

We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him – 1Cor.2.6-9.

It is a different way of knowing: *And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual – 1Cor.2.13.* It is a personal experience that underpins true religion – the figures in the Bible did not just believe, they *know – but mysteriously.* Take for example the Paschal Mystery the experience of loss and renewal in the death and rising of Jesus. We can and do affirm this ritually, but until we lose our own foundations and *experience* God sustaining us, we have little awareness of this mystery. We move from *belief systems* to *living faith* through encounter, surrender and trust in this inner experience of presence and power.

The great truths, like love and true freedom, are not totally conceptual, can never be understood by reason alone. They can never be proven to others – they are known holistically – when *all of you is there!* Bonaventure says *a good illiterate person can know God far more intimately than any DD.* God does not rely on knowledge – Biblical knowledge is face-to-face presence. In biblical tradition *getting it right* is not found. Biblical holiness is relating intimately.

What is this *presence*? It is the experience when self-exposure to another promotes a deeper life in the other. We do not need to think or understand to be present; it is giving and receiving right now, and not done in the mind. Being received graciously by another helps us be gracious ourselves, realising that we are both part of something even greater – Being itself. This is why we speak of the Eucharist as the *Real Presence*. This is what happens when falling in love. We move to a deeper level of experience. There is a Hindu saying: *you come here not to gaze at God, but to let God gaze at you!*

This is how much power God has given us for one another. We can receive another's love, or curse; we can affirm or deny one another – this is the doorway to divine affirmation, or to ignorance of the divine. Life is full to overflowing, and everlasting when I am gifted to see me as I am, seen and loved by God. Standing within God's gaze stops me looking for tomorrow's happiness – because, clearly and experientially, *now is the acceptable time – 2Cor.6.2.* Which is what Jesus says to all of us, as he said to his friends- *come and see.*

All this has nothing to do with being perfect, but with staying within relationship, holding onto God as God is holding onto me. Jesus offers himself as *way, truth and life – Jn.14.6* – it is personal, sharing ourselves not just our thinking. We can live in our heads and avoid relating – even God is not free here, since I only allow myself to *think* God. We cannot *think* God – only think *about* God. God is relationship – the intimacy of Father, Son and Spirit – and can only be experienced – with the heart, not the head.

God is beyond gender [neither he, she nor it]. The Bible appears to be uninterested in third person language about God – what Scripture seeks is second person language – it is a face to face experience – it is an *I – thou* relationship. Most languages have special words for second person relationships [German, Spanish, and French] modern English has but one, which is why we use the Old English *thou* to try to reflect intimacy proper to feeling treasured as a person rather than known as an object.

God revealed to us in the Bible doesn't care what word we use, as long as it is honest, trustful and in some way intimate. Hebrew offers several *Elohim, Yahweh, El Shaddai [warm-one]...* as well as *Lord*. What matters is that we have the experience of being called *beloved*, whatever name we use to describe it. To be in love with whoever – parents, children, partner – there are special words reserved for that relationship – nicknames which say a lot, but which can offend when others, not part of the relationship, presume to use them insensitively. Whatever that word, it is sacred – it is prayer – far too special to be reduced to he, she or it. But we must find the wonderful "I" before being able to appreciate this special "thou". Alas, I will be seeing the face I had before I was born.

Let me put it another way.

The Law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith – Gal.3.24.

Surely we have to eat a little fruit of the tree of good and evil? Not without reason did Jesus speak of the *narrow gate* – Mt.7.13. Faith will always be faith i.e. we will never be able to make it into total certitude and clarity – though that is ever the temptation for religion. The only *absolute* the Bible promises is Yahweh, and in relating to Yahweh all else is relative. No institution, no priesthood no school of thought can displace Yahweh – our *rock and only fortress* – Ps.71.

Listen to what Paul says about it: *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 – Rom.8.38.*

Morality is a counterfeit for religion, often appearing as a false absolute. Scripture has two books dedicated to highlighting the idolatry of law – Romans and Galatians. It is about the creative tension between *religion as requirements and religion as transformation*. Is God's favour based on performance or on an entirely new economy?

This tension – we all go through – seems to be a necessary experience. The classic three divisions of Scripture – [Law, Prophets, and Wisdom] - parallel spiritual development and human development in 3 ways: *order, criticism and integration*. We usually start with being told *this is the way we do it*. Torah - Law – provides for the ego, identity and the need for boundaries. It gives a firm footing, a place from which to move out. This is catered for through Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy [which most of us don't read too often because they don't inspire us]. There is something compelling attention about an absolute.

Torah/Law provides well for the ego – I can perfect myself through observance. But we mustn't abandon value for valuables. We must not let go of ideals, absolutes, goals and boundaries – else we are lost; we are not made to be self-fulfilling, but to receive fulfilment as intended and tailor-made gift. Recall what happened in the conflict between Adam and Eve, and Paul's struggle:

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet. But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin – Rom.7.7-25.

Paul anticipates the Dalai Lama: *learn the meaning of law very well so that you will know how to disobey it properly?* We must know and respect rules before we can break them. The Prophetic Canons of Scripture have had the least influence on Catholic and Protestant theology, because we read them only as proofs for texts speaking of the coming of the Messiah. What actually emerges through the Prophetic Books is critical consciousness, and the consequent interior struggle – leaving false innocence aside and admit we do not live what we say.

Most of us choose to remain in a kind of naiveté that offers a hint of security – it even passes for holiness, which it isn't. What is needed is an objective inner witness assessment if we are to see ourselves as we really are. It is painful but necessary to be critical of our own self-evaluating systems;

we have waiting for us the offer of the Paraclete [defence lawyer] which, far too often is either overlooked or mistrusted.

The Wisdom Books – *Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Wisdom* – but especially *Job*, bring a different way of thinking. A way able to cope with mystery and complex issues that cannot be resolved, yet bring a sense of closure through asking for trust, a surrender to faith. God answers none of Job's questions, but leads him deeper into mystery.

The *Law* is the thesis, the Prophets develop a positive antithesis, and only then comes Wisdom literature to provide a synthesis for thesis and antithesis. The thesis happens within our dualistic thinking – Wisdom breaks through with a call to patience, trust, paradox and the like. Jesus was such a person who ended up creating an entirely new religion. Most reforms and revolutions have failed to appreciate the need for taking previous ways of knowing into what is higher and transcendent – nothing is discarded. Wisdom honours both the Law and the Prophets: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil* – Mt.5.17.

Jesus is always trying to remove the arrogance of self-evaluation [entire Sermon on the Mount Mt.5-7]. He sees *pride and self-sufficiency* as our primary moral problems. *You have neglected the weightier matters of law – justice, mercy and good faith - in favour of Temple tithes* – Mt.23.23. The definition of sin we were given: *thought, word, deed or omission against the law of God!* In other words there had to be full knowledge, grievous matter and free consent. This isn't a definition of sin, it is a juridical definition of law.

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet. But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure – Rom.7.7-13.

The reason we live in freedom is because we started with moral laws and expectations from people in authority; putting good and necessary limits to our egocentric living. Predictability, order and tradition are the only ways to create a healthy ego structure. Law is the best place to begin, but not to stay, and certainly not the place to end: *who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life* – 2Cor.3.6.

But without a religious experience we cannot follow the ethical norms of Jesus – we don't have the power to obey the law of forgiveness, of non-violence, of the humble use of power. With Paul we cry out *who will rescue me from this wretched state* – Rom.7.24. He answers his own question *thanks be to God, Christ Jesus*. Paul tells us in Philippians [3.6-8] he was a perfect Pharisee – *I was faultless in observance of law*. Sin takes advantage of law – whatever selfishness you are intent upon, do it for religious reasons!

The law is not to make God love me – this is already guaranteed. Yet we have created a religion that says *we can't be sinners because we keep the law*. We can give God much more than obedience, in the parent-child relationship. God didn't create the world or the Church for the sake of social order – ministers are not meant to be policemen or traffic wardens.

God not only lets us make mistakes, but even uses the mistakes for our benefit. If we could have reached God by obedience to laws, there would have been no place for Jesus, God-incarnate.

Good and bad power

Spend but a little time working on a committee and see that the issue of power has not been well served for the majority of people. *Good power* is what has been used to protect children, the poor and the powerless. *Bad power* is bullying, used to protect and promote self. Hierarchy and power are not inherently bad – but are hazardous if the necessary spiritual homework has not been done. Francis reminded the ministers – *you are to be the first servants of the brothers!* Two thousand years after what Jesus revealed, many prefer a punitive and threatening God, which produces the same kind of people – *if God does it so can we!*

Good power

Power cannot be inherently bad, because in Acts both Luke and Paul use it as a name for the Holy Spirit: *You will receive power when the Spirit comes upon you* – 1.8. If the Spirit is power, then it has to be good, not the result of ambition or greed. God wants adults *who can handle power*, they can handle it because they don't need it.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God – Rom.8.16. This power of the Spirit is initiated by God and embraced us at Pentecost – Acts.2.1-13. As with Mary, this is *done to us*, all we can do is allow it to happen – it is foolish to think it's our own initiative. To bridge the gap between divine and human, God plants a little bit of God [Spirit] inside us:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel

and with the people of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the Lord.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."

Jer.31.31-34

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

Jn.14.16-17

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezek.36.25-26

Power in itself cannot be bad, but needs a refocus. It needs to rediscover the paradox of power from Scripture. If the Spirit is power then power has to be good, not a result of ambition or greed. In people like Moses, Paul and Jesus God used their powerful egos to build on and transform, but never dismiss. God is not interested in keeping us as children – *when I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me* – 1Cor.13.11. *I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live* – Jn.14.18. Until we don't need external power we will not handle power correctly.

Paul has us *be ambitious for higher gifts* – 1Cor.12.31. In NT Apostles are slow learners, immediately after Jesus teaching the way of servant leadership they are arguing about who is the greatest – Mk.9.30? This hasn't changed too much over the centuries. Clergy are rewarded for their role and function, rather than for relationship. *Father* has become a title!

With everybody listening, Jesus spoke to his disciples. "Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preen in the radiance of public flattery, bask in prominent positions, and sit at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end – Lk.20.45-47.

Structural blindness is more prevalent than personal blindness; the group all too often keeps us away from truth. With Constantine, the Church moved from catacombs to basilicas almost overnight. [*Basilica means palaces of kings and queens*]. The Church became the established religion of the empire and started reading the Gospel the position of power and privilege – we turned Jesus from being *meek and humble of heart* to the righteous Judge [see the Sistine Chapel – the Pantocrator].

The Roman Empire needed an emperor, was in decline and Jesus was used to plug the gap. The Trinity relationships were lost and God became angry and distant, Jesus became the needed emperor, and the Holy Spirit was virtually forgotten. Systems need laws more than mercy – ecclesiastical took over from ecclesial. Happily, the *anawim* were willing to walk the way of the cross – *the descent into the hell of being marginalised*. Recall Jesus asking James and John *can you drink from the cup I am going to drink?* Religion is largely populated by people afraid of hell; spirituality begins to make sense to those who have been through the hell of intensive systematising.

Knowing and not knowing

My thoughts are not your thoughts... Is.55.8. *you travel over the sea to make a single convert, and once you have him, you make him twice as fit for hell as you are...* Mt.23.15. This latter quote is Jesus talking to orthodox believers of his time – people who claim *to know!*

When our God-image is true, so will be our self-image. Religion is the best thing in the world – it can also be the worst! If relating to God is life-giving in relationships, almost all else – even the broken

parts – benefit from healing. But *orthodoxy* is not just something that happens in the head – the word does not occur in the Bible, which always stresses right relationships; which involves much more than *being right!* Jesus consistently speaks of *being saved*, being in right relationship with him – *your faith has done this*.

When we presume to know fully, we have become goal-focused and arrogant. When we know that we don't know, our concern is about loving relationships. When speaking about God and transcendent reality, all we can do is use metaphor. Unlike other sciences, theology cannot validate itself by external proof. So, how are we to know that what the prophets say is true? The only criterion the Bible gives for a true prophet –

*if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?' when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him – Deut.18.21-22. Note the scrambling for words to talk about God in Dante's *Paradiso*.*

The best things cannot be talked about – only *experienced*. Which is why Revelation, *talking* about heaven is disappointing; what is meant by *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known – 1Cor.13.12*. The second best are those things that point towards the best – philosophy, theology, psychology, poetry and music. Jesus shows us this pathway which is risky, because it allowed him to be interpreted in so many different ways [there are thousands of *Christian denominations*].

Jesus never said *you must be right* or even that it is important to be right. He talks about being honest and humble – provided we are honest, we may not be right, but we won't be wrong: honesty is a way of life, and when honesty meets truth [Jesus], to continue being honest there has to be change [conversion]. In my experience people who have let God find them have become aware of the total giftedness of God's presence; never the result of our own efforts. This experience of giftedness has the bonus of realising that the gift of presence is so that we can become what we are receiving – gifted presence for others.

I'm sure there are converts through Papal Encyclicals, though I haven't met any – such letters are too clear, pleasing the mind more than the soul. Which is probably why Jesus used parables, which are indirect, subtle and capable of being misunderstood. He said: *the seed is sprouting but we do not know how – Mk.4.27*.

Jesus seemed to be comfortable with such *not-knowing*. In most of human history, poetry and religion are almost the same. Poetry doesn't give a definition of an experience, it tries to give the experience itself – as good liturgy should do. Why do we need to be clearer, less capable of misunderstanding than Jesus?

There is an example of the integration of knowing and not-knowing in Scripture. Moses on the mountain, Jesus at the Transfiguration. With Moses, God is obviously present, though hidden. Jesus presented in dazzling light, yet overshadowed by a cloud. Epiphany [appearance of God] is both light and darkness. [E.g. *The Cloud of Unknowing*]

In the beginning there was wisdom, then came erudition, now we have information! The presence of fundamentalisms in many religious leaders – God was *used* to justify violence and exclusions and insistence on *my way* of doing things. *The fundamentalist mind is a mind that likes answers and explanations so much, that it remains wilfully ignorant about how history arrived at those explanations, or how self-serving they are.* Satisfying untruth [fake news] is more pleasing than unsatisfying truth – full truth is invariably unsatisfying, at least to the small ego.

Faith is the breakthrough into the depth of the soul, which humbly accepts paradox. It was assumed that Europe was healthily Christian – but see our empty churches today! We need to rediscover *an honest and humble process for listening and learning* – then there will not be over-reaction against authority which comes from trying to force conclusions without discovering the way to reach such conclusions. Outer authority is to be anchored to inner authority.

Paul teaches: *The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart* – Rom.10.8. *Do not tell yourself you have to bring Christ down* – 10.6. The Mystery of the Incarnation is the positioning of God *down here* once and forever. *The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" - that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for "whoever will call on the name of the LORD will be saved* – Rom.10.8-13.

Prayer

In Jesus' teaching we have the prayer of words, like the Our Father, with its petitions – but there is a much-less taught prayer – beyond words. Prayer in secret – Mt.6.5. It was common for Jesus to demand silence after working miracles. Why did he tell people not to talk about this- Mk.9.9? For the same reason that he never wrote – he knew we would set it in stone, verbal dogma, instead of allowing ourselves to *experience* what was happening. Islam, Judaism and Christianity all took a great risk in putting religious experience into words.

God took an even greater risk in the Incarnation – Jn.1.14. We have paid a heavy price for trying to put this into words; whereas Jesus' claim to truth was his person - *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* - Jn.14.6. He was *experiencing* being the beloved of Abba. Substituting words for experiencing has cause much violence and absence of peace. But we do need pointers [words] but always as means not ends; a corkscrew is a necessity –

but always a *means*. There is only one interpreter of Scripture – the Holy Spirit, who allows us access *through experiences*.

We must approach Scripture by keeping ourselves out of the way, allowing the Spirit to ignite enthusiasms in us. Otherwise we only hear what we have decided to expect: *Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches; comparing spiritual things with spiritual realities* – 1Cor.2.13. There is a necessary light which is only available through darkness, the *darkness proper to birth, death and suffering*. The Bible doesn't let us resolve all theological questions, it is not written for our academic benefit.

Jesus was able to heal, touch and transform people, with no demand for previous education. He talked about what was real and what was unreal, and how to live inside reality. God comes to us disguised as our life. He did teach in the Temple a few times, but most of his teaching was walking with people, even into the desert and often into nature – about birds and flowers, clouds and rain, landlords and tenants. *This*ness is the spiritual doorway to everywhere and always [Scotus]. Only individuals, not abstractions are real.

Incarnation is always concrete and specific like this bread and this wine. We can't fall in love with abstractions, only with concrete people, concrete moments and a personal God. Why the word became *flesh* is for embodiment – *the fullness of grace and truth* – Jn.1.14.

When God led his people from Egypt it was not by the scenic route – because the real goal was not getting to the Promised Land, *it was the journey itself*. There is no path to peace, peace itself is the path; a journey in faith makes people of faith. Sadly, in the way of religion, the container substitutes for the contents of the container. God's greatest ally is reality itself:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse
– Rom.1.20.

What is conversion? Initiation belongs in birth and death – even though we have medicalised them, and hidden them away in hospitals. It is *people* who have first lived and loved, suffered and failed, and lived and loved again who have the humility to read Scripture fruitfully. In the hands of people uninitiated by life such reading becomes a head-trip, a prescription rather than a description.

The Second Commandment insists we do not take God's name in vain. Superficially, many saw this as an embargo against swearing; instead of speaking God's name in a trivial manner, as if we knew what we were talking about. Breath and spirit are gifts from God, and we should refrain from filling the sacred name with our own breath. Only God can say *I am who I am* - Ex.3.14. God's mystery cannot be captured, only received. God is as available as breath itself, and no religion can portion it out – it can *only be received*. Is not this why Jesus breathed on them after the Resurrection – Jn.20.22?

God refuses to be the object of knowledge – God cannot be known as we know a tree or a poem. God can only be known as a fellow subject - *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* – 1Cor.13.12. It feels like being *known*, rather than knowing for oneself. Let breathing in and out henceforth be prayer – just be a real, fully alive person, and so praise God.

Evil

The Bible is a dangerous document – obvious from its continual use to foster hatred, prejudice and violence. The things Jesus openly opposed, we have justified. We seem to think that someone else is always the problem, not me. We export our hatred and evil. History is little more than a record of who killed whom. Most history is revisionist – revised so as to be acceptable. We are hard-wired to create victims. The most persistent violence in history is *sacralised* violence. Such scapegoating is a perfect disguise for evil, by focusing on the evil *over there* and avoiding our own. Evil is rarely recognised as evil by those who do it: *Satan disguises himself as an angel of light* – 2Cor.11.14. *Your* violence is always evil, *my* violence is always necessary and good. However, goodness is accompanied always by patience and peace and even consolation.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down – Rev.12.10.

The accusing and blaming pattern is present from the outset – Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent and soon we have Cain killing his brother.

God's love has not yet been received at a deep level by the biblical author; it is still *merited* love – God is *created* in our own accusatory image; but at least Yahweh is revealed as *saviour* of some! At this stage, God's love is determined by the worthiness of the receiver. Killing those they fear is the natural pattern, but is not revelation. What makes me holy can also make me evil. Self-centred people misuse human love, and will do the same with divine love!

Why do we behave like this, and why does the Bible appear to teach it, and God appears to condone it? In this statement, we have both the problem and the solution. We must step outside our pressing need for ego security. Where is the sense of the text leading us? To a God of suffering and humble love – Jesus suffering is God beyond tribalism and violence and every form of exclusion.

Jesus does not define holiness as separation from evil so much as seeking to transform it; he pays the price instead of asking others to do so. It is a seismic shift from redemptive violence to redemptive suffering. Traditional atonement theories asked a lot of Jesus, but very little of us, except lots of thank-yous! So, how do I stand against hatred without becoming hate myself? It is clear how Jesus lived this, but what about his followers? There are 3 clear scapegoats in Scripture: the Baptist, Jesus and Stephen.

There is a difference between the Baptist' words and Stephen's – because the Baptist happened before Jesus' birth, death and resurrection.

There is a stoicism about John – his zeal is commendable, but it is not what Jesus offers. Stephen accepts his death and forgives his enemies – he seems to face his death with joy. His energy is not oppositional or hateful – Stephen has become a new Jesus. Like Jesus, he states the truth and forgives. He transforms the situation without any need to transmit; and Saul witnessed this. So begins the transformation from Saul to Paul.

John speaks of Jesus as the Lamb – the one who opens the seven seals, as if using the code for understanding history – he is simultaneously slain and fully alive. Showing why there is no life without death, no death without life – we call it the Paschal Mystery.

When the Spirit shows in Pagans, Peter says: *who am I to stand in God's way?* – Acts.11.17. However, he hides this through fear of Jewish conservatives. For this, Paul labels him –

the other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" – Gal.2.13-14.

I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. However, whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. However, one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus – Phil.3.5-16.

Jesus has no part in redemptive violence, even though redemptive violence is present in much of the Bible – [conquering the Promised Land, wars of the Kings of Israel, Saul, David, Herod and the like]. Jesus is redemptive forgiveness, even though redemptive violence is present and in every mind and heart – the instinct to destroy what we see as the source of the problem. In this sense, he is truly the Saviour

of the World – Jn.4.42 – because that is the world’s primary agenda, which he unmask and replaces with one very different.

To achieve this he has to relativize group identity, our security systems and what we call family values. See how he does it: when the disciples want to stop others using Jesus’ name he says *you must not stop them* – Lk.9.50 [*how different would have been Christian History if only we had listened*]. More insidious is the group ego – he questions two sacred cows – job and family. He told them to *leave their nets* – Mk.1.18 – he told Matthew to leave his job – Lk.5.28.

Finally – they leave their father and the men he employed – Mk.1.19-20; he even speaks of *hating* all blood relatives – Lk.14.26, and illustrates this in his relationship with his mother – Mt.12.48. All this indicates a *radical* life-style change and not just attending religious services. He is moving them beyond every kind of narrow world-view. Which is why it is not surprising to find *outsiders* understanding him better than insiders. A Centurion calls him *Son of God* – Mk.15.39 – a Syro-Phoenician woman – Mt.15.21 – the Gerasene demoniac – Lk.8.26, the foreign leper – Lk.17.19 – Zacchaeus and many non-Jews – Lk.19.1.

Notice what he usually tells them – *you have great faith* – Mt.19.28. He does not invite them into his group, or to accept John’s baptism – even to the public sinners he says *go in peace your faith has made you whole* - Lk.7.50. No wonder the religious leaders were out to get him! Holiness is no longer to be found through separation or exclusion but in the *inclusion* of radical forgiveness. Every system of exclusion lays a foundation for violence in thought, word and deed. He leads us along a new path: *he will give people knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of their sins* – Lk.1.77, and *inclusion* of the enemy – Mt.5.44.

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. However, if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. Moreover, what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? If anyone is ashamed of my message and me in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels – Mk.8.34-38.

Forgiveness and inclusion are his great themes. Without forgiveness and inclusion, love is just for romantics. They are the two values that remove violence. Leviticus 16-27 speaks of the law of holiness as separation from sinful people – Jesus turns this around by showing how the act of separation and rejection is in fact the sin [Read the parable of the man born blind in John 9]. All of us are blind, but when blindness is compounded by participation [claiming that we can see] in active exclusions, then our collective blindness becomes culpable.

If we focus on positively choosing the good, rather than the negative rejecting evil, we will overcome evil much more readily – practice of the better rather than a criticism of the bad! This is how Jesus reformed the laws of religion doing away with the basis for violent exclusions by becoming the forgiving victim. He became the one falsely accused, so we would be careful whom we accuse. The Gospel points out that it was the elders, priests and leaders of the people who judged Jesus to be the problem – every authority deemed him unworthy, and even released the violent Barabbas rather than him– Mt.27.26.

The system of power and violence is judged to be wrong. It is not Jews, priests, lawyers or Rome – rather is it the way power is exercised and violence justified in institutions. The killing of Jesus is evidence of how blind we all can be when enjoying the benefits of power. Bad power, which always eliminates opposition, killed Jesus.

The Biblical core theme

Divine and unmerited generosity that is available everywhere. It is grace – *that which confers on our souls the new life – sharing in the life of God*. Grace cannot be understood in terms of merit and demerit; it has nothing in common with buying, losing, achieving or manipulating. Grace is simply *for the taking*. It is God eternally giving away God. Grace is always *more than enough* in contrast to survival rations.

We do not know how to receive things freely or without logic. We like to be worthy; whereas *we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose* – Rom.8.28. *I no longer call you servants...* Jn.15.15. Jesus introduces common and open table fellowship - *But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together* – 1Cor.11.17.

The Gospel needs to present humankind with a world view of abundance – a vision of grace that knows nothing of fear. A story is told of an angel, carrying a lighted torch and a bucket of water, being asked what are you going to do with them – replies *burn down the mansions of heaven and extinguish the fires of hell!*. *Then we will see who really loves God!* Only Grace will move us beyond the tired system of reward and punishment. Without it we remain mired in duty instead of delight.

Reward/punishment is the plot of plays, novels and operas – the only way our dualistic minds can read reality. The win/lose scenario has become an art form in the Western world, forever getting to the price of things – meritocracy rules! Earning worthiness is a dead-end, which had Jesus *create a whip of cords*. As long as market values rule, the Gospel will never be understood. Jesus' violent reaction is not against people, but self-serving religion: *my house is a house of prayer for all people* – Is.56.7.

None of us appreciate the parable of the worker arriving at the last hour to receive the same wage – Mt.20.1. With Constantine's Edict of Milan – 313 – both grace and forgiveness were politicised and

controlled by formula. When penances were prescribed and exact punishments in purgatory for specified sins were laid down; liturgical errors made Masses invalid and a variety of formulae for meriting heaven appeared. Sin-management became the work of the priesthood. More about saving the dead than healing the living.

The miracle of grace and true prayer invades the unconscious mind and heart. The whole movement of the Bible is towards the possibility of intimacy with God.

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt – Deut.7.7-8.

This is the theology of Grace. Divine election is totally free, it has never been a worthiness contest. *God does not love me because I am good, but because God is good.* God does all the giving and invites us to do the receiving. David was a violent warrior – 2Sam.8 – an adulterer, egocentric – having Uriah killed to save his own name – 11.5 – it is said by some that his relationship with Jonathan was somewhat Gay – 1Sam.18.1; 2Sam.1.26 – yet God chooses him: *I will be a father to him and he a son to me* – 1Sam.18.1. David relies on this promise, and so we have the House and the Line of David, from which Jesus is born. With this in mind, it makes sense that he wrote many psalms of biblical faith.

Our problem is not sinning, nearly as much as our unwillingness to admit we have sinned. Sinners never upset Jesus; but people who do not believe they are sinners upset him! To allow myself to become the beloved of Abba is to be the beloved of Abba! Sinners in recovery know God does not love them because they are good, but because God is good.

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin – Ex.34.6.

In Ezekiel 36.22 we read *it is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.*

God is God's reference point; God being true to God as nothing else but love. Then follows the dry bones in Chapter 37. God breathes new life into old earth.

Someone has said – *if you ask the people in hell if they are happy, almost all would say yes!* Hell is where people have become comfortable with no life, no belonging – *hell* is later because it was chosen now! No one is there unless they want to be – we freely choose now and God always respects free choice. No one is going to be in heaven who does not want to be there – once again, *heaven* is later because it is chosen now! Which is why we read Moses hearing God's words – *I set before you life or*

death, blessing or curse. Choose life – Deut.30.20. We cannot threaten people into love with hell-fire or fear.

The Cross

It is a wisdom that none of the masters of this age has ever known, or they would never have crucified the Lord – 1Cor.2.8.

It is no accident that the cross is the Christian Logo – in the cross, many great truths become obvious and even overwhelming, yet not so obvious previously. The mystery of Jesus crucified makes the crucified Lord no stranger – we all can relate to this from our own experience. If all human crucifixions are leading to some possible resurrection, and are not just dead-end tragedies, this changes everything. If God is somehow sharing in human suffering and not just passively tolerating it – this changes everything.

So – how does the victim transform us? *How does the Lamb of God take our sins away? Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world."* – Jn.4.42. It is as if Jesus is saying I am going to take the worst thing, and turn it into the best. He takes away the sin of the world by showing what real sin is – deliberate attacking and excluding, not breaking purity codes.

Both the lie and the strategy have been revealed; not by Jesus working some magic that saves the world from death, but living so as to change history. He is not changing God's mind about us, but changing our mind about what is real and what is not. Jesus did not come just to offer us willpower. On the cross he identifies with the human condition.

Remember, *Christ* is not Jesus' last name, but his transformed identity post-resurrection; which carries humanity and all creation along with it so that Christ is all and in all. Which is why Paul uses a new term to be inclusive of all of us - *The Body of Christ*. Jesus dies, Christ rises, because of the manner of his dying. The cross exposes the problem of random killing, to inoculate us against doing the same thing - *No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man – Jn.3.13. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me – Jn.8.28.*

Jesus – scapegoat?

We have always needed to find a way to deal with human anxiety and evil – invariably by some way other than forgiveness. Something has to be sacrificed, blood has to be shed, someone has to be blamed – it is the way of deliberate exclusions [*both Marxism and Capitalism see this as acceptable*]. In forgiveness, it is my ego that has to die, my need to be right. We are the only religion that worships God as the scapegoat! Jesus, the most perfect man that ever lived – and all the great powers of Church

and State got it so wrong in condemning him. Power/authority are not good guides if we are to heed history – they take away, along with anxiety all personal responsibility.

Atonement – did Jesus need to die for our sins?

Scotus did not question God's redemptive work in Jesus, only the *how* and the *what*. *How did God transfer redemptive love to humanity?* And *what is the precise nature of Jesus' redemptive mission?* In other words, where did the idea of repayment of debt come from? Scotus' stance has never been condemned by the Church, and was considered a *legitimate minority position*. The Protestant Reformers favoured the majority position [necessity of blood sacrifice] favoured by early Church Fathers and championed by St Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo?* And later by Aquinas.

Scotus was not persuaded by the atonement theory of the necessity for a blood sacrifice, frequently found in OT. Scotus saw it as a human reaction based on sin, instead of God's perfect and utterly free initiative of love. Atonement Theory appeals to the juridical mind, usually uncomfortable with forgiveness, preferring a tit-for-tat response. Scotus was committed to protecting the total freedom of God, along with the necessary freedom of the individual.

Freedom of will [to love] is a higher attribute than knowledge [for Scotus]. Which is the difference between the Franciscan and Dominican Schools. For Scotus, choice is absolutely free and random for God, in no way rational or determined. Which puts him more in harmony with Colossians and Ephesians. These letters saw Jesus as the *first image in the mind of God* – Eph.1.3-6, 10-11 which appears in Col.1.15-20.

Scotus said Jesus was never *necessary* to solve problems, never God's plan B, but a pure declaration from the very beginning of the *Primacy of Christ*. He is the pattern for all, doing what we must do, which is why he always invites – *follow me*. Whatever happens to Jesus must and will happen to the soul – *incarnation, embodiment of being ordinary, faith, death, resurrection and home to God*.

Christ's primacy and pattern is undone when all that matters is the last moments of life [*I get this impression from Mel Gibson's The Passion of Christ!*]. Whereas, through goodness revealed in the whole of Jesus' life we see how infinitely rich is God's grace, saving us by pure gift so that we become God's work of art.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing – see Eph.2.7-10.

Jesus is both the medium and the message [way, truth and life] all combined in one human body Jesus, and the cosmic body Christ. Jesus is pure gift, and *from his fullness we have all received, grace on grace* – Jn.1.16.

Jesus communicates this totality of God's love on the cross. Where we see and learn to trust the free offer of God's love for us. As S Francis said *such freely given love calls forth love in return*. The sad situation is that we paid more attention to paying the cosmic bill [atonement] than to such credible love – which made the cross an image of God's demands rather than the image of truly human transformation. No wonder we ended up with the image of a kind yet vindictive God and a Son sent to solve problems; all because sin becomes the motive for redemption instead of love; and the central act of the saving of the world is based on an act of violence.

The Son of God is presented as *reacting*, whereas our free and loving God always *acts* - God's love is not determined by the worthiness of the object but by the sheer goodness of the subject. Sin-based Christianity is not just uninviting, it is also unsafe! True Christianity *seduces, invites, creates and surprises* into the very heart of redeeming grace. God wants us to become *a new creation* – Gal.6.16 – *putting on the God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God mind of Christ* – 1Cor.2.16 – *friends, not servants* – Jn.15.15.

Nothing changed on Calvary, but *everything* was revealed so that *we could change*. [How unreal not to conclude *if this is what God demanded of his own Son – what is he going to ask of me?*]. Take heart from Hebrews 10.31 - *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living [totally loving] God* – fear at the tremendous joy and freedom this makes possible. Sadly, healing and forgiveness have not been at the forefront of Christian history, even though these are the only things Jesus does.

Truly, Jesus died for our sins, but not through any demands from God. The cross is refusing to hate or needing to win. The cross says evil is to be opposed, by holding the tension and ambiguity of the pain, instead of passing it on – evil that is not transformed will be transmitted. The cross moves us away from *redemptive violence to redemptive suffering*. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the beloved of God* – 2Cor.5.21. How to stand against hate without becoming hate.

We share many things with other religions, but no other religion has the revelation of the cross. It is revelation because it is something the rational mind can never come to by itself. The cross says human existence is neither consistent, nor is it total chaos. The world is the coinciding of opposites. The price to be paid for holding contradictions together is a form of crucifixion. But the giftedness of it is to see ever-more clearly how everything belongs.

Mutuality

You must be perfect, as is your heavenly Father... Live generously with others, the way God lives with you – two renderings of Mt.4.48.

The first focuses on personal perfection – appeals to the yes/no mind-set, whereas the second focuses on communion with the Divine; as Paul writes - *be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith* – Phil.3.9. He sees perfection as union rather than achievement. Our goal is not personal holiness – something clearly impossible – yet focusing on it as Christianity has done is disastrous.

The Bible has us begin in *the garden* where Adam and Eve know no shame, but not for long. It is hard to doubt the Creation stories in Genesis are inspired. It would seem that from then onwards the Bible is seeking to return us to the garden. By the end it becomes the new Jerusalem – Re.21-22, where there is no temple, only the River of Life and the Trees of Life whose leaves are *for the healing of the pagans* – 22.2 – and where God lives among us – 21.3.

The Garden symbolises the union of consciousness. We cannot be separate from God; we all walk in the garden whether we know it or not. We came from God and are destined to return, everything in between is the school for conscious awareness of what is happening; so that, as Eliot puts it we will return and *know the place for the first time*. As Jacob put it when awaking from sleep – *Truly, Yahweh was always in this place and I never knew it* – Gen.28.16. Note how this is core to Jesus' parables – *the treasure, the pearl, the dragnet of fish, the weeds and the wheat, the lost coin, the lost sheep* with the final outcome a party or a celebration.

The Bible is a movement towards ever-greater Incarnation, until the mystery of mutuality with God is finally experienced and enjoyed, even now in this present life. It then become the banquet we call eternal life, or heaven. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the ultimate symbol of all this and its embodiment – *when Christ is revealed, and is your life, you will be revealed in all your glory with him* – Col.3.4. This is what Paul understands as the *Body of Christ*, and not to do with individual perfection. It is more important to be connected than to be privately correct.

Paul's belief in the *Body of Christ* has a cosmic meaning and begins here, in this world – which is why we believe in the resurrection of the body and not just the soul. Yes, there is a new heaven – but also a new earth – Rev.21.1. See here the meaning of the *Second Coming*, when humanity becomes *a beautiful bride dressed for her husband* – Rev.21.3. Truly, a triumph for God and for humankind. This is another way of saying *the mystery is Christ within you, your hope* – Col.1.27. Which is how the final chapter of the Bible concludes – *Now God lives among humans, they become God's people, he has become their God* – Rev.21.3.

The things Jesus constantly talked about, like living a simple and non-violent life of forgiveness and inclusion, are still on the periphery for many believers; so that we can say with Isaias – *this people will hear, and hear again, but not understand, see and see again but not perceive* – 6.9, and Mt.13.14. It is not badness that keeps us spiritually blind, we were never taught how to see! The risen Christ is leading us into a future for which we were never ready; only little by little does the gift of awareness get through and we become more and more capable of intimacy with the ever-living God. *All our mind can do is before and after, it does not know how to be present in the now.*

All that is needed from us is heed – *if you remain in me and I remain in you, you can ask for whatever you want and you will get it* – Jn.15.7 – *the branch severed from the vine is useless* – Jn.15.5.

Eucharist

It is right to speak of going to communion; many who have left the Church say they miss giving up going to communion. In the Eucharist *Jesus gave us something*, he did not say *you need to think about this, look at it or worship it* – he simply said *do this!* It is a special action for a community. He said, after I leave just keep on doing this until I return, and find out what it means to be Christian. Take it and eat, break it and give it away, don't protect it.

In the Eucharist we eat and drink our own death ahead of time, in union with his death – instead of demanding the death of others – *whenever you do this, you are proclaiming his death* – 1Cor.11.27. The eating says *my life is not about me*. Tradition insists that this meal is also a sacrifice, solidarity with Jesus' letting go -

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord – 1Cor.11.23-27.

Unfortunately, we made it into Jesus' heroic sacrifice that we could thank him for – instead of an invitation to do the same – *through him, and with him and in him!* There is no argument about the Real Presence. People who are simply present to another know about union and intimacy. Able to see the Eucharist as a statement about ongoing Incarnation, telling us - *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is* – 1Jn.3.2.

In a sense, we are saved in spite of ourselves – and for one another! If God is love and grace is true there can be no exclusions - *when is God's arm too short to save* – asks Isaiah 50.2. Does sin have the last word? The *all-power* in God has Paul say

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord – Rom.8.38-39.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed – 2Cor.13.5-6.