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Advent Sunday

30th November 2003

In Advent, tradition demands that we preach on the four last things – death, judgment, heaven and hell – a tradition observed these days more often than not in the breach. I can't even remember when I last followed this pattern myself. It feels wrong, somehow, to be focusing so exclusively on the four last things when all the world is rushing toward Christmas. It's almost as if the church just can't stand too much joy, and really wants to stop us having fun in the m beginning to wonder if this rather superficial view doesn't tell us more about ourselves than anything else, and this wondering leads me to think that maybe we have been a bit cavalier in abandoning the wisdom of our mothers and fathers in faith. Besides, who is to say that death, judgment, heaven and hell are depressing themes in the Christian economy? Surely, this is a rather serious misdiagnosis of fundamental proportions with very significant ramifications?

With all this swirling around in me, three very different events intervened to determine the course of my Advent preaching this time around. First, I began reading a wonderful new book by James Alison, one of the most creative and disturbing theologians at work today. Second, I sat down one day recently with Christine Simes to re-work the Advent liturgy we have both been using now for about ten years. Third, her father died yesterday, almost a year to the day after her mother's sudden death on 5th December 2002. In the space of twelve months, I have buried her mother and she has buried my mother, and now we face another funeral this week. Such facts tend to concentrate the mind even as they break the heart, and often it seems to be true that God draws nearest to us, speaking into the silence of our hearts, forging an ever more intimate friendship with us when we are wide open, not quite knowing who we are or where we are going. Bill has certainly not known who or where he was for a long time now, yet what a mystery it is that his dementia was at the last over-ridden by some sort of genetic clock ticking away inside him! This long, sad saga of little-by-little loss brings us face to face with the eternal verities, cutting straight through all the tinsel of this season to what really matters.

Hold that fact, if you will, in the context of this liturgy we offer together, carefully designed as it is to trip us up, throwing our automatic pilot into complete confusion, so that we have no choice but to slow down and pay close attention. In Advent we are asked to attend to ourselves and one another, and to attend to the God *who came, who comes, and who will come* always to live in us. One clue to what this involves is to be found in an almost throw-away line in the special form of intercession we use. Notice how it calls Mary, Christ's mother and our own, "the Most Holy Birth-Giver". This is not exactly a phrase always on our lips or tripping easily off the tongue. Indeed, to western ears this distinctly eastern orthodox expression has a continuing strangeness about it.

I want to suggest that this very strangeness may be the first gift given to us this Advent. Mary is the Most Holy Birth-Giver, but certainly not the *only* Birth-Giver. She is the first of Christ's disciples, first among the faithful. St Augustine says of her that she is more blessed in conceiving Christ in her heart than she is blessed in conceiving Christ in her womb. In other words, she is our pattern, our model of faith. We too are, as it were, pregnant with Christ. We too carry Christ in our hearts. Truly, we are his body in the world. Continually, he is enfleshed in us and through us, not least through our participation in the sacrament of his table, always and always becoming incarnate here and now so that everyone may enjoy God's life and love and peace.

And all we need do is welcome this visitation, gladly accepting that Mary's vocation is simply our own vocation writ large. God *came* and *comes* and *will come* to dwell in us because God loves us and likes us. Listen to this wonderful passage from James Alison, who writes specifically in the light of September 11 and all its terrifying consequences –

“Jesus not only teaches us to look away, but models what it looks like to live within the utterly non-rivalistic creative power for which death is simply not a reality. There is a desire in this. A desire for us not to be trapped in death. And this is where I think I'm going – something apparently terribly banal but, I think, of earth-shattering significance. The person who teaches us to look away and models for us another way of desiring *actually likes us*. It is only possible to imagine doing something like that for someone you actually like. And Jesus is doing it for all of us who are caught up in the sacred lie – which is to say, all of us.”

“The staggering thing that this means, for me, is that the most extraordinary fruit of contemplation in the shadow of the violence which we are experiencing is this: God likes us. God likes me and I like being liked. It has nothing to do with whether we are bad or good, indeed, he takes it for granted that we are all more or less strongly tied up in the sacred lie. In teaching after teaching he makes the same point: all are invited, bad and good. Those are our categories, part of the problem not part of the solution, not God's category. God's 'category' for us is 'created' and 'created' means 'liked spaciously, delighted in, wanted to give extension, fulfilment, fruition to, to share in just being'. We are missing out on something huge and powerful and serene and enjoyable and safe and meaningful by being caught up in something less than that, an ersatz perversion of each of those things. And because God likes us he wants us to get out of our addiction to the ersatz so as to become free and happy.”

“I want to say something more: behind the word 'like' there is an astonishing gentleness. The word 'love' which we have vastly overused can have for us the meaning of a forceful intervention to rescue us, and we can forget that behind a forceful intervention to rescue us, which may indeed be how love is shown in a particular circumstance, there is something much stronger, gentler and more continuous. This is *liking* us. What I want to suggest is that the word *like* in all its gentleness is the word appropriate for the extraordinarily unbothered, non-emergency power we mean by creation. It is that gentle liking that is the sign of a power which could not be in greater contrast with the power of the satanic. A power so gentle and so huge that we are able not to be afraid. In the midst of the false manufacturing of meaning and frightening power displayed by the satanic, we are being taught that our being liked and held in being is at the hands of something infinitely more powerful, infinitely restful, and we can live without fear. What is being revealed is the power of the Creator. 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'”

So much, then, for death being a morbid subject on this first Advent Sunday, or a terrifying experience for the Christian. With God, death is simply not a reality. We are swallowed up in life, so that *nothing* can ever separate us from God's love and God's liking – a power so huge and powerful and serene and enjoyable and safe and meaningful that it transcends all the ersatz substitutes we grasp at. In the light of this stupendous revelation, in the sheer joy of this freely given knowledge, we can pray with the poet Kevin Hart, *maranatha*, O Lord come.

O come, in any way you want,
In morning sunlight fooling in the leaves
Or in thick bouts of rain that soak my head

Because of what the darkness said

Or come, though far too slowly for my eyes to see,
Like a dark hair that fades to gray
Come with the wind that wraps my house
Or winter light that slants upon a page

Because the beast is stirring in its cage

Or come in raw and ragged smells
Of gumleaves dangling down at noon
Or in the undertow of love
When she's away

Because a night creeps through the day

Come as you used to, years ago,
When first I fell for you
In the deep calm of an autumn morning
beginning with the cooing of a dove

Because of love, the lightest love

Or if that's not your way these days
Because of me, because
Of something dead in me,
Come like a jagged knife into my gut

Because your touch will surely cut

Come any way you want
But come'

Second Sunday of Advent

7th December 2003

Advent means coming or arrival. Traditionally on these four Sundays, we preach the End Time, the Last Day, what is sometimes called the Day of Jesus Christ or the Day of the Lord or the Second or Final Coming of Christ, and we do so in stark terms of death and judgment and heaven and hell. We do this because God's advent among us always involves dying and judging, the twin experiences we call hell and heaven. As this was true for Mary, the Most Holy Birth-Giver, so it is true for all of us, for all the rest of us whose vocation is also to become Holy Birth-Givers. Always, there is a dying as we encounter the divine.

"All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

So T. S. Eliot reflects in his poem *The Journey of the Magi*, as those mysterious visitors from the east bring gold and incense and myrrh to Bethlehem. And there are consequences.

"We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death

Advent takes up this truth we all know in our heart of hearts. Meeting God involves meeting death, our own death, and yet we would be glad of another death. Hard as it is, cold as it can be, we would not avoid God even if it costs so much, being no longer at ease in the old dispensation, no longer clutching our false gods with an alien people, gazing steadily now at the only true God.

If we consider each of the characters in Matthew and Luke's nativity stories, all know such dying, all taste such judgment, simply from contact with reality, the reality where death and birth are so alike. Christmas is no party game for children. It is an adult entertainment, and if Simeon and Anna and John and Elizabeth, and Herod and the shepherds and the magi all know this, and if angels sing of it, no one, of course, knows it more intimately than Mary herself or sings more lustily. For this judgment, this looking reality in the face, the reality of God and the reality of ourselves, is not bad news, but good news. Yes, it is gospel, the decisive moment of encounter, of transition, when we stand on the threshold looking into the future, poised for a whole new entry into life. Yes, we are in the birth canal, caught up in the painful contractions that will push us out into the glorious liberty of the children of God. The Day of the Lord is a day of sunshine and tears, but these are tears of joy.

Let me explain what this means by asking us to listen once again to the voice of that extraordinary faith explorer, James Alison. James Alison has been teaching us that God doesn't just love us, but that God actually likes us, spaciously, generously, passionately,

freely, and above all gently. Incredibly gently, God is drawing us into life, into God's own life, and he quotes Pascal's famous saying that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. In other words, in God's scheme of things there are no margins. No one lives on the edge, no one is "in" just as no one is "out", all are embraced, all are included. In this kingdom everyone belongs, everyone matters. "God likes me and I like being liked." And, perhaps surprisingly in our excessively activist church and relentlessly mobile society, one immediate and long-term consequence of this is complacency.

"Isn't there something complacent about this sense of receiving an inheritance which is the opposite of all those rather athletic-sounding New Testament exhortations about striving and persevering...? At least there are little voices from my old self kicking in to tell me that I should, like a good evangelical, be doing more about things. But I think those voices are wrong. The first point about complacency is that, contrary to its bad name, it is in fact rather a good thing, because it means dwelling with liking in something. The Father says to his Son, 'This is my son in whom I am complacent.' If you want to know that I am not making this up, here's St Jerome's translation: *'Tu es Filius meus dilectus in te complacui.'* If the Father dwells with liking in or on someone, then to like being liked, to go along with that being liked, strange though it may seem, is surely a rather important part of receiving the regard of the Father. We tend to use complacency only in the sense of a closed-off being-pleased-with-oneself which cuts one off from further involvement with or vulnerability towards others.

However, I'd like to suggest, and I think that this is what I am experiencing over time, that just as complacency can shade off into presumption, so it can also, and more properly, deepen into compassion. That is, it is someone who is liked who can appreciate what is really likeable about someone, and bring that out."

James Alison then relates this unusual, and unusually touching, illustration of what he means, taking us into a part of the real world not often touched on in sermons. As we listen we might reflect that the church is usually too prissy and too proud to allow God to be God, too prissy and too proud to acknowledge God where God is to be found. Let us be crystal clear about this. In the sordid and the shallow, in the gutter as much as in the sanctuary, the God of surprises continually adverts, for the incarnation, the flesh-taking at Bethlehem which is repeated everywhere, means precisely that there is no division any longer between sacred and secular, no demarcation at all between the holy and the profane.

"I remember a story in one of the London free weekly gay papers about a man who, together with his boyfriend, rented a porno video. Unbeknown to the man, his boyfriend had previously acted in porno videos of a rather violent and disturbing sort before they met. The shop assistant at the video store that evening put the wrong video in the box, and – hey presto – they suddenly found themselves watching a film in which one of them was starring, if being repeatedly raped for the pleasure of others counts as starring. Needless to say the former actor rushed out of the room with shame and fear at his being uncovered, and only dared to come back in several hours later, where he found his boyfriend just sitting and crying in front of a blank TV screen. The former actor imagined that this meant that it was all over between them and that he should collect his things and move out. But no, it turned out that the boyfriend was crying because of the debasement to which someone he loved had submitted himself, or been subjected; he was crying with compassion as he saw something of the sort of deep dark place his partner must have been in, in order to have got himself into something like that."

So here we have not an end, but a beginning. This is not death, but birth, or both at once. What touches us in this unlikely place is truly a divine moment, a holy epiphany of the Spirit, a sacrament or encounter with God where we are simultaneously judged and released, judged and set free. God's judgment really is bursting with new life.

In the darkness, in a split-second of searing illumination, and not without tears, contemplation and complacency transfigure into compassion. Such judgment and agony Mary knew, and the birthing and the delight. So too can we, and so we plead with Christ to come to us, to do whatever it takes, adventing in our lives today and every day.

O come, in any way you want,
In morning sunlight fooling in the leaves
Or in thick bouts of rain that soak my head

Because of what the darkness said

Or come, though far too slowly for my eyes to see,
Like a dark hair that fades to gray
Come with the wind that wraps my house
Or winter light that slants upon a page

Because the beast is stirring in its cage

Or come in raw and ragged smells
Of gumleaves dangling down at noon
Or in the undertow of love
When she's away

Because a night creeps through the day

Come as you used to, years ago,
When first I fell for you
In the deep calm of an autumn morning
beginning with the cooing of a dove

Because of love, the lightest love

Or if that's not your way these days
Because of me, because
Of something dead in me,
Come like a jagged knife into my gut

Because your touch will surely cut

Come any way you want
But come."

Third Sunday of Advent

14th December 2003

This Advent, possibly after many years of avoidance, I am asking us to look steadily once more at the traditional End Time themes – death, judgment, heaven and hell. The End Times have always been the church's particular concern across these four weeks because we are not simply preparing for another Christmas as a sentimental commemoration of the birth of baby Jesus. On the contrary, we see and understand the coming of God in the flesh at Bethlehem as characteristic of the only true God in every place and at every time. In other words, God is always becoming incarnate, always taking human shape. It is in the very nature of God to do this, for *God* is not the name we give to some distant and disinterested potentate, dwelling in solitary splendour over against us. *God* is the name we give to that beneficent, creative, redemptive, gentle power or energy who calls into being all things, the giver and source and consummation and end of all life and love. So *God* is never distant or disinterested or even distinct, a being in isolation from other beings, a spirit in isolation from other spirits. Indeed, *God* is not *a* anything - *God* is Spirit, not *a* Spirit. The New Testament could hardly be more precise about this, and yet we perversely persist in getting it wrong. *God* is Spirit, and because this is so we worship in spirit and truth. And we do this not because of any decision of our own, but simply because God is, because God is as God is in Jesus, and therefore we have hope. We do this because God comes to us, adventing among us continually, for the stunningly simple reason that God loves us and likes us.

Loving and liking, after all, is always what create communion. God is with us because God cannot still be God while choosing to be elsewhere. Loving and liking necessitate relationship, community, friendship, family. When we like someone we naturally want to be with them, for this is where we find life and discover love, and just as it is with us, so it is with God. As we say over and over again in this Advent liturgy, God *came* and *comes* and always *will come* because there is nowhere else God would rather be.

That dynamic and courageous contemporary faith explorer James Alison has been helping us see just how much God likes us, and it is precisely as we begin really to believe and trust that we are liked, that our very existence is an expression of divine regard, that we begin to like ourselves and each other. But James Alison, important though his insights are, is by no means our only companion on this journey, for we travel too in company with the very first Christian disciple, the supreme pattern and model of all Christian believing. For, supremely, we pilgrims share the company of Mary, the Most Holy Birth-Giver.

Such fellow-travellers teach us to see what we mean by death, judgment, heaven and hell with Christ's eyes. Not surprisingly, then, we have already discovered that death is not quite what we think it is. Birth and death are very much alike, for all life involves death, all living necessitates dying. The Christian secret of life through death, of death leading to resurrection, can now be seen for what it is. Real life is actually a post-mortem experience, and this is the decisive clue about the heart of reality, the clue we need in order to unlock the mystery of being. In just the same way, judgment is not inevitably an end in itself, what we might call a dead end. Judgment can always be the necessary prelude to a fresh start, the experience we desperately need if we are to reinvent ourselves and go on healthily into the future.

Death and judgment, in other words, both belong to the birth canal. They are actually the way we emerge from the darkness and come into the light. Suddenly, after all the struggling and all the pain, we pop out into the sun, gulping for air, filling our lungs with every fresh gasp, crying out with sheer joy at being alive. Just as Mary inevitably meets death and judgment in her own encounter with God, so do we also. Coming face to face with ultimate reality means an end to unreality, the severing of all our pathetic attachment to the ersatz and the satanic, so that we no longer waste time running after what can never satisfy us. Just as blessed Mary opens herself up so trustingly to the God who likes her and chooses her, so can we also. Just as birth and death are two sides of a single coin, so too are judgment and redemption. There can be no birthing without dying, and no saving without judging. Death is actually a kick into life, and judgment is actually a kick into salvation. This is to say, we must learn to see ourselves as we are without dissembling, shown up for who we really are in the dazzling light of God's advent, for only then can we really die utterly to all of that. But, quite crucially, for here is the heart of the Good News, this happens not because we are hated but because we are loved. As James Alison has it, the day of salvation comes simply because we are liked and because we like being liked. Entering into this truth in the depths of ourselves, the Christ is conceived all over again. Suddenly, miraculously, Mary the Most Holy Birth-Giver is joined by us, all the little Birth-Givers, all the other God-bearers, all the numberless Christ-bearers, all Christians of every age who carry Christ to the waiting world. To do this, to be this, to share in the one mission of God who wants us all to be free and healthy and happy is to become multipliers of the divine harvesting. Another way of saying the same thing is to say that to do this is to be catholic. As James Alison says –

“I take it that one of the joys of being Catholic is that we are not a group united by an ideology, nor a group who adhere to a text, nor a group under the command of a leader or set of leaders, but a group brought into being along with an ordered way of life as we undergo a certain form of listening, listening to the crucified and risen victim as he shows his forgiveness of us and undoes our ways of being together, which tend to be judgmental, violent and so on, so that we can share God's life forever. What keeps us as Catholics, and what is the central element of experience and truth as lived by Catholics... is that we can count absolutely on the crucified and risen Lord, present in our midst especially in the Eucharist, who is gradually teaching us how to reinterpret our world in such a way that we build each other up, and do not fear the truth which will set us free. The presence of the crucified and risen Lord teaching us as Catholics to inhabit words like “Go and learn what this means, I want mercy and not sacrifice” or “the sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the sabbath”, His presence *is* the still small voice that is at work through and in all our debates and disjunctions, and will always be opening us up to being made anew starting from where we are.”

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Those words are the living interpretative presence of One who loves us starting exactly where we are, One who reaches us in the midst of all the collapses of what seemed sacred, and the coming upon us of new dimensions of ourselves which seem terrifying until we learn to look at them through the eyes of One who loves us so much that he longs to be us, and longs for us to be free and happy with him, forever.”

That we are learning to relax, together, through hearing His words, into being loved, is, surely, the central Catholic experience.” To accept Mary's vocation as our own, to relax in the living presence of One who loves and likes us so much that he longs to be us, this is very heaven. I mean this, of course, in the strict sense that heaven is nothing else but eternal life *with* God and *for* God and *in* God, life lived out in real harmony and genuine

friendship with ourselves and with one another. The opposite of such heaven is quite obviously hell. And hell, of course, is still available, always available, just waiting around the corner as it were, for hell is something we choose for ourselves and do to each other. In other words, like death itself, hell holds no reality for God. The only question is whether it will be real for us, and this is a question only we can answer.

Faced as we are each day with the choosing, let us crave the prayers of Mary and all the saints who have chosen before us the way of life and peace, as yet again we pray this great Advent prayer –

O come, in any way you want,
In morning sunlight fooling in the leaves
Or in thick bouts of rain that soak my head

Because of what the darkness said

Or come, though far too slowly for my eyes to see,
Like a dark hair that fades to gray
Come with the wind that wraps my house
Or winter light that slants upon a page

Because the beast is stirring in its cage

Or come in raw and ragged smells
Of gumleaves dangling down at noon
Or in the undertow of love
When she's away

Because a night creeps through the day

Come as you used to, years ago,
When first I fell for you
In the deep calm of an autumn morning
beginning with the cooing of a dove

Because of love, the lightest love

Or if that's not your way these days
Because of me, because
Of something dead in me,
Come like a jagged knife into my gut

Because your touch will surely cut

Come any way you want
But come

Fourth Sunday of Advent

21st December 2003

We have scaled-down, domesticated and miniaturized Advent so that it is nothing more than a four-week gestation period we put up with to get the baby we want for Christmas! But the church has traditionally thought of Advent as something much more than just a convenient way of keeping track of how many shopping days are left till Christmas. Advent is a time when we face the big questions – the realities of heaven and hell and death and judgment – questions that change our lives, realities that push us to consider our lives from the inside out. Over these few weeks, I believe we might have been re-discovering the wisdom in this tradition, even as we have also been surprised that death and judgment and hell and heaven are not quite what at first we imagine them to be. Seeing them through the eyes of contemporary theologian James Alison we've been learning how these realities are rather more subtle and slippery than we usually think. Seeing them with the eyes of Mary the Most Holy Birth-Giver certainly confirms their paradoxical nature, for the four last things turn out to be on excellent speaking terms with one another. Indeed, they are actually very good friends! Far from being negative or depressing truths, when we allow them into our frame of reference they reveal themselves as gospel. In other words, they enable us to see afresh and in depth the radical revelation of God in Christ for the Good News that it really is. Even hell itself, in this scenario, is not the black hole we expect to find.

Just as every new step into life demands some sort of death, just as every experience of redemption grows essentially out of judgment, so the sheer bliss we call heaven can never be appreciated apart from the sheer agony of hell. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light!’...” It is, after all, in deepest darkness that Light is born. In darkness Light shines, and only after aeons of struggle is the dark pushed back, overcome and defeated. “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and God was the word”. The first creative word is spoken by God in darkness and silence, so that darkness gives birth to dazzling light, turning silence into conversation and communion. Into this loving dialogue we enter again every morning, opening up the frontiers to glimpse the face of God. Like Mary, we say our own *Yes* to God, over and over again, giving ourselves up to this adventure of seeking and finding, this voyage of discovery wherein we uncover our own identity. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” Death and life, judgment and redemption, light and darkness, hell and heaven, yes and no – you don't need to be a rocket scientist to get the connections!

On this last Sunday of Advent perhaps we can say that the astonishingly complex project of becoming truly human is, after all, terrifyingly simple. For the choices we are faced with are really no less and no more than a choice between answering *Yes* or *No* to One who calls us into being, letting be or refusing to let be.

*The angel's entrance (you must realize)
was not what made her frightened ...
No, not to see him enter, but to find
the youthful angel's countenance inclined
so near to her; that when he looked, and she*

*looked up at him, their looks so merged in one
the world outside grew vacant, suddenly,
and all things being seen, endured and done
were crowded into them: just she and he
eye and its pasture, visions and its view,
here at the point and at this point alone:-
see, this arouses fear. Such fear both knew.*

Not surprisingly, if the poet is right, at the solemn moment of decision, Gabriel and Mary, like all of us, are afraid. For everything – quite literally – depends on keeping the thread of attention alive, giving the response of the heart which alone leads to life. Archbishop Michael Ramsey was asked once in a TV interview if he believed in hell. His answer? “I believe you will be allowed to stew in your own juice if you really want to”. In other words, hell, like death, is a human construct, a human invention. God is deathless and hell-less. These are simply not realities for God. Hell is something we choose for ourselves and do to each other. Hell is our saying *No* – our refusal to be part of God’s adventure, our refusal of life, our choosing of death and destruction. But just as Mary says *Yes*, so too can we, for she is our great enabler, the supreme model and guide given to us in the New Testament, the pattern for all Christian discipleship

*The angel and the girl are met,
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.*

*See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other’s face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He’s come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.*

*Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on its wings.*

*Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way.
Sound’s perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.*

*These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
But through the endless afternoon
As if their gaze would never break*

In keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus heaven is reflected in our faces, for we are giving ourselves up to One who first gives himself up to us. And it happens “in the ordinary day” where time and eternity intersect. If we are to hold on to sanity, it is essential to keep this vision alive in these crazy final days before Christmas. If we are to flourish and flower, it is essential to treasure what Mary shows us as we come to the crib and the altar-table and go away refreshed to face our families and friends and neighbours and enemies. It is easy to despair of ourselves and our world, to choose hell, or at least feel powerless to do anything but go along with the ruling madness. To speak truth when we are surrounded by lies is hard, to say *Yes* when all the world seems to prefer *No*, is harder yet. We are called to do no less than bring heaven down to earth, by witnessing to the vivaciousness of our death-less, hell-less God. *Yes*, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We are the answer to our own prayer, we and all who collaborate with us. For, as James Alison says, “It is not true that we pray so as to move God. It is truer that in our prayer God is moving us.”

Bishop Richard Holloway once said in a Christmas sermon, “Rejoice and be merry; eat heartily, drink gustily – and tomorrow go out and change the world.” That’s what *Yes* means, and that’s heaven - beginning right here and now, and extending through all days and beyond all days.

O come, in any way you want,
In morning sunlight fooling in the leaves
Or in thick bouts of rain that soak my head

Because of what the darkness said

Or come, though far too slowly for my eyes to see,
Like a dark hair that fades to gray
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Or if that’s not your way these days
Because of me, because
Of something dead in me,
Come like a jagged knife into my gut

Because your touch will surely cut

Come any way you want
But come.

Christmass 2003

Unlike some of you, I've never been a dog owner. I have, however, shared my life with a number of domestic cats. And the naming of cats, as T.S. Eliot knew, is a difficult matter. My first cat was called Ambrose, and he has been succeeded over the years by several cats called Lambeth, one Pontius, and two Magnificats. These days I am also attended by a cat, but this one I don't need to feed or provide with kitty litter. These days my cat sits in the corner of my computer screen smiling at me when I work, swatting butterflies, washing himself with long licks, gently dozing with a soft purr, occasionally talking to me, sometimes hanging precariously upside down, and occasionally scratching the screen to show that spell check is working. He's known as the office assistant, although I call him Benedicat, and you may find he will assist you too if you ask for help. By the way, you can always switch off the office assistant, although if you do this too often he will refuse to go away before asking if you want to get rid of him altogether! This, of course, is typical cat behaviour. Unlike a dog, who when you call wags his tail and comes running to ask "what can I do for you?", a called cat just yawns and says "put it in writing and I'll get back to you". As they say, a cat probably knows when your birthday is, it's just that a cat couldn't give a damn!

For all my devotion to cats, however, it's a dog I have in my sights tonight. This is the dog in the manger. You may not have spotted him, but once upon a time Bishop John Taylor wrote a charming Christmas poem about him.

*Come to think of it there must have been
a dog in the manger cocking a culprit eye –
"Only warming the hay" – cuffed off the scene.
He never was one for letting sleepers lie.*

*Twelfth Night came. It laughed to see such sport,
baying the star and nipping the camels' heels,
exciseman's nose probing the smells they brought,
crookleg thumping fleas as the company kneels.
Now with outrageous confidence it may take
its place at all our high solemnities.
Carpaccio, Corregio, van Eyck
let the dog in, knowing what pain it is*

*to run the streets in renegade repute,
faithful even to death and yet unclean,
since none forgets the muzzle of the brute
lapped beggars' sores and blood of a tumbled queen,
and still betrays the dustbin roundabout.*

*its infidel fidelity does not doubt
that crumbs fall freely from this master's table.*

You will see immediately why I'm so fond of this dog. Like my own Benedicat, this dog in the manger, cocking an eye, crooking his leg, thumping fleas, baying at the star, nipping the camels' heels, always makes me smile. Somehow, when he's around I don't feel quite so lonely or out of place. His company is very reassuring. Somehow, if he's present, I know that I too have a perfect right to be here. Besides, the dog in the manger reminds us at all our high solemnities that Christmas is actually very homely, terribly,

terribly ordinary, and perhaps this is why so many continue to find the story so attractive. After all, apart from a handful of angels singing better than Kings College Cambridge, there is absolutely nothing at all remarkable in what Luke gives us. All we see is a rather ragged engaged couple, an unwed teenage bride, an overbooked motel displaying the usual “No Vacancy” sign, and a motley lot of thoroughly disreputable shepherds. And, eventually, in the dead of night, a slippery new-born baby wrapped up tight just like any other baby, warmed by the bad breath of goats and cattle in a crowded shed.

It’s not hard, is it, to imagine a dog sneaking in to this scene on the sly? It’s not hard because this is actually our world, made up of all the everyday places where we live and work and try to make sense of our lives. We know about birth, just as we know about death and almost everything between. Absolutely none of this is foreign territory. Bethlehem is not so much a small Palestinian town just south of Jerusalem as Bethlehem is our very own city and neighbourhood. The humble stable where Jesus is born is not some romantic construction full of cute, perfectly behaved animals in a charming rustic setting two thousand years ago. The stable is our own ramshackle home where we now live cheek by jowl with people who are sometimes little better than goats and cattle, and sometimes worse. If you don’t believe me in tonight’s candlelit magic, wait till you spend six hours eating Christmas dinner with them tomorrow, and then think again as the ambulance drives you away! Think again, and look a bit longer and harder and deeper, for the Christmas gospel is that God is in this mess, mixed up with us right where we find ourselves - in all our innocent joys, in all our unresolved hurts and fears and hopes for something better.

What we celebrate in this most holy night is not something that happened to other people long ago. We are not just a crowd of idle spectators. We cannot look on from a safe distance because we are celebrating what happens to us as we believe and trust that God loves us and likes us enough to want to be one of us. For Jesus is living proof that God is not just *with* us, but *one of us*. And if this is true, then God is to be found and loved and worshipped and served in those around us or not at all, in those who share our lives, in all who cross our path. If this is true, there can be no convenient separation between politics and religion. Loving God means really caring about hospitals and schools and poverty and refugees and concentration camps and racism. Loving God is never a matter of us privately feeling momentarily better in what can be a hateful world. Loving God is about public policy where we who believe insist on justice and dignity and freedom for everyone regardless of colour or class or sexual orientation. Hell is something we choose for ourselves and do to each other, while heaven is learning to welcome God’s way and do God’s will, seeing to it that this all-embracing divine love rules and shapes life on earth.

As one of the great mystics said in the thirteenth century, “*What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my own time and in my culture?*” At Bethlehem there is bread enough to feed everyone, but God relies on us to share the gift around, to feed each other, to see to it that all are satisfied.

*Come to think of it there must have been
a dog in the manger cocking a culprit eye –
“Only warming the hay” – cuffed off the scene.
He never was one for letting sleepers lie.*

*Twelfth Night came. It laughed to see such sport,
baying the star and nipping the camels’ heels,*

*exciseman's nose probing the smells they brought,
crookleg thumping fleas as the company kneels.
Now with outrageous confidence it may take
its place at all our high solemnities.*

*Whatever longing urged it to the stable,
its infidel fidelity does not doubt
that crumbs fall freely from this master's table.*

The Epiphany of the Lord

Sunday 4th January 2004

There was a star all right around the time Jesus was born. It was not a new one. The gospel of Matthew doesn't suggest that it was. What the astrologers of those days, like their modern counterparts, based their predictions on were the changing positions and conjunctions of stars, which as we know from almanacs surviving from those times they could calculate decades ahead. From our own scientific reckoning we know that around the time Jesus was born an extremely rare conjunction took place, one which can occur only every 1000 years or a little less. The planet Jupiter met Saturn several times in that year, and it must have been a magnificent sight in the brilliant sky of lands around the Mediterranean. But its astrological interpretation was even more striking. For Jupiter was known as the planet of the world ruler, and Pisces was the sign of the final or golden age.

So the star is certainly not legend. Legend, however, has gathered around it, and our Christmas traditions and carols are full of myth.

The gospel tells of magi, that is, magicians or star-gazing astrologers. It does not call them kings, and it never says there were three of them. Nor does it give us their names, making one European, one Asian, and one African. These details were added in later versions of the tale, and in the 4th century their bodies were "discovered" and enshrined at Constantinople, later to be transferred to Milan, and later still to Cologne.

That's how legend works. As time passes the original story is surrounded with embroidery. This may even have started before Matthew wrote the story down. Underneath it all, however, and however top-heavy the tale eventually becomes, there remains a nugget of truth. Basically, we are probably dealing with things that really happened.

So Christmas, and the *epiphania* or revelation or self-disclosure of God's nature given to us at Christmas, is no fairy tale. The embroidery may encourage us to dismiss it all as fanciful nonsense about the same time that we grow out of other childhood legends, but the essential truth remains for any who will take the trouble to uncover it. And, all the elaborate decoration aside, this truth is really very simple. In the manger we see a baby, and in a special way this baby comes to life for us here this morning in Carys who comes to us just a few weeks old for baptism.

Well, what's so remarkable about this child? The answer to that, of course, is absolutely nothing and absolutely everything. New-born babies are a dime a dozen, and at the same time miraculously unique. Years ago in another parish I had a big, rather awkward, and in some ways rather a sad man helping me with baptism preparation. On the outside he was a rather gruff, bluff figure, a no-nonsense sort, and somewhat overbearing, although underneath this tough exterior he was really a pussy-cat. Many times we would gather together ten or a dozen couples seeking baptism for their children, sit them in a circle and talk about the whys and wherefores. I always asked this big man to introduce the session by telling us about his experience at his grandson's birth. The story was almost always the same, sometimes word for word. And on cue, at a certain point in the telling, he would burst into tears. This wasn't a stage piece. It wasn't an act; it was absolutely

real. For Robin had seen God in that moment, and the wonder and mystery and awe of it never left him.

And his “worship” - for this is the only word I have for it - inevitably triggered similar emotions in the group, so that the flood-gates opened as one after another, even the most hard-bitten of them, told their own story. Not many of them had much of a clue, frankly, what baptism is about or why they wanted and needed the church’s blessing for their baby. Every single one of them, however, knew with certainty that their child was both their own and not their own, that they had made it together and yet it was not just the sum of their genes, that it came to them from somewhere or someone else as sheer, unmerited gift. Seeking baptism was one obvious way of celebrating this divine gift, of thanking God – a God they sometimes hardly believed in at all – for such treasure and such joy.

At the heart of all the tinsel and legend gathered around the infant Christ, God comes to us in great simplicity - back then at Bethlehem, now in the birth of each new child fresh from the womb. At the start of a new year, when there is much about our world to make us despair, it is worth remembering that the year 1809 also was overshadowed by war and exhaustion from too much violence. It was a time when most people had given up hope for any sort of human future. Yet that year saw the births of Alfred Tennyson, Frederic Chopin, Felix Mendelssohn, Charles Darwin, and Abraham Lincoln. When the human condition seems hopeless God commonly sends a baby. That’s what epiphany is all about, and it invites us to believe again, perhaps for the first time.

Baptism of Christ

11th January 2004

“When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’” According to Luke, this happens while the people gathered on the banks of the Jordan are wondering if John might be the Messiah, the emissary of God they are looking for and hoping for. So when the voice from heaven says “You are my son”, this is in effect God saying, “*this one, not that one, Jesus is the one, not John*”.

The Christian movement began because people felt that in the presence of Jesus they were closer to God than anywhere else. God seemed real and near and believable when they were with him, more so than at any other time. Looking into his eyes they felt a gateway was opening up, drawing them into an endless journey into God’s light and love, an endless journey into the heart of reality itself. And if this sense of being with God whenever this man was around sparked what we call the church, so it continues even to the present day. We are here because the sheer aliveness of Jesus touches and transforms us, making it possible for us to trust that God loves us and likes us enough to become one of us.

But how is it that God is with us and one of us in Jesus? How is it that the humanity of this person opens up to reveal such inner dimensions? How is it that he is the Messiah, the Christ? This is undoubtedly our experience, but when we try to put this experience into words, words fail us. Inevitably, we find ourselves stammering in all our attempts to explain what we mean, for the reality is simply too real for any language we know. Our struggle is itself one indication, of course, of the authenticity of the mystery into which we enter, for now we see in a glass darkly. Only *then* will we see face to face. Only *then* will we know even as we have been fully known.

And because the struggle is embedded in the New Testament itself we can be sure that the unfolding and deepening reflection contained in these foundation documents of our faith is characteristic of all genuine faith. So I want briefly draw to our attention a conversation that begins with Paul and Mark and Matthew and Luke and John, a conversation which now involves us all. The apostolic writers are deliberately listed in this order because it seems fairly certain that this is the correct historical sequence. Paul’s letters are the earliest documents we have in the New Testament, and the gospels were written quite some years later, one after another, starting with Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke, and finally by John. All five of the inspired authors try to tell us as honestly as they can who Jesus really is, and all five do it rather differently. Indeed, all five *fail*, which is precisely why we need all five. But as time goes on and the story is told and re-told, so the insights mature and the language shifts and changes accordingly.

All five are agreed, of course, that God is creator and sustainer of life, and that all of us without exception are God’s daughters and sons. That we are all made in the divine image and likeness is absolutely foundational. But if this is true of all, how is it that one among us stands out so dramatically, like the rest of us in every way yet at the same time so much more? How is it that Jesus is God’s son in such dazzling fashion that to look at him is to see our true selves without any of the usual distortions? This is the question the writers struggle with, and these are their answers.

Paul says Jesus is Son of God by virtue of the resurrection. He writes of Jesus “who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead”. You could say that Paul is almost entirely disinterested in Jesus prior to Easter, telling us no stories about his life, hardly ever mentioning his teaching. Everything depends on the cross and resurrection.

Mark comes along some years after Paul and he too is quite clear that Jesus is only fully perceived as Son of God at calvary. But he does want to say more than this. So he begins his gospel with today’s festival, the baptism of Jesus by John. Yes, Jesus is undoubtedly Son of God by virtue of the resurrection, but what happens at Easter fits in with all we know of the rest of his life. At the cross all eyes are finally opened, but the truth was there all along for those with eyes to see. Certainly, from the moment of his baptism, Mark is convinced, Jesus is adopted and possessed by the divine Spirit in the same way that we all are, although in his case more fully. So, what we might call the christhood of Jesus, his inner reality as the mirror reflecting God’s love, is visible, even if not properly understood, at least from the time his public ministry begins.

Matthew and Luke, a little later still, agree with all of this, but for them it is still not enough. They refuse absolutely to pin-point a moment of adoption or possession. If Jesus is really God’s Son in this special way, they reason, it cannot begin at some particular moment of his life, like switching on a light. What is true at the end of his life must equally be true at the beginning of it and all through it. God is saying “You are my beloved son” long before the cross, and even long before the baptism. From the very moment of his conception, from the moment of his birth into the world, Jesus is God with us. So Matthew and Luke weave their Christmas stories, two very different stories, to demonstrate as best they can their conviction that Jesus comes direct from the heart of God, that there is never a time when he is less than God’s servant and God’s son. God, they are telling us, brings life as much out of the empty womb as of the empty tomb.

One after another they have all, as it were, taken a step back, until finally John comes along and steps out of time altogether, out of time as we know it and into eternity. Yes, he says, Jesus was designated Son of God at the resurrection, yes he was embraced by the Spirit at his baptism, yes the Spirit was active in his conception and birth and all through his human life, but all this is insufficient. “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” What we see in time is true even before time begins. Jesus is the word God speaks to us, God’s own word from before the foundation of the world, and now made flesh for our salvation. In other words, God is always and everywhere Christlike. All other perceptions of God are partial. Every other revelation of the divine nature, however true, is less than the whole truth.

In the muddy Jordan today the secret is disclosed, and if only we will welcome this one who comes to stand in complete solidarity with us, we can journey with him into the promised land.

Second Sunday of Epiphany

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there." Try putting that opening sentence from today's gospel alongside another opening sentence, spoken by a young Palestinian woman, veiled and demure. There is not much difference between Mary and this anonymous woman. Twenty centuries apart, they even look alike. At least today's young mother looks much as we imagine the mother of Jesus to be: olive skin, dark eyes, a shy smile under her head scarf. She looks at us from her farewell video. "I have always wanted to turn my body into shrapnel against the Zionists". This is news to her husband. It is hardly news to her children. They are only one and three years old – too young to understand that she has strapped explosives to her body, walked into a busy Israeli street and blown herself up. All they know (or will know) is that they have no mother to make breakfast for them anymore, no mother to brush their hair.

Barbara Crafton, an American priest, has been writing about this –

"I cannot scold her and tell her to look at who she'd hurt most, for God's sake, her own children. I can't do that because she's already dead. Can't tell her how angry her action makes me. Furious. At her. I couldn't have told her anyway, of course. I didn't know her. It's just as well. Something in Palestine has upended and overturned the basic values of human life – at least I thought taking care of your kids until they can take care of themselves was a basic value of human life. Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe we're supposed to turn our bodies into shrapnel. Maybe I just haven't kept up. This is hard for me, because I support her cause. The Israelis need to get out of the settlements now. They need to get over their mythology about themselves now, and quit clothing their own imperialism with God's will. Now. They need to accept two states, yesterday. They need to stop bulldozing peoples' houses.

"I think the situation there has driven people crazy. A young mother who thinks she's supposed to become a bomb? Insane. I don't care how normal she looks on the video. This young woman had gone mad.

"Please don't write about the Israelis and the Palestinians, I scold myself as my fingers fly furiously over the keyboard. People don't like it when you get political. Your readers count on you to help them through their days with grace. Don't rant. Why don't you write something about prayer instead, there's a good girl? All right. I will. It's what I need to write anyway, because my grief and fury are too immense for me to manage. There are many things like that: things too heavy for me to lift, anger too hot to touch, grief too deep for words. So how do I pray for this young woman, now dead, for her children who awoke this morning with no mother to fix them breakfast and help them get dressed and brush their hair? What do I say?

"Sometimes it's best to say nothing. Sometimes it's best just to picture them – her demure head covering and her automatic rifle. Her bewildered children. Her weeping husband. Her mother. The people she killed, their children, their husbands and wives, their parents. The people who lured her into the terrible place from which this all looked like God's will. Picture everyone and breathe deeply. It was not God's will that this happen. God is the author of life and never wills death. But God's love is never absent from any human event. Never. Not any. Not even the worst. The divine blessing was all

over the terrible scene, full of love and lament, right away. Scattered among the body parts and twisted pieces of metal are the building blocks of what could become the healing of Israel... I picture the scene and try to see it the way God sees it. Now there is quiet within me, and I don't want to scold the young woman. I can only love her."

These are wise words, true words, and we might well note how prayer is not, after all, an escape from politics. On the contrary, prayer and politics always go together, or faith is not faith, not engagement but escape. But I want – very briefly - to link these wise words about prayer and politics to today's gospel, and to Amber who comes for baptism.

The story of the marriage at Cana is just not a party trick. We are *not* asked to believe that Jesus provided 120 gallons of quality wine for someone's wedding breakfast so that everyone could get smashed out of their brains. We *are* asked to believe that the world is a wedding – that God's will for us is to enjoy life, living together in real peace and genuine pleasure. We are asked to do all we possibly can to make the world such a place. We are asked to be as generous as God is generous – lavish in refusing to condemn, prodigal in forgiving, tender in understanding, gentle in caring. We are asked to be God's Easter people, people of "the third day" when all the water is turned into wine.

Every birth and every baptism is a new beginning. It is not too late. It is never too late to correct our mistakes, never too late to start afresh, for the divine love and lament is everywhere. Amber is a living sign of this hope which, for all our apathy and cynicism, is not yet extinguished in our hearts. All we need do, like her, is turn away from evil, turn to Christ, reject selfish living and embrace his way of love and generosity. All we need do is follow Mary's advice to the servants at the wedding, "Do whatever he tells you." This is hard, but not impossible, and begins with a change of heart. Isn't this always what makes the wine flow?

Papias, an early Christian and a disciple of John who wrote the Cana story, says that the age to come, that time when we see to it that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, will mean more than 500 bottles of vintage wine at a wedding. "Vines shall come up with 10,000 branches", says Papias, "and on each branch 10,000 twigs, and on each twig 10,000 shoots, and on each shoot 10,000 grapes, and each grape when pressed will give 25 measures of wine."

Yes, we will be swimming in the stuff.

Third Sunday after Epiphany

25th January 2004

It is hard to overstress the importance of this scene in Luke's gospel. In modern political terms this is where Jesus launches his campaign, announces his manifesto. The way he inaugurates his mission here in Nazareth's synagogue and the response he receives set a pattern that will run throughout the gospel.

A curious aspect of the episode, however, as many have noticed, is that we hear virtually nothing of the content of Jesus' sermon, unless what we hear *is* the sermon. After quoting at length from the prophet Isaiah, all we hear him say is, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's it. End of sermon! Brevity, as they say, is always a winner. Well, full marks for brevity!

Taking this as my model, I too will try to be brief, even though I'm afraid I can't quite match that. I do, however, want to make a single point as simply and strongly as I can.

As I said, Jesus quotes from Isaiah, but he leaves something out. This is what Isaiah says –

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to proclaim a year of acceptance on the part of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God."

Jesus is happy with every bit of this except the day of vengeance.

In his vision, there is no violence in God at all. And highlighting this fact is surely part of what it means - and I would say no small part of what it means - for Christ to open our blind eyes.

We are all of us too good by half at creating God in our own image. God, we like to imagine, is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-mighty, a bigger and better version of ourselves.

Because we are violent, God must also be violent, concerned chiefly with justice, righteousness and punishment, balancing the books, settling accounts. Because we routinely hit back, returning evil for evil, so will God. As night follows day, it follows that vengeance is part and parcel of God's nature.

But no, not so, says Jesus. There is no day of vengeance. What we need to see instead is that God is first and last *accepting*. Instead, God creates space for us, a year of welcome, of release, of hospitality. Into this reality we are invited, all of us without exception. Whoever we are, wherever we have been, whatever we have done or left undone, the divine welcome awaits us, an arena in which we can begin afresh, a place of liberation where we can find our true selves, where we can come to ourselves and start over. Recognition of this is the beginning of repentance, of conversion.

This is the good news, this is the gospel of God. The table is set for us, a place prepared, and the banquet ready.

Will we, can we, believe God longs for our company in this way? Will we, can we, accept that we are accepted? Or will we, like the people of Nazareth, reject such acceptance as impossible?

The Lord of life throws down the gauntlet, and the choice is before us.

CANDLEMASS

Presentation of the Lord in the Temple

Sunday 1st February 2004

Depending on which aspect of today's bitter-sweet, many-sided festival needs emphasizing at a particular time in the church's life, the name tends to change. In the western church, two proper names are the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Candlemass is just a nickname, derived from the church's ancient custom of blessing candles on this day, a reflection of divine light.

Jewish law prescribed that every male child belonged to God, and needed to be presented to its Father and dedicated to the Father's glory, before being redeemed or bought back. The overtones and ironies of this in the case of Jesus are obvious: for here is one who calls God his Father in more intimate tones than any other of God's daughters or sons, and here the Redeemer of all is himself redeemed. Jewish law also prescribed that the child's mother should be purified, after the ritual defilement and uncleanness of birth. All this need not necessarily take place in the temple at Jerusalem, but it must take place by sacrifice - with the release of life-blood and the offering of life-blood back to the Life-giver. Mary's offering of a pair of turtle-doves shows that she is poor, but the bloodshed invites us to look back to Jesus' circumcision, and forward to the sacrifice of the cross.

In other words, this story, like all gospel stories, is full of subtle and not-so-subtle references and connections, allusions, hints and suggestions. During these weeks after Christmas and Epiphany we have been with Jesus as he embarks on his terrifying work, and if we have discovered one thing it is that there is no logical sequence to our walking in his way. The helpless, silent baby of Christmas, is soon enough the crying baby at his circumcision, while next week he is transformed into the young man on the verge of his life's work at his baptism. One day he is partying with the best of them at a wedding, producing prodigious quantities of vintage wine, and then turning his hand to preaching in the Nazareth synagogue. In the liturgical cycle, we leap from babyhood to manhood with no interval, and from one context to another, irretrievably mixing the secular with the sacred. And then, just as we may begin to think we are getting somewhere chronologically, just as we begin to develop a taste for biographical order, forty days after Christmas Jesus is telescoped back into helpless infancy this morning, carried to the temple by his parents, handed from one person to another.

Perhaps we begin to wonder if it's all done with mirrors! And it is, for all these mirrors are needed to gather up the flickering candles, to pick up all the shafts of light. Just as we get comfortable the boat is rocked, for the oldest truth we know about God is that God is always doing something new, always shocking and shaking us awake, always claiming our attention in the present for the future.

Our God - the only true God, the God of cradle and cross - is not the God we choose or invent. The real God always comes to us as an unwelcome surprise: at once our dread friend and the joy of our heart's desiring.

So the gospels and the church's liturgy have this habit of unsettling our certainties, undermining our convictions, keeping us restless, disturbing us with new visions, reminding us how much we don't know - for the more we learn, the more we realize how ignorant we really are. The more we drink the new wine of the kingdom, the greater the

thirst grows on us for more. The more we feast on the bread of life, the more we find ourselves famished and longing for truth. The churches of the Oriental and Orthodox east pick this up in their names for this end-of-Christmastime festival. They call it neither Presentation nor Purification nor Candlemass. To them it is simply and obviously the “Feast of Meetings”, an “Encounter”. They take seriously the historical moment in the life of Mary and her young child, but they don’t get stuck there like amateur archaeologists. Like every other Christian feast, today is not just a simple commemoration of something that once-upon-a-time happened. This festival is an image “in little”, in miniature, of the cosmic encounter between darkness and light, of the cosmic choice between good and evil, focused for us in the space of a brief moment.

And what a cameo it is! Simeon and Anna - both extremely old, on their way out, presumably set in their ways, possibly nostalgic for the good old days, certainly good for nothing but the unproductive work of prayer and prophesy - these are the very ones who have the necessary grace and faith and humility to discover God’s new thing. Against all the odds, they have the necessary freshness to meet the divine promise and presence in a new-born child. As one commentator says, “No doubt many others were in the temple that day besides Simeon and Anna and saw nothing more than a little child. So often we fail to see the grace of God present in our life. Even worship is humdrum; we hear the preacher prattle, see the bread and wine - but no more! We do not look with eyes of faith to see salvation in the Lord’s Christ. But because Jesus is consolation, redemption, light, glory, we should, like Simeon, take the Lord up into our arms, in response to his Word and as we make Eucharist. Then, like Simeon, we can depart in peace. Even the darkness of death is pierced with light.”

But don’t mistake this peace for a rest-cure, some form of private nursing home for the spiritually well-insured. Those who glimpse the light cannot hold in the joy of it. Simeon and Anna tell out their souls, praising God and letting others overhear, sharing what they see, opening more and more eyes. The light is never to be hoarded by the chosen people. Always, it is for those outside the gates. Enlightenment is for everyone living in the dark. And we bearers of light are the evidence, the only evidence. Simeon and Anna and all of us share a mission because the precious gift is the clue every person needs to unlock the mystery of life. God has disappeared into humanity, and is to be found supremely here, present in our flesh, in whatever happens between us. In the baby wrapped in a woman’s blood, at his circumcision, at his baptism, enjoying a happy time with a boozy bunch at a village wedding, preaching in a synagogue, presented in the temple, walking the dusty paths of Galilee, teaching by the lakeside, dying on calvary - God encounters us in the contours of a human life. Everything is given, nothing is held back. The truth behind and within all things is entrusted to us. This means that God is counting on us, depending on us. Indeed, we can and must go even further. Amazingly, God is actually dependant on us. God chooses to be held in our hands, carried in our arms. What will we do with this fragile strength?

Third Sunday before Lent

8th February 2004

“Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid’”. Together with Peter, we find ourselves in the entirely overwhelming presence of Christ, confronted by the absolute otherness and sheer holiness of God, an experience which takes our breath away. I mean this literally as well as metaphorically. Encountering the living God is annihilation, the death of ourselves. Standing in the real presence we feel we are likely to be dissolved, extinguished like a candle flame, blown away, unable to stand the force of so much reality invading and exposing our endless dissembling. And because this is so it is absolutely imperative that we hear the word of the Lord, “Do not be afraid”. “Do not be afraid” because I will not destroy you. “Do not be afraid” because this death is really just the beginning of life. “Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” If only you will let me Easter in you, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

Widening our vision beyond today’s gospel, we discover something axiomatic here for all Christian discipleship. Christ the Lord is saying “Do not be afraid” to all the churches all the time. In the New Testament itself the many instances suggest this. By my count - and I am not much of a counter, so your count might will be more accurate! - there are some thirty-four occasions when the Lord of the church tells us “Be not afraid” or something very like it, usually “Fear not”.

When you think of it, this is hardly surprising, for fear is the opposite of faith, just as certainty is the opposite of faith. Doubt is never the problem. Doubt is simply part of what it means for us to be human. No, fear is our real enemy - fear of failure, fear of getting things wrong, fear of making mistakes, fear of making fools of ourselves, fear of misleading others.

When I first started preaching, I trusted books more than I trusted myself. I hardly dared say what I really believed in case I was wrong. I had to learn - very slowly, sometimes joyously, other times painfully - to listen to my heart, allowing intuition to surface when it seemed more prudent to suppress it. I had to learn to read the scholars and then set them aside, using their insights to guide me and to fill out what I was finding for myself to be true rather than hiding behind their skirts. Paying attention to my own experience means taking seriously the possibility that God speaks to me all the time - in real people, through everyday events. But, more than this, such self-trust means trusting God and trusting God’s people, trusting that the Spirit is patiently leading us together into all truth.

Quite recently, the Roman Catholic priest James Alison impressed on some of us the necessity for this kind of trusting faith when he gave a remarkable talk at Saint Joseph’s-in-the-Village in New York City. He was asked to address the question, “is the church wrong on the gay issue?” His careful and detailed answer need not be reproduced here, and in any case that is not the question before us today. It is not what he says, but how he says it, his attitude and tone of voice, that we need to pick up and make our own.

“I welcome the question because it obliges me to stand before you bereft of all clothes but my own. This is because I do not think that the current teaching of the Vatican congregations is true. I am well aware that for a convinced, and somewhat conservative

Catholic, for such do I consider myself to be, and such are some of you, to address the issue of whether such current teaching is untrue is to take a step into a very frightening space, the space where I may well be wrong, may be leading my brothers and sisters astray, encouraging them down a dark path of self-deception. I am well aware that to cause scandal to the faithful by leading astray in a matter of doctrine is a terrible thing to have on one's conscience, and of course, as a theologian, my fidelity to my vocation will be judged by whether I have borne witness to the One calling, and made available that One's words to my brothers and sisters, or whether I have, in the splendid words of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, 'followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart', and borne witness only to those devices and those desires.

I only feel able to embark upon this course of suggesting that the current teaching of the Vatican congregations is wrong, for one simple reason, and it is one of the reasons I am overjoyed to be a Catholic, and that is that we are in this together. I am delighted to rest in the certainty that the One who loves us and calls us into communion with him will not allow such a person as the one speaking to you to lead you too far astray without providing the means to lead us all into the truth. And I am also sure that if my attempt to say why I think the current teaching is false be conducted with appropriate courtesy and tentativeness, then the One who makes the truth resplendent will have no difficulty in turning even my falsehoods into paths by which we may be called to live in the truth.

Yet I am also aware that the truth will not shine unless people stand up for it and are prepared to run risks for it. I want therefore to put my credibility on the line by saying: this is what seems to me to be true, and this false, and I suggest that we must live accordingly. I am confident that if what I say is true, then whatever the current reaction within the Church, in the long run it will be found to have its place in the developing of our reception of the Good News brought to us by Jesus Christ. And if not, not."

Don't you think that's a splendid statement? In our journey of faith we find ourselves in some very frightening places. In every one of these, the question is: will we be overwhelmed, silenced, reduced once again to our trembling, terrified isolated self, or can we respond to God secure in the faith that we are all in this together? The truth will not shine if we refuse to stand up for it and take risks for it. If we are right, this truth will be recognized as part of the gospel, part of the Good News, and if not, not. So, then, "do not be afraid".

Second Sunday before Lent

15th February 2004

I love the beatitudes, but I never know what to say about them. I'm not sure why this should be, but I suspect it has something to do with their fragility, a sense that by touching them you might annihilate their power. Analysis and commentary can, after all, be deadly. I have a book in my library about the work of a writer I admire, which represents the dead hand of scholarship. When it first appeared, I bought and read it eagerly, hoping to learn more about one of my heroes, only to find that page by page this plodding commentary kills the freshness of the original.

When I was myself writing about Bishop John Taylor this was my constant fear, that I might inadvertently catch and pin down his butterflies in flight so that they became dead things. Would what I said about him and his ideas only make him and them seem dull and boring? Something like the same fear arises whenever I hear today's gospel. So I want to say as little as possible, in the hope that the strange words of the Lord stay with us rather than any words of mine. Indeed, perhaps I can offer just a thought or two about how to hear these overly-familiar sayings, and encourage us to go back to them again and again in the course of this week?

First of all, notice the careful stage-set. Luke is very different to Matthew in this regard. Matthew sets this sermon on a mountain, and the image we have in mind is rather like the one depicted by the Monty Python team in *The Life of Brian*. Jesus is at the centre, with groups of people ranging down the mountainside straining to hear what is being said. This leads to all sorts of comical possibilities, with some mishearing "Blessed are the peace makers" as "Blessed are the cheese makers". As one genius then explains, "Blessed are the cheese makers" is not to be taken literally, for it undoubtedly includes all makers of dairy products!

Fun though this is, to see what Luke is up to we have to wipe all such imagery from our minds. This is, as I say, a careful stage set. Jesus is surrounded by the twelve disciples, then the wider group of disciples from which the twelve have just been chosen, and then the hungry and needy crowds of people from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon, all hoping to receive from him healing and wholeness. Jesus speaks only to the twelve, but the crowd overhears everything he says to them.

It is rather like the charge given at an ordination. Addressed strictly to the candidates, it is witnessed by those among whom they will minister. And this charge is cryptic – brief as brief could be. Unlike Matthew, who has nine beatitudes, Luke is content with only four, matched closely by four corresponding woes. Unlike Matthew, who is inclined to spell things out ("Blessed are the poor in spirit"), Luke is content to be blunt ("Blessed are the poor"). And his Jesus goes on like this in the part of the sermon we don't hear today] "Love your enemies..." "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you..." "If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other also" "Do good and lend, expecting nothing in return..." "Do not judge, and you will not be judged ..." "Forgive all and you will be forgiven..."

It's all as sharp as a tack, and probably strikes us as totally mad. So, what on earth is going on here? Well, as I said, I want to avoid blunting in any way the fiery words Luke puts into the mouth of Christ, so I will offer you no tedious blow by blow explanation.

In one sense, in any case, the detail is actually unimportant. For the detail is something we have ourselves to work out as we go along, choosing how we will live day by day as Christians, responding to everyday events and taking appropriate initiatives. What is being hammered home here is more like a set of general attitudes than specific prescriptions for action, but every bit of it is based on a very particular vision of God.

Jesus is saying, God is like *this* and you will only be content when you are like *this* too. If God is generous, it follows that we must be generous. God's generosity is wide open to abuse, so we must be equally foolish in all our dealings. There is nothing good about being poor, except that God can fill us up with riches. No congratulations are due to the hungry, except that there is always a place prepared for us at the Lord's table. The bereaved and the broken-hearted are lucky, for, having looked into the darkest place of all, we can now look up, see light, and find ourselves laughing with sheer joy at being alive. To be ridiculed and denounced and betrayed for fidelity to truth goes with the territory and is actually to be welcomed as a mark of authenticity by all genuine prophets.

What at first sounds mad turns out to be not so mad after all. A choice is being put before us, and we find that it is possible to choose to live this way. It is possible to take what life deals out to us without hitting back, without seeking to redress the balance or plotting revenge. It is possible to absorb evil rather than retaliate and add to it, deliberately refusing to live in bitterness, refusing to let past or present cripple our future. It is possible to be gentle without being a doormat, to seek justice without forgetting mercy. All this is hard, sometimes very hard, but it is possible if we have the will, if we will walk the way of Christ, the way of the cross that leads to life. Do we want to share his resurrection, or are we content to go on living among the dead?

Last Sunday before Lent

22nd February 2004

In the heat of Thursday afternoon I set out to find the S. H. Ervin Gallery on Observatory Hill overlooking Sydney harbour. This was not quite like climbing the holy mountain of today's gospel, although it did require a sort of mountain-goat dexterity, and I was certainly foot-sore and weary by the time I found what I was looking for. But the struggle was worthwhile, for apart from that marvellous vantage point overlooking the bridge and the sparkling water, I suddenly stood surrounded on all sides by the drawings, paintings and tapestries of the fantastic retrospective exhibition *John Coburn: Five Decades*.

Undoubtedly, this was a place of metamorphosis, of transfiguration. You simply cannot be in such an extraordinary atmosphere without being changed, infused with the sheer joy of being alive as the brilliant colours and shapes seep into body and spirit. As John Coburn says, "Abstract art is fundamentally religious. I don't want to teach people to see. I want to get them to feel." Inevitably, those fascinating words of the artist made me think of this Last Sunday before Lent. For today is a day when we baptise new Christians, before draining away the life-giving water of the font because there can be no more baptisms until Easter. Today is also the day when we burn last year's palms to make ashes for Ash Wednesday.

Feeling, of course, is central in all this. We feel ourselves being changed and charged with new life. Even if we resist, as often enough we do, we know deep down that nothing really remains static. Inexorably, moment by moment, we undergo transformation or transfiguration, reaching back without knowing it into the Greek language as we talk of metamorphosis. Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke doesn't actually use this word to describe what happens to Jesus on the mountain today. Instead of saying Jesus underwent metamorphosis or experienced transfiguration, Luke simply says Jesus was changed.

"And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Whatever his reasons for this simplification, we can be grateful to Luke because it means that *metamorphosis* is used only four times in the New Testament – twice of Jesus, twice of us who follow in his footsteps. This nice parallel draws our attention to the fact that what happens to Jesus happens also to us. Gazing into the looking glass, we are given a tantalizing glimpse of ourselves as we shall be when God is finished with us.

Like the highly-charged forms of John Coburn, each one of us will eventually have our own halo, that projection of the spirit, an aura of light shining out from within. There is actually something divine, something god-like about us, hidden or clouded, marred or disfigured now by all we are not, but then to be transfigured, polished, burnished for all to see. We may be oblivious to it most of the time, but as the Apostle says, simply by being with Christ we are always being refashioned at the hand of the sculptor, changed little by little into our true selves. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be *metamorphosed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." Or, as we heard in the second reading, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror,

are being *metamorphosed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

From birth to death, and from the second birth we call baptism, through death and beyond death, we journey into the truth of God which is also the truth of ourselves. The miracle is being worked in us this very moment, as we turn to Christ and stretch out our hands to him. Even now we share in his divinity who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

Ash Wednesday

25th February 2004

In fourth and fifth century Egypt, the desert seems to have been full of monks and nuns seeking God in simplicity of life and quiet prayer. It is hard for us to imagine just how popular this phenomenon became, but we know there were hundreds of these solitaries, if not thousands. Equally surprising, these monastic oddballs from an unimaginably different and ancient world are currently experiencing astonishing popularity, no doubt because the knowledge they have to share with us is experiential rather than theoretical. In other words, they have things to teach us that no modern economist, sociologist, politician or religious leader can match.

All these centuries later, as citizens of another world entirely, we find ourselves among the spiritual tourists, venturing into the desert to see and to consult one or other of these great explorers of the inner life. For some, this spiritual tourism is quite literal: it requires visiting the sacred sites of Egypt and elsewhere where the solitary figures lived, mostly ruins now, although some monasteries are again stirring into life. For most of us, however, this is inevitably an armchair pilgrimage. We turn to the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers in search of wisdom, opening a book or looking at a video, letting the stories captivate us. On this first day of Lent we might do worse than begin with one of the most attractive and memorable.

A certain brother came to see Abba Arsenius at Scetis. He arrived at the church and asked the clergy if he could go and visit Abba Arsenius. 'Have a bite to eat', they said, 'before you go to see him.' 'No', he replied, 'I shan't eat anything until I have met him.' Arsenius's cell was a long way off, so they sent a brother along with him. They knocked on the door, went in and greeted the old man, then sat down; nothing was said. The brother from the church said, 'I'll leave you now; pray for me.' But the visitor didn't feel at ease with the old man and said, 'I'm coming with you.' So off they went together. Then the visitor said, 'Will you take me to see Abba Moses, the one who used to be a highwayman?' When they arrived, Abba Moses welcomed them happily and enjoyed himself thoroughly with them until they left.

The brother who had escorted the visitor said to him, 'Well, I've taken you to see the foreigner and the Egyptian; which do you like better?' 'The Egyptian (Abba Moses) for me!', he said. One of the fathers overheard this and prayed to God saying, 'Lord, explain this to me. For your sake one of these men runs from human company and for your sake the other receives them with open arms'. Two large boats floating on the river were shown to him. In one of them sat Abba Arsenius and the Holy Spirit of God in complete silence. And in the other boat was Abba Moses, with the angels of God; they were all eating honey cakes.

This homely tale tells us that being close to God is very different for different people. Holiness is never a matter of cloning. It's always a matter of horses for courses. In other words, God respects absolutely our individuality, and Christian community will not extinguish diversity. On the contrary, our common service of God is perfect freedom, the arena in which true individuality emerges. There are no standardized forms of holiness. No holiness is impersonal. Everyone comes from a different past, with different gifts and different wounds, different memories and different abilities. We come to ourselves, discovering the truth, only as we welcome one another as messengers and servants of Christ - especially when we have little in common, especially when we find our sympathies sorely tried. And this really *is* a matter of 'welcoming' one another rather than simply 'tolerating' each other, for tolerance means putting up with, and we are called

to something much more generous. Only as we genuinely welcome the strangeness of one another as God welcomes us do we come alive.

Our Lent journey to Easter is all about such coming alive. Some of us like silence and solitude, others prefer eating honey cakes and laughing with our friends. The point is, it doesn't matter what our preferences are, for there is room in the household of faith for us all. The ninety days of Lent and Easter are as good a time as any - and a better time than most - to experience this truth, and not by doing what comes naturally, but by actively embracing what we find foreign.

It is all too easy to modernize the desert tradition in a shallow way. It sounds wonderful when we are told that the path is all about self-discovery, because most of us are deeply in love with the idea of self-expression, and discovering the 'true self' so as to express it more fully is the burden of hundreds of self-help books. But for the desert monks and nuns, the quest for truth can be frightening, and they know how many strategies we devise to keep ourselves from the real thing. In particular, they are familiar with the mistake of thinking that to become ourselves all we need is for other people to go away - or at least to fall into the parts we have written for them, and not try to change us or interfere with our plans. Yet, perfection comes through life together, or not at all. Our life is with our neighbour. If everyone else were actually taken away, we wouldn't have a clue who we really are. Our life is with the neighbour, bound up with our vulnerability to each other, trusting each other over time - usually, a long, long time.

Can I suggest, then, that we use Lent and Easter to strengthen this patient trusting of one another as a very diverse groups of Christ's friends? Can I suggest that we go out of our way in these coming weeks to see if we can imagine what it is like to be the person next to us, for imagination of this kind is the beginning of love? Normally, we like only those who agree with us, those whose opinions tally pretty much with our own, those who confirm us in our prejudices, those who will leave us alone to get on with our lives in peace. All too often, we damage ourselves and hurt each other by rejecting anyone who disturbs or challenges or upsets us, yet isn't it precisely these uncomfortable people who are more likely to be God's messengers than those we find immediately congenial? Those who undermine our assumptions and unsettle our certainties push us, sometimes quite painfully, to think harder and feel more accurately. In other words, they call us to repentance and fresh vision. For they are God's agents of transformation, of conversion.

As we fix our eyes on the cross and the Easter fire, for the joy that is set before us, we who enjoy company might be bold to explore solitude and we who relish isolation might pluck up the courage to explore conviviality. Such acts of faith could bring us to a very interesting Pentecost! After all, if our mothers and fathers in faith are right, it's all a matter of silence and honey cakes.

First Sunday in Lent

29th February 2004

There is no avoiding a little reminder of geography this morning. To overlook this is to get off on the wrong foot, and get lost before we even set out on our journey. When I think back over the many occasions I have preached on today's gospel, I'm quite sure I've mostly been a rather self-absorbed and unreliable tour guide. I'm equally sure that this hasn't been noticed, because what I have often done is something we all do with familiar material. We rush to what we think is the substance of the story, rather than paying attention to the all-important detail. In other words, we miss tell-tale clues in our perfectly natural desire to cut to the chase, to get to the heart of the matter.

So, let's slow down and listen. Slowing down and listening is, of course, a good motto in itself for our approach to Easter through another Lent. For the moment, however, let us just go quietly enough to notice how Luke begins his story. "Now Jesus, full of Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was being led by the Spirit in the desert, being tempted forty days by the devil." If Jesus is in the desert, then he is outside the promised land. He is in exactly the same place as God's people Israel, and the forty days of his exile mirror the forty year exodus through which they escape their Egyptian captivity and become free.

Immediately, we are in the world of symbol, and if we miss this fact we will misunderstand the whole ensuing struggle within Jesus himself - the endless struggle within each one of us between God and Satan, between truth and falsehood, light and dark, life and death. For the specifics of our Lord's temptations are not nearly as important as this big picture.

What we see here, right at the start of his ministry, are not a series of esoteric custom-made temptations confined to Jesus himself. Rather, we are given a cameo of his daily struggle to be true to God and true to himself. What looks at first like a rather exotic experience, happening exclusively to the Christ in some far away, lost world, turns out on closer examination to be absolutely commonplace, something we share in fully, the familiar testing characteristic of our own every day world.

Not surprisingly, then, whole story recalls the history of Israel. In the desert place, Jesus relives the history of his people, proving victorious where they had failed. In the place of testing, he passes the test where Israel continually put God to the test. Mistakes made once upon a time are not made this second time.

And so it is that this story, rooted in the past, opens out to the future. Because Jesus chooses rightly, we know that we too can choose rightly. Here in the wilderness - the place traditionally where the conflict between good and evil is out in the open and clear - a new people is coming to birth, born from the old and steeped in its ways, but defined by this new Moses who speaks and acts for us all. This Son of God, when he re-crosses the Jordan into the promised land, comes in God's name and with God's truth.

But let us not make the mistake of thinking this victory is easily won or instantaneous. The temptations we all face with Jesus are extremely subtle and terrifyingly persistent, and we sift through them day by day and hour by hour. Will we live for ourselves or for others? Do we concentrate on satisfying our own hunger or are we troubled by the hunger of our sisters and brothers? Is life a matter of bread for me or bread for all? Do

we simply please ourselves, or do we give ourselves away in love and service? Do we seek power, influence, authority, and, if so, what sort of power? Will we resort to force when persuasion fails? Will we crash or crash through? Can the ends ever justify the means? Will we do bad things for good reasons? Do we risk vulnerability, or protect ourselves against rejection and pain by never trusting each other?

These are not just academic questions, are they? They take us to the heart of reality. Will we rule the world on the world's terms? Or, to put it another way, who is God, what is real? How can we live happily and smoothly with the grain of reality rather than cutting against that grain and losing ourselves in some futile blood-bath?

What we see in Jesus is a determination to enter at every point into the normal human lot of loving and suffering, the normal human experience of living and dying. Rather than wave a magic wand miraculously from above over the ills and evils of humankind, he knows that what really counts is working an inner transformation, rendering our world, by the choices he makes, hospitable to God. There is nothing neat and tidy about such an approach. Christ chooses the only way to live, and it is a messy way, so we who follow him find it equally messy.

Deciding what is right and what is wrong in every situation is an onerous responsibility. After all, we can choose very badly, making terrible mistakes which hurt us and those around us. We would like to escape, perhaps into a religious world where everything is nicely settled. But, there is no escape. To live is to choose, and to choose is always costly.

In the temptation story, notice how Satan quotes scripture to answer questions, to close the conversation down, while Jesus quotes scripture to open them up again! The bible doesn't make it easier for us to live humanly, but harder. Walking in the way of Christ, living as he does, inevitably means walking the way of the cross. Luke hints broadly at this, and we had better not miss the point. The devil, we are told, after all this tempting in the wilderness, departs from Jesus until "an opportune time." This opportune time is none other than the hour in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, where he confronts the full horror of the fate to which his costly choices have brought him.

Second Sunday in Lent

7th March 2004

There is blood on the altar, but this is not news to us. This, after all, is precisely what altars are for, the designated place of sacrifice where life-blood is offered back to God the giver of life. The horror is not in the blood. The horror is that this everyday experience of animal blood caking the altar is no longer just animal blood. Here we have a mixture of animal and human, a barbarous act of desecration, a vicious demonstration of brute force, of sheer political power in the holiest place of a subject nation. Apart from Luke's gospel we have no evidence for this massacre from any other contemporary source. But we have little difficulty believing such sacrilege occurred, because we do know from other historical sources what a weak and violent ruler Pontius Pilate could be. Indeed, what we have here might be something even more sinister, namely a glimpse of Pilate's macabre sense of humour. Perhaps this side of him helps explain his Good Friday role when the moment comes? It may well be the case that humour and weakness combine to give Pilate his unique fame as the one human being damned in our creed: "*He suffered under Pontius Pilate...*"

Near the time of this grim massacre, another sad event happens, although this is in quite a different class of disasters. A tower crumbles and falls in Siloam, and there is tragic loss of life for those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. One disaster represents human cruelty while the other represents human negligence. In other words, neither has anything at all to do with God, and yet we religious people perversely and persistently make that wrong connection don't we? I'm afraid we are not exactly famous for our clear-headedness, for paying attention to the facts, for logical thinking. When bad things happen to us, however sophisticated we happen to be in other respects, we automatically snap back into primitive mode, blaming God. Effortlessly, we make the extraordinary mistake of imagining that we are being punished by a god constructed in our own image and likeness – someone capricious, violent, punitive, a monster we have invented somewhere in our own twisted psyche and projected onto the heavens. Without stopping for a moment to consider what an appalling travesty this ersatz god of ours really is, we march off down this narrow, winding road of tit for tat, of despair and self-pity and self-harm. Instantly, the question on our minds is the unanswerable "Why?", or possibly "Why me?" We never stop long enough to ask "Why not?" or "Why God?"

Now before we blame ourselves overly much for such shooting from the hip, it is worth recalling that there is something incredibly ancient about this, built into us by people whose names and stories we have long forgotten. On Thursday of this past week I went with a friend to see *Live Acts on Stage* at the Playhouse. The story is a tapestry of Greek myths in contemporary dress – very funny at times, quite tragic at other times, for the gods of the Greek pantheon are nothing but ourselves writ large. In relation to these crazy, savage, fickle gods, human beings are just puppets and play-things, available to be manipulated and slaughtered at will. I don't remember the original stories well enough to pick up all the allusions, and this amnesia is true of most of us today, but let's not therefore assume we have left these nasty little gods behind. On the contrary, they keep insinuating themselves like poison into our service of the true God, continually tarnishing and degrading what is healthy and life-giving, turning it into something demonic and dangerous.

Thank God, then, when Jesus steps into this closed fantasy world of religion and begins to dismantle it from the inside, for nothing less will do if its sinister power is finally to be broken. Thank God we are not left to the devices and desires of our own hearts, that our deranged dreams can never be the final word about the shape of reality. "No", and "No" again says God's true servant and son. Never make the ancient mistake, never confuse conscious human cruelty or sinful human negligence with anything divine. Such happenings certainly tell us something horrible about ourselves, but, equally certainly, they tell us nothing at all about God. Massacres do not happen because God is cruel, and towers do not fall because God is incompetent or capricious. Much, perhaps most, of the evil that spoils our world derives not from God, but from the human heart. So, cut the knot once and for all, reject the spurious link, refuse to make the simplistic connection, for responsibility lies elsewhere. Repent of this, change your mistaken way of looking at these things, back down and back off, look again and look this time without squinting. Remember that one of the most fundamental of all truths we know about God is that God is everything we are not. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are God's ways our ways. Unlike us, God is constant, faithful, merciful, tender, endlessly forgiving, endlessly gracious and gentle. Unlike us, God desires only our flourishing, and goes to any lengths rather than tread on our toes, damage our dignity or curtail our freedom. We might be just a bunch of mean-spirited, petty tyrants, but God is utterly generous, totally magnanimous, loving and patient to a fault.

Lent is like a visit to the optometrist, for it is about having our distorted vision corrected, healing our blindness so that we may see clearly. This is a time of reprieve, when perishing people begin to flourish. Maybe we are like the fig tree, just a waste of space, but God refuses to cut us down and throw us away. There is space for conversion of heart, time to change our minds. Our Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and self-denial allow the gardener to pile on fertilizer, digging around the roots for the good of our spiritual health. The Christ whose face it set toward Jerusalem, who knowingly faces up to mortal danger, who takes his cross and walks right into death rather than betray us - he alone can and will show us the Father's face. What we see at Calvary obliterates all we think we know of God. We strain to glimpse the mercy-seat and find God kneeling at our feet. Precisely at this moment Easter happens, the stone is rolled away from the tomb, and absolutely everything is made new.

Third Sunday in Lent

14th March 2004

I am rather glad of today's strange little gospel because I'm not immediately sure what to do with it. This is one of those passages none of us would choose to hear. There are so many more obviously promising stories we might use for meditation. Indeed, it's hard to avoid wondering why Luke writes this interlude as he does. Would his book lack anything much if this handful of verses were omitted? Why are they so important to this sophisticated author who never wastes a word?

As these questions swirl around in us, perhaps some clues start to emerge, and if this homily was a bible study we would explore them one by one. The Sunday eucharist, however, is not a study circle. What happens here in word and sacrament, gathered around book and table, is something quite different. The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus, meets us here and speaks to our hearts. This gathering is a living encounter where faith is nourished and nurtured, where we are bound together as together we are caught up in his own ministry and mission. And often, so it seems to me, we are touched here not so much by argument as by emotion, converted not so much by reasoned logic as by intuition, transformed above all by love.

In other words, we may find the actual words rather strange, but the tone of voice is easily accessible to us. Today is surely such a day. We could spend our time patiently exploring the detail of the sacred text, but this process might actually turn out to be something of a *cul de sac*.

To make my meaning clear, listen to one contemporary commentator, the Australian biblical scholar Fr Brendan Byrne –

“A warning from some Pharisees about King Herod's murderous intent prompts Jesus to reflect upon his mission and its eventual climax. No threat of death will deter him from the liberating program upon which he is presently (“today and tomorrow”) engaged. Nonetheless in due course (“the third day”), he must be on his way because it is in Jerusalem that prophets meet their fate. Speaking in the persona of divine Wisdom and anticipating his later weeping over the city, Jesus adds a prophetic lament. Jerusalem's tendency has always been to reject with violence the emissaries (prophets) sent to it by God – even though the divine intent was ever benign, as benign, in fact, as the action of a hen gathering her brood under her wings. Jerusalem's ‘house’ will be left desolate – an allusion to the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.”

Writing from the far side of Easter, with all the benefit of hindsight, Luke is offering us an elaborate code to be cracked open. As we do this, we see that the person who meets us here is not so much Jesus of Nazareth, a man who serves God faithfully by lovingly doing God's will regardless of the consequences. We are actually met by the crucified and raised Christ, the living Lord of the church, the redeemer of the world, the Wisdom and the Word of God. What touches us here is the passion and the pain, the immense and immeasurable cost to God of God loving us. We feel the tragedy. As Brendan Byrne notes, “The tone is not condemnatory but tragic.” It is this tragedy which invades us, floods into us and moves us.

I am suggesting that this is all we need today. In our bones we feel the sharpness of sacrifice, the pathos of the cross and the whole way that leads to the cross. The necessary work of Jesus is only finished or completed there, at calvary, and this is Easter, for we can hardly miss the full significance of that highly-charged phrase 'the third day'.

I think my point is pretty simple. As we come to mid-Lent today's gospel is a reality check. Too often, we turn the resurrection into the fairy-tale happy ending to a heart-breakingly sad story. In other words, we draw the sting of the cross. We minimize what happened to Jesus. We lose sight of what our indifference and lack of response, what our casual complacency and failure to surrender ourselves wholly actually do to God. Time and time again, Christ gives himself into our hands and is nailed up and left for dead. It is, after all, not only in Jerusalem where God's intentions are mistaken and rejected, where prophets meet their fate. We avoid the crushing weight of the cross, or we wallow in it, paralysed by guilt, condemned and rejected. But we are not abandoned as a lost cause. Tragedy is not condemnation. We are loved still, loved through and beyond it all.

Easter is not a matter of removing the broken body from the cross, hosing away all the blood and gore, smoothing and polishing the splintered wood until it gleams and sparkles like gold. Whatever else it may be, Easter very simply is God's "Yes" to all that happens, to the whole weight of evil which comes to rest on Jesus and which is absorbed magnificently by him. In other words, resurrection is our assurance that this tragedy is undoubtedly a love story, the greatest love story of them all.

Today we are being warned not to shield ourselves. Look at the crucified Christ during these Lent days. Look more closely, more persistently, than ever before. Allow him to look right into you. Look at the stations of the cross. See how we wound God continually, and how we maim ourselves and each other every day. Let the darkness in, as Jesus let the darkness in. Do not be afraid. In deepest darkness light is always kindling. Let the painstakingly slow divine work be finished in us. Do not be distracted or deflected. Get on with all the tasks of today and tomorrow and come to the third day when the whole purpose is accomplished. Do not be afraid, for the hen desires still to gather her children under her wings, and will do so.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

21st March 2004

This parable must surely be ranked among the greatest and best loved stories ever told. Indeed, it is hard to imagine ourselves without it. And yet, we have perversely and persistently misunderstood it. For a start, we normally call it the parable of the Prodigal Son, as if it is a story about one son instead of two. Better to call it the parable of two lost sons. Better still, let's call it the parable of the foolish, compassionate, extravagantly loving Father.

See how changing the name changes the focus? We begin to see with different eyes, and perhaps see why it is so crucial that we hear this story right now - in the middle of another Lent journey to Easter.

But let's not jump ahead of ourselves. The sons are not insignificant, so let's look first at them. When we do, it dawns on us that we probably identify with one or the other.

Perhaps I am the younger brother, the dissolute son who goes off the rails, living a self-destructive life of debauchery – consumed as it were by sex, drugs, and rock and roll! I sink and sink until I can sink no lower. Finally, I am in roughly the same situation as this penniless Jew in hostile country. I am broke, ashamed, publicly humiliated, living like a pig among pigs. Only as I hit ground and look into the abyss do I achieve any measure of self-knowledge and “come to myself”. Only at this point do I repent. Suddenly I change direction, I look up, recognize the error of my ways and seek forgiveness.

Or perhaps I am more like the older brother? I live my life safely, respectably, dutifully, thinking of myself more as a slave than a son. I go through all the motions, I do all the right things, playing the part to perfection. I am steady, reliable, dependable, trustworthy. From my pedestal I look down on the transgressors all around. I resent the fact that the undeserving are treated as well as I am. Little by little my anger grows – at the loose-livers, but also at myself for lacking their courage to splash out. I am blind to the fact that I am becoming bitter and poisonous. If I am religious - and I probably am! – my self-righteousness starts to show itself as savage and destructive. Everyone in the household of faith must be like me, and I have no shortage of energy or enthusiasm when it comes to driving out sinners. I am God's right hand, busy in the Lord's service. Now this, of course, is the greatest irony of all, for it proves that I have successfully created God as a mirror image of my own mean self. In other words, I am just as lost as my younger brother. Indeed, I am even deeper into the dark than he is because I am blind to my own predicament. I am actually light years away from “coming to myself”. And perhaps I never do “come to myself”. The story ends with no promises. There is no artificial guarantee, no fairy tale happy ending. Loose ends are deliberately left loose. We never learn if the older brother is found or if he remains lost.

Instead, instead of wondering endlessly about this, we are left looking at the astonishing picture of the Father. Instead, we are ushered into the heart of the Easter God, the God of the cross. Every carefully crafted detail spells out for us the divine character, patiently hammering into place an image of ultimate reality we could never invent for ourselves. Left to ourselves, this is the last God we would come up with. We see the true God, the Christlike God, scanning the horizon - like a love-sick father who apparently has nothing better to do than spend his whole time looking out for us. And when he sees us

tumbling to it, finally stumbling in the right direction, he literally goes overboard. The Palestinian cultural world of the story is suddenly turned upside down. This father defies all the rules, humiliating himself by leaving the house to meet someone of lower rank. Ridiculously, he runs rather than walking in the prescribed sedate and dignified manner. Most astonishing of all, he loses face by displaying emotion in public, falling on his child and kissing him. The son's prepared confession is cut off at the socks. There is no place here for contrition, no talk of needing forgiveness. Sin and repentance don't even get a look-in. There is only a father's joy in his beloved child, and nothing the child does or fails to do alters this fact. So the son is vested with the best robe, sandals are brought for his feet, and the family signet ring placed on his finger. Finally, the celebration begins, with music and dancing. The lost has been found, the dead one is alive. In a word, this is resurrection.

And we are left with a bunch of sharp questions. Can we cope with the God imaged by the father in this parable? Can we be part of a family whose hospitality is so extravagant, so uncalculating, so indulgent of human failing? Can we really believe all we see at the cross? Can we come joyfully to Easter dawn, or will we stay out in the cold?

Fifth Sunday in Lent

28th March 2004

Desire and intimacy lie at the core of discipleship. I wonder if you think that's a strange statement or an obvious one? I wonder if we usually think in these terms? Perhaps we rarely do or never do? If so, then I suggest we have lost our way and strayed into some other religion than the way of Christ. Somehow, we have taken our eyes off the Easter God revealed to us supremely in the cross.

We call ourselves Christian, yet we are always needing christening, and not least as Lent comes to an end and we arrive at Holy Week. Precisely at this intersection, today's gospel story comes as an amazing gift to us for it helps us make the necessary connections, repairing the broken circuits, letting the energy flow.¹ It does this by casting a long shadow forward to Jesus' arrest, trial, condemnation, crucifixion and burial.

To see this more clearly, we need to think forward to Maundy Thursday. Today's gospel and the gospel for the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper are joined at the hip. Both narratives are set within the context of Passover. In both accounts there is a shared meal, suggesting sacramental overtones in a church where eucharist is central. Judas, the betrayer, is present on both occasions and is explicitly identified as treasurer of the band of disciples. Both narratives involve anointing and washing followed by drying of feet as an act of loving-service. Both narratives are linked to Jesus' death and are principally concerned with union between Jesus and his disciple.

When these two events are placed next to each other we see how one symbolic action folds into another. Perhaps all we need do today is observe and keep this observation in mind when we come to the upper room. For the moment we can look steadily at the Bethany scene. Here Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is held up as our model of faith. She is the exemplary disciple who articulates right practice, the positive counterpart to Judas whose response to Christ's love reveals the way evil infiltrates the life of the community. Mary does what she can to match Jesus' generosity.

“As if he were already dead, she anoints his feet with costly oil, with unbound hair, with unrestrained love”.

Christ lavishes his deathless love upon us and, like Lazarus, we are brought from death to life because of his sheer aliveness. True disciples respond, and respond with all they have. And this leads to communion. Desire is met by desire. Love is greeted with an answering love. Surrender leads to intimacy, and a bond is forged which can never be broken.

But there is nothing automatic about this scenario. We always remain free to choose, to respond or not to respond. We can be ungenerous, mean-spirited like Judas, unwilling to lose whatever our particular stake in the *status quo* happens to be. As one of my teachers, the distinguished Australian biblical scholar Dorothy Lee, says –

“As a true disciple, Mary responds to the costliness of Jesus' gift of life with the costliness of her own gift in an act of 'self-giving extravagance'. John's theology of mutual love is exemplified in this symbolic action. Disciples are not slaves... but friends and beloved of Jesus, yet even so Mary illustrates the freedom of humility in her loving action. The extravagance and humility of Jesus' self-gift,

behind which lies the Father's bountiful love for the world, call for a response that, however feeble or inadequate in objective terms, is subjectively of the same type: self-giving love calls forth a self-giving response. Mary responds as the faith-community to the dying and undying love of Christ: pouring, in the flow of the myrrh, her own self in love for Jesus. Although at one level the two gestures hardly compare, at another level, they are compatible acts of self-sacrificing, extravagant love. Mary responds to the death of Jesus on behalf of the community of faith, in the fullness of love and adoration."

Mary's embodiment of us, responding as us, is our reality check. Discipleship is about desire and intimacy. Do we come to Easter as business as usual, or are we wide open this time around to the miracle only God can work in us? If we can only let go and really trust ourselves to the experience that awaits us in the Christian Passover all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. Resurrection is what God is about and nothing less than resurrection. At Easter, as already at Bethany, perfume fills the house, and "the reek of death is transmuted into the fragrant odor of life".

Passion Sunday

4th April 2004

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Nowhere else is the gospel tradition so united in sequence and historical detail as in the story of Jesus' suffering and death. Together, the four passion narratives have created in our imagination a composite picture of the events of the last days and hours – the supper, the arrest, the trials before the council, and Herod and Pilate, and the crucifixion itself. But we must resist the temptation of thinking that Mark and Matthew and Luke and John are at this point interested only in the facts of what happened. Here, as everywhere else in their texts – indeed, more so here than everywhere else – they are principally concerned with meaning, with interpreting the brutal events.

One striking indication of this overriding concern is Luke's description of the manner of Jesus' death. Instead of a blow by blow account of the horrible process involved in such an execution, all we get is the terse phrase, "When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there ...". It is simply astonishing, when you think of it, that there is no interest at all in describing the gruesome details. What actually happens is just not particularly important. We are not to dwell on what Jesus endures for love of us, focusing on the intensity of his physical suffering, so intent are we on celebrating his love and all it means.

Unlike Hollywood, all four gospels agree on this point: the cruelty of crucifixion is swallowed up and transfigured entirely by the way Jesus responds to what we do to him. So, let's not be deflected by those who would take us down another road. All we need to know about the crucifixion is right here in the sacred texts. This is my first point on this momentous day as we enter once again into the experience of Holy Week.

My second point is equally simple. As we come to the supper table and the foot-washing of Maundy Thursday evening, as we come to touch the wood of the cross at noon on Good Friday, and as we gather around the newly kindled fire in the chill of Easter dawn, remember just one remark. Remember the words of the dying Jesus to the repentant thief crucified with him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." We think of salvation as being saved from this or that – saved from the consequences of our actions perhaps, or saved from illness, saved even from death itself. So far as Luke is concerned, however, salvation is none of these. Salvation is simply being with Jesus, accompanying him on his exodus to the Father. "Today you will be with me ..." All that matters is this "today", the immediacy of the moment, the intensity of the experience.

To be in the presence of Jesus is to be as near to God as we can get, but it is also to be near to our true selves. This is the place where we see clearly and see deeply. This way of the cross is the place of truth, and of true insight. Here we see ourselves as we really are, without all our masks, deprived of all our usual disguises. Here the masks are off, and all defenses are down. Here we look at him and he looks at us. Just as he looks at the humbled Peter and just as he looks at the converted thief, Jesus looks right into our hearts with boundless compassion and with everlasting healing.

All we need do this week is be present. All we need do is enter in and participate. For as we give ourselves to this journey we pass over from life through death to life in company with our saviour. Today is always the day of salvation. Today our destination is Paradise.

Maundy Thursday

8th April 2004

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that the hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end.

As we enter together into this sacred Triduum, three days which become one single great day of the Christian Passover, we are celebrating a love story, the greatest love story ever told. Having loved his own who are in the world, Jesus loves us to the end. To the end of his life, until his final breath, Jesus loves us. Indeed, to this loving there is no end. Through everything, and despite everything, we are loved, and in this loving God is made known. Whatever else we may think we know of God is obliterated, eclipsed, swallowed up, in this perfect revelation. In the hour of the cross, as Jesus passes to the Father, we see more clearly and more plainly than anywhere else at all who God is and how God acts. Here alone are our eyes opened to the truth, and here alone we become a truthful community.

This means that every Easter is a real experience of death and resurrection. And this is not a matter of looking back fondly on something that happened once upon a time to Jesus of Nazareth. It is not a matter of immersing ourselves in the gory detail of crucifixion or speculating about whether or not the tomb was empty a few days later. Easter is not so much about then, as about now. We are not involved in an archeological dig, an historical inquiry, a forensic investigation. Easter is first and foremost an existential reality, and an eschatological mystery. It consists in our own journeying with Christ now from one reality to another. We can say that it is about tomorrow rather than yesterday. In other words, the story of how Jesus loved his own to the end, is the story of his loving us without end. We cannot pretend to be detached spectators. We are all of us involved, implicated, compromised. We go with him as he passes to the Father - trailing in his wake, haunted by his spirit, caught up in one event after another along the way.

Tonight he looks at us across the supper table, as do his first disciples. To put it bluntly, they are a motley lot – fallible, fragile, ignorant, frightened, disloyal. It is not only Judas who betrays his master. Peter too exhibits hostility to the revelation of God's ways in the words and actions of Jesus. In John's hands, the passion narrative drips with heavy irony. Judas walks away from the Light of the world and disappears into the night. He returns soon enough with a nasty coalition of the willing, Roman soldiers and religious police fitted up with lanterns and torches coming out against the dazzling radiance of the divine presence. Peter, representative of the twelve, draws near a fire made by Jesus' enemies when he could easily have warmed himself next to his master, the fire of divine love. Beside this fake fire he commits the ultimate sin, not just against Jesus, but against himself, the denial of his very identity. In the course of this night all Jesus' friends fall away. They are all a waste of space for, in order to save their own skins, they mercilessly abandon him to his fate.

We need to remind ourselves of these things, because it is this pathetic crowd who sit down to dinner at the Last Supper. It is with these people that Jesus breaks bread this final time. It is these people whose feet he washes. Regardless of what they do *to* him, regardless of what they fail to do *for* him, he goes on loving them. Here is the miracle. Here the final veil hiding God's face is drawn aside. Without a word the Teacher and

Lord rises from table, removes the seamless robe, wraps a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash the disciples' feet. Do not look anywhere else, look at this! "Behold your God."

The cruel reality of their turning against him, their lifting the heel against their host, alters nothing. Here, and through it all, right to the end, he is loving them. The argument he has with Peter over the foot-washing uncovers the truth that by water we are made one with Christ, identified for ever with his way of living and dying. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." In all the splashing and drying we are not simply given an example of social service. We are allowed a glimpse of ourselves. We are the baptized, and this is why the church washes feet. Loving service doesn't come from nowhere. It flows from being loved. Loving service is love embodied and lived out.

In the same way, the strange little incident with Judas and the bread dipped in the dish uncovers the truth that eucharist is for everyone. Jesus deliberately gives his bread to the most despised character in the story. We all must face the fact that disciples have always and will always display ignorance and cowardice. However faithful we may be some of the time, we all fail the Lord, some of us even betraying him in outrageous and public ways. But the divine love reaches out even to the archetype of evil. Not one of us is beyond the pail. On the contrary, we are the chosen ones, called and commissioned to be the presence of the absent One in the world. To us Christ entrusts his very own ministry and mission. For all our failings, we are nonetheless God's agents. "Whoever receives one whom I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me." It is our calling to see Jesus' love and repeat the pattern of the crucified Lord's loving in our own lives, reproducing his same deathless love, making present his saving lifestyle here and now. Like Christ, who passes to the Father, we are to give ourselves without end. We are to go on giving ourselves away with both hands until death makes the sacrifice complete.

Good Friday

9th April 2004

You men there, keep those women back
and God Almighty he laid down
on the crossed timber and old Silenus
my offsider looked at me as if to say
nice work for soldiers, your mind's not your own
once you sign that dotted line Ave Caesar
and all that malarkey Imerator Rex

well this Nazarene
didn't make it any easier
really – not like the ones
who kick up a fuss so you can
do your block and take it out on them

Silenus
held the spikes steady and I let fly
with the sledge-hammer, not looking
on the downswing trying hard not to hear
over the women's wailing the bones give way
the iron shocking the dumb wood.

Orders is orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand – we had a
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't
a patch on you

then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread
so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him
and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free
and only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.

One reason I like Bruce Dawe's poem "And a Good Friday Was Had by All" is that it is so matter of fact. In his blunt Australian way he catches something authentic, something of the distinctive take the gospel writers have on the crucifixion. For they too are absolutely matter of fact. Not one of them dwells on the blood and guts.

Mark is almost banal: "It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him." Matthew and Luke are equally terse, giving virtually no information. "And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves..." "When they came to the place that is called The Scull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals..." And as we heard a few moments ago, John contents himself with saying, "he went out to what is called The Place of the Scull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him ..."

Now admittedly, the four evangelists could afford to be brief. After all, the gruesome process of public execution was known only too well in the ancient world. But we may suspect another motive at work as well. They don't spell out what is involved in crucifying someone because the appalling violence is actually a distraction. It is surely no accident that Jesus says, "Do not weep for me."¹ This is the only prohibition in the passion story. The Lord himself says no to the easy spontaneous emotion, the quick release of tension, because it is misdirected and because it is dangerous. It is too shallow. It focuses on the wrong things. As Bishop John Taylor says - "We should be thankful for this prohibition. We belong to a culture, especially in the Western lands, in which feelings have been prostituted. Tears are wrung from us for our entertainment. We enjoy a good cry - and feel better afterwards and quickly forget what it was that moved us. We are accustomed to watching the misery of others on our TV or cinema screens without ever having to do anything about it. But it is very rarely that we weep for truth. It is very rarely that we weep for our sins or for the love of God. Pity is too cheap. We need the bracing realism of Jesus who turned out the professional mourners - Why this crying and commotion? The demand that Jesus makes from the cross is so stark, so matter of fact, so persistent that it cannot be satisfied by a brief response of our surface emotion. He is looking for nothing less than a change of direction in the quiet depths of our wills."

So our attention is deliberately directed away from the brute facts. Instead, we are encouraged to stay with the big picture. And the big picture is not just about what happens to Jesus. It is equally about what happens to his friends, what happens to his disciples then and now. As we noticed last night, some of this is focused around two betrayers, Judas and Peter. After the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples move to a known location on the Mt of Olives "where there is a garden." Judas arrives with his coalition of the willing, a mixture of Roman soldiers and religious police. These representatives of "the world" advance against the Light of the world with their own flimsy light - lanterns and torches.¹ It is night, but the darkness is all the time deepening. Jesus comes forward asking whom they seek, only to level them to the ground when he identifies himself as $\square\square\square\square\square\square$, I Am.¹ At this point he is no one's victim, simply to be arrested. He informs his opponents that they can have their way with him if they let the disciples go free. The narrator nudges us to remember his prayer to his Father, where he says "Of those you gave me, I lost not one." Not even Judas, the betrayer, is excluded from those who must be allowed to go free. However bad his performance, he too is given into the Father's care, the Father whose astonishing love is being revealed in Jesus.

Jesus has already prayed for his disciples and for all who hear the word through their ministry. He prays that they might be swept up into the oneness of love that exists between Father and Son "so that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me."¹ As he now initiates the process of his lifting up on the cross, he demands that his disciples go their way and perform their missionary task.¹ Peter fails to understand, and reaches for a sword. Peter is rebuked because he is thwarting God's design just as Judas is thwarting God's design. He is rebuked but not abandoned, because Jesus goes on loving him. The scene fades, and another takes its place. Suddenly, we are in the courtyard of Annas, the High Priest. The servants make a charcoal fire against the cold.¹ Shivering in isolation from his master, Peter warms himself beside this little fire. "Are you not also one of this man's disciples?" The answer is very striking. Instead of answering $\square\square\square\square\square\square$, I am, Peter says $\square\square\square\square\square\square$, I am not.¹ A terrible lie is told, and as so often we do, Peter lies not only against Jesus, but also against himself. Just as Judas was with Jesus' enemies in the garden, so Peter is now found with his enemies in the courtyard. Sadly, he approaches the warmth and light created by

characters who have sided with the powers of darkness. Like Judas before him, Peter is steadily moving away from the true light into the gloom. In relating all this, however, he is designated *disciple* four times. In addition, he is deliberately called *Peter*, the symbolic name Jesus gives to this faithful but fragile disciple, on seven separate occasions in the same handful of verses. In six brief sentences, then, we are faced with the theme of discipleship eleven times, although it is discipleship denied. Against this lie, as against every other lie, Jesus stands firm, for he is Truth embodied. In all this hectic confusion, he stands still as the Way. Surrounded by death, he is Life. Countering such cowardice with courage, he covers fear with faith. Above all, he is not deflected by betrayal, loving and hoping to the end. Against all the odds, he continues making God know.

Another of Bruce Dawe's poems, not so well known as "And a Good Friday Was Had by All", is called "Bring out Your Christs".

We tried to hold him back
but he was strong (they get
like that) broke clear
and headed at a run
into the blaze,
 the flames
enfolded him in their orange
arms ...
 the building fell, well, anyway,
those who were saved
were saved, the rest
blended like him
into the mother ash that clung
to our wet gum-boots as we stepped across
non-existent thresholds, like dream-walkers strolled
through walls and smelled
the black smell of extinction.
The bloody fool, I said.
What was he up to?
 Here, use the hose, said Jack.
You wouldn't want to be carting him everywhere.

This poem makes me think of Mychal Judge, a Franciscan priest who was chaplain to the New York Fire Department. Fr Mychal was the first official fatality in terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He runs into the first tower with the fire fighters and administers the last rites to several injured people. Shortly after, he is carried out dead. He dies performing an act of love. Christ-like, he loves his own to the end. For all his fallibility, frailty, and ignorance, for all his many betrayals – for, after all, he is only human like the rest of us - he remains a true disciple, beloved of God. At his funeral mass his friend Michael Duffy said – "We come to bury Mychal Judge's body but not his spirit. We come to bury his mind but not his dreams. We come to bury his voice but not his message. We come to bury his hands but not his good works. We come to bury his heart but not his love. Never his love."

Why is this Friday called *Good*? Because today Christ – the bloody fool! – simply for love of us, runs into the blaze, into the black smell of extinction. There is no greater love than this. It's why we want to be carting him everywhere.

Easter Day

11th April 2004

Evangelical audiences who flocked to see Mel Gibson's graphic portrayal of *The Passion of the Christ* may get another eyeful when Hugh Hefner, on fire for God after a near-death conversion experience, releases his equally graphic *The Passion of Solomon*. If *Sojourners Magazine* is to be believed - and we should note it *was* the April Fools Day edition! - the aging Hefner is quoted as saying, "After a life as America's playboy, I wanted to use my gifts for Jesus and make a film that does for biblical sex what Gibson did for biblical violence." This *Passion* promises to be no less controversial than the former. Critics question the film's R rating, suggesting that it is little more than pornography. Hefner's response: "Yea maybe, but it's in the bible. Bring the kids." Feminists have labeled Hefner's vision of Solomon's exploits among 700 wives and 300 concubines a non-stop parade of mind-numbing misogyny. "Their problem isn't with me, it's with scripture", says the unrepentant Hefner. "Just be glad I didn't make a movie about Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19 - now that's some whack shinizzle!"

Over these great three days we are living through together I have argued strongly that we are not to get hooked on the violence of the crucifixion. Biblical violence is no more the point than biblical sex! The cross is first and last about the persistence of God's love of us. It is not for us to wallow in the terrible things we do to God, at calvary and every single day. Yes, we crucify the Lord of glory continually, and the cross with all its blood and guts is ever present in human affairs. We only need open our eyes to see how Jesus dies again and again in the most dreadful ways imaginable, and each time we die with him, losing a little more of our humanity on every single occasion. At Easter we are certainly given a picture of ourselves as crucifiers, as those who cause pain and transmit it to others. The gospel will never tell us that we are innocent, but it does tell us that we are loved. And in asking us to receive and consent to that love, it asks us to identify with, and to make our own, love's comprehensive vision of all we are and all we have been. This is the transformation of desire as it affects our own selves. The world cannot be unmade, but it can be transformed. We can never again be a blank canvas, like a newborn baby, but we can be redeemed. We see this in the way the betrayers Judas and Peter are treated in the gospel. Neither is written off. There is hope for both, and there is hope for us all. Good Friday is not just about what happens to Jesus, but also about what happens to his friends, including us. Likewise, the total Christ who is raised to life today is not simply the dead Jesus mysteriously resuscitated, as we look on from afar, a bunch of goggling spectators. As Bishop David Jenkins rightly says, the resurrection is not a conjuring trick with bones! The raised Christ, the total Christ - the *totus Christus* beloved of Saint Augustine and his greatest follower, the reformer Martin Luther - includes all of us who are now his body in the world. Everything that happens to Jesus happens to us. His passover from death to life is ours as well. If the crucified Jesus is alive, no shadow of death can touch us. We are forever set free, unbound from our grave-clothes. Like the first disciples, we are ourselves evidence of the resurrection rather than gatherers of evidence.

Across these great days Peter is our good companion. To look at him is to see a mirror-image of ourselves. At the Last Supper he tries to prevent his Lord and teacher washing his feet. We witness his bravado in the garden, recklessly turning to violence to keep control of a situation beyond his comprehension. We cringe to see him in the courtyard

of the high priest repeatedly denying the Lord and himself to save his own skin. There is a charcoal fire there too, just as here on the beach this morning.¹ Between these two fires Peter is on a journey, and we with him. He has to make a great discovery, as do we all. And his discovery is the earth-shattering, rock-splitting good news - his betrayal of God does not make God betray him!

When we think about it, we realize that those first frail and fallible disciples had every reason to fear the day of resurrection as a day of reckoning. The Lord they abandoned to his fate is no doubt coming back to haunt them and to balance the books. We routinely construct God this way, in our own image and likeness. And one of the strongest arguments for the truth of Easter is probably this single fact, namely that the raised Christ does *not* return to exact revenge. The One who reveals God's heart by going on loving through all their betrayals, now returns with healing and wholeness in his wings! To their terror and their fear he brings only peace. "Peace be with you". Peace to you who deserted me. Peace to you who caused me my greatest grief. Left to our own devices, never in a million years would we come up with a God as absurd as this one. Our betrayals of God never make God betray us! We cannot undo what we have done, or do now what we failed to do when we had the chance, or take back our denials. The world cannot be unmade. The canvas cannot be stretched a second time, as if it were untouched. But perhaps now we can see for the first time who God really is? Perhaps now we can see without fear the One who knows everything there is to know about us, and yet endlessly longs for us?

Here is the beginning of wisdom, of saving self-knowledge. Here also is the beginning of love. "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you." Such learning and accepting and loving occurs in the presence of the living Lord, in the return of the crucified to his crucifiers. As the Archbishop of Canterbury says, "The presence of Jesus, still faithful, still calling, inviting his followers to love him, opens out the past in grace. And what Peter may learn is that wherever he may find himself, however he may fall, his life is constantly capable of being opened to God's creative grace: God's presence in Jesus will not fail him. The inconstant, vulnerable decisions and commitments of human beings, endlessly liable to destructive illusion, are set against the backcloth of God's constant decision and eternal commitment, his everlasting invitation to and 'making space' for his creatures."

Resurrection for you and me means we are given a fresh identity. In other words, at Easter I am given back my memory. I am given my dead self raised to newness of life, so that I can now live my life, uniquely coloured by the loves in which I have already struggled, failed, learned and repented. This history means my life with you and yours with me is in this particular 'key', this particular 'mode', and not some other. For each one brings to the eucharistic community the irreducible particularity of our own gift. "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love today and tomorrow and everyday in the mode that emerges from the past that is yours and no one else's. Love now out of the process in which you have learned to accept yourself as God's own beloved daughter or son. Know yourself as one for whom Christ in deathless love lays down his life, raised with and in him in the resurrection. See your self as a gift, love it as a gift, a gift from God's wounded hand, and learn how your neighbours too are gifts, to themselves and to you. Whoever you are, wherever you have been, come, join the adventure. Don't look over your shoulder any longer. Don't look back to the Easter garden and the empty tomb. Look up and look ahead. "Follow me."

Second Sunday of Easter

18th April 2004

Here on the obstetrical ward, is a double sink in a little room... just like any kitchen sink. There is a counter on the left, and a counter on the right. Overhead, a long heat lamp lights and warms the two counters and the sink. This is where they wash the newborns like dishes. A nurse, one or another, spends most of an eight-hour shift standing here at the sink. Different nurses bring in newborns, one after another, and line them down the counter to the sink's left. The newborns wear flannel blankets. Knit hats the size of teacups keep sliding up their wet heads. Their faces run the spectrum from lavender through purple and red to pink and beige.

Nurse Pat Eisberg wears her curly blond hair short in back; her thin neck bends out of a blue collarless scrub as she leans left for the next bundle. The newborn's face is red. "Now you", she says to it in a warm voice, unsmiling. She slides it along the counter toward her, plucks off its cap, unwraps its body and leaves the blanket underneath. This baby is red all over. His tadpole belly is red; his scrotum, the size of a plum, is fiercely red, and looks as if it might explode. The top of his head looks like a dunce cap; he is a conehead. He gazes up attentively from the nurse's arms. The bright heat lamp does not seem to bother his eyes... His plastic ID bracelet, an inch wide, covers a full third of his forearm. Some one has taped his blue umbilical cord – the inch or so left of it – upward on his belly. A black clamp grips the cord's end, so it looks like a jumper cable. The nurse washes this boy; she dips a thin washcloth again and again in warm water. She cleans his head and face, careful to wash every fold of his ears. She wipes white lines of crumbled vernix from folds in his groin and under his arms. She holds one wormy arm and one wormy leg to turn him over; then she cleans his dorsal side, and ends with his anus. She has washed and rinsed every bit of his red skin. The heat lamp has dried him already. The Qur'an says Allah created man from a clot. The red baby is a ball of blood Allah whetted and into which he blew. So does a clown inflate a few thin balloons and twist them lickety-split into a rabbit, a dog, a giraffe. Nurse Pat Eisberg drains the sink. She drops the newborn's old blanket and hat into an open hamper, peels a new blanket and hat from the pile on the right, and sticks the red baby on the right-hand counter. She diapers him. She swaddles him: she folds the right corner of the blanket over him and rolls him back to tuck it under him; she brings up the bottom corner over his chest; she wraps the left corner around and around, and his weight holds it tight as he lies on his back. Now he is tidy and compact, the size of a one-quart Thermos. She caps his conehead, and gives the bundle a push to slide it down the counter to the end of the line with the others she has just washed. The red newborn looks up and studies his surroundings, alert, seemingly pleased, and praeternaturally calm, as if enchanted.

This hospital, like every other, is a hole in the universe through which holiness issues in blasts. It blows both ways, in and out of time. On wards above and below me, men and women are dying. Off they go, these many great and beloved people, as death subtracts them one by one from the living – about 164,300 of them a day worldwide, and 6,000 in the United States – and hospitals shunt their bodies away. Simultaneously, here they come, these many new people, for now absurdly alike – about 10,000 of them a day in this country – as apparently shabby replacements. At the sink in the maternity ward, nurse Pat Eisberg is unwrapping another package. This infant emerged into the world three weeks early; she is lavender, and goopy with yellow vernix, like a Channel swimmer. As the washcloth rubs her, she pinks up. I cannot read her name. She is alert and silent. She looks around with apparent concentration; she pays great attention, and seems to have a raw drive to think. She fixes her eyes on my eyes and, through them, studies me. I am not sure I can withstand such scrutiny, but I can, because she is just looking, purely looking, as if she were inspecting this world from a new angle. It is life that glistens in her eyes; it is a calm consciousness that connects with volts the ocular nerves and working brain. She has a self, and she knows it; the red baby knew it too. This alert baby's intensity appears hieratic; it recalls the extraordinary nature of this Formica room. Repetition is powerless before ecstasy, Martin Buber said.

Now the newborn is studying the nurse – conferring, it seems her consciousness upon the busy nurse as a general blessing. I want to walk around this aware baby in circles, as if she were the silver star's hole on the cave floor (in Bethlehem), or the Kaaba stone in Mecca, the wellspring of mystery itself, the black mute stone that requires men to ask, Why is there something here, instead of nothing? And why are we aware of this question – we people, particles going around and around this black stone? Why are we aware of it?

Now, you may well ask, what's any of this got to do with the price of fish? Why read this on the Second Sunday of Easter, with Saint Thomas waiting in the wings? Well, since Annie Dillard has opened the batting, let her have another hit.

There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been: a people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful and self-aware; a people who scheme, promote, deceive, and conquer; who pray for their loved ones, and long to flee misfortune and skip death. It is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew God personally once upon a time – or even knew selflessness or courage or literature – but that it is too late for us. In fact, the absolute is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less. There is no less holiness at this time – as we gather together here to baptize James and to eat and drink with the crucified Jesus after his resurrection – than there was the day the Red Sea parted, or that day in the thirteenth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as Ezekiel was a captive by the river Chebar, when the heavens opened and he saw visions of God. There is no whit less enlightenment under the tree by your street than there was under the Buddha's bo tree. There is no whit less might in heaven or on earth than there was the day Jesus said "Maid, arise" to the centurion's daughter, or the day Peter walked on water, or the night Mohammed flew to heaven on a horse. In any instant the sacred may wipe you with its finger. In any instant the bush may flare, your feet may rise, or you may see a bunch of souls in a tree. In any instant you may avail yourself of the power to love your enemies; to accept failure, slander, or the grief of loss; or to endure torture. Purity's time is always now. "Each and every day the Divine Voice issues from Sinai", says the Talmud. Of eternal fulfillment, Tillich said, "If it is not seen in the present, it cannot be seen at all." God has nothing to give you that is not given right now. All people at all times may avail themselves of this God, and those who are aware of it know no fear, not even fear of death.

Like the first disciples we are gathered in an ordinary room on the Lord's day. The raised Christ appears among us to take away our fear, saying "Peace be with you". With Thomas we are all of us – even if we don't yet know it - coming to faith. And when the moment arrives we too discover that we don't really need the proof of touching. For all our protesting, this sunrise of wonder turns out to be not so terribly difficult after all. We simply need to abandon ourselves in awe and wonder before the astonishing miracle of life, for not even death can extinguish it. Now we are numbered among the blessed who have not seen but who yet believe.

Third Sunday of Easter

25th April 2004

In this great twenty-first chapter of John's gospel, the author ties off some loose ends.

The lakeside breakfast recalls the feeding of the multitude, for here again Jesus takes bread and gives it to the hungry disciples, and likewise the fish. The body of the crucified Christ is not to be found as an absence at the empty tomb, but present on the altar and around the altar. The raised Christ is the eucharistic Christ who comes to meet us here this morning just as mysteriously as by the Sea of Tiberius long ago.

On that first day of the week, as on this first day of the week, our rendezvous is a fresh start. The past, our own past, whatever that might be, is set aside, put behind us, forgiven. The dialogue between Christ and Peter assures us of this truth. On the night of his betrayal Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, and now these three denials are undone. Just as Mary Magdalene and Thomas have already been saved by love, so too is Peter saved by love. "Lord, you know that I love you; Lord, you know that I love you; Lord, you know everything (there is to know about me), you know that I love you." Care of the flock is deliberately given into the hands of this failure, to someone who has fallen, but is now redeemed and restored. Peter is to follow the Lord and to lead the Lord's people.

As we noticed on Easter Day, there is something wonderfully unexpected about all this. The mystery of Easter is that the Jesus who is let down by all his friends and abandoned to his fate returns to settle accounts, but not in the way we would anticipate. Yes, there is a settling of accounts, but it is not achieved by condemnation and punishment.

This settling of accounts is worked by lifting up the fallen, by forgiving his betrayers, by restoring their broken communion. Peter learns that his betrayal does not make the Lord betray him. And we all discover that God's ways are not our ways. There is in God a bottomless generosity we can barely fathom. We come face to face with God's foolishness which surpasses anything we call wisdom, face to face with God's weakness which is stronger than human strength. The raised Christ returns to break bread with his disciples as before, to embrace them – not despite their frailty and failure, but because of their frailty and failure. The living Christ comes to heal us and give us peace simply because we are needy and naked. In other words, God so loves the world that all can be saved.

This all sounds perfectly right and proper, indeed, we might even find it commonplace, but are we forgetting someone? As a friend said to me recently, what about Judas? Given that Peter and the other disciples all fall short, given that they all let Jesus down in one way or another, surely Judas outdoes them all? Whatever is said about the others, the New Testament always labels Judas the betrayer. In the story, he is the very devil. Indeed, we are told in so many words "Satan entered him". So he becomes a guide for those who arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. All the gospels agree that Judas is personally responsible for handing Jesus over to his enemies. According to Matthew he later repents and returns the payment made for his services, but then despairs of himself and suicides. This is reported as a matter of fact in a matter of fact voice, almost with an air of resignation. But Luke, in his Acts of the Apostles, goes further, devising an even grislier end for Judas than any nice quiet hanging. Luke knows nothing of Judas

repenting, and he returns not a penny of his fee. He buys a field with his ill-gotten gains, and there in his field he falls headlong, splits down the middle, and his bowels rush out! This field is known all over Jerusalem as the “Field of Blood”, watered with the blood of Judas, purchased with his blood money.

Now I think it has to be said that none of the New Testament writers can manage much for Judas, but Luke is dramatically more vindictive than the rest. The moral isn’t drawn, of course, spelt out in so many words, because it doesn’t need to be. Clearly, we are given to understand that Judas gets his just deserts. By hanging or splitting open – take your pick! - he comes to a sticky end, and serve him right. And that, presumably, is an end to poor Judas. The story of Jesus goes on, but the story of Judas is given a full stop. At least, so it would appear.

But will this do if the gospel really is gospel? I believe what we have in the closing off of Judas’ story are typical human attitudes, our own idea exactly of what justice requires. Luke and Matthew and Mark and John and Paul are not, after all, infallible. Great saints, to be sure, yet in each and every one of them, as in all of us who struggle to follow Christ, great stretches of mind and heart remain to be converted. At every point, thank God, God is doing far more than we can ever imagine, and certainly far more than we ever desire. So we may damn Judas, as Judas (it would seem) damns himself. But dare we assume God shares our opinion? Is it possible for God to stop loving anyone, even Judas? Does God give up hope when human hope runs out? Is not the God of the cross eternally searching, endlessly scanning the horizon for the returning prodigal, stooping to whatever it takes to woo us back?

Unless this is true, the gospel is not really good news at all. Unless this is true, not one of us has any right to be here. But Christ is risen, and the risen Body of Christ is on the altar and around the altar. We are the Body of Christ, we who feed on the Body of Christ. We may be unclean and unseeing, but all are washed and enlightened in baptism. From the household of faith and from the kingdom feast, the Lord of life excludes no one at all. Better than the resignation of Matthew or the vehemence of Luke, or the thoughtless indifference you and I mostly bring to the matter, a remarkable poem by Robert Buchanan reflects the heart of Christ.

‘Twas the Bridegroom sat at the table-head,
And the lights burned bright and clear –
“Oh, who is that?” the Bridegroom said,
“Whose weary feet I hear?”
“Twas one looked from the lighted hall,
And answered soft and slow,
“It is a wolf runs up and down
With a black track in the snow.”

The Bridegroom in his robe of white
Sat at the table-head –

“Oh, who is it who moans without?”

The blessed Bridegroom said.

‘Twas one looked out of the lighted hall,

And answered fierce and low,

“Tis the soul of Judas Iscariot

Gliding to and fro.”

‘Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot

Did hush itself and stand,

And saw the Bridegroom at the door

With a light in his hand.

‘Twas the Bridegroom stood at the open door,

And beckoned, smiling sweet;

‘Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot

Stole in and fell at his feet.

“The Holy Supper is spread within,

And many candles shine,

And I have waited long for thee

Before I poured the wine.”

Fourth Sunday of Easter

2nd May 2004

I reckon we need to be more than usually thick to miss the point of today's gospel. You could say that we would need to be even dumber than the sheep to whom we are likened!

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is always observed as Good Shepherd Sunday, and Jesus the good shepherd is good for the same reason that the Friday of the crucifixion is good - because this shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. St John is very insistent about this. He makes Jesus repeat the same word over and over so that we can't avoid its implications. In the original Greek or even in English translation, this device has the effect of grabbing our attention every time. Sometimes, we have to read very closely the text of sacred scripture as it comes down to us in the church's living tradition if it is to connect with the real lives we lead. This is particularly important today, otherwise we end up with nothing but a sentimental story about being kindly to one another, or about leadership and pastoral care in the Christian community. If we pay attention to the text for half a second before embarking on our own personal reverie, we will quickly find that it is nothing of the sort.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down (tiqhsin) his life for the sheep..I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down (tiqhmi) my life for the sheep.. The Father loves me because I lay down (tiqhmi) my life for the sheep...No one takes my life from me, I lay it down (tiqhmi) myself... I have authority to lay it down (qeinai) and I have authority to receive it..."

Five times in eight verses Jesus uses the same word. And every time this is John doing something no other New Testament writer does. This use of tiqhmi and its derivatives is entirely John's own, unique to this particular gospel. Why is it so important to him? And why is it so important to the church that every Easter 4 without exception becomes Good Shepherd Sunday?

It is, surely, because this word tiqhmi brings us right to the heart of the gospel. For the good news is that self-sacrifice is the secret of life. Jesus is the good shepherd because he sacrifices himself for love of us. His death is no accident, just another mindless tragedy which could so easily have been avoided. No, his death - the timing of it and the manner of it - is his own choice. No one steals his life away from him against his will. In freedom, he chooses to lay down his life rather than give the lie to his life and teaching, choosing to give up his life rather than abandon us.

And this is not only a once-upon-a-time happening. This one occasion shows us that this is the way things always are. Christ's self-sacrifice is the indispensable clue we need if we are to see what sort of universe we live in, if we are to appreciate which way the grain of the world actually runs. As the poet says -

*I see his blood upon the rose,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.*

“In the humility of Jesus, his pureness of heart, his forgiveness, his courage and sacrifice, his infinite concern for all persisting even in the throes of death, we meet that eternal persuasive love which through countless aeons has been striving, suffering, going under, yet ever rising to new life, within the fabric of the universe.”

So, today’s gospel is all about the identity of God, for the creation is patterned on the life of the Creator, and the nature of Creator and creation is nowhere revealed more plainly to us than in the cross of Christ. “I am (egw eimi) the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down (tiqhsin) his life for the sheep”. Egw eimi, the great I AM, is, of course, nothing less than the unpronounceable divine name, and tiqemi or tiqhsin, as we have seen becomes a code-word in this gospel for the divine identity. Egw eimi tiqhmi, in this context, means God lays down, God surrenders, God lets go, God is the good shepherd who abandons life rather than abandon us.

And good theology leads to good anthropology. In other words, seeing the inner shape of reality, we can be most real by consciously aligning ourselves with this pattern. This, after all, is what is meant by being made in the divine image. You and I will only truly live when we stop grasping, when we become open-hearted and open-handed. “Whoever seeks to save their life will lose it, but who ever loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel finds it”. “You have heard that it was said ‘eye for eye and tooth for tooth’. But I say to you, Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect - turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, if someone robs you of your coat give them your cloak as well...” On and on and on it goes, from one end of the gospel to the other. And not because Christians are wimps or doormats or fools or practicing masochists, but because this is what God is like and this is what it means to mirror the divine likeness.

Crucifixion happens every single time we are mean-spirited, every time we are morally cruel to someone, every time we shun or exclude or punish each other. Then and there we hammer in the nails. Resurrection occurs every time we are merciful, every time we are generous, tender, gentle, encouraging, forgiving, loving. The Christian story is not about other people and places long ago, but about us here and now, today and tomorrow. It is about Ryan at his baptism even before he knows what we are doing to him, as it is – just as mysteriously - about every one of us. Christ is risen now, or not at all. He is risen indeed, alleluia!

Fifth Sunday of Easter

9th May 2004

When things go wrong it's rather tame
To find we are ourselves to blame,
It gets the trouble over quicker
To go and blame things on the Vicar.
The Vicar, after all, is paid
To keep us bright and undismayed.
The Vicar is more virtuous too
Than lay folks such as me and you.
He never swears, he never drinks,
He never *should* say what he thinks.
His collar is the wrong way round,
And that is why he's simply bound
To be the sort of person who
Has nothing very much to do
But take the blame for what goes wrong
And sing in tune at Evensong.

For what's a Vicar really for
Except to cheer us up? What's more,
He shouldn't ever, ever tell
If there is such a place as Hell,
For if there is it's certain he
Will go to it as well as we.
The Vicar should be all pretence
And never, never give offence.
To preach on Sunday is his task
And lend his mower when we ask
And organize our village fetes
And sing at Christmas with the waits
And in his car to give us lifts
And when we quarrel heal the rifts.
And when we're rude he should be meek
And always turn the other cheek.

I'm rather fond of this poem by John Betjeman, and for fairly obvious reasons. One reason, however, is possibly less obvious. For all its surface jollity and playfulness, the undertone is evidently serious, and this has quite a lot to do with today's gospel.

According to John, one of the last things Jesus does on the night of his betrayal, as he faces the terrible reality of his death, is issue to his little company of disciples a new commandment. This is the mandate which gives Maundy Thursday its name. We are to love one another as Jesus loves us. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Nothing could be easier to say, or harder to do. No one dreams of quarreling with it in theory. It's what we call a motherhood notion, very suitable we might think for Mothers Day, so no one will vote against it. Putting it into practice, however, is something else entirely. For the kind of love Jesus offers for our imitation in his living and dying is a verb, not a noun. Love is a doing word. It does not describe my warm,

fuzzy feelings toward my neighbour. It defines my resolute action in my neighbour's best interests.

Now I don't intend to be tedious in spelling this out. I am, after all, simply recalling us to a known truth. It's not that we don't know what to do, it's that we lack the will. Indeed, the problem is that we lack the good will. We find ourselves at a crossroads. And this is not simply a Christian dilemma. We see the stresses and strains most obviously in Islam. But living out any traditional faith at the beginning of the third millennium isn't easy. In a time of incredibly rapid change, those of us who are in the world but not of the world struggle for integrity, balancing the insights of ancient wisdom against the realities of the present moment. But what we see on the big screen, we also experience within our own household. There is a battle going on at present for the soul of Anglicanism. We all know what some of the contentious issues are, but these are really just the current presenting symptoms. The real problem is deeper than any of the surface conflicts. There are always conflicts, divisions and disputes. It is in the nature of human beings to quarrel. No surprises here, and nothing much swings on our fights, but absolutely everything swings on how we fight.

"Love one another" is actually a battle plan. And it covers every situation, for nothing falls outside it. So the real scandal in the battle for Anglicanism's soul is not that we fight, but that we fight dirty. Intimidation, threats, personal smear campaigns, and blackmail have no place in the Christian armory. In the Christian dispensation, ends never justify means. As Jesus knew, how we love shows who we actually are. From the President of the United States to the humblest private in his army there is endless talk of liberation and freedom. But who will ever think of the Iraq war without being haunted by the terrible picture of that hooded victim with electric cables attached to his hands and genitals?

I care deeply about some of the arguments in the church right now, and want to see a generous and compassionate Anglicanism live into the future, rather than some narrow, cold and cruel caricature of a great Christian tradition. But, more than this, I care about how we live together through our differences, how we fight, and what weapons we employ. Because the fundamental question is not who wins or loses. The fundamental question is this: are we really Christ's disciples, or disciples of someone else?

And if we can't answer that question, others certainly can. As the Lord assures us, "everyone will know..."

This is serious stuff; indeed, try to think of something more serious. But, serious doesn't necessarily mean solemn, so let's return to John Betjeman. He was, of course, writing for another day, but it's hardly a matter of rocket science to apply his warning to our own day.

Dear People, who have read so far,
I know how really kind you are,
I hope that you are always seeing
Your Vicar as a human being,
Making allowances when he
Does things with which you don't agree.
But there are lots of people who
Are not so kind to him as you.
So in conclusion you shall hear
About a parish somewhat near,

Perhaps your own or maybe not,
And of the Vicars that it got.
One parson came and people said,
“Alas! Our former Vicar’s dead!
And this new man is far more ‘Low’
Than dear old Reverend so-and-so,
And far too earnest in his preaching,
We do not really like his teaching,
He seems to think we’re simply fools
Who’ve never been to Sunday Schools.”
That Vicar left, and by and by
A new one came, “He’s much too ‘High’,”
The people said, “too like a saint,
His incense makes our Mavis faint.”
So now he’s left and they’re alone
Without a Vicar of their own.
The living’s been amalgamated
With one next door they’ve always hated.

Dear readers, from this rhyme take warning,
And if you heard the bell this morning
Your Vicar went to pray for you,
A task the Prayer Book bids him do.
“Highness or “Lowness” do not matter,
You are the Church and must not scatter,
Cling to the Sacraments and pray
And God be with you every day.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

16th May 2004

If Jesus came into this church this morning what would he think? Occasionally, you hear this question from frustrated clergy attempting culture change in the Christian community, struggling to shift a congregation from one state to another. If Jesus came into this church this morning, what would he think about our worship? Would he recognize us as his own? Would he consider us welcoming or cold? Would he or wouldn't he? This rather obvious motivational ploy sounds like a natural enough question, but in fact it's a dead give away.

It starts, of course, by presuming Jesus is absent. It is grounded in the unexamined assumption that Jesus belongs to the past, just like any other figure in human history. In other words, it is a flat denial of the mystery of faith. Christ has died, but Christ is risen. We cannot pose the question, "what if Jesus came" if we really believe that Jesus comes. It cannot be the case that Christ materializes out of the dead past if Christ truly exists in the living present.

So, a casual question unmasks us without us even noticing. And thus unmasked, we are crippled. Our ministry and mission is still-born because we face the deepest identity crisis of all. We fail to be God's Easter people because we have cut off our source of energy and enthusiasm.

Now I happen to believe that today's gospel goes straight to this problem, for today's gospel is all about the presence of the absent one. Easter is not a story about the empty tomb and the absence of Jesus. Easter begins with a whole host of appearance stories, with the unexpected presence of the dead Jesus alive with his disciples. The body of Christ is no longer the flesh and blood of the man born of Mary, living in Palestine as an itinerant preacher and teacher, and dying outside Jerusalem's city walls. The body of Christ is now on the altar and around the altar. The body of Christ is now bread set out on this hospitable table, just as the body of Christ is our own flesh and blood. As St Augustine says, we are what we receive, and we receive what we are. We are people of the real presence, not stand-ins for a real absence.

Listen again for a moment to the opening verses of our gospel. "Those who love me will keep my word (logos), and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words (logous); and the word (logos) that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me." Do you see it? Do you hear it? In just two sentences, "word", "words", and "word". We can hardly forget that this Fourth Gospel is the gospel of the word, the gospel of the logos. "In the beginning was the word (the logos) and the word (the logos) was with God and God was the word (the logos). And the word (the logos) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The dwelling place of the logos, the word or reason or wisdom of God which once upon a time was incarnate for all to see in Jesus of Nazareth is incarnate for all to see here and now in us. The logos finds a home in human hearts, and the glory of God is revealed, full of grace and truth. Word and words continue to become flesh, for we cannot understand them otherwise.

So it is that the revelation of God continues in and through the Spirit-filled community. The departure of Jesus is unlike any other departure, for it is not a moment of tragic desolation for his disciples. On the contrary, this departure leads directly to the time of the Paraclete, the Advocate or Encourager, a time of love, belief and peace. We ourselves are the body of Christ, crucified twenty centuries ago but now risen, for his Spirit is with us.

So do not imagine that the best has already been and gone, so that we simply live in the afterglow. The best has not already been. The best is yet to come. “The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be cowardly.” On the contrary, be supremely and humbly confident, be brave, be strong. Know whose you are, and who you are. Live in sure knowledge that what we have glimpsed of truth in the past is nothing compared to what is yet to be revealed. Lift up your eyes to see and welcome the coming Kingdom. Lift up your hearts and love with pure generosity. Open your minds to explore the mystery fearlessly. Above all, believe.

Ascension Sunday

23rd May 2004

It is my belief that there is little healthy religion apart from a fairly vigorous imagination and a developed sense of humour. If we lack imagination or if we fear imagination, we tend to become intolerant literalists or crusading fundamentalists. If we can't laugh at ourselves because we take ourselves too seriously, we tend to become dangerous zealots intent on forcing our view of things on everyone else. Healthy religion values faith stories and doctrines, but sits light to them, because it is secure in itself. It does not see day-dreaming as dangerous or delusory. On the contrary, it encourages imagination, allowing it free range. We are to explore the mystery which grasps us, discovering the truth embedded in myths and fables without attempting to catch the butterfly in flight. Healthy religion laughs at itself - once again, because it is secure and relaxed, because we know what frail and fallible creatures we are, mere earthen vessels holding such magnificent treasure, fallen yet made for glory. The whole idea that God is head over heels in love with us is so patently absurd that it has to be true. So laughter pricks the bubble of self-importance and pomposity, grounding us in reality, keeping our feet on the ground. It is a sign of healthy scepticism, humbly open to the gloriously unrestrained wind of the Spirit, and attractive to others.

The event we call the ascension of Jesus, which we celebrate forty days after Easter, happens right at the end of Luke's gospel and brings to an end the Easter appearances. It happens without fanfare, and Luke speaks of it in plain language. After all these weeks, the crucified and raised Lord is simply no longer present in Palestine with his friends. There is a final separation, but a separation which is somehow a fulfilment rather than another bereavement. "He led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." Compared to what Luke might have written, this is decidedly restrained. Indeed, it is almost matter of fact. As a way of bringing down the curtain, it is admirably unembellished. I think we need to keep it that way.

Jesus has died into God and is therefore fully alive as God's Christ. Jesus is no longer confined to a particular time and place, so Christ is accessible in every time and place. It may seem a strange thing to say, but one of the chief blessings of the ascension is that it stops us gazing at Jesus. It changes our focus, and lets us see things afresh. This means that Christianity struggles with an inner tension. Naturally, we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus because his birth and life and teaching and death and resurrection show us more clearly who God is than any other revelation. And yet we are not to go on staring stupidly for ever. For he draws attention not to himself but to the Father. He points always away from himself, always beyond himself. The following that Jesus wants is not someone drawn by personal devotion to himself. He is never interested in fuelling our innate narcissism, particularly when it manifests itself as religious scrupulosity. Instead of being concerned about our own standing with God, he wants us to share his own devotion to finding and doing God's will. Religion as Jesus understands it is always about making us less self-centred, never more so. Forgiveness and salvation are not unimportant, they are essential, but they are always by-products. It is only those who commit themselves to live out the prayer 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done' who know the absolute need to pray 'give us today our daily bread' because they may not know where their next meal is coming from. And they also need to pray 'Forgive us our sins' because they make such fearful mistakes.

Paradoxically, the absent Jesus makes us acutely aware of the presence of God, for the absent Jesus opens our eyes to God's eternal christlikeness. When we stop staring at the fixed point, Jesus of Nazareth, we begin looking within and looking around. "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." So it was then, and so it is now. Ministry and mission arise out of recognizing what the creating and redeeming God is doing in the world and trying to do it too. Genuine relationship with God derives from the work we do together. Rather than shutting out the world while we delve into each other's depths like a pair of adolescent lovers, we find life and joy in a common task. Heaven is heaven and earth is earth. Ascension forbids getting the two confused, while insisting that one infuse the other.

The Day of Pentecost

30th May 2004

“Poor little talkative Christianity” is a charge against us in general as a people of faith, and also a caution to clergy who, generally speaking, are generally speaking!

Perhaps this is one good reason for being exceptionally brief this morning?

Or, perhaps, having nothing much to say, it seems prudent to say nothing much?

I’m starting to sound a little like St John, justly famous for his circular arguments, as today’s gospel exemplifies.

However that may be, the fact is that to say little is sometimes to say more.

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If you love me you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father who will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees it nor knows it. You know it, because it abides with you, and will be in you.” On this last day of Easter, such simple and searching truths may do us more good than Luke’s dazzling light show, the Hollywood block-buster we usually associate with Pentecost. No amateur dramatics here, no tongues of fire, no rushing mighty wind.

Just the stillness of peace conveyed by the Spirit of truth, knowing that to see Christ crucified and risen is to see the Father.

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Never mind what else we may imagine we know of God, all the truth we can ever absorb is disclosed and made visible in the Easter Jesus, offered for our enlightenment and our imitation.

Here, of course, we touch the ministry and mission of the catholic church.

But, in order really to appreciate this, we need to get away from a view of the church which is very seductive and very damaging and very popular.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury says –

“This is the view that the Church is essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith and get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people ‘outside’. It looks a harmless enough view at first, but it is a good way from what the New Testament encourages us to think about the Church – which is that the Church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God’s sons and daughters), and that what we have to do about the Church is not first to organize it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly – God, God’s creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are

invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.”

Inhabiting Christ’s place as we inhabit a climate or a landscape is not, after all, so very difficult.

It is simply a matter of immersing ourselves in the waters of life, allowing the word of grace entry into our hearts and minds, drinking deep of the divine love poured out for us in the sacrament.

It is a matter of keeping ourselves open to the sweet breath of the Spirit, which blows where it wills and blows us together.

If we keep looking each other in the face long enough we see the face of God looking back at us, and know ourselves forgiven and healed and set free.

“We may feel bound”, says Barbara Crafton, “but we are not bound. We may feel all alone – may prefer it – but we are not”.

“The fellowship of the human race is an ecology: we are all related, whether we wish it or not. I am not separate from anyone on earth. Everyone feels the ripple of the smallest of my actions... We affect each other, and we affect the earth itself: its trees, its water levels, its air. Where my actions are injurious, that fact is ever before me. By the power of the Spirit, I don’t have to be part of the injury. I can say no. I can act in such a way as to transcend my aloneness. My part of the world can begin a small circle of goodness, the ripples of that circle will also extend to the ends of the earth. Evil and confusion are not the only things that ripple; good can ripple, too. The gentle breath that Jesus breathed on his disciples still ripples through the air. No wind, good or ill, ever comes to an end: it travels through history, touching everything in its path. Receive the Holy Spirit and then breathe it out again into the world, and let reconciliation begin.”

The Most Holy Trinity

6th June 2004

If we ask who is a Christian? the answer seems blindingly obvious. A Christian, surely, is anyone who believes in Jesus Christ? This is one reason we have liked talking about the sacrament of Christian initiation as Christening. Christening is a perfectly good word, not to say a perfectly grand idea - individuals being made over in the image of Christ himself, that he may dwell in them and they in him. If this expression is gradually falling into disuse it is not because it is somehow bad in itself, but simply inadequate. A Christian is not someone who believes in Jesus Christ. A Christian is not someone sporting the bumper-sticker "I love Jesus". A Christian is someone baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is not simply that we dwell in Christ and he in us, but that we actually share right here and now in the very life of God, joining the divine dance of mutual self-giving Love. Baptism literally means to drown, to be plunged into the waters of Love, to be completely submerged in it, totally overcome by it. Here is both death and resurrection, after the pattern of Christ himself: death to our old life of separation and isolated individualism, rising to new life in interdependence and community. Here we are passing over from estrangement to reconciliation, from isolation to communion.

The doctrine of the Trinity which we celebrate today was a long time developing in the life of the church. We certainly don't find it fully formed in the New Testament documents. In today's gospel, for instance, we see it only in embryo. It is vital to remember this obvious truth for two reasons. First, doctrine only develops as the Spirit leads us into all truth. Faith is not set in concrete in the first Christian century, and revelation didn't cease when the New Testament was closed. If the early church was bold enough to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, we can be equally bold in following truth wherever it leads us. Secondly, the doctrine of the Trinity is not mere speculation, mere conjecture about the heart of heaven. It is not some esoteric branch of higher mathematics designed to confuse ordinary people. The church talks about God as threefold unity because it has to. In other words, this talk is firmly based in human experience. One of my very favourite prayers captures this remarkably well.

*God above me,
Father from whom my being descends,
on whom my existence hangs,
to whom I turn up my face, to whom I stretch out my hands:*

*God beside me,
God in a man like me,
Jesus Christ in the world with me,
whose hand lays hold of me, presenting me, with yourself, to God:*

*God within me,
soul of my soul, root of my will,
inexhaustible fountain, Holy Spirit:*

*Threefold Love,
one in yourself, unite your forces in me,
come together in the citadel of my conquered heart.*

*You have loved me with an everlasting love.
Teach me to care.¹*

Jesus in the world with us, whose hand lays hold of us, walking beside us on broken feet, shows us the one, true God as no other is able to do. To see God through his eyes is to see more clearly than we can with the help of a million other saints and prophets. In his humble birth, his teaching stories, his eating and drinking with sinners, in his healing love, his ready forgiveness, his gentleness and selflessness, all gathered together and expressed so eloquently in the cross, the only God is saving us from ourselves.

All we think we know of God apart from Christ is shadow and speculation – mere hints, small glimpses, some truths, many mistakes. To see him is to see the full reality of God in all its splendour and majesty, in all its deathless love and endless tenderness. Because Jesus is the human embodiment of the divine Spirit who declares to us the things that are to come. In us the Spirit is like a flickering flame or a faulty light globe, for we cannot bear very much reality. Whereas in him, the Spirit is luminous, steady, patient, complete, one even light and one equal music. Coming face to face with Jesus Christ we are eventually driven to speak of the Triune God because there is no other way to express the truth of our experience. But this is not to exhaust the mystery. I've told the story many times now, but I remember years ago after preaching on Trinity Sunday, a woman at the church door thanking me for explaining the Trinity to her. It was a reality check, a wake up call. Instantly, I knew I'd failed miserably. For there is no explaining. There can be no explaining – not now, not ever! Experience leads into mystery, into that deep and dazzling darkness where the living God is to be found. Preaching only succeeds on this day when it illuminates the mystery just a little, by leading us deeper into the mystery, not out of it or away from it. All our talk of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if we are paying attention, alerts us to this truth. Fascinatingly, the great Trinitarian text for the Orthodox is nowhere to be found in any Christian document. With exceptional insight, they fasten instead on the story in the Hebrew scriptures where Abraham entertains God as three angel-messengers, and the iconography of the Holy Trinity represents this scene. As he lay dying, my great teacher Bishop John Taylor spent many hours meditating on this icon, and managed to write down two last poems. Five other poems were in his head when he died, and as his wife said to me, went with him on his final journey. Look at the icon, let the icon look at us, and let the poet speak.

*Love in its fullness loomed, love
loomed at the tent door in its truth,
not the sole unique truth
reserved for the incomparable God,
but for a love consisting of communion.
I, Abraham, looked for a single
flower; but it has blossomed into a
multiple head, made for sharing.
Love's ultimate reality, gazing at the Son
proclaims 'I AM'.
And He, as love's obedience,
responds 'I will'.
And the Spirit, love's delight,
says 'look and see'.*

*Their mutuality precedes creation
being Eternal, and offers the only space
in which it can exist.
So the cup of suffering at which they gaze
is the price already paid
for the world's pardon. 'The Lamb
slain before the foundation
of the world.'*

Third Sunday after Pentecost

20th June 2004

Today's gospel is a sharp word addressed by Christ to today's church, but it is more than that. As with so much of our Lord's teaching, it is certainly not restricted to religious people, and this is one reason the incident takes place outside Jewish territory. His concern is that we should all become more truly human, so the word is directed to every time and every people. It shows Jesus at his comic best, and, simultaneously, at his most serious.

As so often, he is with his fisherman disciples on the Sea of Galilee, the Lake of Gennesaret. They sail down to the country of the Geresenes, on the way rebuking the troublesome wind and the roughness of the water, smoothing things out as God always intends, creating harmony where there is discord.

Before the story proper even starts to be told, Luke is signalling to us that the present tempest in human affairs is not the last word. However stormy the weather, however dangerous the times, whenever we feel we are being swamped, the present danger also presents wonderful opportunities. At moments such as this we stand poised for greatness or failure.

In other words, at moments such as this we will become more or less human. The choice is ours, for it is always a matter of choosing, always a matter of taking responsibility and deciding. How do we respond to the given circumstances? Will we go under or keep swimming? Does the provocation lead to deeper thought and more sustained love, or do we fall into despair?

But let us put such generalities on one side, and go to specifics. This particular gospel is, after all, about as topical as possible. The crazy man living among the tombs epitomises all our victims. He is the epitome of all outcasts. Agreeing on a victim, or a class of victims, unites us.

We bind ourselves tightly together, defined not by who we are but by who we are not. If only we can push someone out there, if only we can identify some group or class of people with all we fear in ourselves, we feel safe and secure. The scapegoat carries our sorrows and bears our griefs, and they are legion. Indeed, so many are the demons that torment us that we daily project them on to others terrified that they will devour us.

Unscrupulous politicians and others know all about this, exploiting our natural tendency for their own ends, for there is nothing quite so immediately effective as wedge politics. We routinely divide and rule. No wonder then, that Jesus stirs up so much fear today, for he is actively undermining this technique and strategy. Theologian James Alison puts the accurate question. "What made them afraid?"

"They hadn't been afraid when the guy was running around bruising himself, breaking chains and so forth. That was pretty much business as usual. What was shocking was seeing him sitting, the position of the peaceful, clothed, where they were used to his familiar bizzareness, rent garments, gashed body... and, even more perplexing, in his right mind. Their being afraid is only odd if we don't understand the dynamic in the story at all. Before, they had been "in their right minds". Indeed, one of the things that had kept them in their right minds was the comforting knowledge of one of their own

who was not in his right mind. If the demoniac were not part of their fragile economy of group survival, they would of course have been pleased to have him returned to useful life among them. But it is as a demoniac that he was part of their economy, and they sense it.”

Yes, they sense it. We always do. This is why I say wedge politics, division and rule, always works well in the short term. It plays to our insecurity, and it is only gradually that we feel its dehumanising effects, only gradually that we experience the cost of building ourselves up by putting others down. Somewhere deep down, we know perfectly well when we are abusing other people, when we are grasping selfishly rather than giving ourselves generously. Somewhere deep in our hearts, we know when we are cutting against the grain of reality, when we are destroying rather than creating.

On Friday night in Christchurch, New Zealand, I preached at an Inclusive Eucharist celebrating the astonishing diversity of God’s creation. In particular, we were celebrating the gifts and sufferings gay people have to offer and share with all of us. It was an extraordinarily emotional moment to look out at that congregation. It really was a case of what the old prayer book calls “all sorts and conditions” of people gathered together, at home together, around the Lord’s table. Together, with all our hopes and hurts and fears and longings, we sang and prayed and listened to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Some of us were more obviously damaged by life than others, some had paid and are paying the terrible cost of demonisation and division, but not one of us is whole. For just that brief moment, little over an hour, however, we were whole as we joined hearts and hands. Briefly, we were aware of God who has no outcasts. We glimpsed the living Christ, crucified at our hands, returning to love and to heal us, feeding us all with his own hand.

An Inclusive Eucharist is, of course, a tautology. It is like offering a Thanksgiving Eucharist for some person or event, when the word “eucharist” literally means thanksgiving. What sense is there in a Thanksgiving Thanksgiving? So it is with “inclusive”. Every eucharist is, by definition, inclusive. No one is, or can ever be, excluded. In God’s eyes we are all absolutely equal, equally liked and loved, and there is a place set for me and for you at table which no one else can fill. What a judgment on us that we have to spell this out!

On Friday we breathed deeply and freely this liberating air for a few precious moments. We raised our eyes and saw the coming kingdom. Indeed, we felt it in our bones, and knew we were home. To become more human is to become divine. Christ offers us nothing less than this. Seated at the eucharistic feast we are clothed, and, perhaps for the first time in a very long time, in our right mind.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

27th June 2004

I've had an interesting time this week, unexpectedly caught up in discussion with a close friend who is framing a thesis proposal for a higher degree in theology. He began by saying that he wanted to explore the method and the goal of God's presence and action in our lives and in the world. I took issue with the word method because I thought it suggested that God might be capricious, choosing different methods according to particular circumstances. One of the fundamental pillars of Jewish and Christian thought about God, after all, is that God is consistent or faithful in dealing with creation. I suggested that my friend think instead in terms of God's behaviour and goals, but he quickly pointed out that the word behaviour was as problematic as method. As we thought further about this, we came up with the word signature. Jesus Christ is God's signature, God's authentic self-expression, as opposed to a whole host of God-forgeries.

Now it just so happens that we catch a glimpse of what this means in today's gospel. And if we think this whole discussion is sounding a bit academic, today's gospel demonstrates that grasping what it means to say Christ is God's signature could hardly be more urgent or more practical. By his own obedience as God's servant and son, Jesus shows us who God really is and how God really acts. And this revelation cuts right across what we usually think of as God. Our picture of God belongs to the world of the disciples James and John. God is imaged a sort of super-potentate who can do anything, a heavenly judge who can send fire from heaven to punish and consume us. With God on our side we can force our will on the disobedient and the inhospitable, for God shares authority and might and power with us, equipping us for our adventures. You don't need to listen to religious people for very long to find this God alive and well in all the religions today, including Christianity. There is, however, one little problem. This God is a forgery! If Jesus of Nazareth is himself God's signature, then this God has to be a forgery.

Listen again to the gospel. "On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans top make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'" Now this bright idea of James and John doesn't come out of nowhere, out of thin air. They are drawing on a well-known bible story, a popular story from the Hebrew scriptures, and isn't scripture God's revelation? If Elijah long ago could call down fire from heaven, surely they can too? Faced with a spot of opposition, Elijah declared: "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you...", and, we are told, "The fire came down from heaven and consumed him..." So successful is this tactic, that Elijah actually repeats it a second time! No wonder James and John thought they'd give it a go. But Jesus turns and rebukes them in no uncertain terms. Whatever the elders thought, this is not the way of God, and this is not the way for God's loyal partners and servants. God does not send fire down from heaven, for God actually cannot send fire down from heaven. This is because God cannot deny God's own nature. God is love, through and through, and this means that God's hands are tied by love. Retribution and revenge do not belong to God's nature. Retribution and revenge are a forgery masquerading as the real thing, nothing more than a forged signature which is absolutely deceptive and totally worthless. And it follows that if retribution and revenge blaspheme against the heart of God, they must also be de-humanising forces which have no place in the lives of God's

friends. Do you see what a tremendous difference this insight makes? No doubt about it, Elijah was a great prophet, but something greater than Elijah is here! Elijah's view of God and Elijah's view of what constitutes truly human behaviour cannot stand for long against the clearer light we see in Jesus. Scripture, no matter how sacred, no matter how hallowed, is not the word of God to us, except in a derivative or secondary sense. The Word of God is the living person Jesus Christ. God speaks to us in him, he is God's authentic signature, and nothing unChristlike can ever belong in God or be of God. This is a case not of like, but is. Elijah shows us what he imagines God is like, while Jesus shows us who God really is. And the gentle, patient, passionate God who meets us here makes us gentle, patient and passionate in our turn as we abide in the divine love. This is the conversion, the change of heart we need if we are really to see straight, to see not like but is, to see and be God's friends. In Alana Valentine's scintillating stage play *Savage Grace*, there is a marvellous moment when we overhear someone praying, someone who is clearly a man of God, someone clearly who recognizes the signature of the real God.

I have often asked you to be in my day
then wonder to glimpse you in a turn of light.
But the thought instead that you are the day.
Are time and place
are the bands of colour that arouse the morning
to see you not like but is.

You are this day
and then more
You are this hour
You are this minute
How plush then
each moment of my life becomes.

I have often asked you to be in my flesh
then wonder to see you in my arching hand.
But the thought instead that you are my flesh.
Are bone and sinew
are the blood and phlegm that spin within me
to see you not like but is.

You are this skin
and then more
You are this muscle
You are this organ
How gracious then
each motion of my flesh becomes.

I have often asked you to be in my mind
then wonder to know you in a peaceful thought
But the truth instead that you are my mind.
Are emotion and memory
are the ideas and perceptions that entertain hope
to see you not like but is.

You are this image
and then more
You are this dream

You are this feeling
How amazing then
each process of imagination becomes.

Recognizing God's signature directs us toward God's goal. It is how we become truly human here and now. It is how we welcome and work for God's dawning kingdom of justice and peace. It is how we set our faces toward the heavenly Jerusalem where the only fire is the fire of God's love.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

11th July 2004

“And who is my neighbour?” The story we have just heard is our Lord’s answer to this perennial question, and if he could only answer with a story, far be it from us to reduce his story to a set of logical propositions. Story-form answers to such lingering questions are not, after all, some sort of luxury. They are essential and inescapable, for the question can never be answered if our hearts remain untouched.

The movement of the heart is the answer. Indeed, this movement within the depths of ourselves is more primal still. The despised Samaritan is etched into our imagination as supremely good precisely because he is filled with compassion, moved with pity. It is worth noting that the word used in the text originates as a noun denoting the “inward parts” of a sacrifice, and this is transferred to the “inward parts” of the human body, particularly the womb or the loins. In pre-Christian Greek, however, this word does not denote compassion or pity. It takes on these meanings because of Christ himself, the servant of God who is regularly described in the gospels as full of compassion. As the mirror-image of the divine nature, Jesus exhibits compassion, not so much as an everyday human emotion as a divine characteristic.

As such, compassion means that his stomach turns over. There is a revolution within. Being moved in this way takes guts – quite literally. Compassion, then, is not sentimental or weak or ephemeral. On the contrary, compassion is tough love, and whoever exhibits this tough love reveals something of the heart of God.

If we are to avoid turning the Good Samaritan into a sentimental figure fit only for stained-glass windows, we need to keep sight of this. In Jesus’ story, the Samaritan is no wimp. He is the strong victim who rises above his victimhood. Despised as a half-caste, he ministers to his racist persecutor. He is black South Africa forgiving the sins of white South Africa. He is the Aboriginal loving the murderous invading European. He is the tortured prisoner of conscience pitying his torturer. He is the cruelly abused refugee, locked away for years in detention, becoming the model Australian citizen.

I have got myself into trouble before for saying I have felt in recent years ashamed to be an Australian because of the way we treat refugees. I’m afraid I haven’t repented. Australia’s good name in the international community has been tarnished as both Labour and Liberal governments have exploited our fears and prejudices. We have all been shamed, and I wonder how it has happened and how long it will take for our basic decency to reassert itself. My own theory is that we support these hard-hearted policies when we refuse to see our victims as people just like us, when we refuse to feel, when we set our faces like flint and our guts like concrete. No wonder we are not allowed to see what goes on in our detention centres. To see is to begin to feel. When we see, the thaw sets in and the snow begins to melt.

I confess to being terribly sad when people I know to be good people, people I love, leave the parish when I say things like this. They want to be good people, caring people, Christian people, while averting their eyes, while looking the other way. They don’t want to feel distressed, so they somehow close down their normally warm and generous hearts. And when I say “they”, of course I really mean “we”. For the truth is that we are all inclined at one time or another to escape reality, to shield ourselves from the pain.

Which is precisely why Jesus the master story-teller spins this tale. Originally, he was speaking to good people. He speaks to good people still. And the message is the same: there can be no limits to compassion. Whatever you do, never imagine you can remain fully and happily alive if you pass by human suffering on the other side of the road. Without exception, everyone is my neighbour. It may even be that, miracle of miracles, those I hurt most see me yet as their neighbour!

So, little by little we are becoming more human together, more human and more divine. “Which of these three, do you think, was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”. He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” “Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate.”

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

25th July 2004

“Lord, teach us to pray” is a request we all make, but I suspect what we mostly mean is “Lord, teach us how prayer works”. The Lord answers the first request, but never the second, and not because some requests just don’t deserve answers, but because some requests cannot be answered. The mechanics of prayer is none of our business. Perhaps, it’s not even any of our Lord’s business. Our business is simply to pray because prayer is the language of love between us, linking us in one communion with the heart of reality, connecting us with the beating heart of God. The sight of Jesus at prayer, sometimes for whole nights at a stretch, shows us that we can never be our truly human selves apart from this essential connection. It is surely no accident that his first disciples ask him how to pray immediately after he has done so, and we too see that prayer is tied up with the mystery of his aliveness and want access to his energy and grace.

Today’s gospel draws us into this arena, into the wonderful mystery without exhausting it. It is a play in three acts, and I want to focus on the second of these, without saying much at all about the first or the third. I will focus almost exclusively on the parable of the friend at midnight, and very briefly at that.

This parable leaps right out of village life in Palestine in a wonderfully fresh way, and this is Christ’s intention, for he wants us to feel something rather than think about something. As one commentator rightly says, “Jesus does not tell his hearers about God. He makes them feel something very deeply and then says: “That – multiplied a thousand and more times over – is how God feels about you!” The parable could hardly be more brief, but the setting and the customs are a bit foreign to most of us. Suppose you have a friend, but not exactly a good friend. Actually, this is someone who doesn’t think much of you at all. Nevertheless, you both live in a small town, and unless he fulfils the town’s obligation to look after strangers he will be publicly vilified. This peer pressure means that the so-called friend will certainly act generously, even if he doesn’t feel like it.

Suddenly, you have a guest arrive at midnight, and you have to provide adequately for him. You must offer a meal, and the guest must eat something, and leftovers and scraps will not do, indeed leftovers will be an insult. This is where the aforementioned friend comes to the rescue, for the only thing to be done is go and borrow all you need. There must be a whole loaf, but you cannot offer just one loaf. The bread is not, of course, the meal. Bread in this culture is knife and fork and spoon. Bread will be broken and dipped in the common dishes. All this food you must borrow, together with whatever else you need – probably including the best tray and pitcher and cloth and goblets the village has to offer.

When you go to this kind of neighbour everything is against you. First, he doesn’t even like you. Second, it is dead of night, and he is asleep in bed. Third, the door is locked, and his children are asleep. Jesus is saying to his listeners, can you imagine the neighbour refusing? We might think, well yes, we can, but then we don’t live in a small village. The original audience has no doubt at all. Of course the neighbour won’t refuse. Of course the neighbour won’t offer silly excuses. The door is locked, but is soon unlocked. The children may stir, but they will soon go back to sleep. The neighbour will do the right thing, not because he wants to do so, but because he is afraid of ridicule. If he fails to

respond as asked the story will be all over the village by morning, and he will be greeted in the market square with cries of “shame!”

Well then, if you are confident of having your needs met when you go to such a neighbour in the night, how much more can you rest assured when you take your requests to a loving Father? Keep on asking, then, and seeking and knocking. Cry out to God when your heart is breaking. Don't be shy, and don't be afraid. Demand whatever you need most. A round stone may look like a round loaf of bread, but every mother knows the difference. The sea snake, the eel, may look like an ordinary land snake, but every fisherman knows which is which. A scorpion folded up looks remarkably like an egg, but your father will never hand you one. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

It is not that we get what we pray for – bread and fish and eggs, or the health of a friend. It is not that we get what we think we need. The answer to our prayer is not just some good gift, but always the best gift of all. One reason we pray the Our Father liturgically with eyes and hands open, is that we have no idea what we will receive in detail. All we know is that we will be given the best of gifts, and we want to see it coming and receive it carefully. The answer to our prayer is always the gift of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of awareness and gentleness and patience and courage. God gives us the Spirit of truth to make us strong, and the Spirit of love which will see us through. In other words, instead of supplying this or that commodity, God shares God's very self, the divine presence itself, ultimate reality, total security. And this delivers us from fantasy-land so that we live adult lives in the real world, the world in all its heart-breaking beauty, the world in all its heart-breaking brutality. Prayer is not a shopping list, and God is not a genie in a bottle who can and will grant all our wishes. Prayer is a conversation through which we grow up. And prayer is answered when we respond to God's initiative, when we respond to God's invitation, when we enter into relationship with God and become responsible.

As the poem has it -

“Ask and it will be given to you;
search and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks,
the door will be opened.”

So, what's stopping us? It is possible for every one of us to walk through that opened door out of this shadow-land and into real life.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

1st August 2004

On Friday, right out of the blue, I had a letter from my bank. Out of the goodness of their hearts, those in authority have decided to increase my credit limit from \$8,000 to \$11,500. To accept, all I need do is sign the enclosed form and return it.

Apparently, they are doing this because I am an important and valued customer. While I may not use my new credit limit every day, they tell me it is reassuring to know that it's there if I need it. And there is the additional bonus, of course, that I can earn more Qantas Frequent Flyer points.

Now I would need to be an even bigger mug than I am to swallow all this. I am not an "important" customer. I am, in point of fact, a very small beans customer indeed. However, "valued" I may well be, because the bank knows it can make money out of me. I have several thousand dollars on my Visa card at present, and this is not an entirely unusual situation. I don't default on my payments, I pay on demand every month, but I tend not to clear the card either.

This means that there is money to be made out of me, a small but steady stream of ready cash, because interest is calculated at 18.25%. If the bank can encourage me to run up even bigger debts, it can be sure of a steady income, and its future profits are assured.

Now, none of this is very exceptional. The scenario I describe is only too familiar to every single one of us. We are all part of the "greed is good" culture. The bank has bought into corporate greed in a big way, and depends for its success on encouraging greed in little people like you and me.

We are both products of the system and contributors to its ongoing life. At some very basic level we are all compromised and corrupted by this state of affairs. However much we might like to keep ourselves nice by opting out, the fact is we cannot opt out. The banking system is international as well as national, and its tentacles reach into our lives at every level.

In any case, it's not all evil; it has its uses, and comes in useful. It is reassuring to know that I have credit if I need it. It is only dangerous if I am greedy. But the trouble is that I am greedy, and so are you. Greed is not one of the seven deadly sins for the fun of it. Greed infects every self-centred human heart, and wreaks havoc rather more often than just occasionally! Most of us are probably not often tempted to build bigger and better barns, but "bigger and better" do tend to go together in our thinking – even in the church! "Small is beautiful" belongs to the looney left, while we sensible folk work away industriously gathering more and more.

But, beware, this very day our soul is required, who we really are, our very self – not our house or our bank account or even our credit rating. So, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed ..." "The son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." To give after the pattern of Christ is true wealth, wealth that is part of us - open-heartedness and open-handedness, true generosity of spirit.

When we are rich toward God, there is more than enough to go around.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

8th August 2004

It is sometimes difficult to know what on earth to do with an appointed text. By the time the four gospels were written down, the sayings and doings of Jesus had been circulating in oral tradition for decades, passed on by word of mouth in Christian worship and in everyday settings. Having long-since lost their foothold in human history, they are threaded together by the evangelists like graded pearls on a string. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John seem to feel entirely free in doing this, putting the material together quite differently.

The section of Luke's gospel from which our passage today comes is a good example of how this works out in practice. There are various scholarly theories about why Luke combines at least four disparate bits of tradition as he does, but these need to detain us. We do, however, need to detect the four components so that we can separate them in our minds and in imagination. This is not, after all, a normal, continuous conversation we are overhearing, and we do not necessarily need to swallow it whole.

First, there is a saying about the giving of the kingdom by God to the fragile little flock, a word of encouragement to the earliest Christian communities, and now a word of encouragement to us. Second, there is a saying about possessions, a typical Jesus theme: in all you are and in all you do, be generous, for this both moulds who you are and reflects where your heart is. Third, there is a little picture-story about masters and servants, containing a distinctive Jesus twist: the amazing spectacle of the tired master stripping down to serve his own hard-working slaves. Finally, there is a saying about a thief in the night: the advents of God, the comings of God into our lives, always take us by surprise.

Now, as I say, there is no necessary connection between these fragments. Luke had his reasons for stitching them together, but, by the time they reach us across twenty centuries, circumstances are very different. Let me be bold, then, and draw some understandings from them for today rather than Luke's yesterday.

I am always comforted by the little flock saying. To a shrinking church, acutely aware of our minority status in a society where Christianity is too long established to have any of the glamour of Buddhism or Islam, and where the sins of our past are catching up with us, this is surely a precious word of hope. "Fear not, little flock, do not be afraid, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is an interesting translation, oriented to the future, influenced perhaps by the later story of the Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour. The Greek text is rather different. "Do not fear, little flock, because your Father was well pleased to give to you the kingdom." We have *already* been given the kingdom. This is the pearl of great price the fragile little flock *already* possesses.

The reign and rule of God is for us present reality, even if it is still to come in all its glorious fullness. We live simultaneously in two worlds. In us, the world as it is, the old world of injustice and disease and violence, meets God's new world of dignity and freedom and health. We know the power of the old world is already broken, destroyed, swallowed up in love. We are set free to live right here and now in fresh obedience to God, to live with the grain of reality rather than against it. We do so by turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, living generously in a greedy society, forgiving those who still live by the law of each for themselves, for they know not what they do. We breathe the

kingdom air and live the kingdom life already, before it is safe to do so, and a realistic assessment of the risks involved in such an enterprise suggests we are like lambs in the midst of wolves!

It also means that we need to be alert and remain alert. If we walk around with our head in the clouds we will probably be run over by a bus, or trampled to death by the crowd, or mugged by vested interests, chewed up and spat out by the free market. We, who are gentle as doves, need to be wise as serpents. So we are dressed for action, expecting our master to return at any moment from the wedding banquet, expecting him indeed at *every* moment. Our confidence about living the kingdom life here and now arises only from our relationship with Christ, crucified and arisen. And to sustain us in our journey, and to strengthen us in our struggle, to make us more sensitive and loving and less judgmental, he sits us down to eat, and himself comes to serve us. This, after all, is what happens to us and for us in every Eucharist.

To those who are ready and expectant, to those capable of receiving his gifts, the master comes. And *this* is the unexpected hour.

What wind brings to the lagging sail,
rain to the drooping flower,
sweet fire and the broken bread
and song's peace to the lonely hour,
You bring,
and blithely, to your kind
You come, and lo!
the sail is spread,
the flower dances in the sun,
the heart leaps heavenward
like flame –
and God is in the broken bread.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Festival of Mary

Sunday 15th August 2004

A week ago today, I heard the best homily I have heard in years at a pub in Inglewood. It lasted all of thirty seconds. Late in the evening - when various artists had created the sort of atmosphere we long for in our churches, but rarely find - the singer dropped into the conversation a few words of French novelist Anais Nin. "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage." But that text was not left bare, without exegesis or commentary. In his own words: "To everyone who has a vision: let us move forward with courage and trust; may our commitment dance with our surrender, and may it be a smoochy dance."

Now, hearing those words, for me at least, was one of those grace-filled moments. It was a moment when, as we say, the "ice breaks", or the "penny drops", a moment of disclosure, of revelation, when everything somehow makes sense. In preparation for tonight, and for the ordination retreat, I had already been living daily with Mary, Mother of the Lord. Let me be clear about which Mary I mean. Quite deliberately, I have not been living with Mary as she appears in church tradition, where we have so often projected on to her our own pathology. I have been living, rather, with the New Testament Mary. In the gospels, of course, she is one of the principal players. Without her "Yes" to God, none of us would be here. Mary is first among the faithful, the very first Christian believer. From among the small company of God's faithful ones, the *ananim* - named as Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna - she steps into the light, not just one of the crowd, but the very epitome of trusting faith. Her virginity is never about purity, but always about poverty. Mary is the courageous woman, the strong woman, the empty and open woman. She represents all who long for the coming of God to fill our emptiness, to save us and make us fruitful. As such, she becomes God's willing partner and loving servant, the friend who returns love for Love, who offers and gives herself wholly to the divine promises, who helps us hold in our hands the bird in flight by showing us that it can be done. In a word, her commitment dances with her surrender, and so she becomes our pattern for living humanly, our model for believing, our good companion who walks ahead of us and prays for us always. We look to her and see ourselves, as we already are in God's imagination. Mary represents who we are becoming, embodying the destiny of the whole company of the baptized.

If priests are representative Christians, endowed with grace and power to live for and act on behalf of the church in the world, then they are representative only in the same way as Mary is - she who is full of grace, she who empties herself of ego, she who faces the void without fear, she who embraces her extraordinary destiny with trusting faith, she in whom courage and commitment dance with surrender. Here we touch the mystery at the very heart of discipleship and apostleship. Here we touch the mystery of priesthood and priestly ministry. In this sense, we are all feminine: we are all the Virgin, pregnant with the Word which comes with the wind.

Now I speak these words primarily, of course, to Evan and Jan and David and Clive and Graeme and Susan and Lynne. The rest of us simply overhear this privileged conversation as we hold them close tonight in our love and prayer.

Clive, Graham, David, Evan, Jan, Lynne and Susan – as you know already, the mystery of your priesthood, the mystery of our priesthood, the priesthood we share, is essentially this hidden reality. It arises deep down inside you, this God-bearing, a kindling of light in the darkness of who you really are when all the games have stopped, a kindling of the creative Spirit, endlessly bringing life out of the empty womb and the empty tomb. Like Mary, each one of us is invited to say, “Here I am.” The sacred text says, “with God, no *word* shall be impossible”, and Mary says, “Let it be to me according to Your *word*.” This is the indispensable foundation, upon which everything else is built, a foundation you will revisit daily in your ministry, a foundation you must keep in good repair. Not only tonight, but day by day, your word must answer God’s living Word as it is spoken to us in the sheer aliveness of Christ, crucified and raised. As priests in the church of God, this endless dialogue means that *who* you are is more important than *what* you do, for all your work - as leaders, enablers, encouragers and confessors, preaching and teaching, celebrating the sacraments as caring pastors and shepherds – all this and more flows from inside out, so that together we build the upside-down kingdom.

So, wherever this priestly ministry takes you, however your future path unfolds, remember this festival day, Mary’s day, and now your own day, surrendering all over again your heart to your first love. Keep your eyes fixed on her, for she knows better than any of us both the cost and the joy. More than this, allow her to look right into you, into the murky depths of you, she who sees so penetratingly and so tenderly all that lies buried there. We have lived together three nights and three days with our Lady, Captive Daughter of Zion, of the Sign, a contemporary image based on an ancient prototype. She has been looking steadily at us, and continues to do so in this privileged moment - Mary, our sister and good companion; Mary, Mother of the Church; who stands praying with empty hands, with empty hands wide open, stretched out to receive the gift. Wearing the yellow Star of David, she is stamped by Nazi hatred simply as “Jude”. The background is defaced by the barbed-wire of the death camps. In the light-filled circle of her womb, the infant Christ, already strangely mature, swathed in the blue and white *tallith*, the Jewish prayer shawl, bears the sacred Torah scrolls in their elaborately embroidered coverings. Here is the Lord of life praying in Mary. Mary becomes a sign, as the church becomes a sign, by virtue of the action of Christ praying in her. We are pointed to one of the most mysterious bits of our belief in God’s emergence among us in the flesh. For nine months God was incarnate on earth, God was human, in a completely hidden way, growing in Mary’s womb. Here is the secret, silent God, God swimming in the dark, entirely helpless, totally dependent. Contemplating this vision, the Archbishop of Canterbury wonders aloud: “What if the life that fuels the Church through prayer is not the routine prayer of the worshipping community, not even the prayer of the religious orders, but moments of exposure and insight, or of desperately needy openness on the part of very irregular Christians? What if the Church really lives from the prayer and experience of those it least values in its public talk? Another teasing consequence is that those parts of our own individual experience that seem least pious or ‘together’ may be the points at which we are exposed to God, and so the points from which we most truly come to live in Christ. Our instinct is almost always to expect God to work in us at the points where we sense that we are on the right lines, not those areas of our life where we feel we are at sea, not understanding, not succeeding; but it may well be that, in our honest helplessness, there we come closer to the real well of life than when we sense all is fairly well.”

Yes, I think we can recognize the truth of this. This matches our experience. The prayer that really counts is the prayer of the least and the last, the honest prayer when all the games have stopped. Every cry of the human heart, every scream of anguish, wherever there is desperation, utter helplessness, wherever there is pure joy, whenever we come to the end of ourselves – there we touch God’s face. In so far as we too stand before God like Mary, with nothing to offer but empty, open hands, responding as best we may in love to the Love that first and last loves us, longing to be filled with fully divine and totally human life, there is grace sufficient not only for ourselves, but grace enough and to spare. Mary, the woman clothed with the sun, standing on the moon, crowned with twelve stars, prays only that we may be ourselves. Apart from this, there is and can be no priesthood, no matter whose hands are laid on our heads.

If we are called individually to be ourselves, our priesthood helps other individuals be themselves, helping them, by living authentically ourselves, to say in their turn, “Here I am...” Indeed, your ministry is crucial in enabling the church to be itself, in allowing the church to say with passion, “Here I am...” You stand at the centre of the eucharistic community in place of the bishop, so that the local Christian company may see wider than itself, to ensure that it is really open and welcoming and generous and catholic in the unnerving and electrifying world where we all search for meaning.

At a time when schismatic forces are gleefully at work, your task – as much by how you live and the tone of voice in which you speak, as by anything you do – is to keep the connections live – live connections between parish and diocese, between this particular company of the baptized you happen to serve and the worldwide Anglican Communion, between this tiny Anglican household and the universal Body of Christ, past, present, and yet to come. As ministers of reconciliation, you are to proclaim in season and out of season, the truth that church is not a ghetto of the like-minded, that Christian unity is not negotiable, that our very life in Christ is inextricably linked with our willingness to abide with those we think are sinful and those we think are stupid, as much, perhaps more than, those we like and love.

It is precisely because all this reflects in time and space the unity of the eternal Trinity, the endless dance of Love, that God says, “I want you Mary”. And Mary, finally, overcoming her very natural fear, gathering up all her courage, says her full-blooded “Yes”. But Mary is not the only highly favoured one “I want you, Graeme”, “I want you, Lynne”, “I want you, Evan”, “I want you, Jan”, “I want you, Susan”, “I want you, Clive”, “I want you, David.” Not someone else, but you; and not the respectable you the world sees, and not the religious you the church approves, but the real you. Only if the real you is at home, can I reach you with my grace. “I want *you*, I *need* you ...” If the real you says *Yes* without reserve, I can turn all your wounds into worships, for the sake of my hungry people, for building my topsy-turvy kingdom.

To our seven new priests, and to every one of us who has a vision: let us move forward, like Mary, first disciple and mother of all disciples, into God’s future with courage and with trust. Like her, may our commitment dance with our surrender. And may it be a smoochy dance.

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

22nd August 2004

Regardless of whether or not we are interested in sport, we are all of us caught up in the drama of Athens, where the XXVIII Olympiad is playing itself out. Given that the whole world is tuned in, even if just to Roy and HGs nightly commentary, it is surprising that religious communities have had little if anything to say about these games. Sometimes, you can't help wondering if people of faith live in this world, or some other world altogether?

Given the usual deafening silence, I was relieved to read an editorial in the English Roman catholic weekly, The Tablet, dated 14th August 2004. It seems to me to be a fine example of religious comment on the real world, so I published it on the ECU Chaplaincy Discussion Board. Let me quote just a bit of it –

“Would the ancient Greeks have approved the modern Olympics? Modern sporting fixtures move to an endless cycle of raised hopes, hopes dashed; of heroes made and unmade in an afternoon; of Kipling's imposters Triumph and Disaster both led away for drug testing after the event, for one or other to be disqualified and banned (or to give a press conference to claim they had merely taken a dose of cough mixture). Greek drama works best with moral polarities: corruption and nobility, profit and selflessness, honour and cheating, purity of intention and impurity of urine sample. And there is a newer and more sinister pairing this year: an event held ostensibly to promote peace among nations will also be the biggest fixture in the calendar for the security industry, as it offers a multitude of tempting targets for terrorists of every kind. May they all fall at the first hurdle. Certainly no Olympics would be complete without the usual rows and scandals, plus the swirling stench of international bribery and skullduggery off-stage as nations compete for the honour of holding another games a decade or more ahead. London wants to be first in the queue, but so do New York and Paris, and the reason has little to do with sport, everything to do with the urban regeneration than an Olympic Games invariably stimulates, as in Athens, and the money to be made from a billion-dollar tourism frenzy. And the biggest polarity is that between all of the above, and the pursuit of sporting excellence for its own sake: the true Olympic spirit, modern and ancient. This is what drives athletes from all over the world to regard an Olympic appearance, let alone a medal, as a pinnacle of their sporting career. Genuine athletic genius is a rare gift of God, but it takes the singleminded dedication of a saint and martyr to bring it to its full potential”.

Now, here is serious reflection by a Christian writer, who does not make the mistake of being solemn. The ethical and theological foundations of this opinion piece are easily identified by the initiated, without drawing attention to themselves or being in any way self-conscious. The author is sufficiently secure and sufficiently mature to speak as a Christian, but in a way that should appeal to any thoughtful person. There is also a welcome lightness of touch, and even an engaging sense of humour.

Here, I would say, is genuine humanity, enhanced and deepened by faith, able to think and speak intelligently, yet without bible-bashing. But I knew in advance that everyone would not be happy with this approach. As I remarked to the University Chaplain, “some will be unable to recognize this as a ‘religious’ comment at all”. Sure enough, my prediction came true even as I spoke! The very first response on the Discussion Board reads: “how is this article religious?”

Such a question, of course, cuts directly to our fundamental approach to reality. Is religion a separate department of life, or is all life religious? Is spirituality a vicer

overlaying or obliterating human nature, or is spirituality the absolute essence of what it is to be human? Does faith make us more human, or less human? Is religion and spirituality basically about tender, vulnerable people, or basically about rigid, abstract principles?

These are the raw questions Jesus addresses in today's gospel. In a nutshell, and in terms of Jesus' own Jewish religion, is humankind made for the sabbath, or the sabbath for humankind? Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good, or evil? Is religious practice life-giving, or death-dealing?

We know that our Lord was killed for being insufficiently religious. Again and again, he clashed head-on with the religious authorities of his day, and these same religious authorities are alive and well today. The supreme irony, of course, is that some of these rigorists now claim to be Christian! In this, they could hardly be more distant from Christ. As he is truly human, so he calls us to be truly human. To see God and serve God, as he sees and serves God, does not remove us from this world. On the contrary, it imbeds us more deeply in everyday reality by equipping us with a particular vision, a unique perspective. As Bishop John Taylor liked to say, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to boiled potatoes as much as to Jesus Christ, for nothing human is foreign to God.

To believe this, of course, is to be totally subversive, entirely radical, absolutely and utterly revolutionary. Nothing at all remains the same. Everything looks and feels and tastes different. Religious rules and regulations crumble at the hands of the creator and sustainer and redeemer of life, consumed in the fire of divine love. "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from bondage on the sabbath day?"

Never underestimate what is at stake here. The old world and the new world are doing battle. Are we raised with Christ, or still dead in our sins? In this clash of kingdoms, we must decide where we stand and to whom we belong.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

29th August 2004

In the beginning, God created day and night. God created day for footy matches, going to the beach and barbies. God created night for going prawning, sleeping and barbies. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Second Day.

On the Second Day, God created water - for surfing, swimming and barbies on the beach. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Third Day.

On the Third Day, God created the earth to bring forth plants – to provide malt and yeast for beer and wood for barbies. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Fourth Day.

On the Fourth Day, God created animals and crustaceans for chops, sausages, steak and prawns for barbies. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Fifth Day.

On the Fifth Day, God created a bloke - to go to the footy, enjoy the beach, drink the beer and eat the meat and prawns at barbies. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Sixth Day.

On the Sixth Day, God saw that this bloke was lonely, and needed someone to go to the footy, surf, drink beer, eat and stand around the barbie with. So God created mates, and God saw that they were good blokes. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came, and it was the Seventh Day.

On the Seventh Day, God looked around at the twinkling barbie fires, heard the hiss of opening beer cans and the raucous laughter of all the blokes, smelled the aroma of grilled chops and sizzling prawns, and God saw that it was good.... well almost good. God saw that the blokes were tired and needed a rest. So God created sheilas - to clean the house, bear children, wash, cook and clean the barbie. God saw that it was not just good, it was better than that, it was bloody fantastic, and God called it AUSTRALIA!

There are no barbies in the New Testament. Well, perhaps one, where the crucified and raised Christ cooks breakfast over a charcoal fire on the beach. But if barbies are scarce in scripture, there are at least as many meals as miracles. To the extent that this observation is true, we largely have Luke to thank. Luke, more than any other gospel writer, uses the everyday event of gathering at table for meals as the locus for Jesus' teaching. There can be little doubt, I think, that he is quite consciously helping us make the link between then and now. Our Sunday by Sunday eucharistic gathering around the table is, after all, the place where Jesus meets us, feeds us, teaches, shapes, heals and saves us.

In this, our experience is, of course, identical to that of the earliest Christian communities, and of the disciples themselves, quite apart from matching the experience of Christian people down through the ages. Given this scenario, we can say that it is not incidental that Luke introduces today's gospel by remarking that Jesus is on his way to a sabbath meal in someone's house. To the little house-church which was Luke's community, the conclusion was obvious, as it is intended to be to this house of the church. In the same way, it is not incidental that he repeatedly uses certain key words in his text like trip-wires to alert us to the story's significance. Sadly, these words are mostly masked in translation, leaving us with a very odd impression indeed. At a glance, we

assume we are being offered mundane advice about social etiquette, cunningly promoting ourselves in public by feigning false humility and then awaiting our inevitable reward. But a closer look takes us deeper, and the gospel starts to make sense.

First, we notice the repeated use of the word place in this parable. Inevitably, this focuses attention on who is in and who is out, on who belongs and who doesn't, who ranks in terms of social prestige and who is invisible. Secondly, reinforcing this sense of place, is the play between the place of honour and the lowest place. Literally, this is a play between first and last. In Matthew, when Jesus talks about salvation and the coming kingdom of God, the first are last and the last first. Here is Luke's version. We are to choose the last place in order to avoid being put last! For "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In God's reckoning, all human rankings and ratings are upset, radically undermined and routinely inverted.

The most telling vocabulary, however, is that of call and blessing. The guests are all individually invited by the host. In a word, these are those who have been called. For Luke, being called is central to discipleship and to the kingdom. Fully half the NT occurrences of the term are in Luke's two books, his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. In the gospel alone, there are forty-three occurrences, almost twice the number in Matthew, his nearest competitor. Jesus' instructions about accepting invitations point always to the Lord of the banquet, the one who calls, the divine host who invites us. This language of call, when joined to talk about first and last, brings us squarely before the God who changes expectations. We come face to face with God who delights to unsettle the status quo in a series of characteristic surprises.

It follows from all this, as night follows day, that blessing, fullness of life, real aliveness, is experienced only by those who live this way, who live God's way. All this, of course, is the very antithesis of the sexist, self-centred universe parodied in that Australian creation story: the blind world of blokes, served where everything serves the needs of some. We are called to live our lives generously, not giving in order to get. We are invited to spend ourselves liberally, freely, sacrificially, expecting nothing in return, living with open hearts and open hands. For God welcomes absolutely everyone, making the sun rise and the rain fall on just and unjust alike. God's loving compassion is entirely indiscriminate, uncalculating, even foolhardy, wide open to abuse - it makes no sense to us at all, yet we are invited to match it.

There is a sharp word here, a cutting word of God. It is addressed directly to a church in danger of selling its catholic birthright for comfy sectarianism. This word of God is also addressed, and on the very day a federal election is announced, to tight-fisted nations hoarding wealth in a needy world.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

5th September 2004

Today's gospel selection is one of those artificial constructions, where dislocated bits and pieces of Christ's teaching are pasted together to create a semblance of coherence. This is not, of course, to suggest that our Lord was incoherent; simply that it is inevitable when sayings are passed on by word of mouth for a few decades that their original context gets lost. After all, it's not as if reporters with tape-recorders were standing by to catch the latest pearls of wisdom! So Luke has inherited these detached sayings, and brought them together in this section of his gospel to make a point.

In Luke's scheme of things, Jesus is still journeying, day after day setting his face like flint as he makes for Jerusalem. In other words, he himself is moment by moment facing up to the cost of remaining true to his vision of God and his vision for humanity. Jerusalem, with its inevitable cross, is always in his view. Not so, necessarily, for those who follow. Not so, necessarily, for the likes of Luke and his community. Not so, necessarily, for the likes of you and me. In the nature of things, we are much less clear-eyed. We routinely shield ourselves from this level of reality. We are shy of commitment, and the cost of commitment. We are loathe to take up our cross and follow, because our destination is only too clear.

This being the case, we need shocking out of our complacency. Today's commands to hate are over-the-top, deliberately dramatic and deliberately shocking, wake-up calls designed for this very purpose. The divine jealousy, God's single-mindedness, blazes out in a series of fiery statements, demanding absolute allegiance, demanding our total self-surrender. It's almost as if Jesus prefers no disciples to disciples who sit light to our responsibilities.

There is no place here for the half-hearted and the lukewarm, no place for fellow-travellers and fair-weather friends. Friendship with this man, discipleship of this man, demands of us not less than everything, so we must give our hearts without remainder or not at all. These are some of the hard sayings of Jesus, and if we take them even half seriously they disturb each one of us.

If you must choose between family and faith, says Jesus, then choose faith. There is no contest, even on Father's Day! Here is the Lord of life inviting us to leave death behind. Hatred of family looks good when family comes, as it can, between me and the Source of life. So too does hatred of my own life, understood classically in terms of what matters most. Is there anything I'm prepared to die for? The same question is even sharper when it's asked another way: is there anything I'm prepared to live for?

In hearing these sayings, it's very important to see that we are not being asked to sit in judgment on ourselves or anyone else. I am not asked to feel guilty about my own lack of commitment. Neither am I asked to sift your soul to see if you qualify as a true Christian. I am simply invited to let myself go a little more, to surrender my heart a little more, to trust more fully the One who calls me into life.

We are invited today to turn like flowers toward the sun, to stop fuming about the present and fretting over the future.

We are invited to abandon ourselves to the gospel, to rest secure in the pierced hands of the Saviour.

We are the salt of the earth, or the bland leading the bland.

Which is it?

Can anyone actually tell which it is?

Do we make a difference, or don't we?

Salt is only good when it's salty.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

12th September 2004

The last time I preached on these texts was shortly after September 11, 2001. By then I had seen again and again the breath-taking, totally surreal beauty of a plane slicing effortlessly through the glass and steel and concrete of the World Trade Center towers. Like you, I had watched as this symbol of western sophistication and wealth and power flamed out against the perfectly clear blue sky of an early autumn morning, disintegrating before our eyes like a grey flower opening itself up to the light. It is a vision now engraved on our collective psyche, one never to be erased, evil given form and shape, a dance with death and destruction to chill the blood and numb the senses. What we witnessed in this terrible moment is more than the astonishing and incomprehensible human sin whereby thousands of people perish. It was the end of an age.

And what begins as a result is born in silence. It is the silence of the dead. Hospital emergency rooms stood ready, blood was donated by strangers, relatives desperately handed around photographs, rescuers picked hopefully through the rubble. But there were no injured. There were not even bodies, or hardly any. There was nothing to find, no possible way to restore what was lost, to tidy up the devastation, to reverence the past, to order the chaos.

And so the sombre months began, a procession of pain, an endless sacrifice, as funerals and memorial services struggled to speak a word of comfort to the broken-hearted. For there are two sides to the events of human history. There is what happens, and there is what we choose to make of it. As the Archbishop of Canterbury says, these people have spoken their opening words; now they wait to see what language we will use to answer. "Violence is a communication, after all, of hatred, fear or contempt, and I have a choice about the language I am going to use to respond. If I decide to answer in the same terms, that is how the conversation will continue."

Well, what language do we use? For a few brief moments after 9/11, when the world was united in sympathy, it looked as if we might find the grace to reply carefully, to reply in a way that changes things, rather than simply demonstrating to ourselves that we are not helpless. But that moment didn't last, and next we were fighting back, adding violence to violence. Soon we were using the language of "war", and so much good will was simply squandered as the most powerful nation on earth marched off down the all too familiar path.

Tragically, we did precisely what Osama bin Laden hoped we would do. We prove the barbarians right by acting barbarically ourselves. Christ, of course, cuts right across our predictably angry rhetoric and our predictably angry action. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." He seems to offer us sayings that make no sense at all. How can we possibly imagine living this way? In the face of naked evil, this stuff sounds about as crazy as it gets.

Like the scriptures for today. In the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, three parables are deliberately bound together. God is an obsessive woman who spends hours searching for a coin, when it will undoubtedly turn up anyway. God is a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep at risk of a savage end in the wilderness, and goes searching for a single lamb. God is the besotted suffering father of two selfish sons who couldn't care less

about his feelings, abandoning what little dignity he has left to demonstrate his passion for them. So blinded is God with love for each and every one of us that these three stories of Jesus, this single play in three acts, opens to us the divine heart in all its unusual wisdom.

Whatever else this gospel offers us, it is certainly not what we equate with common sense. Indeed, it turns on its head what we call logic, inviting us to embrace another vision and different paths. Loving enemies and turning the other cheek has to do with absorbing evil and refusing to pass it on, redeeming evil and refusing to be dragged down into bitterness. It is about saying no to violence, standing against it, and putting an end to it. It is about allowing the God of Jesus' parables to change the temperature of our human conflicts, by permitting a fresh vision, something to break our endless cycle of retaliation and revenge. It is about escaping the trap, choosing to be part of the solution rather than adding to the problem.

Again and again, our world stands at the cross-roads. Again and yet again, terrorists attack and maim and murder. On every occasion, they speak and wait to see how we will answer. The language of our reply matters desperately, and we must get the tone of voice right.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

19th September 2004

Almost from the time it left the lips of Jesus, this parable of the rogue manager seems to have been a puzzle for interpreters. The sayings appended to it reflect various attempts in the earliest Christian communities to make sense of the story. Down to our own time, scholars and preachers have struggled with the unlikely material, and we ourselves probably wonder what on earth it is about as we hear it read again today. For all this, however, the matter appears really to be quite straightforward. As I see it, the key to unlocking the mystery involves no more than paying closer attention to what our Lord actually says, together with a little background cultural knowledge.

How, then, do we hear the story? It is true to say, I think, that we see the manager's activities with the debtors as the crime for which he is first fired and then congratulated by his wealthy employer. A moment's attention, however, and we see that the rogue manager is dismissed before any of this trading begins. We have no real idea what his crime might be, and his trading over olive oil and wheat is probably not criminal. It was customary for managers of this kind to operate with considerable autonomy, and the manager would routinely let out his master's goods for a commission that included some proportion for himself. What the manager does after his dismissal is certainly opportunistic, but not in itself wrong. We see him cutting his losses, foregoing his own slice of the cake, so that the debtors will remember him kindly when he needs their help. He reckons it will be advantageous to have their goodwill when he is unemployed, and his master praises this sensible action. He is praised because he has not clung to his wealth, but used it to win goodwill that will serve him in his time of need. Faced with his looming crisis, the worldly-wise manager acts violently against his own immediate interest to preserve his long term future.

In this sense, a "child of this world", he shows himself more shrewd than "the children of light". If the worldly manager can see clearly enough to take such action, how much more should we "children of light" choose to do so? For we, above all others, know that wealth is not measured in terms of what we have, but in terms of how much we give. If the grasping businessman is shrewd enough to give in order to get, surely we of all people will be shrewd in giving simply for the sake of being generous. It is the open-hearted and open-handed who are truly blessed because no one can take such wealth from us. The generous heart accrues and multiplies riches all the days of this life, riches we carry with us into the life to come. In the topsy-turvy, upside-down world of God's dawning kingdom, nothing matters more. Forget the supposed wisdom of grasping and getting. We follow in the footsteps of One who could not grasp, and who could not clench a defiant fist.

Such wisdom is simply given to us, that we in turn may discover the joy and the life in giving, full and eternal life, both here and there. On 21 May 1996 an Algerian Terrorist group - the GIA - beheaded seven French Trappist monks who, against all advice, decided to remain at their abbey in the Atlas Mountains alongside their Muslim neighbours with whom they had established deep bonds of affection. Their compassion and their generosity of spirit and their vow of stability led them to stay put in spite of all dangers. Five days after their assassination, on 26 May, the Day of Pentecost that year, the testament of one of the slaughtered monks, Father Crétien was opened and read. It was dated 1 January 1994, two-and-one-half years before his kidnapping and murder. It

is a profound expression of a compassionate heart, and what it means to live one's life "hidden with Christ in God" through word and sacrament. It reads in part:

"If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country. I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I would ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones which are forgotten through indifference or anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. I would like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who will strike me down. Obviously, my death will appear to confirm those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!" But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free. This is what I shall be able to do, please God: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences".

Father Crétien then addresses his assassin, the one who will do him evil: "And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this "A-DIEU" to be for you, too, because in God's face I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both".

Here is the witness of a contemporary: a man who allowed the compassion and the generosity of Christ to inhabit the whole of his being. Was he perfect? No. Those who knew him could tell of his many faults and imperfections. But Father Crétien was captured and transformed by Christ's unbounded compassion and graciousness. Love overleaps all boundaries and his deadly enemy is embraced, and declared "my last-minute friend". Greed and hostility and violence remain very much with us and almost daily assume new and more hideous forms, but we can by grace choose to live our lives against this tide of evil. As we stretch out our hands to receive the eucharistic Lord, we are handed our own share in his mercy and love and deathless compassion. We become signs and agents and ministers of another and more glorious way.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

10th October 2004

by Archdeacon Michael Wood

Text: 2 Timothy 2 : 8-15

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”

It’s the last few words that I’d like to reflect upon today”correctly handles the word of truth”.

During the last week I’ve spent nearly 12 hours each day at the National Synod of the Anglican Church, down at Fremantle. Those who have been following the news this week will know that about just over 60% of Synod (houses of clergy and laity) voted to approve the consecration of women as Bishops (74% in the house of Bishops) – which was insufficient to reach the 75% needed in all houses to get the legislation passed in those dioceses which wished to adopt it at their next synods.

One of the strongest oppositions to women as Bishops came from the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. The whole experience was extremely distressing for me personally as well as the group from the Diocese of Perth – which was strongly supportive of women bishops. As well as being distressing, it was also fascinating for me to experience and to try to understand more deeply how Anglican Christians can come to such starkly different conclusions as we try to discern the leading of the Spirit.

So what I would like to do today is share some of my reflections as to what was going on in the debate, which was underlaid by two quite different ways of approaching the bible - the approach adopted by Sydney and the approach adopted by Perth and much of the rest of the Anglican Church in Australia.

Let me start with Sydney:

For Sydney Anglicans, the consecration of women as Bishops was unacceptable on the basis of a clear and plain reading of scripture. They argued that the bible is the clear Word of God when it says the following:

1 Timothy 2 : 11-12

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (and it goes on to say) “the bishop must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife“

Similar passages regarding the submission of women to men can be found in Ephesians 5:22, Titus 2:5 and Colossians 3:18. The recurring argument was that men and women are “equal” in Christ but “different” in roles.

As I sat there, open mouthed and stunned, I learnt that the group from Sydney really do take these passages as applying directly to us today – not only the men believe this but also, at the least, the 1300 women from around Australia who had signed a petition stating that the house of bishops was no place for a woman.

Sydney argued that because this is the clear word of God that it is what God wants for all women and the church everywhere. The fact that the legislation need not have applied in Sydney but need only apply in the places which wished to adopt it, did not matter. The fact that many many Anglican women and men throughout the church discerned the Word of God in a different way did not matter - in the end, the text of the scripture was clear and there was to be only one correct interpretation of it. In other words, the Spirit of God cannot reveal something to be true which contravenes the plain, self interpreting meaning of the bible.

How then does Perth and the rest of the 60% of Synod who voted for women as Bishops deal with these texts of scripture which are apparently so clear?

Well, the reason I and others come to a different conclusion on this question is that we have fundamentally different assumptions about the role of the bible in interpreting the will of God and the movement of the Spirit.

For Sydney Anglicans – the foundational assumption is that God only reveals himself completely and without error through the words of the bible – which are the direct revelation of God to us. This is based on the belief that God's faithfulness is such that God would not want to leave us in any doubt about what God's will is – therefore God writes down his will for us in the words of the bible.

Perth Anglicans (+60% etc), and this would also be the view of the great middle ground of the Anglican tradition throughout the world, would say that God reveals God's truth in a different way. We would say that God's revelation does not stop with the bible but is constantly being revealed in new ways to meet new situations and demands as the world evolves.

We believe that the Primary Word of God is not a book but a person – Jesus. In a recent National Joint Statement by Anglicans and Roman Catholics, it says that the Word of God is Christ, to whom the text bears witness. In other words – the words of the bible point to THE Word of God who is Christ. Christ is God's definitive communication to us. Because Christ and the Spirit, along with God the Father are alive and active in today's world – they continue to reveal themselves to us in new ways. We believe that this revelation comes to us through a dynamic interaction and conversation between:

- a. The written Words of the Bible
- b. The writings of the Church through the Ages in light of the church's experience
- c. The conversations which the church has as we sit down and dialogue with the Words of the bible and with each other in light of our experience, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

When we engage in these conversation, we discover that the interpretation of God's will can and does change as God works within differing cultures and points in history. We also maintain that the bible itself is a historically conditioned text, affected by the culture in which it was written. While the central themes of the bible (creation, sin, judgement, redemption) are universal and timeless we also see historically specific cultural assumptions embedded within the text. For example, we can perceive how some of the

incredibly radical freedom which Jesus gives to women, and which is reflected by Paul in Galatians 3 : 28; is modified and toned down in other passages – the strong likelihood being that the early Christians were trying hard to find acceptance in a culture which was very hierarchical and male dominated. In asking themselves how they were to live as Christians in their time, they clearly did not wish to cause scandals. We get some sense of this in the following verses:

Titus 2 : 5

“... to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the Word of God”.

And **Titus 2 : 10**

“... And not steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive”.

Those of us who take this view of scripture would disagree with our brothers and sisters in Sydney who say that the Word of God applies to us as it always has, plain and simple throughout history. For example, we would point out that the bible assumes slavery as a social condition – and provides advice for slave / master relationships (Eph 6; Titus 2 : 9). We point out how as little as 200 years ago the bible was being used to justify slavery – and yet we now we believe God’s spirit has led us to eliminate slavery.

We would say that just as slavery is a cultural assumption embedded in an unquestioned way within the text, so are the assumptions regarding the place and role of women in society.

Interpreting the bible as we do provides great difficulty for our Anglican brothers and sisters in Sydney. They worry that we will simply accommodate our reading of the text to the cultural norms of our day.

In the end we do seem to have almost irreconcilable positions because both positions start with different foundational assumptions, neither of which can be proved. The real question for the church is whether and how we can live together as Christians with such different views.

Part of my stress this week, and I am sure for many others has been in wondering how we stay in union with people with whom we have such apparently irreconcilable differences.

This question would be true of many relationships – from relationships between nations to relationships in marriages. When relationships become stressed because of different views and assumptions how do we stay in the furnace of union?

One clear conclusion I’ve come to this week is that the health and vision of relationships requires absolutely that we try to enter into the world of the other – to see the world through their eyes. I found that trying to enter into the mind of Sydney Anglicans was a bleak and painful experience – and no doubt that feeling was reciprocal.

Our example of course, is Christ – who entered our world in the incarnation, and who remains with us and in our world forever. Christ the reconciler stands in the middle of all our confusions and conflicts – siding with no-one in particular but remaining close to all. St. Bonaventure said that “Christ is crucified on the co-incidence of opposites”.

Christ bears the cost of everyone seeking reconciliation – he stretches out his arms, holding the tension of apparently irreconcilable positions, and brings us into his peace.

There is no doubt in my mind that Christ is our only hope for the Church and for the World.