

Advent Sunday

28th November 2004

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As some of you know, I am a fan of that quirky home-grown Australian prophet, Michael Leunig. Leunig's cartoons in our major newspapers penetrate the hard shell of the self-sufficiency, pricking the bubble of pompous self-importance, naming our smug provincialism, the open brutality of the global village, recalling us all to half-remembered human and spiritual values. Just before the Sydney Olympics, Michael offered us one of his little men gazing up at the night sky, completely alone, keeping company with the crescent moon and the stars, flowers at his feet. The text says a very limited period of time is coming when no festival, celebration or major event will be making a claim on our existence.

"Perhaps it could be called 'ordinary time' or 'peace' or 'ordinary life'. It has no official name. It may not last very long. Perhaps you will also hear a bird sing or a spoon move in a bowl or a person whistling over the back fence or the sound of pruning secateurs on a rose bush. Who knows. There will be no fireworks nor will there be a release of doves or balloons; nor will there be 'special offers' of any kind and no information hot-line. There will be no media coverage; no commentary or analysis. It will all pass unremarked upon. Are you ready?"

This is the voice of the prophet because this simple truth, this common or garden, ordinary insight, is what we are mostly too proud, too busy, too preoccupied, or too sophisticated to see. And not least at Christmas, which is why this special season of Advent is so precious and potent. As everything speeds up and spins into a frenzy – "ourselves, our souls and bodies" along with everyone and everything else in our society - we who follow the way of Christ are given an oasis of quiet, of beauty, of poetry and mystery to regularly refresh our sanity. Sunday by Sunday we step out of the rat-race - to touch the life-giving waters of the font, to sit around the camp-fire of the Advent wreath telling the ancient stories of faith, time to gather at the eucharistic table, there to remember who we are and whose we are. Taking a leaf out of Michael Leunig's book, I want us to look hard at these very ordinary signs and symbols.

For us, the bird song or the sound of a spoon in a bowl, connect so easily with what we do here in this holy place - the splash of water, the striking of a match, flickering candle-light, the floury taste of fresh bread. So let us not make the mistake of looking for God outside ourselves or beyond our everyday world. For we are all the time looking directly at God's image and likeness, only we are too embarrassed or ashamed or smug to recognise it. I mean, of course, one another, ourselves. Jesus, we say, is the human face of God, and – in theory at least - we celebrate the fact that we are the Body of Christ in the world today. "In theory" because mostly we don't or can't or won't believe it, this primary truth of our faith. So we have to keep coming back to this sacred place, to this privileged moment, because we need to keep seeing the truth and feeling it. Christ has no other hands than our hands to soothe and to strengthen, no other lips than our lips to tell the good news, no other heart than our hearts to love the loveless - and no other face to smile and accept, no other eyes where the light of compassion still shines. This is why we are sitting facing each other, with the water, the fire and the word between us. You cannot see the face of God in the back of someone's head. It happens only as we look at each other, and as we look into each other. And not just as we are pleased to see our natural friends, the people we find easy to like, but also those we find hard to love and difficult to understand. For as we look attentively and generously at each other, with the sacramental signs interrupting our vision, we begin to see each other as Christ sees us. Indeed, we begin to see with Christ's eyes, just as we feel ourselves being seen with Christ's eyes in return. In this light and warmth, this persistent and penetrating gentleness, this tough and unflinching loving, we can feel ourselves beginning to thaw. The winter within turns to spring, the sliver of ice in the heart starts to melt and move - as we know ourselves to be little lower than the angels, accepted just as we are without one plea, crowned with glory and honour, loved patiently and passionately simply for ourselves, and from everlasting to everlasting.

A year or two ago, I saw the banners designed for the General Convention of the Episcopal Church of America. They shocked me awake, as, no doubt, they were meant to do. Hung in series around the altar where the Convention's daily Eucharist was celebrated, these banners transformed a large, anonymous hall into a powerful arena of Christian worship. In my mind's eye, I still see them with perfect clarity. Each banner simply presents a collage of faces - young and old, women and men and children, white and coloured, some smiling, some in pain, some hopeful, some despairing, some straight, some gay, some with almond-shaped eyes. Each banner is

emblazoned with the words 'The face of God'. Now if this is true, if it is true that we are all of us fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image, then simply everything changes, transfigures and transmutes. When we look at each other and see God we become for the first time human, and then we become family. When God looks on me through your eyes I can be myself without apology and without fear. When I reverence you for the unique and holy individual you are, I free you to be real and true, for we both see that we are all the walking wounded, we are all works in progress.

The practice of the presence of God here around the table of Christ means we can venture out in courage and hope, knowing that wherever we go God is always there before us, secure in the open secret that every encounter takes us on to holy ground, sure that the miracle of resurrection is happening moment by moment. As you and I begin again today a new liturgical year, the grace to find God in one another is the key to happiness and harmony in ministry. And it is as we really learn to be Christ to each other that we have something wonderful to share, so that others are drawn into the circle of love. "Perhaps you will also hear a bird sing or a spoon move in a bowl or a person whistling over the back fence or the sound of pruning secateurs on a rose bush." In the little and the commonplace and the ordinary, in our world and in ourselves, God *came* and *comes* and *will come*. *Marana tha* - O Lord, come. As they say, be careful what you ask for, you might just get it. There will be no media coverage, of course, no fireworks or balloons, no public commentary or analysis of any kind. "It will all pass unremarked upon. Are you ready?"

Advent II

Sunday 5th December 2004

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The English stage and screen actor, Joanna Lumley, has just published an autobiography called *No Room for Secrets*.¹ Not unexpectedly, the reviewers are having a good time with this. Evidently, Joanna Lumley is as much fun in real life and in print as she is in *Absolutely Fabulous*, and kind and generous too. In the course of one review, I came across this observation: "Lumley doesn't say as much but she seems to be an intensely spiritual person, who perceives spiritual meaning in the smallest of gestures. At the same time, paradoxically, this spirituality is married to an acute sense of physicality – objects, too, are resonant with meaning."²

I went back and re-read that paragraph, not quite believing what was before my eyes. Yes, it does actually say there is something paradoxical about the intersection of spirituality with physicality. Christopher Silvester, whoever he is, obviously hasn't the faintest clue that there is nothing paradoxical about this at all. Spirituality is emphatically not about flight from this physical reality, an escape into some other world. If it is, it is no better than wishful thinking, and wishful thinking takes us, more often than not, on a dangerous, destructive, and self-destructive journey. Any sort of spirituality worth the name will not provide us passage to never-never land. Real spirituality grounds us more and more firmly in the here and now, making us more mature and responsible, not less.

All the great religious traditions know this, but it seems to be news in our own rootless generation, cut adrift from our history and free-floating in some sort of new-age soup. It certainly appears to be news – good news in every way - that the Word and Wisdom of God became flesh in Jesus Christ and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, destroying for ever every dualism, uniting things earthly and heavenly, things below keeping feast with things above.³

Yes, Joanna Lumley is an intensely spiritual person, and we know it not because she tells us she has gooey feelings about this or that. We know it because she cares about people and animals and the planet. She is a vegetarian by conviction because she doesn't want a single animal to suffer for the sake of her palate. She puts out dishes of dog food for the foxes who live below her garden because she can't bear to see them with mangy coats from eating garbage. We know she is spiritual because she champions Frogmat, a form of extruded-straw mattressing designed for mopping up oil spills. We know she is spiritual in the space she affords her husband Stevie, an orchestral conductor, in a strong marriage. We know she is spiritual in the way she never throws away an old snapshot of someone without kissing it; when she says goodbye to old clothes before she sends them to the charity shop.

We know who Joanna Lumley is in the only way we can know, by deeds and by words, by sacramental actions of one kind or another. We cannot read her soul apart from her body, and we may or may not believe her if she tells us how she feels. We know one another, our true selves, only by sight and touch, by the way we change the atmosphere, by the way our presence or absence changes the world for better or worse.

None of this is any sort of surprise for us who gather in this eucharistic assembly week by week, and especially in Advent as we pray "*marana tha*, O Lord come". Each time we come here, before ever a word is spoken or an act done, we are greeted by a bowl of fresh water. We can't get in or out without passing the Font. The Christian assembly is not just a place for mind games, for preaching and teaching and singing songs, for instruction and thinking. It is not just a place for feelings, for being moved in the depths of ourselves, for our feelings are fickle and our moods evaporate like frost before the sun. Spirituality divorced from physicality is illusion or delusion. Of course objects are resonant with meaning – all objects - the water we touch, the candles we light, the bread we eat, the wine we drink.

We find God in one another's faces, in our own face in the bathroom mirror, and in the spaces between us. We find God in the pure water, cold and clear and refreshing in this great parched south land, in the pure water just as it is, before anything is done to it or with it, before it becomes "religious" in any way. We find God in this same water charged with the Word, infused by grace, named and hallowed as the womb wherein new Christians are conceived and nurtured and birthed. The sanctification of this water sanctifies all water, making us grateful, making us eucharistic, thankful people, not just on Sundays, but all week long, every single time we turn on the tap. The sanctification of this water sanctifies all water, making us passionate for social justice, making us workers for God's coming kingdom, for one sure sign of Kingdom Come is good clean water for every thirsty person, sufficient water for every farm and farmer, healthy rivers and healthy oceans.

Yes, we are not just imagining things: the river Jordan flows right through this place, so that we who are washed and anointed with the cross must again and again decide if we are really with Christ or against him. "*Marana tha*, O Lord come" - when this prayer is answered, nothing at all remains the same. We are changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and we set out to change the world.

▣ Joanna Lumley, *No Room for Secrets* (London: Michael Joseph 2004)

▣ Christopher Silvester, "The House of Lumley" in *The Weekend Australian*, 4-5 December 2004, p. R11

▣ John 1:14

Advent III

Sunday 12th December 2004

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What is Australia's favourite book? A rather silly question, about which the ABC made a rather silly TV program. *My Favourite Book* screened last Sunday evening for a silly ninety minutes, Jennifer Byrne presiding. Sadly, few real "book people" – writers, editors, publishers and the like – appeared. Instead, we got an odd mix of celebrities, some of whom were quizzed about what they like reading on the loo! But if I was singularly unimpressed by Sunday's offering, I could not have predicted something even sillier happening on Monday. Among Australia's top ten books were the usual suspects - *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wind in the Willows*, *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the Harry Potter series, *Catch 22*, and *The Bible*. Naturally enough, this occasioned some discussion of authors, making one Christian out there in talk-back radio-land cranky that the author of *The Bible* didn't rate a mention. The author of *The Bible*, we were assured, is God, a sort of sure-fire winning author if ever there was one. Now there is only one little problem with this assertion, or perhaps two problems, depending how you count. That Christian is wrong, because that Christian is mistaken about Christianity. Orthodox Christianity has never, as a matter of fact, claimed that God wrote *The Bible*. *The Bible* was not written by God, it was written by human beings, mostly Jewish human beings! Yes, they are inspired by God to write as they do, but we mean this in the same way as Mozart is inspired to write his first symphony, or Picasso is inspired to paint his Harlequin series.

Why then do we treat scripture with reverence and respect, reading and interpreting it week by week as somehow central in our lives? What are we to say about this lectern, this scriptural table, placed in the middle of our

eucharistic assembly? The holy book, after all, is one of the great signs and symbols of Christian faith. Indeed, it is sometimes said that what we Christians have in common with the other two great monotheistic religions - Judaism and Islam - is that we are all "people of the book". Is this true? Well, yes and no; it is, and it isn't! Insofar as it is true, we are rather more like our Jewish parents than our Muslim cousins. Muslims believe that the words of the Koran are actually words spoken by God, written down by the prophet Muhammed at God's dictation. For this reason, the Koran may not be read in any other language than the original. Strictly speaking, it cannot be translated into English or Italian or Swahili, because languages have no precise equivalents, so every translation involves approximation and interpretation. If God speaks Arabic, to accurately hear what God is saying you really must speak Arabic yourself.

Now, the very fact that Jews and Christians *do* translate their scriptures, and have always been happy to do so, should alert us to a different ethos and a different emphasis. We are not "people of the book" in quite the same way Muslims claim to be. For Jews and Christians are not required to know Hebrew or Greek in order to read the scriptures. The words on the page are not, for us, the actual words of God. The words on the page are the best attempt of human witnesses to write down what they understood God to be saying to people at given times in particular circumstances. Biblical words simply reflect as accurately as human words can the Word or Wisdom of God which lies beyond all words. God's self-giving, God's self-disclosure, God's revelation, God's coming to us - these life-giving and life-changing encounters, these amazing advents, are so real that they transcend all our stumbling human attempts to talk about them. Language falls in a heap and fails, just as it does whenever we attempt to express what is truly in our hearts. Not surprisingly, then, in the Jewish tradition we inherit, God's Word or God's self-expression keeps taking flesh in different people and in different ways - in Abraham and in Moses for example, in Miriam and Ruth, in Isaiah and the other prophets. The last and greatest of these prophets of truth appears again in our gospel today, John, the forerunner of Jesus, he who prepares the way of the Lord. And yet all of these great ones are adopted by the Spirit of God in an *ad hoc* kind of way, so that they seem sometimes to be inspired and sometimes not, only intermittently under the influence of the divine Spirit. Startlingly, when the Lord comes, when the Word of God is really enfleshed, there is nothing occasional about it. In Jesus, the marriage of human and divine is indissoluble, and it is nothing like what John expected. All that stuff about winnowing forks and brute justice and unquenchable fire goes out the window, for Jesus is not of this temper at all.ⁱⁱⁱ The God who comes to us in Christ is all compassion and forgiveness, gentleness, patience, kindness, self-sacrifice. Listen, and see if it isn't so now as then - "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them".ⁱⁱⁱ The Word incarnate, the living Word to which all the words of sacred scripture bear witness, is shown to be only and utterly lovely and loving. It is our prayer that this Word may live in us and bear much fruit to God's glory - not the *words*, but the *Word* itself. Week after week and year after year, it is our prayer that this Word will now clothe itself with our own flesh and blood, just as it did in Christ Jesus our Redeemer. It is all there in the Aramaic prayer *maranatha*, O Lord, come. And this is where Christian faith is at its most distinctive, in this conviction that God's enfleshment, God's embodying, is not some freak occurrence once upon a time two thousand years ago, our belief that this is characteristic of God always and everywhere. God always has hands to touch and soothe and heal, just as God always has a face to smile on us and kiss our lips. The arms spread wide on the wood of the cross are forever embracing, including, welcoming us home.

Not surprisingly, one of my favourite books, *The Go-Between God*, didn't get a look in on the ABC. On the final page of that book Bishop John Taylor tells the story of a West Indian woman in a London flat being told of her husband's death in a street accident. "The shock of grief stunned her like a blow, she shrank into a corner of the sofa and sat there rigid and unhearing. For a long time her terrible tranced look continued to embarrass the family, friends and officials who came and went. Then the schoolteacher of one of her children, an Englishwoman, called and, seeing how things were, went and sat beside her. Without a word she threw her arm around the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. The white cheek pressed hard against the brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeped through to her the newcomer's tears began to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap. And then at last the West Indian woman started to sob. Still not a word was spoken and after a little while the visitor got up and went, leaving her contribution to help the family meet its immediate needs." John Taylor comments - "That is the embrace of God, his kiss of life. That is the embrace of God's mission, and of our intercession. And the Holy Spirit is the force in the straining muscles of an arm, the film of sweat between pressed cheeks, the mingled wetness on the backs of clasped hands. He is as close and as unobtrusive as that and as irresistibly strong."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

The written words of scripture point always beyond themselves to the living Word, Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth."^{iv} All we need do to take that statement of fact with full seriousness, is change past tense to present. The Word becomes flesh and lives among us, and we see his glory, full of grace and truth.

[i] Matthew 3:12

[ii] Matthew 11:5-6

[iii] J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Classics 2004; introduction by David Wood) p. 243

[iv] John 1:14

Advent IV

19th December 2004

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One of the pleasures of my life is being a priest associate of the Community of the Holy Spirit in New York City, a bond of faith and prayer and lasting friendship with a wonderful company of women. A few years back, one of the most remarkable among them, Sister Mary Christabel, spoke some words I treasure. "It is hard to believe that Advent is here again. Time for trimming the lamps - for preparing, for getting ready. But less preparation, I think, for the Christmas event than for Advent as sacrament. It is a sacrament of presence of the Holy One who has taken up permanent residence within each of us, of the One who dwells at the core of our being, and who is always passing through our lives as he passed through first century Palestine: living, dying, and being resurrected."^[1] Here is the essence of the season, the season as a focused sign in the compass of just four weeks of what is always and everywhere true. Here is the God we know, here is the God revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ, this is the one true God who alone we confess - the Holy One who takes up residence within each of us, dwelling at the core of our being, always passing through our lives: living, dying, and being resurrected.

Our way into exploring this reality has involved shining a spotlight on the arrangement of our worship space, where we face each other with the great symbols of Christian faith between us - the Font with its life-giving waters, this Lectern where the written word is read and the living Word proclaimed, and the eucharistic Table where we gather for communion. It is serendipitous that we look carefully at the Table on this fourth Sunday of Advent because today we light a candle for Mary of Nazareth, the *Theotokos*, the most holy birth-giver and God-bearer. And, if it is true that there are as many meals in the New Testament as miracles, then it is also true that Jesus learns the language of hospitality, as he learns the language of love, principally from his mother.

It was, after all, at her table that he practiced and refined the art of sharing food and conversation. The sacrament of human relationship, eating and drinking together, was celebrated first in their home in Nazareth. Here the young Jesus learnt about exclusion and inclusion, about rejection and acceptance, around a table where everyone was welcome, where no one ever went hungry, where there was always room for one more guest. Mary it was who kindled the Sabbath lights and said the prayers to welcome in the weekly day of rest and refreshment. Mary and Joseph presided together over the yearly feasts, mistress of the festive table, taking their parts in all the preparation and the ritual celebration.

We tend to imagine Jesus strolling onto the stage as an adult fully formed, a pretend human being without any background or history. But this is not so: he had to learn obedience in all things, and in all the usual ways.^[2] When we see him sharing his own table as a travelling rabbi - eating with disciples, welcoming outcasts and sinners, going to parties, enjoying himself too much and being called a drunk, booking a room in advance for the last supper of all those other suppers - it takes little effort to imagine him growing up, with his father and mother, within the circle of his extended family, participating fully in village life. It was here, after all, that he learned how to live, this was his school-room, and it is all terribly ordinary. There is nothing particularly religious about any of it, for it grows out of the everyday commonplace world of ordinary human activity. It's about life itself rather than any particular piety, although meals in a Jewish home, then as now, always have a wider frame of reference. They are eye-openers to that other world which is the same as this one, moments for connectedness and memory and insight. In a marvellous passage in his book *To Heaven With Scribes and Pharisees*, Rabbi Lionel Blue reminds us.

"The birthplace of the Christian mystery was not the Temple, but a room on the first floor of a lodging house in Jerusalem. The things that Jesus saw and touched that evening he could find today in a traditional Jewish home. The great Temple ended. In Judaism the inheritance came to rest in the privacy of the home.

The entry of this refugee, this fallen greatness, transfigured the nature of the house, and its occupants. The father became a priest, the mother a priestess, and the dining-room table an altar. The furniture of the Temple from the Holy of Holies itself came to rest beside the salt cellar, the mustard pot and the sauce bottle. The candles, the clothes, the white of the tablecloth brought the holiness and mystery of tremendous events into the surroundings of daily life. In the world of rabbinic Judaism, the synagogue emphasised doing and knowing, but the home was concerned with being, with memory, and experience.

Because of the new Occupier, the Jewish home became a meeting place for both natural and supernatural beings. The hospitality affected Jewish cooking, which does not centre around the grills and roasts of England, but inclines to casseroles and stews, which are infinitely stretchable. 'Let all who are hungry, come and eat!' says the celebrant at the Passover meal in the home. In the Mass there are similar words of invitation to a spiritual meal. The home has traditionally been open to all God's friends, wherever they live.

These are the poor, the widowed, the orphan, the refugee, and the stranger, all of whom are specially mentioned time and again in the five books of Moses. And with them come other beings of God's acquaintance, the creatures who inhabit, so to speak, the interstellar space and the spheres which lie between us and the divine.

Traces of the invisible Guest are everywhere, signs of His marriage to the household of Israel. Passages from Deuteronomy rest in little metal boxes on the doorposts, and the pious kiss or touch them as they enter. In cupboards among the glasses and decanters are the candlesticks for the Sabbath lights and the cup for the wine that is blessed, and lying among the napkins is the cloth for the Sabbath bread which will be sanctified. In the cupboards holy and secular meet and jostle, there is no strain, for all things can be transformed if they are turned to God. Cocktail cabinets and the kitchen drawer are the sacristy for the liturgy of the home.

And the changes of the liturgical year are marked out for the Jew by smell and taste, by the aromas of the kitchen. Through the most basic senses, he feels the changing moods of the spirit. Theologies alter and beliefs may die, but smells always remain in the memory, calling him back to his own childhood and to the childhood of his people. Whatever prayers he may forget, the gastronomic cycle always remains. Passover is the bread of poverty, with tears of salt water, and the horseradish of bitterness. Ruth is cream and cheesecake, and the New Year is the sweetness of apples and honey. Esther comes with poppy seed, and the Macabees with nuts.

So the history of the Jewish people becomes part of the Jew, absorbed into his digestion and his memory. It is not a theology, but an experience, which binds him to a long past, a taste left in the mouth, a smell hovering about his nose. At the synagogue he seeks to know God with his mind, but in the intimacy of his home, God joins his family, and effortlessly His presence fills the room."^[1]

The richness of Jewish experience reveals our indebtedness to our parent faith, allowing us to see the links between Jewish and Christian liturgy, if it also shows how thin we sometimes allow our worship to become. Above all, though, imaginative entry into a Jewish home helps us make vital connections between what we do here in church and the rest of our lives. And it also alerts us to the danger of the Advent prayer, *maranatha*, O Lord, come. For the God who *came*, who *comes* and who *will come*, does so whenever and wherever, invited or uninvited, with no sense of occasion, heedless of religious niceties, never reading the rubrics, ready or not.

So do not make the mistake of seeing this altar as any more or less real than the dining room table or the kitchen table or the picnic table on the beach. The adventing God claims them all, carelessly, joyously, breaking bread with all and sundry - the invisible Guest who takes up residence within each of us, always passing through our lives as he passed through first century Palestine: living, dying, and being resurrected. God has tables all over the countryside, right across the world, and Christ is really present wherever love turns on a celebration.

[1] Mary Christabel CHS, "Deepening the Centre - Stretching the Edge" in Associates Newsletter, Advent 2000, Issue 67, p.1

[2] Hebrews 5:8; Luke 2:52

[3] Lionel Blue, *To Heaven with Scribes and Pharisees: The Jewish Path to God* (London: DLT 1975) pp.38-40

Christmass 2004

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what colour are you God
what's your body like
any disabilities, distinguishing characteristics
would we spot you in a crowd
would we stare at you for some deformity
how many senses have you got –
five, six, eighteen, ninety four
and what's your sense of touch like
is your handshake firm as a vice or slippery as an eel
what do you smell of,
anything in particular - the universe, for example
planets, oceans, space, skies -
do you smell of petrol like everything else
we believe your Spirit is always willing
but is your flesh ever weak

and if the Word was made flesh
are you flesh of our flesh
bone of our bones
is that you there, meek and mild
all meanly wrapped in swaddling clothes
is that you Baby J Word of the Father
now in flesh appearing
is that you screaming as you arrived
like the rest of us
screaming at the shock of the new
the shock of the cold and the old and the broken
is that you Baby J
slipping clumsily out from between a Virgin's legs
covered in blood and gunge and straw
when moments before you had been covered in glory
is that you tied to the mother of God by a fleshy cord
sucking on a woman's breast for your very life

what a come down

still at least you had an audience
cows was it, a goat or two
did they look on in awe and wonder
were the cattle lowing a bit
or were they a right nuisance
but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes
well, that's not true is it?
the thing about flesh is it makes you cry
for better or worse, you've got to cry
who is he in yonder stall
at whose feet the shepherd's fall
did they fall
did they recognise you up close
did they know that was you, God, in the flesh
or were they just intrigued by the heavenly host
and the funny star

and did the flesh inconvenience and annoy
and anger you like it does the
rest of us, your fleshy creatures
did your nose run green
your skin flake or bruise red
did you itch
your breath catch from asthma
in that smelly barn
your chest tighten in fear

and later on what did you do about your desires
you know, the fleshy ones
and, just out of interest, where on earth
did you go for your private movements
and are there miraculously fertile plants there today
trees with roots for miles and branches into the heavens
never barren, endlessly ripe ...
or are those places where the divine squatted in squalor
feeling quite a lot lower than the angels
- wiping his bum with leaves –
are they like every other place, where folks did their business
with no particular supernatural horticultural memento

and when you were tired, when it all was going wrong,
when your friends misunderstood, lost interest, wandered off,
did you think
what did I get into this body business for
swapping omnipresence for being somewhere in particular
did you feel trapped in that body
or didn't you know what it had been like before you became body
when you were in-carnate
could you know what it was like out-carnate
flesh can't be in more than one place at a time
flesh is limited
flesh is awkward
you must have wondered at the restrictions of the corporeal
did you ever notice, could you tell the difference

and did the flesh also exhilarate you, excite you
did you run and laugh and kiss
did you sweat and wrestle and argue
and if you longed to be more ... were you grateful to have lived
on earth
a human
in flesh
to have become one of us
he was little, weak and helpless
tears and smiles like us he knew
and he feeleth for our sadness
and he shareth in our gladness
how's the old body now
do you wear a halo
or a crown
is it of gold
or is it of thorns
are there marks on your palms
blood on the side of your shirt still

Jesus of the body, of the flesh, Jesus of the Spirit
welcome to the body God,
thank you for being it

putting flesh on the bones of our skeletal lives
fleshing out the way life might be lived.[¶]

I hope that long poem hasn't alarmed you. It does *not* mean I am going to talk long! For one thing, there is too much to say tonight, and for most of it I can find no words. For another thing, tonight is not about what we say. Tonight is about what God says to us. Tonight is about the single Word God speaks, not any babbling of our own, however fine, however finely crafted. Tonight is about where God is, and who God is. We gather around the Christmas Crib and around the eucharistic table because God is not far away, a distant potentate from some other galaxy, occasionally visiting earth, occasionally meddling in human affairs. If God is anywhere at all, God is with us, bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh, closer than hands and feet, closer even than breathing. The proper name of God – always and everywhere – turns out to be Emmanuel.^{¶¶} For the flesh-taking of God in Jesus tonight shows us the eternal truth about God, truth to counter all the lies.

God turns out not to be some celestial monster, the task-master demanding satisfaction or the judge dispensing rough justice, the God of too much human imagination. To the acute disappointment of wowserish religious leaders, God does not, after all, specialize in pouring buckets of cold water on people having fun. God is not that prissy creature who disapproves of human love unless it conforms to a set of very tight rules. It is us, not God, who condemns young lovers, scowls at single mothers, worries over the supposed attack on the institution of marriage, and refuses to bless same-sex unions. God is not that maniac who sometimes appears at funerals, who "calls" us from this life before we are ready, who swallows up real human tragedy by somehow "taking" small children to heaven.

To believe and trust in the only true God for half a minute, is to do away with all this accumulated junk. It is to clear the decks, allowing the real God a look-in. And the real God is no stranger to our screams of delight, no stranger at all to the shock of the new, the shock of the cold and the old and the broken. The real God appears incognito, never colonizing our space, one with us in every way, one of us without distinction. The divine Word speaking in human flesh knows from inside about all the frustrations and struggles and all the unutterable joys of bodily life, that it is sometimes a crown of gold, other times a crown of thorns.

In November I visited once more the beautiful little hill-town of Assisi to drink in something of the spirit of St Francis. Francis liked to say, "Daily the Son of God humbles himself, just as when he left his royal throne and came into the womb of the Virgin". This saying has often had heart room for me in the lead-up to this Christmas, as this community lived with the dying of Mary Michael. Our commonplace Advent prayer, *maranatha, O Lord, come*, tastes very different this time around. An answered prayer: and not only at the end, when Mary died on Tuesday evening. This prayer was answered day by day, every step of the way, and not least in the wisdom and grace and courage continually surfacing in Mary herself, in the sparkling humour redeeming all the tears. Last weekend, Mary and Jan and I got to talking about the Christmas hampers we make up every year for Anglicare. "We're not doing a hamper this year", Jan said, "we can't afford it", and Mary chimed in, "Yes, we're saving up for a funeral, you know."

Is it only as we look into the abyss that a life-time of trusting Emmanuel really begins to make sense? God with us, one of us, one with us in every circumstance, in the brutal as much as the beautiful, touching and transfiguring each moment, lighting up the distant horizon so we can make the journey without fear, teaching us to care. In this most holy night the Word is made flesh, not tinsel, vulnerable humanity, not conquering ideology or cornering proposition, and every single day we spread the joy or stifle it by how we treat each other. God is born into the flux of the world. "Jesus's gentle stirring is God's redeeming movement of love, justice and peace in a world where we are forgetful and brutal towards one another."^{¶¶¶} God is abandoned in our midst. What are we going to do about it?

[¶] Martin Wroe is a freelance writer, and an organiser of the Greenbelt Arts Festival. In another age he would have liked to be a heretic, but not burnt.

^{¶¶} Matthew 1:23

^{¶¶¶} Simon Barrow, "And the Word became Tinsel", in *Ekklesia*, 24th December 2004.

The Epiphany of the Lord

Sunday 2nd January 2005

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There is little doubt that Christmas 2004 will forever be clouded by what the United Nations is calling the greatest natural disaster of them all.

It is still much too soon for accurate accounting, but it seems likely that the number of the dead is upwards of a million, most of whom died suddenly and unprepared. Then there are those who somehow escaped, their lives ruined by indescribable shock and loss. Beyond this, many hundreds, possibly thousands, are unlikely to survive the life-threatening diseases that inevitably follow in the wake of such tragedy.

As we have been bombarded with images all week, we have been struggling to comprehend the magnitude of this event, and failing. It is simply beyond human imagination. Like every great disaster, it defies our limited scope, until we start putting names and faces to those hundreds of thousands of dying and suffering people. As someone said of the Jews who died in the Nazi death camps: six million didn't die; one person died, by six million.

For me, and perhaps for some of you, the name and face this Christmas will always be that of Melina Heppell, the six month old baby swept from her father's arms as he walked with her on the beach at Phuket. There is nothing remote about what has happened; the shock waves wash up on our own doorstep. The Heppells live right here in Perth. When I look at the Crib now, I find I see Melina, eyes bright and smiling in a lovely picture published in *The Weekend Australian* yesterday.

The Crib is not quite so cosy as we like to pretend, and this is as it should be, for God is here in our midst – entirely human, utterly helpless, totally dependent on our care and attention. God is always this close and this vulnerable, for the only power available to God is the power of presence and the power of love.

In a world where natural disasters strike as the earth shifts and evolves, God is not watching from a distance, pitying or indifferent, let alone orchestrating such happenings.

God is right here with us – as much on the beach as in the sacrament, caught up in the heartbreak of loss, in the terror and the struggle and the dying. Calvary turns out to be in that sandy place where the holiday resorts so recently stood, now places of destruction and desolation. The One who was not received, for whom there was no room at the inn, shelters on mountains above the boiling sea, in crowded hospital rooms and airport lounges. Jesus still has no place to lay his weary head, is tortured still, and weeps tears of blood. No hell opens up before us where God has not journeyed already and will not journey yet. We are never abandoned, never alone.

It is of these things that the Christmas angels sing, and go on singing always. This is no time for talking, for preaching. What we need is quiet, time for looking lovingly with the eyes of faith, listening with the ears of the heart. Let's be still together, silent before the mystery. Let's open our hearts to the flood of pain so suddenly unleashed in our world. Spare a thought for the dead, the injured, for weeping families and friends.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury says in his New Year message: "As we think about the coming year, let's not spend all our time on trying to perfect the huge plans that will change everything. We ought [instead] to be asking, 'What's the difference I can make to this situation, this person, to myself, to someone close, to someone whose face I know?' The biggest picture we could ever hope for is the sight of what the human heart is capable of when complete love and trust are allowed to touch it."

Look long at the Crib, for the truth of God is here, awaiting our recognition and response.

Baptism of the Lord

Sunday 9th January 2005

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"An omniscient god must have known the tsunami was coming. An omnipotent god must have had the power to prevent it. For the benefit of atheists like myself, would the believers please explain what happened?"^[1] A friend of mine – as least I think it was a friend! – has gathered together for me all the newspaper clippings from two weeks of public debate about God and the Indian Ocean disaster. I am glad to have these, but it is depressing reading. I come away from the experience depressed as much by the predictably glib arguments of believers as by the predictably glib arguments of atheists. As far as I am concerned, both camps miss the point: they are arguing about a god who doesn't exist. At no point in the war of articles and letters to the editor have I encountered the only true God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So the debate degenerates swiftly into those who believe in an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God verses those who don't. If God is omniscient (all-seeing), omnipresent (universally present), and omnipotent (almighty or all-powerful), how can natural disasters like the tsunami occur? That they do occur proves that God is not all-seeing, universally present, and all-powerful, or if God is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, God is plainly a cruel and capricious monster, or a sadistic headmaster hell-bent on forcing our reformation. Such luminaries as the Dean of Sydney and the president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils apparently vote for the sadistic headmaster. "Natural disasters are God's warning of judgment to come", says the dean.^[2] "He is teaching us a lesson – he wants to see how we react to this", says the Muslim president.^[3] On the opposite side of the court, another voice quotes Richard Dawkins: "It is time to get up off our knees, stop cringing before bogeymen and virtual fathers, face reality, and help science to do something constructive about human suffering."^[4]

Needless to say, this contrary argument goes on and on fruitlessly forever, round and round in circles. It amounts to nothing more than an unedifying and objectionable shouting match, trampling over dead bodies and bypassing the suffering millions. And the trouble lies in the unexamined assumptions on which both sides strangely agree, namely that God is – by definition - omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. But, who says so? The answer is very simple: human philosophy says so. If God exists then it follows logically that God must be, by definition, all-seeing, universally present, and all-powerful. In other words, God knows in advance all that will happen, is ready to intervene at every point of need, and can do so with ultimate power. God knows the tsunami will occur, God is right there in its path, and God can act to stop it if God wishes to do so. The point I want to make, however, is that we do not believe in the god of Greek philosophy and the whole Western philosophical tradition. This is not the God of the Bible. This is not the God of Jewish and Christian revelation. I cannot speak for the other great world religions, not even for Judaism. There is no shortage of competent scholars and teachers who can do that, but I am not among them. But I can tell you what Christianity teaches. I can say what is to be found at the cradle and the cross of Christ, what is disclosed about God at Bethlehem and Calvary. I can say something about who it is who encounters us standing in the river Jordan today at his baptism, standing as it were in full stream, letting the whole torrent of human experience come upon him in all its delightful beauty and all its dreadful pain.^[5]

The God who comes to meet us in Jesus Christ is clearly omnipresent^[6], but equally clearly not omniscient or omnipotent – at least not as these qualities or attributes are traditionally understood. The God who comes to meet us in Jesus Christ is everywhere present. God's name is Emmanuel^[7], God-with-us, and not just for a brief period of years in Nazareth and Galilee and Jerusalem, but always and everywhere. But this God is not omniscient in the sense of knowing in advance everything that will happen. Such a God would be no respecter of human freedom of choice, the real freedom we have to choose - between black and white, right and wrong, our freedom to stuff things up, to be selfish and greedy and cruel, as much as our freedom to rescue situations, living selflessly, generously and lovingly.

If God has a blue-print, if God knows in advance all that will happen, then we are no more than puppets on a stage, and our fate is fate and fatalism. Nothing we do or say has any real value, it doesn't matter one way or the other how we live, all our actions are empty and delusory. An omniscient God in this sense renders all other life worthless. Experience teaches us that God is not like this, that we can and do make good and bad decisions, that our obedience and disobedience matter desperately. The real God has no single blue-print, but an infinite set of blue-prints, for absolutely everything is redeemable and nothing can ultimately cut us off from God's love. The real

God waits expectantly to see how we will act, never knowing which way we will jump, and then, depending on what we have chosen, sets before us new possibilities, new ways forward.

So we believe in this kind of God, the God who allows us to work out our own salvation, who sets up a world of chance and accident because this is the only sort of world in which freedom, development, responsibility and love can come into being.^{lviii} The tsunami is one of those chances, an accident of living in a dynamic world still making itself, where tectonic plates shift, where volcanoes erupt, where tidal waves occur. None of this is actively desired by God. It breaks God's heart. But all of it is belongs to the way the world evolves.

It's not that God could see it coming, could have stopped it, but did nothing. If God could see it coming, God could do nothing to stop it. It is absurd to think that God can establish a reliable world where the laws of nature operate, and then keep interfering with it whenever things go wrong. The world does not run on miracles; God's hands are tied – they are tied by love. Indeed, the only omnipotence, the only absolute power known to God, is love, almighty loving.

God is active, not in pulling strings, not in averting tragedy, but in loving us through thick and thin, holding us always in pierced hands. Look at Christ at his baptism: standing in mid-stream, the waters of human experience flooding upon him, unprotected, open to all the risk, open to all the possibilities. Here is the self-same God revealed to us in cradle and cross, at Bethlehem and Calvary.

What we know of God and of God's ways with us is only the tip of an iceberg; the more we know, the more we realize we don't know. We are feeling our way, and we rightly feel terribly afraid that we may inadvertently add to the suffering by thinking aloud a times such as this. But we must speak as honestly and clearly as we can about what we really believe, and not least because others demand this of us. The compassionate and merciful God is with us in good times and bad times, in our laughter and our tears, in disaster and triumph, inviting us to take responsibility for one another, asking us to live humanly and humanely, calling us to care.

^{lv} Frank B. Walker in *The Australian*, 4th January 2005.

^{lvi} Phillip Jensen in *The Australian*, 4th January 2005.

^{lvii} Amjad Mehboob in *The Australian*, 4th January 2005.

^{lviii} Quoted by David Legard *The Australian* in, 6th January 2005.

^{lvi} Matthew 3:13-17.

^{lvii} Matthew 28:20.

^{lviii} Matthew 1:23.

^{lvi} John V. Taylor, *Weep Not for Me: Meditations on the Cross and Resurrection* (Geneva: WCC Risk 1986, p. 12.

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 16th January 2005

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The Roman Sacramentary could hardly be more precise. "The priest genuflects. Taking the host, he raises it slightly over the paten and, facing the people, says aloud:

This is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sins of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper."^{li}

A variation on this formula is familiar to us. The invitation to communion here is frequently -

Behold the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper.

It may seem a bit like splitting hairs, but it seems to me crucial that we say with John the Baptist "Behold the Lamb of God" rather than "This is the Lamb of God" as the missal has it, and also that we say "who takes away the sin of the world" as opposed to "who takes away the sins of the world".¹¹¹ The bread of the Eucharist demands genuflection, bending the knee before God with us in the sacrament, but "this" is not the Lamb of God. At least, not in the sense that I might say "this is an elephant", or "this is a blue balloon". To gaze on this bread, broken and given for us and to us, is rather to "behold" the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.¹¹²

There is always a tendency in religion to say more than can be said. So it is good for us to be reminded that we need to be genuinely tentative and unusually sensitive when we express what we believe about God and the world. This is not because we are unsure of ourselves, but because we know we stand before so great a mystery that we can never express satisfactorily in faltering human speech the reality confronting us. It is also because we know our own capacity for wishful thinking, for delusion and self-deception. Do we really speak the truth with economy and grace, or are we simply whistling in the dark, shouting against the wind?

In this morning's gospel¹¹³, Jesus is present, but this is all. He walks through the narrative, never speaking so much as a single word. The Word of God is himself most eloquent in total silence. John does all the speaking, turning attention away from himself to the One who is more really present than any other among us. And he does not say to his disciples "This is the Lamb of God", but "Behold the Lamb of God". In other words, look - look for yourselves, see all that is to be seen, allow the eyes of your hearts free reign and take in who is really here. Look at the man Jesus and see the One sent from God, see God the Lamb who comes gently and silently in self-giving love. The sacrificial gift of this life will take away, not the "sins" of the world, every single transgression of ours being forgiven one after another, but the "sin" of the whole world. Behold the Lamb sent from God, God the Lamb, who sets us right with God once and for all by being right with God himself. Behold the Christ who, by his own selflessness, by his own absolute generosity of spirit and his own complete openness to the Spirit's breath, prepares for us the way of freedom and peace.

John knows perfectly well that he cannot make his disciples see what he sees, that they are free to see or not to see, that no one can do this work for them, that this work we must each do ourselves. Faith cannot be handed over or handed on like a game of pass the parcel. It is always a matter of opening eyes, always a task of imagination, of evocation, not in the sense of conjuring up what is not there, but in the sense of penetrating the veil. By all means let us be passionate about our faith, by all means let us be active in witnessing to its transforming power in all the places we live. Certainly, never feel embarrassed or ashamed to confess the hope that is in you, for we are followers of Christ Jesus who calls us to be with him on his journey to the Father. But let us never get carried away, slipping over from zeal into zealotry, from belief into bigotry, from faith to fanaticism.

Robert Runcie, the 102nd Archbishop of Canterbury, liked to say there is a "passionate coolness" about the Anglican way, but actually passionate coolness is characteristic of any faith worth the name. Every psychiatric ward has its share of people who are certain they are the Messiah, alongside those who are certain they are poached eggs. Frankly, there is an over supply of that sort of loony religion around at the moment. Some of it has been positively cringe-making in the wake of the Indian Ocean disaster, so much so that one hesitates even to be identified in some circles as a person of faith at all. Real religion, however, as opposed to the ever-popular ersatz variety - as we've noted so often - makes us more human, not less. And part of being truly human is to doubt, to sit lightly to what we hold most dear, keeping a sense of proportion, keeping alive a sense of humour, being skeptical - especially about ourselves.

We breathe a particular air, but sanity demands a window permanently open to catch a different breeze. For however convinced we may be, however trusting, however sure, it is entirely conceivable that we may be mistaken. Sane religion keeps its powder dry, keeps the passion cool - tentative, exploratory, humble seekers standing together before the mystery. It is worth remembering that the root of the words humiliation and humility is humus. Bishop John Taylor comments - "To be down in the straw and the dung and the refuse - Paul's words - is to become the soil in which the seed of Christ's manhood falls and dies and brings forth the harvest. Here is the meeting of the four elements: we the earth, and the Spirit the wind, the water and the fire."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ The Order of Mass from *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company 1985) p.564.

▣ John 1:29, 36.

▣ Revelation 13:8.

▣ John 1:29-34.

▣ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Classics 2004) p. 128.

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 23rd January 2005

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For several weeks now, some of us have been attempting to follow at a distance an extraordinary row in England over a BBC show called *Jerry Springer – The Opera*. I say *attempting* because it's a bit difficult to understand why so much heat is generated when you haven't actually seen the show. Christians have burned television licenses in protest, posted private names and addresses of BBC executives on a web site leading to threats of violence against their families, and exaggerated the number of expletives used by characters in the play. As Jonathan Bartley, the director of theological think-tank *Ekklesia* says, "Christians will now be seen as wanting to have their religious cake and eat it – happy to defend their right to criticize other faiths when it suits, but protesting vigorously when anyone raises questions about their own beliefs".▣

Well, surprise, surprise, imagine Christians wanting to have their religious cake and eat it! Where, I wonder, have we heard that before? Perhaps you remember a few years ago the furore when the National Gallery of Victoria displayed a crucifix suspended in a vat of urine? Perhaps you are old enough to recall the ruckus over Monty Python's *Life of Brian* – the picketing of movie theatres, the cries of "blasphemy" from hosts of Christians who – needless to say – hadn't even see the film?

Some of us just never seem to learn. Our sense of irony is undeveloped, we take ourselves too seriously, we are too quick to take offence, and we just don't get it. We imagine it is our role to protect God, as if God were an antique porcelain doll who might get broken in the rough and tumble of public life. After two thousand years, we seem entirely to have missed the disarming, transforming, defenceless God of cradle and cross.▣ We demand the right not to be offended, imagining all the while that God is as insecure and frightened as we are.

Now, if this is not a serious heresy against the incarnation, against God embodied in the flesh and blood Jesus, then I don't know what is. And, frankly, it's a bit late to be wrapping Christ up in cotton wool, because we've already done our worst to him long ago. So I agree with Giles Fraser when he says – "I take exception to those Christians who are successfully persuading the public that Christianity is a weird cell of narrow-minded and grim-faced protesters, always frothing at the mouth over some perceived slight. If we shrugged our shoulders and got on with the business of proclaiming good news to the poor and freedom to the captives, we wouldn't be the butt of half so many jokes. Show me a beetroot-faced Christian, furious once again at something to do with sex, and I'll show you something funny. But it's more serious than funny: 30,000 children are dying each day in Africa from disease, starvation and AIDS, and all some Christian groups seem to get upset about is the fact that the *Vicar of Dibley* took midnight mass the worse for drink, or that *Jerry Springer – The Opera* showed Christ in a nappy proclaiming himself 'a bit gay'. These people need to grow up and get a sense of proportion. The Christmas story is about collapsing the barrier between the sacred and the profane. The pure and awful majesty of God is born in a filthy old shed out the back. The message is clear: God is not to be protected from the grubby reality of human life. In the same way, Christ did not make his life amid the pious and outwardly religious, but with those whom decent religious people shunned: hookers, crooks, weirdos and assorted low-lifers – the cast for a *Jerry Springer Show*, if ever there was one."▣

When Jesus says to us today, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for human beings"▣, he doesn't just mean nice human beings like us. He means we will attract all sorts and conditions of people to the truth of God because the truth of God makes us attractive. But all too often we are anything but attractive. As a rule, we are better known for what we are against than what we are for. We are seen as kill-joys rather than life-givers.

I told you last week how I remember as a young curate staying up very late one night listening to the enthronement sermon of Robert Runcie as the 102nd Archbishop of Canterbury. It was so real and powerful that whole passages have stayed with me all these years, and I still hear his voice as he preached it from St Augustine's chair.

"My particular heroes among those who speak for Christ and follow his way are found in places where priest and people, men and women, of different ages, change the atmosphere of their local community, drawing people to Christ by the authority that their honesty and love and service win for them. This way of living and sharing, admitting our own failings and our longings, is not what people expect from those who sit on thrones. 'Speak out, condemn, denounce', is what is expected. But the throne of Jesus is a mercy-seat. It stands firm against all the vileness of the world but it stands also for compassion. The way of Jesus means reverencing people whether they belong to our party or not. The strategy of Jesus means changing lives with love. This is a hard way and people tend to want it only in theory. The cry is, 'The Church must give a firm lead.' Yes, it must – a firm lead against rigid thinking, a judging temper of mind, the disposition to oversimplify the difficult and complex problems."¹

As we prosecute Christ's own mission right here in this city we might do worse than take these words to heart. Let's think on them as we gather around the table today, for the fact is, if we are truly with Christ we will be curing every disease and every sickness among the people.² Let all the sick come to the wounded healer, starting with ourselves.

¹ Jonathan Bartley, "Springer Opera: Christians should face the music", January 12, 2005 at <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk>

² Simon Barrow, "Jesus v. Jerry – a post-christian opera", January 13, 2005 at <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk>

³ Giles Fraser, "Don't shield Jesus from the profane", in *The Church Times*, 14th January 2005.

⁴ Matthew 4:19.

⁵ R.A.K. Runcie, "Christian Authority", in *Windows into God* (London: SPCK 1983) p. 5.

⁶ Matthew 4:23-24.

Candlemass

Sunday 30th January 2005

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"God writes straight with crooked lines" is a saying attributed to a sixteenth century Portuguese bishop. There must have been something in the air in those years, for, around the same time, thousands of miles away in northern Europe, Martin Luther said something remarkably similar: "God rides the broken horse and carves the rotten wood". At a time of great division in Christianity, the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, of fervent Catholicism in Portugal and defiant Protestantism in Germany, there was unity too, unity of vision cutting right across the divides, divine gifts strangely bridging the human chasms. Not that we should be surprised at this, of course, for what is true of that time is true of all times. We always have more in common than we realize or are prepared to acknowledge. Our shared humanity is stronger than our animal nature, and the luminous truth of God transcends all our petty doctrinal disputes.

Today's bittersweet festival, forty days on from Christmas, looks back to Bethlehem and forward to the cross.⁷ The Christ who is presented in the Temple, offered to God's service by Mary and Joseph, comes from obscurity and goes to obscurity. Had we been there with a digital camera, nothing unusual would have been recorded, nothing at all out of the ordinary. Two poor parents with a baby were a dime-a-dozen in Jerusalem that day, and to say so is not just an aside. Actually, it takes us right to the heart of the matter. The crucifixion too was one

execution among many, one more cross lost in a sea of gallows, an anonymous redemptive presence without any Hollywood special effects, without any sky show. After all, when all is said and done, Jesus is never a celebrity surrounded by other celebrities. If Matthew's account is anything to go by, he comes from a dodgy line of ancestors, a rather variegated group of men and a positively dangerous list of women.^{lxi} None of the great holy women of Judaism get a look-in here. There is no mention, for instance, of Sarah, or Rebekeh or Rachel or Leah. Instead we get Tamar, a Canaanite woman, beyond the bounds of Jewish faith, who seduces her father-in-law Judah, so that she can have an illegitimate child.^{lxii} Then there is Rahab, another Canaanite woman, another outsider, whose chief claim to fame is that she was a prostitute.^{lxiii} Ruth, a Moabite woman, is also a foreigner, a refugee who doesn't really belong; and Bathsheba, a Hittite woman, is the stranger who commits adultery with King David and then schemes to make sure her own child inherits the throne.^{lxiv} And, finally, Mary, Jesus' mother, finds herself in a ritually taboo pregnancy and in an irregular marital situation.^{lxv}

All this is gently introducing us to the idea that God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of these lines are our own lives and witness. A God who did not hesitate to use the scheming as well as the noble, the impure as well as the pure, men to whom the world harkened and women upon whom the world frowned – this God continues to work through the same motley crowd. If it is a challenge to recognize in Matthew's genealogy that totally unknown people were part of the story of Jesus Christ, it may be an even greater challenge to recognize that unknown characters of today are essential to the on-going story. Christianity isn't just for the pure, the talented, the humble and the honest. The story of Jesus Christ was written and keeps getting written by the impure, by calculating schemers, by the proud, by crooks and robbers and fools. Nobody is so bad, so insignificant, so devoid of talent, so outside the circle of faith that he or she is outside the story of Christ. And it is not that we need to repent and mend our ways in order to get in. It is not that we need to convert from who we are and become someone else so that God can love us. The good news is that repentance, complete change of direction, follows naturally from knowing ourselves loved just as we are, in the mess we have made of our lives long before we do anything about it. The good news is that conversion of heart is God touching us in love, coming to live with us already in the tangled undergrowth of our society and our relationships.

My friend John Beddingfield, a priest on the staff of St Mary the Virgin Times Square in New York City, writes movingly about this following a recent trip to Honduras. He tells of meeting a man whose old life was one of knives and fights and drinking, of staying away from home for long periods of time, regularly terrorizing his wife and children. "One day someone from the church, perhaps sensing that the man's defenses were down or that he was simply tired, convinced him to go on a retreat. On the retreat he heard the Gospel in a way he had never heard before. He found friends he didn't need to fight. He began to see his family as a gift and a blessing. He was suddenly and drastically changed. He was converted. We met this man, now a prominent lay leader at the church. He coordinated the painting project, handed out worship leaflets, and kept a wary eye on the children and young people. (They still remember his old ways and know better than to disobey him.) We had heard the facts of his conversion but we had not yet fully understood how his changed life affected others. One morning a few of us were busy carving wooden pegs used in the building of church pews. Canon Vasquez asked one of the boys helping us, "Tell us the story of your life." He smiled and was shy at first, but then he began to talk. He talked about playing soccer down the hill. He talked about his school and how a stomach illness had caused him to miss an entire year. He talked about his twelve siblings and the two elder brothers living in the United States who send money back to the family. And then the ten-year-old began to get emotional. He was quiet for a moment or two and then said, "I'm a very lucky boy." There was silence. Canon Vasquez asked him, "Por qué?" "Because my daddy changed," he said, "and everything is just so much better." As Fr Beddingfield wisely says: "It is the business of God to covert people, but we have a role to play. We share the love of Jesus Christ with and without words. We can model his love and mercy. We can welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, as he has asked us to do. We can invite others to worship with us and bring them to church programs and ministries and celebrations. And we can pray for them, trusting in the power of Christ's love to reach all people, knowing that conversion happens".^{lxvi} As we look back to Christmas and forward to Calvary, we rejoice that God writes straight with crooked lines, that God rides the broken horse and carves the rotten wood.

^{lxi} Luke 2:22-40.

^{lxii} Matthew 1:1-17.

^{lxiii} Matthew 1:2.

^{lv} Matthew 1:5.

^{lv} Matthew 1:5; 1:6.

^{lv} Matthew 1:16.

^{lvii} John Beddingfield, "The Power of Conversion", in *The Angelus*, Vol. 7, No. 11, January 30 2005. See <http://www.stmvirgin.org>

Last Sunday before Lent

6th February 2005

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On this day when we burn last year's palm crosses to make ashes for the First Day of Lent, we always read the gospel of the Transfiguration. Plainly, we are moving here in the realm of sign and symbol, of picture and sacrament, performing ritual actions pregnant with meaning, struggling to communicate beyond words. The words we *do* use are poetry rather than prose, suggestion rather than proposition. The greatest truths must be evoked, for they cannot ever be described. I've reminded us many times now how the great Australian poet, Les Murray, calls every religion a long poem. "I think that religions are themselves large poems... In that unique Divine embodiment for which we reserve the term Incarnation, Jesus lives from the first in a wholeness no mortal artist can sustain; he lives on the level of poetry, and thus shows us the way to that quality of life which he calls the Kingdom. This Kingdom is Jesus' own poem, and He embodies it fully, while revealing it as an aspect of God's poem."^{lviii} Les Murray has a delightful way of contrasting daylight reason, what he calls *Narrowspeak*, with the language of faith. The language of faith he calls *Wholespeak*. This is why Christ exults the essential qualities of childlikeness, submitting himself, as Murray says, "to that naturally poetic vision we all have before reason, the dream and the dance drift apart in us and our perceptions flatten."^{lviii} When we hear the scriptures read aloud, when we pray, when we talk *to* God and *about* God, we always employ *Wholespeak*, although some of us in our anxiety to prove what cannot be proven whittle this down to *Narrowspeak*. We can be like Peter on the mountain, wanting to set up three tents to contain the divine glory which can never be captured or tamed. But as soon as we attempt this, the gift evaporates on us. As soon as we mistrust our imagination and intuition, afraid that signs and symbols may simply be illusion, the experience is lost and the truth eludes us.

Whatever the Transfiguration was and is, like the Resurrection itself it can never be recorded simply because it is too real, too intensely real to be consumed or processed. It takes place mid-way between the baptism of Jesus at the start of Matthew's gospel and the crucifixion at the end. Jesus and Peter and James and John go alone up a high mountain, the place so often in biblical tradition for encountering God. Suddenly, Matthew tells us, Jesus is metamorphosed (metemorfwdh), transformed, or transfigured.^{lviii} The face which will be contorted in agony, the head later to be tortured with a crown of thorns, shines now with the brilliance of the noonday sun.^{lv} Even the clothes which later will be stripped from his body and divided among his gambling executioners glow here with an unearthly light.^{lv} Then the disciples see that he is not alone in solitary splendour, flanked not by two criminals but by Moses and Elijah.^{lv} Both Moses and Elijah, we remember, also meet God on the holy mountain. Moses goes up the mountain to receive a vision of God and the tablets of the law, and his face mirrored the divine glory.^{lviii} Elijah goes up the mountain to be strengthened by God in the still small voice.^{lviii} In their own time, both serve God diligently, and both suffer persecution.^{lv} Standing here on the mountain, they represent the law and the prophets, the dead and the living. Peter's misguided but entirely human attempt to capture the moment is interrupted by the bright cloud of God's presence *overshadowing* them, just as the Spirit in some traditions *overshadows* Mary in the moment of Christ's conception.^{lv} And God's word is heard from the cloud attesting to the Word of God in the flesh, and the formula is exactly the same as at his baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."^{lv}

Only one thing new is added: "Listen to him!"^{lviii} And this is no generalised command; it is a specific instruction.^{lviii} It is a hard-bitten centurion who eventually listens, but only as he gazes up at the crucified Lord can he confess, "Truly this man was God's son."^{lviii} Golgotha at the end of the story and the Mount of Transfiguration here at the midpoint, both, in their totally different ways, offer the same truth. Suffering love is the path to glory, servanthood is the way God's sovereignty insinuates itself into our world, and the cross – Jesus' cross and our own – is victory and not defeat. The holy mountain separated from the execution hill called Calvary is nothing but idolatry and

human fantasy. The crucified God may not be the god we want, the crucified God is probably is not the god we think we need, but the crucified God is the only God there is. Found in the little people of the earth, in the forgotten corners of the world, wherever hearts break at the beauty and brutality of things, wherever compassion reigns and rules, this God walks beside us on broken feet and feeds us in the broken bread. Once we have seen Jesus, only a suffering God will do. The cross is at the centre, but not the cross above the orb, triumphant and dominant and distant. What we are given is the cross within the circle, sharing all our joy, redeeming all the pain.

Here is all we need to know of the tenderness and tenacity of that divine love which moment by moment holds us safe, second by second drawing us into life.

There is something wonderfully human about the final act in this amazing transfiguration story. Overwhelmed, the disciples fall to the ground and remain prostrate, face down in the dust, frozen in fear, until the Lord comes and touches them.^{lxvi} Just so, he touches us as we baptize and as we reach out our hands to receive him in this Eucharist, and his words make absolutely everything possible: "Arise, and do not be afraid"^{lxvii} Easter words, the gospel of resurrection. "And having lifted their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself only"^{lxviii}

^{lxv} Les Murray, "Embodiment and Incarnation" in *A Working Forrest* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove 1997) pp. 310, 324.

^{lxvi} Les Murray, "Embodiment and Incarnation", p. 324.

^{lxvii} Matthew 17:2.

^{lxviii} Matthew 17:2.

^{lxix} Matthew 17:2.

^{lxx} Matthew 17:3.

^{lxxi} Exodus 24.

^{lxxii} 1 Kings 19.

^{lxxiii} 1 Kings 5:12; 23:29-37

^{lxxiv} Matthew 17:5; Luke 1:35.

^{lxxv} Matthew 4:17; 17:5.

^{lxxvi} Matthew 17:5.

^{lxxvii} Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 2004) p. 136.

^{lxxviii} Matthew 27:54.

^{lxxix} Matthew 17:6.

^{lxxx} Matthew 17:8.

^{lxxxii} Matthew 17:8.

First Sunday in Lent

13th February 2005

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The announcement on Thursday that the Prince of Wales is to marry his long-time lover Camilla Parker-Bowles took everyone by surprise. On the whole, most people seem pleased for them, and wish them well for the future. Given the continuing popularity of Princess Diana, Camilla will not become Princess of Wales, nor will she ever be Queen Consort. Instead, she will initially be the Duchess of Cornwall, and eventually Princess Consort. These arrangements look like sensible compromises. A civil marriage followed by a blessing service is obviously an attempt to pacify those who have difficulties with the re-marriage of divorced people, exacerbated in this instance by the fact that Charles will some day become Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Now I can't really claim that all this interests me mightily, but when I heard the news I was as pleased as anyone else that a dignified way out of a messy situation had been found for two people who deserve some happiness. But then the public statements started, and among them a sadly predictable pronouncement from the Evangelical Alliance. "The announcement of Prince Charles' and Mrs Parker-Bowles' marriage should be seen as a positive move. As with many modern-day liturgies marking the remarriage of divorcees, we trust that the blessing service at St George's Chapel will offer clear opportunities for expressing remorse for past wrongs and repentance for hurts caused in both their previous marriages. The Alliance recognises that historically, constitutionally and legally, such a formalising of Charles' and Camilla's relationship does not, in and of itself, prevent Charles from inheriting the monarch's historic authority as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. However, in theological and spiritual terms, their documented adultery and the nature of their extra-marital relationship up to this point, do present difficulties for many of our Anglican members and others with respect to Charles' suitability to govern the Church of England."¹

Now this is a very carefully worded statement, much more carefully worded than usual. Clearly, the Evangelical Alliance doesn't want to upset the Royal Family too much, and may even be trying to be generous on this occasion, but, even so, it just can't resist the temptation to point the finger and score a few points. Here we have the righteous, in all their assumed goodness and purity, talking down to sinners, naughty and shop-soiled as we are. In rather measured but decidedly patronising terms, these self-appointed guardians of public morality take it upon themselves to spell out what God requires. And what a repugnant spectacle this proves to be, reminiscent of the disastrous radio broadcast made by Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang after the abdication of King Edward VIII. Lang at least agonised over what to say, and certainly had no desire to speak ill of the former King or even Mrs Simpson, yet he too managed to strike entirely the wrong note. One correspondent sent a stinging verse to Lambeth Palace. To understand how clever it is, we remind ourselves that Lang's official signature as Archbishop of Canterbury was "Cosmo Cantuar" - short for Cantuariensis, "Cosmo of Canterbury".

My Lord Archbishop, what a scold you are!
And when your man is down, how bold you are!
Of Christian charity how scant you are!
And, auld Lang swine, how full of cant you are!²

Well, it seems that nothing much changes. Then as now, those most concerned to uphold the gospel inadvertently damage Christ's cause more than all his enemies put together. Can the Church, we wonder, ever speak in other than scolding nanny tones? Well, yes, as it happens. Indeed, it more often talks in a wish-washy nothing voice, lost in a sea of well-intentioned compassion, but making no point at all. This mealy-mouthing of pious platitudes is, in fact, precisely what the Evangelical Alliance and its affiliates are reacting against. But the choice is never between these two extremes. On the very same day when the Evangelical Alliance delivered itself of its opinion so pompously, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church in England, opened her mouth and spoke eloquently and Christianly. "In the midst of lives which often have more than their share of tragedy and failure, God continues to offer us the possibility of forgiveness, love and renewed hope", she said. That applies as much to princes as to the many thousands of divorced people who remarry in our churches every year. We pray God's blessing on the Prince and Mrs Parker-Bowles as they enter upon this new chapter in their lives."³

Truly Christian comment is all in the attitude and the tone of voice. Significantly, the Moderator (or whoever wrote her words for her) starts with "us" rather than "them". Unlike some members of the Evangelical Alliance, she actually seems to live in this world with the rest of us. So far as the URC is concerned, we are all in this together, we all fail, we all experience tragedy – sometimes more than our fair share. Within this shared experience of fragility and pain, we have no difficulty in recognising and feeling for the vulnerability and woundedness of others. And we throw no stones, for we all live in glass houses. Both by what we say and how we say it, this fundamental solidarity is expressed, as together we look beyond our own horizons to God who "continues to offer us the possibility of forgiveness, love and renewed hope". This, after all, is what Lent is all about. As we gather around the Lord's table, we recognize that it is only because of this good news that we can stand at all. And as Easter people we resist temptation with Christ, especially the seduction of mirroring a false god in the church and in the world.^[iv] The God we worship and serve reigns from the tree, arms spread wide to embrace the whole damned creation.

"then they 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 had it in for him
and the curious ones who'll watch anything it it's free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears."^[v]

As we journey together once more to the cross and the new fire, Lord, open our eyes that we may see.

^[iv] Joel Edwards, "The Marriage of Prince Charles and Mrs Parker-Bowles", Evangelical Alliance Press Release, 10th February 2005, at <http://www.eauk.org>

^[v] J. G. Lockhart, *Cosmo Gordon Lang* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1949) pp. 396-407.

^[vi] See "Evangelicals say Charles and Camilla should have opportunity to repent", *Ekklesia*, 10th February 2005, at <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk>

^[vii] The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are all about the nature of God: "If you are the Son of God..." See Matthew 4:1-11.

^[viii] Bruce Dawe, "And a Good Friday Was Had by All", in Kevin Hart (Ed), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (Melbourne: OUP 1994) pp. 42-43.

Second Sunday in Lent

20th February 2005

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A Native American storyteller is famous for always beginning his tribe's story of creation by saying, "Now, I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."^[ix] Perhaps another way of saying the same thing is to remind ourselves of the child who defined myth as a story which is true on the inside. This is a good place for us to begin this morning as we shift gospels from Matthew to John – something we always do in Lent and Eastertime. None of the gospels, of course, is a straightforward biography of Jesus, simply reporting what any eye-witness might have seen. All four gospels attempt to tell the story of Jesus in ways that bring out his real significance as the early Christian communities understood him. All four are loaded with theological interpretation, written from the far side of Easter, written so that we all may see the truth, so that all may come to faith in him. Nevertheless, it is true that there is a great gulf fixed between the portrait of Jesus given by Mark, Matthew and Luke, and the picture painted by John. Shifting from one of the first three gospels to the fourth gospel involves

more than shifting gears; it is really a move into another world. The contrast between the Jesus of Mark, Matthew and Luke and the Jesus of John is so great that they can't both be accurate characterisations of Jesus as an historical figure. Clearly, Jesus of Nazareth did not wander around saying things like "I am the light of the world"¹³, or "I am the bread come down from heaven"¹⁴, or "I am the way, the truth and the life"¹⁵. If he had done so, the authorities would quickly have locked him up with all the other people who think they're poached eggs. Jesus speaks like this in John's gospel not because the words are historically accurate, but because they are spiritually true. He speaks this way because the Christian community knows the crucified and raised Lord as light leading us out of darkness, food to nourish and sustain us in our journey, the way out of death into life. And we go on reading these stories not because things necessarily happened precisely in this way, but because, with the gift of hindsight, from the far side of Easter, and in the depths of our own experience, we know the story is true. Myth is always a story which is true on the inside.

So it happens that today we overhear the curious conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is a coded conversation about baptism, about what it really means to be immersed in Christ, initiated into the fullness of the Christian mystery through water and the Spirit. As a coded conversation the details become highly significant. There are plenty of them in this passage, rich with allusion and meaning as it is, but I want to focus on just a handful. First, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Right there in the opening sentence, John is jogging our memories. Turn back to the first page of this gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word is life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."¹⁶ Now turn almost to the final page, to the table of the Last Supper. "Jesus said to Judas Iscariot, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' So, after receiving the bread, he immediately went out. And it was night."¹⁷ The dialogue in this gospel is between light and dark, day and night, and to be with Jesus is to be in the full light of day. Nicodemus is like us, indeed Nicodemus *is* us, each of us and all of us. We come by night, in our darkness, in our blindness, to Jesus, God's light shining in the world. We do so again and again. In our ignorance and confusion we come to be enlightened, because every time we take our eyes off him it is night all over again. Baptism is enlightenment, believing is seeing, and the baptismal and eucharistic life of the church is best understood as a continuing journey in the course of which we see better and see more. In Lent we are acutely aware that such eye-opening is neither automatic nor painless, alert to our need of disciplined and patient commitment. This is the work not of a moment, but of a life-time, leading us to two other crucial words or experiences besides "night" and "light". "Jesus answered Nicodemus, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."¹⁸ All this talk of being born "from above" is very intriguing, not least because the word which John seems determined to use can mean "above" or "again" or "anew". We must all be "born again" Christians!

Turning to face Christ in baptism, embracing his way of renunciation, the way of love and self-sacrifice which is the way of the cross, involves us in an endless birthing into new life. Notice that Jesus never contradicts Nicodemus. Fresh birth always involves a return to the womb, a new experience of connectedness and integration, re-entering that water-life in which the unborn baby knows neither separation nor otherness. Never, never do we leave these waters behind. We live on in their meaning, swept along with the current, rediscovering a vision of the many-splendoured glory of God within everyone and everything, the loss of which makes us hard. This is - quite literally! - a matter of old dogs learning new tricks, and not just occasionally but day after day. If we ever tire of the water imagery, turn to the wind. The word John uses for Spirit also means wind, and this connection takes us right back through the Hebrew tradition to the two Genesis creation stories.¹⁹ The *wind* or *breath* or *Spirit* of God which broods over the face of the waters of chaos in the beginning, is also responsible for fresh beginnings in us. God's work of creating remains unfinished. In Christ, we say, we are a new creation, new every morning.²⁰ Children of water and Spirit, water and wind, are pushed and pulled in all directions, never knowing quite where Christ might lead us. All we know for sure is that we are dawn relentlessly forward into an unknown future characterised by his own sheer aliveness, where we are freer and more responsible, simultaneously more childlike and more mature.

There is a brief moment in every eucharist as we approach the Lord's table when this destiny of ours is foreshadowed in prayer. As water is mixed with wine in the chalice, the priest prays almost silently, "By the mixture of this water and wine may we share in Christ's divinity who humbled himself to share in our humanity." The ultimate destiny of humankind, together with the whole created universe, is nothing less than what the Orthodox call *divinization* or *theosis*. "We shall all be changed"²¹, and all things gathered up into Christ. Eventually, we become who we are, sharing in the life of the Trinity. "No one has ascended into heaven except

the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes may have eternal life. For God so loved the world as to give the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."^[xi]

^[ii] Marcus Borg *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* San Francisco: Harper Collins 1994 p.19

^[iii] John 8:12; 9:5.

^[iiii] John 6:35,48;

^[v] John 14:6.

^[vi] John 1:1-5

^[vii] John 13:27b,30

^[viii] John 3:3-8

^[ix] Genesis 1-2.

^[x] 2 Corinthians 5:17.

^[xi] 1 Corinthians 15:51

^[xii] John 3:13-17

Third Sunday in Lent

27th February 2005

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Those who read today's gospel as an historical report are confronted by formidable difficulties. Why did it take every last disciple to do the marketing, leaving an exhausted and parched Jesus to ask a drink from a Samaritan woman? Why was Jesus' party without the essential leather bucket and rope that every traveller needs to draw water from wells along the way? Why did the woman come to the well all alone in the heat of the day, instead of with the other women in the cool of evening? How did Jesus know so much about this woman's convoluted marital and moral history? None of these prosaic difficulties need assail us, of course, for we know that John's gospel is full of richly symbolic tales of precisely this kind. The story is told not because things necessarily happened this way, but because the story is true, and simultaneously true on a number of levels. Let me touch on some of the inside truths conveyed to us by John today, and then concentrate on one which is of supreme importance.

First, all the emphasis on water suggests some carry over from last Sunday's gospel. Baptism is initiation into the fullness of the Christian mystery, so "water and Spirit"^[i] echoes in the church, calling to mind the water-life of the baptised. In John's community, as in our own, we cannot help hearing the story in the light of our own experience of baptism, our shared experience of new life in Christ. Just as surely, this fascinating dialogue must evoke that well-documented characteristic of Jesus, namely his insistence on responding as a human being, pure and simple, to other human beings. If Jesus was impatient of anything, it was the proclivity of religious people to escape the compromises of the everyday world, shutting off possible sources of contamination. Baptism into Christ cannot ever be entry into a Christian ghetto. Baptism is the point where all barriers of race, religion, sex and status are extinguished, dissolved in the waters of the font, because in Jesus all such walls are broken down, all divisions healed.^[ii]

In today's gospel one barrier surmounted by Jesus is that of gender. When the disciples returned from shopping "they marvelled that he was talking with a woman."^{ivii} Public conversation between a pious rabbi and a woman was, of course, unthinkable. If Jesus was concerned about protecting himself, the woman's reputation would have told him to keep his distance, and yet he initiates conversation with her, treating her as an equal, and without a second thought. Reaching out to her simply as a human being offers us a fine image of inclusion, demonstrating God's embrace of everyone without exception, God's embrace of everyone regardless of pedigree. In the course of this gospel this particular barrier is not the only barrier overcome, for barriers of race and religion are also declared unimportant.

The meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is the meeting of those born on the right side of the tracks with those born on the wrong side. True religion seeks justice for excluded people, especially the most helpless and vulnerable, speaking up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. True religion involves opposing the vested interests which keep this group and that at arm's length, or even at each other's throats. I would like to hear the primates of the Anglican Communion on this, but they are too busy defending the institution and keeping their own club intact to worry much about the least and the last.^{lvii} Love makes us ministers of reconciliation, a costly business, for reconciliation rarely comes without breaking the phoney peace through which we maintain our distance from each other.

All this and more is built into John's text. It is there for all those who see with the eyes of faith, who hear with the ears of our hearts. So it is that we arrive at the core of it all. Jesus says, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth."^{lviii} The most common understanding of God is deist or supernaturalist. Speaking broadly, deists conceive God as a supreme being "out there" who created the world long ago, established natural laws as a way of ordering it, but no longer has much to do with it. Supernaturalists also see God "out there", but differ from deists by affirming that God from time to time, rather capriciously, intervenes with the ticking clock. What these two views have in common, of course, is that they both separate God and world: they are oil and water. For Jesus, God is very different. God is reality, all reality, experienced right here and now, day by day and hour by hour. God is not far away, but near at hand, nearer indeed than our own breathing. In this God we live and move and have our being.^{lviii} Indeed, in this God *everything* and *everyone* lives, moves and has its being. Jewish tradition, fleshed out for us in Jesus, speaks not of persons who *believe* in God, but of persons who *know* God, and the Hebrew word for *knowing* is exactly the same word used for sexual intercourse. God is *known* in this physical and intimate way, not merely believed in. God is *known* physically and intimately, *known* in spirit and in truth, worshipped not as *stranger* but as *lover*.

Today's great gospel story comes in Lent as we journey to the cross, there simply to *touch wood*. All along the way Christ is busily shattering stereotypes of what it means to live fully and love humanly, until at calvary we come face to face with God who bleeds with us, God around us and within, endlessly dying and rising to new life in the fabric of the universe. 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.^{lviii}*

As Jesus himself says in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas –

*Lift the stone and you will find me,
cleave the wood and I am there.^{lviii}*

^{iv} John 3:5

^{lv} Galatians 3:27-29

^{lvii} John 4:27

^{lviii} See *The Windsor Report*, and the Communiqué of the Primates of the Anglican Communion, Friday 25th February 2005, at <http://www.AnglicanCommunion.org>

^{lv} John 4:21, 23-24

^{lvii} Acts 17:28

^{lviii} Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916)

^{lviii} The Gospel of Thomas 77. See Richard Valantasis (Ed) *The Gospel of Thomas* London: Routledge 1997.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

6th March 2005

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A long gospel invites a short sermon!

We have just listened to one of the greatest faith stories ever written, one we know almost off by heart. It is always given to us half way through Lent as we journey to the place where blind eyes finally see. This mid-Lent setting reminds us that today's gospel is not a miracle story about a man born blind. But this seems odd, because John's story has all the hall-marks of a miracle story as we know miracle stories from the synoptic gospels. Perhaps the clue to the difference lies in the fact that Jesus heals today not as an act of compassion, but because healing is an opportunity for revelation, an opportunity for showing and for teaching.^{liii}

If this is not a miracle story it is a sign story, and it happens to be the sixth sign of seven signs given in the course of this gospel. This man is born blind not as some crude and cruel form of divine punishment, but that the works of God may be *displayed or revealed or manifested* in him.^{liii} In other words, we are not here concerned with the plight of a suffering individual. This man is a representative human being, someone who stands in for us, floundering around in the shadows, searching for light and life, seeking health and wholeness. And One there is who embodies God's light and life in the world, One who creates and recreates, moulding humankind out of dust in the beginning, now using this very same dust to heal, One who illuminates and enlightens, One who is the light of the world.

Today's gospel story, so long and so beautifully woven, is a narrative restatement of the proclamation on the first page of John's gospel: "The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world".^{liiii} And this coming of the light happens little by little, bit by bit, stage by stage. Our eyes are not opened wide all at once. Like the Johannine community, we perceive who Jesus really is only gradually, struggling to find words to express our experience of the closeness of God in him. In the story, this happens in five distinct stages. First, Jesus is seen as a man^{liii}; then he is perceived to be a prophet^{liii}; later, someone anointed by God^{liii}; beyond this, he is given the mysterious title 'Son of Man'^{liiii}; and, finally, he is called Lord^{liiii}.

Conversion of heart and mind is not something that happens in a blinding flash, once for all. There may be great and grand moments of disclosure, when we see as we never saw before, moments when the penny drops, when the ice breaks, when there is a break-through in understanding. Revelation can be dramatic, disclosure can be spectacular, but, in the nature of things, we can never see whole, never grasp the reality of the God who embraces us, never know as we are known. Conversion happens over a lifetime - sometimes when we are open and seeking, sometimes when we are closed up and fearful, sometimes with open hands, sometimes when open hands become clenched fists. It happens deep inside each individual, ready or not, and there is never anything private about it.

John very deliberately uses of the first person plural. Jesus does not say what some English translations make him say, "I must carry out the works of the one who sent me", but "we must work the works of the one who sent me while it is day".^{liii} This gospel is not just about individual blind Christians, but about the blind church coming to the "I am" (ego eimi), the Light of the world.^{liii} After all, there are none so blind as those who think they see. It must surely be some sort of divine accident that we hear this proclamation just days after the torrent of words from the primates and about the primates.^{liii} This great gospel comes when some of us are feeling decidedly underwhelmed - battered and bruised and depressed about the state of the church; looking for leadership, finding none, and asking why we bother.

It comes as a word of faith and a word of hope from One who knows the cost of both. Above all, of course, it comes as a word of love, using a tone of voice we long to hear from our bishops and pastors. According to ancient tradition, we touch the wood of the cross not only with our lips, but also with our eyes, that blind eyes may

be opened, that we may be enlightened, that together we may see. We do so on the only day of the year we call "good", Good Friday. We have two eyes and two ears and one mouth. Please God, we get the drift, and take the hint.

▮ It should, however, be noted that *all* gospel healings of the blind are symbolic. See Mark 8:22f and 10:46f.

▮ John 9:3.

▮ John 1:9.

▮ John 9:11.

▮ John 9:17.

▮ John 9:33.

▮ John 9:35.

▮ John 9:38.

▮ John 9:4.

▮ John 9:5.

▮ see the Primates' Communiqué and commentary at www.JoondalupAnglican.com

Fifth Sunday in Lent

13th March 2005

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Here we have the fourth and last of the great symbolic stories offered to us in our Lent journey to the joy of Easter dawn.▮ This is the final sign, and the greatest, in John's series of signs revealing the glory or the reality of God in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

"Jesus said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Jesus said to (Martha), 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'"

The glory or the reality of God's presence will flare up and blaze out so that Martha and Mary and Lazarus, the company of disciples and the Jewish crowd, together with all of us may see and believe. And believing, we remember from last week's gift of sight to the man born blind, consists in seeing. The glorification of the Son of God is that we may see and accept Jesus as the perfect reflection of the Father, knowing him as bread from heaven, our way and truth and light, our resurrection and our life, the only good shepherd of our souls. And yet this final sign story is "A Resurrection that will lead to Death".▮ The irony is that the raising of Lazarus is not really resurrection at all, so much as the resuscitation of a dead body. In other words, Lazarus is brought back to this life for a little while longer only that he may eventually die again.

Those who think it odd that such a story pops up now need to note this fact. The raising of the dead and buried Lazarus is not really a foretelling of what will happen to the crucified and buried Jesus, for whatever the resurrection of Jesus is it is plainly far more than simply the resuscitation of his dead body. Indeed, Jesus does not return to this life at all, but moves into some other level of existence which transcends utterly our experience of flesh and blood reality. In the resurrection he seems to belong both to our physical world and not, subject to it's natural laws but also mysteriously free of them, for the most part so changed as to be unrecognisable, identified by his followers only in brief flashes of recognition. The function of the Lazarus story at this stage of Lent is to stimulate in us reflection on this great mystery, disposing in advance of inadequate categories of understanding, opening ourselves out to experience something more wonderful.

One way into appreciating the strange tale of Lazarus is to fasten on the words John puts into the mouth of Jesus at this point, this last in his series of great / AM declarations.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The ones believing in me even if they should die will live, and everyone living and believing in me never dies. Do you believe this?"

In the story, this proclamation is made to Martha, and the question is asked of her: *"Do you believe?"* In the church, however, the proclamation and the question are addressed to each one of us individually, as well as to all of us collectively.

In Jesus we meet Life itself, the energy and the breath animating all living beings, the supreme gift springing from the very heart of God. This incarnate Life annihilates every shadow of death, reviving and revivifying all who wilt for lack of love, all who are only half alive, those of us just taking up space and passing the time. Believing in him who is resurrection and life is never about accepting some theological theory, swallowing some improbable doctrine, but always and only a matter of trusting our experience. This believing is about facing our own deadness, letting go all the supports and stays through which we try to shape our own destiny and construct our own security. It is about letting the full force of God's passionate love right in, walking with Christ consciously and deliberately in the way of selflessness, allowing our best selves to slip through our fingers without fear because it is the only gift we have to give. For it is only when we are broken open by astonishing joy or intense suffering that the crucified and living Lord becomes bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

In her astonishingly tough and haunting poem "Eli, Eli", the Australian poet Judith Wright keeps our eyes fixed on him who comes to rescue us – attentive to all the power of his suffering and longing and loving.

To see them go by drowning in the river –
soldiers and elders drowning in the river,
the pitiful women drowning in the river,
the children's faces staring from the river –
that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him.

To hold the invisible wand, and not to save them –
to know them turned to death, and yet not save them;
only to cry to them and not to save them,
knowing that no one but themselves could save them –
this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him.

To hold out love and know they would not take it,
to hold out faith and know they dared not take it –
the invisible wand, and none would see or take it,
all he could give, and there was none to take it –
thus they betrayed him, not with the tongue's betrayal.

He watched, and they were drowning in the river;
faces like sodden flowers in the river –
faces of children moving in the river;
and all the while, he knew there was no river.ⁱⁱⁱ

"I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted his eyes up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you heard me.' And these things having said, with great voice he cried out, 'Lazarus, come out.' And Jesus says to them, 'Unbind him and let him go free'.

For, all the while, he knew there was no river.

ⁱ John 11:1-45.

ⁱⁱ Francis J. Moloney SDB, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996) pp. 154ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Judith Wright "Eli, Eli", in Les A. Murray (Ed), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: Collins Dove 1986) p. 141.

The Sunday of the Passion

Palm Sunday

20th March 2005

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Toward the end of his long life, the celebrated conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was asked what advice he would give to someone starting out. He thought for a time, looked up, and said this: "Try everything once – except for incest and folk-dancing."

On the first day of the Great Week of the Christian Year, my advice is exactly the same. Try everything. Give yourself up to all that this holy week offers. Give yourself up to the entire experience, without dissembling or holding back, without protecting yourself. Be really present in the same way Christ is really present, and enjoy.

Yes, enjoy! This is not a grim week, a tiresome, drawn-out, slow bleed. It is not a festival of religious misery, when we grovel and beat our breasts, attempting to make ourselves acceptable to God. The contrary, this week is our celebration of pure love, our celebration of the fact that God loves us before we can do anything to save ourselves, and love us always. The week is solemn and serious to be sure, demanding all we have to give, but never sentimental, and never morbid.

The woman who described to me a Good Friday liturgy in which she nearly fainted, so overcome was she by the sufferings of Jesus, missed the point entirely – as, evidently, did the liturgy itself! Passing over with Christ from death to life is hardly painless, but this is nothing less than the agony of birth and the bliss we call joy.

So, as Holy Week begins, the questions are pretty stark, and there is no softening them to make the choice more palatable. Will we stay the distance, or take the easy option and opt out? Will we determine here and now to give ourselves without reserve to celebrating Three Great Days as one long day of salvation, or will we pick and choose as the mood takes us? Can we be constant or will we be our usual fickle selves, fobbing God off with casual excuses?

A priest was telling me about the letter from someone she invited to take part in the Maundy Thursday footwashing ceremony. He hadn't exactly married an ox and couldn't come; he had simply made other arrangements long before the priest said anything about Maundy Thursday! It was almost as if she rather capriciously invented Maundy Thursday, springing it on an unsuspecting parish to spoil their Easter holidays by insinuating religion into the situation! Around the same time, an elderly man patiently explained to me why the 6am Easter Vigil is just too much of a struggle; reluctantly, he has to give it a miss. This is someone I greatly respect, someone I love dearly, and also someone who has no trouble being in Kings Park every year on Anzac Day for the dawn service!

How often it is that Christ is crucified afresh by the sheer mediocrity of our response to what he has done for us; not by any deliberate slight, just by selfishness or carelessness, by lack of imagination. And it's never really a question of what is convenient or difficult. It always boils down to a question of loyalties. The fact is that for some people and some events, nothing's too much trouble.

So, we are called very simply to choose. We are called in clear terms to commitment. We are asked to demonstrate where our heart is. If we say "Yes" to this call, there is no doubt that we will be plunged into deepest darkness, into the evil of betrayal and violence, that we who at the best of times cannot stand very much reality will face something an overdose before the week comes to its end. Keeping close to Jesus as he walks in the way of the cross does mean sharing his own terrible sufferings, stripped of all our usual defences. And God spares us nothing, and is unable to protect us.

But staying with Jesus as he walks in the way of the cross also means treading the royal path, the gold-paved road where sheer goodness and love offer genuine peace and radiant health and fullness of life. If you prefer being half dead, keep the shutters down this Easter. If you are ready to risk life, fling wide the gates.

Maundy Thursday

24th March 2005

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Tens of thousands of Americans are queuing for up to three hours to visit a touring "Relics of the Passion" exhibition. The exhibition boasts a sliver of the true cross, fragments from the crown of thorns and the column of flagellation, full-size replicas of the nails used in the crucifixion made with shavings of the actual nails, and other relics of the first Easter. "People being deeply moved by the experience is very common", says Andrew Walthers from the Apostolate for Holy Relics, a non-profit organization that is mounting the tour. Protestants, who make up about a third of the visitors, seem to have been moved by the amount of suffering in the crucifixion as depicted in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, organizers said.

It's curious what moves us, isn't it? And it's curious, to say the least, how keen we are to set off on wild goose chases across the centuries to other times and places. Almost any other time and place will do, so long as it gets us out of where we really belong, where we live and work and exercise Christ's ministry and mission. It is certainly easier to whip ourselves into an emotional frenzy thinking about Christ's sufferings long ago, than feel the pain around us now. It is a whole lot simpler to be deeply moved than actually do something to relieve such suffering. Bogus relics – and there can be little doubt that all the touring relics are completely bogus - are nothing more than a distraction for spiritual tourists, an escape into some parallel religious universe with little connection to this real one.

Set this charade alongside the church's liturgy, and we come down to earth with a thud. For whatever we do together in these three days of the Christian Passover, we certainly do not escape reality. We are not on a voyage of discovery in old Jerusalem. We are not in the upper room for the Last Supper. And we are certainly not re-enacting the crucifixion or trying to prove Jesus was once upon a time raised to life.

This Easter celebration is about who we are now, not about our mothers and fathers in faith. It is about Christ's present day disciples, rather than the original twelve. And it all takes place very simply and deliberately around the table, where there is room for all of us, where a place is actually set to welcome every individual. The table, of course, is the principal symbol of Christ among us. Marked with the five crosses of his passion, the table stands, like Christ himself, unprotected, unfenced, available, wide open to every comer. Whoever we are, we belong here. Here is food for the multitude, enough and more than enough. Endless hospitality overflows here day after day in endless generosity.

All this, I guess, could be just so much theory, except that it is a matter of life and death for real people. For too long now, the Anglican church has been indulging in a very public brawl about the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church. In particular: can they, or can't they, be ordained as priests and bishops? This is a bloody battle over less than nothing, like arguing about ordaining people with green eyes or red hair. Far, far more serious than the argument itself is the manner and the tone of the struggle. It is not that we differ that concerns anyone, but that we do it so violently - this is what brings the church into disrepute and crucifies Christ afresh. There should never be any place in Christian circles for scurrilous personal attack, for blackmail and threats of excommunication. Yet, to our everlasting shame, we have witnessed all this, and now live with this depressing legacy. And the latest trick is walking away from the table.

Some dozen or so primates of our church refuse to celebrate Eucharist with the Archbishop of Canterbury and their brothers, and then naively wonder why their actions speak louder than their words! In other places, lesser prelates are up to the same trick. Using the sacrament of unity as a weapon, declaring ourselves out of communion and refusing to sit at table, is little short of blasphemy. It spits in the face of Christ who so patiently and painstakingly gathers us together, making a total mockery of his life and work and teaching and death.

We need no reminders of our separations, as ancient wounds are scratched open, and fresh wounds inflicted. But it is no cliché to say that what unites us *always* far outweighs what divides us, for Christ alone unites us, Christ alone is our peace.

As he kneels down to wash our feet tonight, he doesn't mince his words: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

▣ Mk 6:34-44; Mtt 14:13-21; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:1-59.
▣ Jn 13:1-17, 31b-35.

Good Friday

25th March 2005

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Maggie Ross is a solitary. This means she lives under monastic vows, but no longer in a religious community. Once upon a time she did live in a monastery. Now, she lives alone in a hermitage. When people in our activist culture and activist church discover she is a solitary, they usually ask, "What do you do?" Her answer is, "I don't do, I be". This confuses them further, of course, but with a confusion often leading to laughter. We are too earnest and too busy for our own good. We need to relax and laugh and just be. And not least on this solemn and serious day. This second stage of the Christian Passover is not a funeral liturgy for the dead Jesus. We are not here to tear ourselves apart, but to celebrate – to celebrate the greatest love story the world has ever known, to celebrate the cross as God's supreme sign of selfless love and life.

In one of her books, Maggie Ross speaks tellingly of the cross. "Crucifixes can be dangerous. Like other symbols they can lose their meaning through overuse or abuse. Crucifixes confront us, yet we can and often do weasel our way out of being brought face to Face with their message. Sometimes crucifixes incite us to justifiable rebellion against lingering piety that in its imaginative excess appeals to neurotic guilt. In times of crisis or imagined crisis, when we are feeling put upon and martyred, isolating ourselves in self-righteous superiority with our carefully controlled, non-specific, free-floating guilt, we may catch ourselves rolling our eyes toward it while heaving deep sighs over our hurt, using the sign of selfless immolation to justify wallowing in self-pity."[▣]

This is why Maggie Ross uses in Lent a cross not made of wood, like a replica of the original. She uses a contemporary photograph. One year her Lent photo was taken in Minamata, a little seacoast town dependent on fishing the local waters. The only industry in Minamata besides fishing is a chemical plant supplying basic compounds to Japan's manufacturing complex. In the late 1960's the people of the town began to realize something was terribly wrong. Tests revealed something quite simple, although many were already beyond cure. The fish on which the people of Minamata subsisted were contaminated with mercury. Mercury poisoning is silent. It causes retardation, madness, blindness. The bodies of small children become grotesque, their limbs deformed, their nervous systems useless. Maggie Ross' Lent crucifix is a portrait of a mother bathing her helpless, misshapen child.

"When the viewer catches sight of the tortured figure of the little girl, the reaction is physical and spiritual nausea. 'Pietà', your brain registers immediately, and your eyes wish quickly to slip off the edge of the page to something more neutral. But wait. Look deeply into this icon. It is Madonna and Child and Pietà merged into one: infinite love, infinite cherishing, infinite sorrow, infinite pain. It reveals the way God cradles creatures whose lives have been twisted from the effects of evil choices – ours and others'. God bathes us with tears, with the waters of baptism, heals us, shares our agony. With tender patience she cares for her maimed image, helps us, moves us, washes us into transfiguration. This is an icon of God our Mother who sees wholeness in our disfigurement, beauty in our deformity, holiness in our wretchedness. This blind, contorted girl-child is the Body and figure of Christ, and what we have done to her we have done to our selves, to the creation, and quite literally to Christ. In her brokenness, in our brokenness, is Jesus' brokenness on two pieces of wood: now, not long ago; here, not far away."[▣]

Last night I had some hard things to say about an exhibition of relics touring America – bits of the true cross, fragments from the crown of thorns, nails made with shavings from the nails used in crucifying Jesus. Such relics are completely bogus, but even if they were real, they are entirely beside the point. The cross on calvary means nothing divorced from today's crosses. Devotion to Christ embeds us more deeply in the present moment, discovering how this place we know so well is really Jerusalem. Spiritual tourists to some parallel religious universe are little use to God who wills to love us into life now, not long ago; here, not far away. Our devotional life is to make us responsible adult daughters and sons of God, people who will save a place like Minamata: strong, compassionate people who bear the burdens of others and stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Responsible adults embedded in the here and now are rather different from religious freaks inhabiting some other planet, mindlessly peddling pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die-by-and-by. And responsibility

begins on this day with veneration of the cross, and every other day when Christ crucified is truly at the heart of our lives. And we recognize this selfless responsibility when we see it.

Kilmer Myers, later Bishop of California, began his priestly ministry on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Every afternoon, regularly at 4pm, a Jewish woman named Emma, a survivor of the Holocaust, came and stood outside the church and screamed abuse at Jesus. Finally, one day, Kim went down to the street and said to Emma, "why don't you go inside and tell him?" She disappeared into the church. After an hour had passed, Kim was getting worried, so he went in after her. There she was, prostrate and silent under the great crucifix, absolutely still. Reaching down, he gently touched her shoulder. She looked up with tears in her eyes, and said quietly, "After all, he was a Jew, too". I knew a man in Melbourne whose young daughter was dying of leukemia. He went every afternoon to the Royal Children's Hospital to visit her. On his way, he always stopped in a church where he looked hard at the crucifix and asked God to heal his child. One day, he had with him a large chocolate cake. It was her sixth birthday. He stopped and talked to the crucified Christ as usual. When he got to the hospital his daughter had just died. Without saying a word, he walked out, went straight back to the church, and with all his might hurled the cake at the crucifix. It was a prayer, a desperate, broken-hearted cry of pain, a genuine act of faith, of love-making, not unlike Emma's tears of recognition. And, looking back now, I can tell you that it was also a new beginning, the first stirrings of resurrection life.

We can do it, and God can take it. Jesus on the cross shows us how much God willingly takes. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" – and just as surely, bears all our joys and delights as well.ⁱⁱⁱ God has taken it all before. God takes it still: now, not long ago; here, not far away.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maggie Ross, *The Fire of Your Life: A Solitude Shared* (London: DLT 1992) p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maggie Ross, *The Fire of Your Life*, p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 53:4.

Easter Day

27th March 2005

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In his Easter message, Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold of the Episcopal Church of America tells of visiting a newly consecrated Greek Orthodox Church, and being given a tour by the parish priest. "We stopped in front of a large mosaic depicting the Risen Christ standing on the battered doors of Hell. He is extending his hands to a man and a woman, representing Adam and Eve, who seem to be emerging from rectangular tombs looking rather surprised. Locks and chains, symbols of bondage, float mysteriously in a vast black space below the figures. The priest drew my attention to Christ's hands, saying: 'This is not simply an affectionate hand clasp.' And indeed it is not! Christ has Adam and Eve by the wrists and is forcefully yanking them into the freedom of the resurrection. Doubtless Adam and Eve experienced a certain kind of security while safely within the confinement of their tombs. They know the boundaries of their enclosure. Then, suddenly, they are pulled free and find themselves in an open space seemingly without limits. Their wide iconic eyes suggest not only surprise but uncertainty and confusion. This says to me that freedom in the Spirit, which is the gift of the risen Christ, is not always a gentle or immediately welcome experience."

Well, you can say that again. We all like our own little worlds, and we don't much like being disturbed. We usually have quite a lot invested in being half asleep, half dead. And we certainly depend for our everyday security on a reasonable level of predictability – action and their consequence, word and effect, giving as good as you get, tit for tat. Whatever else the resurrection may be, it is certainly an event to pull the rug right out from under us. Surprise and uncertainty and confusion undoubtedly belong to this day, all mixed up with a healthy dose of common or garden terror. So it has been reliably suggested that when the disciple Jesus loves looks out from the fishing boat into the early morning mist and says to Simon Peter, "It is the Lord!", Simon Peter probably said, "Oh shit!" Because this was emphatically *not* welcome news. How could it be to someone who had denied ever knowing Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ In his hour of need, the man for others is abandoned over and over again by Simon Peter, just as self-interest triumphs in every other disciple – "they all forsook him and fled".ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus alive, as Peter acknowledges, is someone who knows everything, someone who knows all there is to know about his friends, all their sorry

history.^[1] His return is the greatest threat they are ever likely to face. "Not one of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?', knowing (only too well) that it is the Lord."^[2]

And yet what they imagine is now to be their due simply doesn't materialize. Jesus does not return to take his revenge, to settle accounts. He does not so much as blame them or reprove them in any way for their faults and failings and faithless fear. On the contrary, he is his usual open, recognizable, reliable self – wonderfully generous and endlessly tender and totally trustworthy. Their betrayal does not make Christ betray them. I want to suggest to you that this is one of the strongest arguments for trusting the veracity of the resurrection appearance stories. For this is not the sort of story we could have invented for ourselves. It cuts right across all our notions of what is likely, of what is proper, undermining every human notion of natural justice. It pulls the rug right out from under us. And what happens to Simon Peter, happens to every single one of us. His story of betrayal and restoration is our own story.

When I was reading St John's closely-woven text yesterday, one feature struck me more forcibly than ever before. It is the litany of the double-barreled name. Simon son of John is referred to throughout not just as Simon, and not just by his symbolic name Peter, the rock-man. With only one exception, John insists on calling him Simon Peter.^[3] He can never again just be Simon son of John; he is also Peter the apostle, Peter the failed apostle. He is both Simon who stands by the charcoal fire in the High Priest's courtyard in the cold and dark of Maundy Thursday, and Peter who stands by another charcoal fire as Easter comes to the lakeside.^[4] He is the Simon who fell away because of fear, the one who didn't love enough, and Peter who now undoes his three-fold denial with his three-fold profession of true love.

The fragility and humanness of Simon Peter is even more evident if we drop the word love, and use the term John most often employs. Jesus says to him, 'Simon son of John, are you fond of me?' He says to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you.'" To us this dialogue is all too easily recognizable, all too poignant, all too tragic. It is each one of us really - in relation to our Lord, certainly, but also in every other of our human relationships. We all come here, the walking wounded, the vulnerable, quite literally, with our *vulnera*, our wounds showing.^[5] We come carrying the heavy burden of our own history - things we regret ever happened, words we can't unsay, actions we can't undo. Around the fire of God's love we gather, warming ourselves, coming alive again. Here we find a home, the hospitable table, food for the journey. Here we know ourselves forgiven, raised, made worthy to stand in God's presence as servants and friends. The One we crucify endlessly comes to meet us, rejecting in word and deed the world's rejections.^[6] No longer must we crouch in the shadows, beating our breasts, feeling like failures, for here we belong as honoured guests in the full sunlight of another day. Resurrection is all about being taken firmly by the wrists and yanked out of our tombs. Christ breaks down the doors of hell, trampling down death by death, and evil has no power over us any more. At Easter our inconstant, fallible decisions and weak commitments, endlessly liable to destructive delusion, are set firmly against the backcloth of God's constant decision and eternal commitment, God's everlasting invitation to us and 'making space' for us.

As we eat and drink with Jesus after his resurrection, as he feeds us with bread and fish from his own charcoal fire, we are offered a fresh start, not a return to lost innocence, but the acceptance of forgiveness, a risen life. For today is the eighth day of the week, the first day of a new creation. All meals with Christ after calvary speak of restoration, restoration of communion broken by our infidelity. "We do not eucharistically remember a distant death: we are 'made present to ourselves' as people complicit in the betrayal and death of Jesus and yet still called and accepted, still 'companions' of Christ in the strict sense – those who break bread with him. The Eucharist recapitulates the Supper, the betrayal and the cross, but it does so as an **Easter** feast."^[7]

Some years back, after twenty-five years of courting New York City officials, the great contemporary artists Christo and Jeanne-Calude were finally given permission to install their latest creation, *The Gates: A Project for New York*. The exhibit consists in a series of 7,500 sixteen foot gates bearing saffron coloured drapes in a river-like succession. These gates are placed at twelve foot intervals along twenty-three miles of walkways criss-crossing Central Park – a burst of colour and new life in the dead park, buried under the beauty of winter snow. The installation began on January 3rd this year, and only ended at the start of March. Christo and Jeanne-Claude claim to create works of joy and beauty that are not intended to be symbolic or carry any political or moral message. But how can we fail to see here our own experience in these great three days of the Christian Passover? And how can we help mixed metaphors, as we struggle to tell the truth of the gospel, as we strive to share the good news? In dead winter, seeds buried alive are surprised by spring! Against all the odds, we find ourselves walking with Christ along the great processional way, hand in hand into the dawning kingdom!

▮ Mark 14:30, 72; Matthew 26:34, 75; Luke 22:34, 61; John 18:27.

▮ Mark 14:50, Matthew 26:56.

▮ John 21:17.

▮ John 21:12.

▮ John 21:2, 3, 7, 11, 15.

▮ John 18:18, 21:9. On both occasions, John carefully inserts the Greek word

▮ Maggie Smith, *The Fire of Your Life: A Solitude Shared* (London: DLT 1992) p. 42.

▮ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: DLT 1982) p. 108.

▮ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 40.

Second Sunday of Easter

3rd April 2005

Father David Wood

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The struggle between faith and doubt is central in all four gospels, as it is, if we are honest, in every human heart. Believing is never easy, and those who pretend it is are really not to be trusted as spiritual guides. Easy belief is usually not worth much, for it must necessarily gloss over some of the evidence, ignoring the hard facts of life that militate against faith. Trusting faith arises in the midst of natural doubts, and the two are not enemies, but friends. Doubt is a friend to be welcomed, because it keeps us honest and humble and human. It seems to me that this is the way doubt is presented in scripture, which makes me wonder why the church as a whole, and individual Christians, can be so afraid of it? Why do we fear doubt so much, and hide it so clumsily? This is surely a central question for us as we celebrate the resurrection.

I cannot think of a single instance when Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not doubt".^[i] Doubt is not our problem. The regular refrain of the Master seems to be, "Do not be afraid."^[ii] This is the heart of the matter. In John's gospel, this perfectly normal struggle between faith and doubt is personalised in today's story of Thomas. This brings the debate to a head, because while John is very careful in what he says concerning Thomas, the church has shown no reluctance in damning him as "Doubting Thomas". Why is this derisory "Doubting Thomas" tag so popular and persistent? Why do we never hear of "Doubting Peter" or "Betraying Peter", or even the "Doubting Twelve"? Such deliberate misreading of the text tells us more about our own pathology than about the gospel of God. It's as if we need to project all our terrors about our own doubts on to some scapegoat, and poor Thomas is randomly chosen.

I want to argue, as I've done before, that Thomas is long overdue for rehabilitation. Pushing back two thousand years of Christian history is no small task, but we are told often enough how important it is to have identifiable and achievable goals. Well, this is one of mine! It is high time Thomas' reputation was restored, for he is not the personification of all our failures. On the contrary, he is offered to us by John as a model of faith. If this seems strange, just put the legendary Thomas on one side for a moment and listen again at the story.

The story itself, freed from derisory tradition, could hardly be more straightforward. Thomas refuses to believe on hearsay. The testimony of his brother disciples is not sufficient to convince him. He simply must see and handle the wounds of Jesus crucified if he is to trust in Jesus risen. Note how the evangelist expresses absolutely no judgment on this. It is taken as necessary. Indeed, isn't it in some sense necessary for us all? The five wounds in hands and feet and side are, after all, the sole authenticating marks by which we can be sure that today's living Christ is one and the same as the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

So it is that the raised Jesus says to Thomas, as to all of us, and not least in this Easter Eucharist, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side, and do not be faithless but faithful."^[iii] Notice, however, that when the moment comes, Thomas actually doesn't need to do any handling. The evidence of his eyes is enough, and on the strength of this he makes the good confession we are all invited to make, "My Lord and my God!"^[iv]

We witness here Thomas stumbling from faithlessness to faith, and his journey is presented as a model for us, in much the same way that John presents the journey of Mary Magdalene and of the Beloved Disciple as patterns for

believing. Some would go further still, claiming that Thomas's confession is in fact "the supreme Christological pronouncement of the Fourth Gospel."^[v] If they are right, Thomas is presented as the faithful disciple, the most fully orthodox of all, someone for us to look up to, rather than someone for us to look at down our noses.

In Eastertime, we all likewise come again and again to faith. In our doubts, we reach out in trust to a reality so real we can never fully grasp it. Let's not worry unduly about this. Our stumbling "little faith" is simply who we are; it goes with the territory of being human, and God does not despise it. We need not be too hard on ourselves, but go happily with the flow. As one great saint says –

At a turn of the head bent intent on a task,
ripple of light, hem of his garment only,
or lift of the heart suddenly less lonely,
is all the Easter evidence I ask.^[vi]

^[v] The usual English translation of John 20:27 is problematic. The saying *mh ginou apistos alla pistos* - "Do not doubt but believe" – is better translated (as John's deliberate play on words in the Greek text suggests) "Do not be faithless but faithful". In Matthew 14:31 Jesus asks Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?", and in 21:21 there is another dialogue about faith and doubt, "If you have faith and do not doubt ..., even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea', it will be done", but these instances seem to support my argument rather than contradict it.

^[vi] Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20; Matthew 17:7; Matthew 28:10; Mark 5:36.

^[vii] John 20:27.

^[viii] John 20:28.

^[ix] See R.E. Brown SS, *The Gospel according to John*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966) Vol. II, p. 1047. Recently R.J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), has argued this case with some force. See especially 13-16, 69-88.

^[x] J.V. Taylor, "Easter", in *A Christmas Sequence and Other Poems* (Oxford: The Amate Press, 1989) p. 26.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

17th April 2005

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The primate of Nigeria, Archbishop Peter Akinola, this week announced plans to set up what he calls a "Convocation of Anglican Nigerian Churches" in America. "This Convocation will function as a ministry of the Church of Nigeria in America. Our intention is not to challenge or intervene in the churches of ECUSA (The Episcopal Church in the United States of America) and the Anglican Church of Canada but rather to provide safe harbour for those who can no longer find their spiritual home in those churches. While it will initially operate under our Constitution and Canons, it will have its own legal and ecclesial structure and local suffragan episcopate. During the intervening months, in cooperation with our friends in the Anglican Communion Network, I will be appointing episcopal visitors from among already consecrated bishops to provide pastoral and episcopal oversight for those congregations already in operation and in formation. I am excited by the possibilities before us and look forward to seeing this ministry grow."^[xi]

Just in case that statement leaves us wondering, *The Church Times* newspaper carries a picture of Archbishop Akinola to prove that he is indeed excited.^[xii] But I'm afraid all we really see here is the excitement of the empire-builder, the excitement of a sheep-stealer and cattle-rustler. Of course this rogue archbishop is challenging and intervening in the Episcopal Church, undermining the legitimate structures of Anglicanism in the United States by

setting up a parallel church. And he is doing so hand in hand with the Anglican Communion Network, a group of intransigents who have every intention of undermining ECUSA.

At least the Anglican Communion Network is made up of Episcopalians, attempting to deal with a situation in their own church. They don't like the fact that the Episcopal Church consecrated Bishop Gene Robinson and that same-sex blessings are permitted. Neither does Archbishop Akinola, but what the Episcopal Church does is really none of his business. By all means let him express his opposition, by all means let him take whatever steps are necessary to keep such supposed evils out of the Church of Nigeria, but he must stop short of interfering in other churches in other provinces.

That Archbishop Akinola cannot stop himself, and that no one else seems able to stop him either, is becoming increasingly plain. When I was in New York in October last year, we learned that the Nigerian archbishop was on one of his tours. Deliberately and rudely, he ignored the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, refusing even to pay him a courtesy call at his headquarters near the United Nations. The Bishop of New York graciously made more than one attempt to contact Akinola, but he too was rebuffed. The archbishop had no time to see his brother bishops and talk with them; he was too busy being feted by his wealthy friends. So much for really caring about the welfare of Christ's church.

Perhaps now we will begin to understand what is really going on in the current struggle for the soul of Anglicanism. The Akinolas of the world are starting to show their true colours, and it turns out that they have no real vision or concern for the catholicity of the church. They are, however, very interested in strutting the international stage for a while, and in expanding their own power. Like so many before them in the history of the church, they demonstrate how easily division is exploited and lasting schism established. Fragmenting the body of Christ, crucifying the risen Lord all over again, turns out to be an Easter sport. It is, after all, the easiest thing in the world, whereas the service of unity requires patient and persistent work. Destroying communion is far easier than creating communion, and is all the more evil when it is disguised as standing up for the faith and resisting doctrinal error.

Can we see anywhere here the work of the Good Shepherd?ⁱⁱⁱ Can this man possibly be a real pastor: the door or the gate of the sheep?^{iv} The authentic voice of the great "I AM" is muffled here, stopped down till it is all but inaudible, for, sad to say, we are actually witnessing the activities of a thief and a bandit.^v I am sure that Archbishop Akinola would be absolutely horrified to think he has fallen into the trap. No doubt he is genuinely excited by what he is doing, and no doubt sincerely hopes to see his ministry grow. Nevertheless, he is a stranger in a foreign land, a lost shepherd wandering in the wrong pasture. All his protestations to the contrary, the situation is pretty clear. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy".^{vi}

ⁱⁱⁱ See P.J. Akinola, "A Word to Nigerian Anglicans in North America", http://www.anglican-nig.org/prlttr_northamerica.htm

^{iv} Pat Ashworth, "Akinola Unveils Plans for US", in *The Church Times*, 15th April 2005. See <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk>

^v John 10:1-11.

^{vi} John 10:1:7, 9.

^{vii} John 10:1.

^{viii} John 10:10.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

24th April 2005

Father David Wood

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Anyone who has ever been to a Christian funeral is likely to know these words. "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also."ⁱⁱⁱ Now there is real irony in this, for John the evangelist almost entirely focuses on this present age and has very little interest in the life to come. In other words, the church routinely uses as a funeral reading something which basically has no reference to life beyond the grave, staining the words to serve this purpose. When we come to this passage in Easter time, therefore, it not only takes some effort *not* to hear it in the context of the graveyard, but we are almost driven to do so. Indeed, we

probably imagine that this is precisely why it is chosen, to help us make the link between Christ's resurrection and our own?

So it can come as something of a shock to find that the focus today is emphatically *not* on some other world. Our focus is life in this world, and for that matter *resurrection* life in this world, *resurrection* in the only world we know. How shall we be God's Easter people now, in this place and time, rather than some never-never land that may simply never come?

The words of the Easter Jesus, heard in this context, become startlingly coherent. Today's gospel is not, as might appear at first glance, three distinct sections each with their own frame of reference, but one seamless sequence of thought which is all to do with how we live today and tomorrow. And the golden thread running through the text is caught in one word. We have met this word before, but here it is an all but unspoken word. The word I have in mind is, of course, the word *abiding*, and John begins to use it early on. Right after his baptism two of John the Baptist's disciples follow Jesus, and their question is, "Lord, where are you staying?", or "where are you abiding?"^[1] This is not simply some idle inquiry about Jesus's home address, but about where his extraordinary and unique *aliveness* comes from. And his answer to those first curious disciples: "Come and see."

Well, this is what we have been doing. This is what we are always doing. As long as we are attracted to Christ we are tagging along, seeing for ourselves what gives, exploring the origins of his vitality. "Christian life", it has been memorably said, "is an adventure, a voyage of discovery, a journey, sustained by faith and hope, towards a final and complete communion with the Love at the heart of all things."^[2] In life and in death Jesus *abides* – he stays, dwells, or lives - in the reality of God, in the sheer aliveness of the Father.

This is why he can talk in terms of *going* to the Father and of *coming again* to his disciples, almost as if there is no movement involved at all. This is why he talks of being *in* the Father and of the Father being *in* him. This is simply where he always lives. It is, if you like, his native habitat, his natural environment, the very air he breathes. It follows that he cannot show Philip the Father as if the Father were *someone* else, as if the Father were *somewhere* else. "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who *dwells* – or *abides*, or *lives* – in me does his works. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."^[3]

It follows perfectly naturally from this that these works of God performed by the Son who models the Father's love and mirrors the Father's life, now fall to us who are to live out the same vocation. By virtue of our baptism and the bread we break together we now dwell in him and he in us. The church is an extension of the incarnation, the mystery of God now taking flesh in our own lives. Just as Jesus in his human life perfectly embodies the unseen God who is the heart of all reality, so we in our turn carry on where he left off. This is what it means to ask in Christ's name, to pray as he prays, to have his mind and seek his face. Jesus is present now as we allow him to do through us the same works of healing and reconciliation characteristic of his ministry and mission. The ongoing presence of the absent Jesus is to be found in every eucharistic community, reaching out in compassion to the world, revealing God's heart in every city and neighbourhood.^[4] As we are sent away from the table, we hear the words "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord". They mean go away and be who you are. Go in peace and *be* the Lord of love and peace. You come here to be nourished with the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven. Now get out of here and be who you are, the Body of Christ. Get out of here and bring a little bit of heaven with you to the patch of earth where you live.

Where is God? Again and again, the question is asked. And we must know ourselves, and others must see in us, the answer. God is here where I am, in me caring for you. It is God who ministers to the lonely, to the old, to the sick. It is no one else but Christ who looks with love and acts in compassion. Someone I know very well has recently struck up a friendship with a Bangladeshi doctor, and just as they are getting on like a house on fire, he discovers that this new friend is dying of brain cancer. Indeed, he has only a matter of months to live. What is just beginning is also ending, and my friend is naturally distraught. Furthermore, my friend is Christian and his new companion is Hindu. Between them a great gulf seems fixed, and there is fear – fear about the future, fear of the pain of loss, even fear about differences in religion. "How on earth have I got myself into this?" my friend asks, "part of me just wants to cut and run". But, of course, he will not cut and run. He'll simply be there, lovingly, patiently, tenderly to the end. And he will actually be God - physically, tangibly - to the dying man, just as the dying man is himself God's presence and present in return. And the labels don't matter for a moment. Faced with the ultimate mystery, the brand names Christian and Hindu mean nothing at all. All we know, and all we need know, is that Easter is no fairytale. "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and even greater works will you do because I am going to the Father."^[5]

▮ John 10:1-3.

▮ John 1:35-39.

▮ *Christian Believing: The Nature of the Christian Faith and its Expression in Holy Scripture and Creeds* (London: SPCK 1976) p.3.

▮ John 14:9-10.

▮ Francis J. Moloney SDB, *Glory Not Dishonour: Reading John 13-21* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1998) p.39.

▮ John 14:12-14.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

1st May 2003

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According to that rather sour English poet, Philip Larkin, "what will survive of us is love."

"If you love me, the commands of me you will keep. The one having the commands of me and keeping them is the one loving me, and the one loving me will be loved by the Father of me, and I will love them and will manifest myself to them."[▮]

But sometimes what we sing makes a deeper and more lasting impression than what is said or read and heard.

"No more we doubt Thee, glorious Prince of Life;
life is nought without Thee: aid us in our strife,
make us more than conquerors through Thy deathless love;
bring us safe through Jordan to Thy home above."

"Thy deathless love."

That's it, isn't it?

We never begin to appreciate what Jesus' desire for our love means until we ask what loving means to him.

For he is giving us part of himself, bequeathing to us the key that unlocks his own identity at every turn, hoping and praying that his friends and followers will continue his life and finish the work he is beginning.

On any reckoning, encountering Christ is a head-on collision with someone intensely alive, vibrantly alive, dazzlingly alive.

And he wants us fully alive too, living intensely, abundantly, choosing between life and death, between existing and not existing.[▮]

Often enough we are barely alive, just going through the motions – as we say, *marking* time, *passing* the time, *filling* in time.

The old joy disappears on us and we are just here, plodding along without much enthusiasm or satisfaction or purpose.

More accurately, I suppose, the love apart from which life is worthless seems to have evaporated or been extinguished, so we are plain weary of it all.

Death, or at least deadening, feels like a merciful release.

Anesthetized, we somehow get by.

Or the loneliness leads to suicide, the ultimate loneliness, the ultimate isolation where we extinguish the pain by cutting ourselves off from everything and everyone.

We can all go down that road, or turn back from the brink and let love in, the "deathless love" of God embodied in God's friends.

We can walk away on our own, or walk towards each other, refuse love or allow ourselves to be embraced by it.

“This is the command of me, that you love one another as I have loved you”.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

And the saying is true: “Love means to stop resisting”.

This, in part at least, is what Easter trumpets to the world.

They will know we are Christians by our love – by love’s patience and passion persisting in us, this love pointing beyond us to its source in the crucified and raised Lord.

They’ll know we are Christians by our love – by the generous, selfless, self-giving, self-sacrificing love of the household where alone that same Lord reigns and rules.

Yes, his “deathless love” is alive in us now, and this is all that matters, and this is what will survive of us.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 14:15, 21.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ John 10:10.

^v John 15:12.

Ascension Sunday

8th May 2005

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“This is eternal life, that they may know the only true God and he whom you sent, Jesus Christ”.ⁱⁱⁱ Knowledge of the only true God is found in the sent one, the human one, the servant and son who walks beside us as our brother. He it is who opens to us the Father’s heart, who shows us all there is of God, for Jesus is nothing other than truth in the flesh. For the writer of the Fourth Gospel, revelation is supremely important. Believing is seeing, and faith is understanding. Knowing somewhere in the depths of ourselves what kind of world this is, knowing the secret at the heart of life, insight, enlightenment, this is essential to real life, life lived in depth, eternal life.

This means the Christian way is all about looking, contemplating, taking time to allow God’s signs entry to our hearts and minds, pondering imagery and event until they penetrate our darkness. Today, forty days into Easter, it means contemplating the ascension of the crucified and raised Lord into heaven. It means being patient over a story which is far more sophisticated than at first it seems. It means looking all day at a portrait of fact and faith, of ending and beginning, of absence and presence.

As a matter of fact, the historical Jesus of Nazareth was seen and heard and touched by only a handful of people. To be with him in Galilee and Jerusalem was to find yourself nearer God than anywhere else. When he looked at you, you knew yourself loved and welcomed, forgiven and accepted. His touch brought healing from sickness and life to the dead. As a matter of fact, all this was experienced, and we have testimony to bring it to our attention. As a matter of fact, all this had to end. It could not simply go on and on for ever, for whatever else we say of Jesus, he is first and foremost a real human being, like us in every way, finite and mortal just like the rest of us. Like every one of us, he belongs to a particular time and place, limited to a moment in history and disappearing very fast into the past. The thirty years or so of incarnation, of God’s reality enfleshed in this Jewish man have a beginning and an end. From conception to death, Jesus is one of us, “from the warmth of Mary’s womb to the stillness of the grave”. And even beyond the grave, all the Easter stories attest that he continues to appear to his friends. But then, at some point, we don’t know quite when, these resurrection appearances cease.

The ascension is the cut off point: one door closes, another opens. We are faced with a new beginning, taking us beyond matters of fact, bringing us into the realm of faith, faith which introduces a whole new world and a whole new set of facts. For the physical absence of Jesus is the prelude to a whole new set of presences, just as physical, just as matter of fact, just as real, but apprehended now by faith, apprehended only by those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Once upon a time a few thousand people saw Jesus. Now he is seen by people of every

race and language and nation. Once he spoke to a few dozen people, at most to a few hundred at a time. Today, in gatherings just like this one, in houses and fields and office buildings and cathedrals large and small, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth[⌘] his voice is heard and hearts are moved. "This is eternal life ...", this very ordinary and yet quite extraordinary knowing and loving, gathered up and gathered together as we are by someone who is plainly not just an historical figure like Plato or St Paul or Michelangelo, or Queen Victoria.

He who opens the scriptures for us does not belong to the pastness of the past. We are ourselves witnesses that he is the living and contemporary Word behind and beyond all the ancient words of the sacred text. He comes to us in the Bible, yes, of course he does, but never just as a two-dimensional figure in black and white. He steps right out of the pages of the book, taking his place in our midst, addressing us directly, wherever two or three or three hundred or three million are gathered together. He immerses us in the waters of rebirth. He anoints our heads with oil, crowning this dust with glory. He spreads a table in our sight, providing bread enough and more than enough for all who are hungry, and a cup of blessing running over in superabundance. In deepest fear and darkest loneliness he comes as courage and hope, as friendship and light; in sickness as health and wholeness, saving us from ourselves, redeeming our failure.

Again and again and again, the absent one turns out to be really and truly and substantially present, using your eyes, or my hands, your tears and my voice. The confined incarnation in Jesus is confined no longer. Indeed, it never actually was restricted in any way. Jesus is simply and supremely the focusing of God, the burning glass under the noonday sun, the prism who reveals all the colours of the rainbow. What we see and touch here in him, in that time and place long ago, can be seen and touched in every place and every person. That means not just in saints, but in sinners, and not just in holy places, but in any place at all. It is not for us to stand gazing into heaven[⌘], expecting to find God somewhere else. Ascension is not about absence, but about presence, fact and faith, ending and beginning. Our task is to see God's will done on earth as in heaven, to seek Christ and serve Christ and be Christ here and now.

⌘ John 17:3

⌘ Acts 1:8

⌘ Acts 1:11

The Day of Pentecost

15th May 2005

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The fiftieth day of Easter, this Day of Pentecost, is a day for stories. Stories told around the fire in the half light of Easter dawn have been unfolding every day for seven weeks now, and they catch our imagination and take flesh in our hearts. I have three stories today, three stories to add to our wonderfully rich collection of stories about the wonder of God and the dignity God gives by loving us.

The first is from Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who died last year at a great age, as the poets say "full of years". I was privileged to find myself at his Pentecost liturgy a few years ago in the Russian cathedral in London. A woman came to Metropolitan Anthony seeking advice. Though she had prayed every day she never sensed the presence of God. How could she learn the secret? He listened to her, talked with her, and sent her away. Later, she told him what happened. She went into her room, made herself comfortable, and began to knit. She was relaxed, noticing what a nice shaped room she had, with its view of the garden, and the sound of her needles hitting the arm-rest of her chair. Gradually, she became aware that the silence was not simply the absence of sound. It was filled with its own density. "And", she said, "it began to pervade me. The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me ... All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was Him"[⌘] "Him", of course, is misleading. This presence is neither male nor female. Indeed, this presence is beyond all words and concepts. The presence of God can never be described, never delineated; it can only be experienced.

Coming closer in time a priest describes an occasion when a West Indian woman in a London flat is told of her husband's death in a street accident. The shock of grief stuns her like a blow. She sinks into a corner of the sofa and sits there rigid and unhearing. For a long time her terrible tranced look continues to embarrass the family, friends and officials who come and go.

Then the schoolteacher of one of her children, an Englishwoman, calls and instinctively sits down close to her. Without a word she throws an arm around the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. The white cheek is thrust hard against the brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeps through to her, the newcomer's tears begin to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap. For a long time this is all that is happening. And then at last the West Indian woman starts to sob. Still not a word is spoken and after a little while the visitor gets up and goes, leaving some cash to help the family meet its immediate needs. This, says the writer, is the embrace of God, God's kiss of life. This is the embrace of God's mission in the world, and of our intercession. "And the Holy Spirit is the force in the straining muscles of an arm, the film of sweat between pressed cheeks, the mingled wetness on the backs of clasped hands".[¶] The Holy Spirit of the crucified and raised Christ is as close and as unobtrusive as that, and as irresistibly strong.

My third story belongs much closer to home. It happens in 1998, when hundreds of thousands of Australians march on the first "Sorry Day". In our cathedral, a middle-aged Aboriginal woman described being stolen from her family and growing up in Parkerville Children's Home. The most chilling moment was when she talked about the youngest children. They were in a section called "babyland". At night they cried themselves to sleep. Hardly surprisingly, many babies died. The Parkerville grounds were littered with small graves. In the face of the heartless refusal of the government to offer any apology, this woman likened our Australian predicament to a thorn in the foot. On Sorry Day, she said, the whole body bends down to remove the thorn. If we don't, it festers, and poisons everything. If we do, we can walk into the future together.

God is not far away, God is near at hand. God is not hard to find; God is always crossing our path. The Easter Jesus invites us to work with him, and on this Day of Pentecost gives us the grace and strength of his own Spirit that we may be instruments of his peace and ministers of his love.

[¶] J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission* (London: SCM 2004) pp. 18-19.

[¶] J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p. 243.

X

The Most Holy Trinity

22nd May 2005

Father David Wood
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Who is a Christian? To most of us the answer seems blindingly obvious. A Christian, surely, is anyone who believes in Jesus Christ? You can even hear it in the name: Christian = Christ. This is one reason we have talked about the sacrament of Christian initiation as *Christening*. Christening is a perfectly good word, and a grand idea - that individuals should be 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*, after all, someone who believes in Jesus Christ. A Christian is someone baptized in the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not simply that we dwell in Christ and he in us, but that we already share in the very life of God, joining right here and now in 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 the new life of inter-dependence and community. Here is our passing over from estrangement to reconciliation, from isolation to communion. The doctrine of the Trinity which we celebrate today 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 Triune because it must. In other words, such talk is firmly based in human experience, in our human experience of God. 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 Ghost:
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]*

It is said that Christ is the heart of Christian theology, and this is true. For us, theology *is* christology. 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 Father.^[2] But why, and how? Because Jesus is the human embodiment of the divine Spirit. In us the Spirit is like a flickering flame or a faulty light globe, for we cannot bear very much reality. But 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. So we learn to image God beyond our imaging and imagining, the mystery that is not to be seen in splendid isolation but eternal being, being with a capital B, reality with a capital R. The Orthodox and Oriental churches of the east help us in the west to see this with both eyes. Fascinatingly, the great trinitarian text for the Orthodox is nowhere to be found in any Christian document. With exceptional insight, they fasten instead on Chapter 18 of the Book of Genesis, where Abraham entertains three strangers in his tent in the desert. They turn out to be messengers of god, 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. Perhaps we can do no better today than look at the icon and let the icon look at us, while we hear the poet speak. For here is a true picture of the one God, a true portrait of who we are yet to be.

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.'^[3]

Love looms in its truth, love offering and suffering and sharing, blossoming into a multiple head. The doctrine of the Triune God proclaims nothing but this deathless Love: Love's ultimate reality, Love's obedience, and Love's

^[1] Austin Farrer *Lord I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer* London: The Faith Press 1958 p.23.

^[2] John 14:9.

▣ J.V. Taylor 'Love's Self-Opening', unpublished poem, from *A Service of Thanksgiving for the Life of John Vernon Taylor*, Winchester Cathedral, Saturday 7th April 2001.

X

Third Sunday after Pentecost

5th June 2005

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A married, middle-aged couple are at a cocktail party. The wife borrows her husband's mobile phone to check on the teenage children. She walks out on to the balcony away from the buzz of conversation just as the SMS version of the postie's whistle announces the arrival of a short text message. Colour washes from her face like the sea sucked suddenly from the seashore. Human expressions leave electronic communication sadly wanting with their singular power to convey wordlessly and instantly an approaching emotional catastrophe. Her husband is by her side in a flash. "He saw my face", the wife says later. "I held the phone up for him to read but he couldn't see because he didn't have his glasses on, so I quietly read it aloud to him: it was his girlfriend thanking him for their latest energetic sexual encounter."

Today we have many ways of communicating, but among the most popular – and the most dangerous! – is the mobile phone. In Australia, population 20.3 million, there are apparently some 17.7 million hand-sets in circulation. On Valentine's Day alone, some 6.8 million text messages were exchanged. In Britain, more than one billion SMS messages are sent each month. Here in Australia it is only 329 million each month.[▣]

I resisted the mobile phone for quite some time, but now I am as hooked as anyone. So when I was temporarily without my phone a few months back, having accidentally put it through the washing-machine, I have to admit I felt quite lost and naked! What if someone wanted to reach me urgently? What if I needed to reach someone urgently? I rushed straight off and arranged its replacement, and life was soon back on track once more. And, strange as it may seem, it dawned on me that I always feel similarly disoriented whenever I miss Sunday's eucharist. I remember years back when I was studying at San Francisco Theological Seminary one summer going to Glide Memorial Church, a black Methodist church in the heart of the city.[▣] They had pulled out all the usual church furniture except the pews, put in a stage, created a brilliant band, and trained up some fantastic singers. We had a whale of a time, singing and dancing and clapping with the best of them. It was spectacular worship to be sure, but at the end of it I said to my companions, "Now we need to go to mass somewhere". I was making no criticism of what we had just experienced. It was an experience I will never forget, and I enjoyed it as much as anyone. But, for me at least, the indispensable encounter with God is much more prosaic. Away from the bright lights and razzle-dazzle of up-to-the-minute professional performance, all it really takes is a group of ordinary people gathered around the book and the cup and a loaf of bread.

This celebration is the heart of the week, the week's proper and necessary beginning and its proper and necessary end. Instinctively, I understand what is meant when theologians argue that eucharist is both the summit and source of the Christian's faith. Everything flows into and out of this gathering of disciples around the Lord's table. Take away this sacramental experience, and faith is weakened and soon begins to evaporate. For it is precisely here that the Lord Christ is our contemporary. Here he communes with us, communicating to us all his own life and love, wherever two or three gather together in his name. Here, week by week, and day by day, he eats and drinks still with tax collectors and sinners, just as he liked to do so long ago.[▣] Here, at the table, he demonstrates how God desires mercy, not sacrifice.[▣] Here, at the altar, he calls sinners to righteousness, looking past all the wrongs, setting things to rights.[▣] Here, as we reach out to him, he lays his hand on us, healing our disease, making us well in ourselves despite every infirmity.[▣] Here we touch the hem of his garment and know his energy coursing through us, welling up into wholeness, infusing us with eternal life.[▣] He takes us by the hand, bringing us out of our graves into the sunlight of a brand new day.[▣]

Contact and communion with Jesus crucified and raised is both like and unlike contact and communion with each other. To meet each other we gladly use all the methods of communication open to us. To meet Christ the Lord we break open the word of scripture together, and he speaks to us as we interpret the sacred text, struggling to apply it in our daily lives. And we break bread together, holding out empty hands, hungry for love.

This encounter becomes concrete and practical as we live lives of Christian seeking and Christian service, giving ourselves away after the pattern of our Master, a living sacrifice. Faith is not simply a way of believing; faith is

always a way of living and dying. The whole of who we are flows into and out of the eucharistic celebration, a great tidal wave of healing and wholeness, of peace and joy. Without such faith we feel quite lost and naked, perhaps because we are.

▮ These statistics, including the story of the man and his wife, are taken from Kate Legg's fascinating article "Upwardly Mobile" in *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, May 28-29, 2005, pp. 28-31.

▮ See the Glide Memorial Church website - <http://www.glide.org>

▮▮ Matthew 9:11.

▮▮ Matthew 9:13.

▮▮ Matthew 9:13.

▮▮ Matthew 9:18, 25.

▮▮▮ Matthew 9:20.

▮▮▮ Matthew 9:25.

X

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

12th June 2005

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Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.▮ Not to put too fine a point on it, this is our commission. We are simply and purely to be and do the works of Jesus himself, continuing his own ministry and his own mission, completing piece by piece the mosaic of his unfinished work. Moved with divine compassion▮, we become truly human, doing the works of God here and now.

As we go on our way, we touch the earth lightly and travel light, giving without grasping, vulnerable to acceptance or rejection like the Master himself, taking all the risks of open-handed hospitality.▮▮ And we go together, never alone.

It is this single point that I want to underline, put in italics, and frame in enlarged bold print today. Notice something about this carefully constructed gospel which Matthew doesn't push too hard. The devil, they say, is in the detail, but the detail is just as likely to be the hiding place of God.

"Now of the twelve apostles the names are these: first, Simon, the one being called Peter and Andrew the brother of him, and James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of him, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, the tax collector, James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananean and Judas Iscariot, the one also betraying him."▮▮

The thing to note, of course, is the couplets, the pairing off. Like all such lists, Peter comes first, for he is leader of the band. But even Peter doesn't stand alone - let all Christians and the new Pope Benedict XVI note! The ministry and mission of Christ committed to us is not for the faint hearted and not for the lonely. Indeed, it cannot be lived out alone, in isolation. There is no such thing as an individual Christian, and no such thing as an independent church.

Only hand in hand can we be strong; only together can we be ourselves; only together can we be Christ's body in the world. Just as God needs us, so we need one another. The proud boast of the true Christian is always interdependence, that linked seeking and linked service characteristic of the web of life.

I have at home a painting I'm particularly fond of, placed so that it greets me every time I come in my front door. By the West Australian artist Jamie Russell, it shows just the head and shoulders of two people, one holding a rose, a sign of love, of friendship. This painting is called "Lean on Me", and one person rests affectionately on the other, an image, an icon of Christ-like love, of grace pooled and strength shared.

For none of us has what it takes to walk tall all the days of our journey. It is said that in the vigour of life we carry our children and at the end of life our children carry us. Indeed, isn't the true glory that we cultivate the humility and the generosity necessary to carry each other every step of the way?

"And while going, preach, saying, 'the kingdom of heaven is near'"^[1].

Just do it together.

^[2] Matthew 10:8.

^[3] Matthew 9:36.

^[4] Matthew 10: 8b-11. See Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 2004) pp. 88-89.

^[5] Matthew 10:2-4.

^[6] Matthew 10:7.

X

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

19th June 2005

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It would be hard to imagine a more apposite gospel fragment for the day of Ginger's baptism, or, indeed, for the week in which World Refugee Day falls.^[1]

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the earth without the knowledge of your Father. And of you, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore, do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows."^[2]

The simplicity of it makes it easy to domesticate and privatize, but this is personal and political dynamite, and fits very well the personal politics of Christian baptism. For baptism is all about the infinite value of individual persons. Like the gospel text, this sacrament of water and Spirit assures us that we are deeply and passionately and patiently loved from all eternity. And the dignity God gives us by loving us, holding us in being moment by moment by paying loving attention to us, flows naturally into concern for each other. My dignity and your dignity go together and can never be separated. If the hairs of my head are numbered, if no sparrow dies without God noticing, there can be no place for exploitation of my neighbour, for turning any other person into my enemy, for treating anyone as less than human.

A new biography of Mao Zedong has just appeared, and it tells the story of a megalomaniac and a gangster, responsible for the deaths of more than seventy million.^[3] As the authors say, he was "a man without law or limit". In the early 1950s, officials faced Mao with a draft constitution that spoke of the need to protect the legal rights of all citizens. Mao wrote in the margin, "What is a citizen?"^[4] Margaret Thatcher's infamous remark, "there is no such thing as society", is but a pale reflection. And yet there is something almost more sinister about Thatcher, for, unlike Mao, she claimed to speak as a Christian.

It just goes to show that christening is never an automatic process. We must claim the grace given to us in baptism day by day, consciously making God's gifts our own, willingly sharing them far and wide with open hearts and open hands. If we do not, they dry up on us and come to nothing. Indeed, gold turns to dust, and good to evil. So there is a sharp edge to these soft sayings of Jesus, a hard demand laid on all those comforted by his words.

Ensuring dignity and freedom and ordinary human succour is our responsibility – and this includes everything from decent schools, to affordable medical systems, to active care for the poor and the weak. The whole debate about refugee policy in these days in Australia is set for people of faith in a much broader context than what might be convenient or expedient or what public opinion might be prepared to tolerate. We are called to ask simply and radically, what is right, what is just, how would God have us care for these dispossessed sisters and brothers of ours, these suffering children of the one Father whose very hairs are numbered?

In this beautiful child Ginger, brought today for baptism, we are invited to see every single child, even the child of Bethlehem. To be held safe in the hands of God, to be held safe in each other's hands in genuine loving-kindness, does not mean we are magically protected from all harm. It does mean that no harm can ever destroy us, that God's love is tough enough for all that may come our way, outlasting all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, outlasting even death itself.

"Therefore, do not be afraid".^[1]

^[2] Ginger Williams-Buckenara, born 30th August 2004; World Refugee Day, Monday 20th June 2005.

^[3] Matthew 10:29-31.

^[4] Jung Chang & Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape 2005).

^[5] John Weston, "Ghost Busters", review of Jung Chang & John Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, in *The Weekend Australian Review*, 18-19 June 2005, pp. R8-9.

^[6] Matthew 10:31.

X

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

3rd July 2005

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We are like children playing in the marketplace. We just cannot decide what God we want. One group of children, looking for diversion, tries to engage the other in their games, but without success. So the first complains: "We tried playing weddings, playing the flute, and you wouldn't dance; we tried playing funerals, wailing our heads off, and you wouldn't mourn. You're not much use!"^[7] Just so, "this generation", every generation, responds negatively both to the mournful, funereal, ministry of John and the festive, nuptial, ministry of Jesus. We reject John as too severe, or we reject Jesus as too lax. John comes, austere and ascetic, fasting from the good things instead of enjoying life, urgently declaring God's righteousness and judgment, demanding repentance, and we say "He has a demon."^[8] Jesus comes, also demanding repentance, but also lavishly celebrating the compassionate mercy of God, and we say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"^[9]

We have noted this cleavage before, the huge gap between the God John the Baptist believed in and preached, and the God Jesus reveals by the way he lives, in his words and his actions. Jesus is simply not the Messiah John was expecting, and yet his behaviour shows God is personally present here, for "wisdom is vindicated by her works, by her deeds."^[10]

I have deliberately shifted all this from past tense to present tense, because it is the same today as yesterday. This is not, first and foremost, a story about other people long ago, but a story about us. We still have to choose which God we want, which God is real. Is it the God of John, or is it the God of Jesus? And the battle goes on all over the church, all over the world. It goes on inside every seeker after human meaning. It is the conversation in each of our hearts, hungry for love.

Will we gravitate to those who shout loudest, to the powerful and the privileged, the wise and the learned, the rational adults who insist that, of course, John is right. They say it is simply a matter of logic that God is holy and just, requiring that we measure up or opt out. The traditional God of human philosophy must stand, for it stands to reason. God dictates the rules and enforces them, balancing the scales, delighting in the pure, sickened by the sinner, punishing the wicked, rewarding the good. This God looks on the world and on us with a jaundiced eye, with a sniff and a turn of the head, barely able to tolerate us, able to love us only grudgingly and conditionally. Only if we repent and turn around, only if we turn away from our sins and misdeeds and beg, can this God forgive us.

Here is one popular version of the gospel and it makes sense to us. It sounds perfectly logical, for it depends on our own logic and appeals to our own notions of what is right and just. The only problem with it is that it is emphatically not the gospel of Jesus himself. It rearranges what we see in Jesus, inverting his truth until it is almost unrecognisable, rescuing him from what are obviously mistakes, saving him from his foolishness. The wise and the intelligent, mostly bishops and priests, scribes and Pharisees, know that Jesus can't possibly be right about God, and seek to set him straight. How can it be that God actually enjoys the company of sinners? How can it be that Jesus joins our parties and eats with us without first insisting that we clean up our act? How can it be that God simply cannot stop loving us, that God idiotically runs to meet us long before we come crawling home, that God's arms are stretched wide in welcome long before we even know what we want? How can it possibly be that we are forgiven, loved to death in advance, just in order that we might repent and respond to God's open invitation to life? None of this makes any sense at all, none of it reflects who we are and what we know, none of it could ever have been invented in our mean imagination, constructed by our own narrow minds. Yet here is the wisdom of the "little ones", the free gift of God, hidden from adults, revealed to mere children. And Jesus says,

“Come to me you little ones, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”^{lv} The great God, the creator of all and redeemer of all, is not, after all, far away, a distant, terrifying potentate, waiting to devour us, patting the elect on the head and nuking the damned. The great God is intimate and inviting, closer than our next breath, warming us rather than warning us, tender as a mother, crazy as any lover.

The current battle for the soul of the church - let us be quite clear - is really just a tarted-up version of the age-old battle for the only true God. The real God is always in the business of lifting burdens; false gods only make the burden heavier.^{lvi} “So our being together here, at the table of the Lord” – in the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury – “recognising that it is not about us but about Him, that our security lies not in the signs of our virtue and achievement, but in God’s generosity – being here on that basis is itself a mark of hope. And those of us who care about our Anglican Communion worldwide – its unity, its life, and its peace – care for it not in order to keep an ecclesiastical institution more or less upright, propping it up with more and more crumbling pillars and struts and buttresses. We care about it because we are part of the Body of Christ and the world needs the Body of Christ. It is hungry for truth and for love. We are here to be fed with that truth and that love in the body and the blood of the Lord in His Holy Sacrament. As we open our hands to receive that gift, so we open them to one another and to the world. We do not have the nerve to walk away. So much the better for us. The appetite for truth is still alive. So much the better for us. May truth and love, the truth and love of Jesus as he sits with sinners, be the motive power of all we do and say in our meetings as Church, in our witness to the world, in our protest against division and violence and hunger. May we say to the whole world that we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”^{lvii}

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”^{lviii}

^{lvi} Matthew 11:16-19.

^{lvii} Matthew 11:18.

^{lviii} Matthew 11:19.

^{lix} Matthew 11:19.

^{lx} Matthew 11:28-30.

^{lxi} See Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2004) pp. 97-98.

^{lxii} Archbishop Rowan Williams, Sermon at the Opening Eucharist of the 13th Session of the Anglican Consultative Council, Nottingham, Sunday 26th June 2005.

^{lxiii} Matthew 11:15.

X

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

17th July 2005

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If you were listening carefully, you will perhaps have noticed the change of voice between Jesus’ telling his parable of the sower of seed out in the open air and later interpreting the parable to the disciples in the house.^{lxiv} Almost certainly, this is because the second voice belongs to Matthew.^{lxv} The Lord spins his tale, casts it on the winds like the seed, and along comes the preacher who digs it into the soil and plants the meaning. It is a good warning: we interpreters can kill everything we touch, throttling life itself if we fail to tread gently. After all, the beauty of the parables is precisely that their meaning is fluid. Jesus is more interested in chasing away the doorkeepers of our minds than replacing them with others. He wants to set our thinking free, to kindle our imaginations, encouraging us to roam far and wide, exploring all the territory of the heart without fear. He teaches in parables and stories because, like the prophets before him, he recognizes that the people see and do not perceive, they hear and do not understand.^{lxvi} He teaches in parables because their hearts have grown dull, because their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed.

In other words, so regimented are we in our approach to life that we are impervious to any teaching, good or bad. It is no use replacing poor teaching with good teaching, for we are so conditioned, so set in our ways, that we still

miss the point. We just love our familiar intellectual and spiritual ruts, imagining we can live here for ever. We fool ourselves that we are being true to ourselves and loyal to Christ, when in fact we are just too lazy or too stubborn or too complacent or too scared to move.

Jesus teaches in parables because he knows our ruts are just graves with the ends kicked out. He knows we need to be puzzled, rather than have everything interpreted for us. He knows we need to be made to wonder again, as we did when we were young. We need to go on facing right into the mystery, without expecting it to be explained away or tamed or domesticated. We need to go on struggling with reality, loving God with the whole of our minds, abandoning ourselves with childlike trust to divine truth which is always too great for us.

In the last six verses of today's gospel, Matthew sets out to explain in so many words what Jesus' story means. It is, of course, a perfectly legitimate venture, but by spelling out what it means in his own church, he immediately limits the meaning of the parable in every other church. By putting his own spin on the story two or three generations after the resurrection, Matthew effectively monopolises the text, so that for us it no longer swings in the breeze as Jesus intended, meaning different things to different people, depending on the current circumstances in which we find ourselves.

I think we need to set aside Matthew's rather heavy-handed explanation, and let the questions come back. What are we to think about as we hear the story? Are we supposed to think about the extravagance and persistence of the sower of seed? Are we offered a glimpse of God who lavishes love on both good and bad alike, who smiles on the unrighteous as much as the righteous, who welcomes sinners and eats with them? Or are we perhaps to focus on how many different kinds of soil there are, asking ourselves which kind predominates in our own make-up? Are we to look around and see how many soil types were represented in every congregation, in every eucharistic assembly, or even in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church? Is this a story about the identity crisis in the Anglican Communion in 2005, rather than the identity crisis in a small Jewish reform group twenty centuries ago? Is this story told to restrain us when we look around and want to get rid of weeds, only keeping the wheat – which usually means accepting those plants that look a lot like us, while rejecting all the others? Perhaps we are to meditate on the surprising possibilities of grace and growth in ordinary fallible and frail human beings, or perhaps we are to reflect on the precariousness of new life, or think more soberly about sheer human stubbornness? Maybe we are invited to think about combinations of all or some of these, by this process coming to a more mature vision of the life of faith, one that doesn't succumb to despair or wallow in the deceit of shallow optimism? Reality includes more than the seed that fails and more than the seed that takes deep root and produces an amazing harvest. Real life includes both, and then some. To despair because of failure is to be blind to the seeds that produce good fruit. Expecting too much success blinds us to the failure that is part and parcel of any Christian ministry. So whenever somebody gives you a still photo and tells you *this* is reality, remember the parable and tell them you'll wait to see the whole movie. No snap-shots of stationary moments, framed and set on a shelf will ever do. This is idolatry, elevating something finite to infinite value, confusing the transitory with the things that last, mistaking the ephemeral for the eternal. Only the full picture will do, recording the whole drama, the whole process and procession of life, with all its multiple outcomes: seeds that never sprout, plants that wither, abundant harvests.

The Lord asks questions. The answers we must search for, work at, discovering for ourselves. Christ tells the parable and lets it stand on its own, happy to risk letting it swing in the breeze, attracting our attention and our imagination. He is more interested in chasing away the entrance guards to our minds than with substituting new ones. He comes to set us free - prising open closed intellects, stretching mean spirits, provoking the lazy to deeper reflection on experience, melting cold hearts, exchanging fear for faith. In this privileged moment, fleshed out in word and sacrament, he looks at us through one another's eyes, greeting us with peace, with healing in his wings. For freedom Christ has set us free, let us not fall back into slavery.¹⁴ Listen, anyone who has ears.¹⁵

¹⁴ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

¹⁵ Matthew 13: 36-43.

¹⁶ Isaiah 6:9-10.

¹⁷ Galatians 5:1.

¹⁸ Matthew 13:43.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

24th July 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest of Grace Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

This is the third Sunday that we have had parables for breakfast. You may, or may not, be glad to know that it is also the last. Next Sunday, we have the feeding of the five thousand men - not to mention, says St Matthew, rather coyly, the women and children!ⁱⁱⁱ So next Sunday we can get down to talking about sacramental life, and, who knows, perhaps we will. Today, however, we have parables again. Indeed, Matthew has arranged for us to have quite a little bundle of them, some of the briefest and some of the best.ⁱⁱⁱ I too will be brief, because I have just one comment to make. My point is simple, and simply stated. All the parables of Jesus are about the coming Kingdom of God, or as Matthew prefers to call it, "the Kingdom of Heaven".ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, they are about God's way and God's rule, the dominion of justice, love and peace which is already very near, already dawning in the world, like that precious moment just before sunrise when already the warmth and light of the still invisible sun begins to flood the landscape, transforming everything. So the parables are all about God, and yet not one of these stories contains anything religious. This fact is to be taken seriously, and religious people need to take it more seriously than anyone else who overhears Jesus' teaching.

"Imagine a sower going out to sow..."^{lv}

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good wheat in his field..."^{lv}

"The dominion of heaven is like a mustard seed..."^{lvii}

"The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour..."^{lviii}

"The dominion of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field..."^{lviii}

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls..."^{lix}

"Again, the kingdom is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds."^{lx}

Parable on top of parable, a piling up of images, but not one religious image or illustration or example. Why not? If all this is about God, why nothing religious? Why do the similes of the kingdom range indoors and out, from the farm to the kitchen, from the market place to the sea, without ever trespassing on holy ground? The answer, of course, is staring us in the face - but we look and do not see, we hear and do not listen. Similes for God's rule in the world never trespass specifically on holy ground because all ground is holy. Metaphors of God's dominion embrace the fullness of common human labour and commerce because God is interested in the whole of life, because God is mixed up in every bit of it, because the divine love is woven into the very fabric of the universe. The parables encompass the fullness of human experience because we are not called to live with our heads bowed permanently in prayer, our eyes clamped shut in private devotion. We are called to be fully alive and fully present, attentive to the ordinary experiences of everyday life. We are called to find the God we trip over at every turn, the God we stumble upon without ever noticing. We are called to serve God not where we think God *should* be, but wherever God happens *actually* to be. This is the only God who meets us in Jesus, who tells us stories to puzzle our minds, stirring our imaginations, stimulating our free and generous response. But whatever we may think about Matthew's peculiar interpretations of the parables^{lxii}, he does show us that Jesus' word is not the last word, that his stories can't just be endlessly repeated. The scribe who becomes a disciple must be like the householder who brings out from his treasure things both new and old.^{lxiii} The real question is, can we ourselves be bold enough to bring anything new out of this ancient treasure-house? Until we begin to find the courage to do so we will always be blind and deaf to the God whose redemptive work never for one second falters.

"The kingdom of God is like Isaac Newton being struck by a falling apple: a tiny event, then physics ... The dominion of heaven is like a black woman called Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus: a tiny act, then a civil rights movement ... God's rule is like Dr Fleming noticing a small growth in a Petri dish: a trivial observation, then penicillin, then antibiotics ... The kingdom is like Archbishop Tutu standing between a lynch mob and the young black man they were about to 'necklace' with a burning car tyre: madness neutralized,

then liberation ... God's rule is like the Mabo family asking for simple justice: an insignificant legal claim, then land rights for a people dispossessed, inventing a new Australia ... God's dominion is coming when fire-fighters rush into the doomed World Trade Centre towers, only to perish saving others ... God rules when doctors, many of them Muslims, risk themselves on the streets of London, tending the dying after Muslim suicide bombers attack ... The dominion of heaven is like the adult neighbour who gives a child ice cream and tells you that you can become whatever you want to be: a small kindness, flowering into an adventurous life ... The kingdom is like one more baby among all the billions born, only this one in a manger at midnight: a tiny new life, hope for a new world". Let anyone with ears, listen!

¶ Matthew 14:21.

¶ Matthew 13:44-50.

¶¶ Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2004) pp. 35-37.

¶¶ Matthew 13:3.

¶¶ Matthew 13:24.

¶¶ Matthew 13:31.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:33.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:34.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:34.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:47.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:18-23; 36-43.

¶¶¶ Matthew 13:52.

X

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

31st July 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest of Grace Church Joondalup

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When Jesus hears of the murder of his cousin John the baptizer, he wisely withdraws from danger into a part of the country Matthew describes as desolate.¶ In other words, he is not hell-bent on getting himself killed, even though there are Christians who seem to think he had nothing better to do. Again and again in the gospels, Jesus takes evasive action to protect himself from his enemies, acting swiftly so that he might live and work another day. Finally, of course, he determines to face the music as the only way to remain true to himself and true to his vision of God. He sets his face toward Jerusalem, and precipitates the showdown. But we are nowhere near the need for that today.

Today, he steps back, out of harm's way, travelling by boat across the lake to be quiet – to reflect, to refresh himself, to re-group. And perhaps his retreat might have lasted quite some time, except for the pressing needs of the people - desperate enough, determined enough, to pursue him on foot. But when he sees them, fear for his own safety evaporates, overcome by compassion, and he immediately takes up where he left off. Not that he says so much as a single word. This is not just some prophet or preacher. God's revelation is not primarily gnostic or propositional, passing on insider knowledge, disclosing secret information about the creator and redeemer of the universe. No, Jesus the living Word of God says not a word. Instead, he acts, and acts decisively. He reaches out of his loving heart, curing the sick among these people.

This is what God is like; this is who God actually is, now as then: compassion itself, love itself, health itself, wholeness itself. The silent, acting Jesus speaks here only when his disciples suggest sending the crowd away to buy provisions for the night. "This is a desolate place, and the hour is already late, dismiss the crowds so that they may buy food for themselves in the villages. But Jesus says to them, 'They have no need to go, give to them yourselves something to eat.'¶ The healer of the sick also feeds the hungry, and we who follow him and walk in his way have no option but to do likewise. God is concerned not just with our spirits, but with bodies as well.

There is nothing unworldly about salvation. Christianity, like Judaism, is not concerned with some other world, but with life in this world. Religion is not about thinking nice thoughts; it is about just actions. We do not escape present reality by day-dreaming of heaven; rather, we work to see God's will done on earth as in heaven. So it is

never an option for religion to keep out of politics, for religion is political through and through. It is right here in Matthew's gospel that Jesus says, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."^{ix} And wherever two or three are gathered, there is politics.

So the command is plain: "You give them something to eat."^x Not for nothing do we offer real food every Sunday, along with our gifts of cash and bread and wine. The generosity of God, God's reckless hospitality to all comers, characterises Christian disciples as well. It is impossible for us to eat our fill while others go hungry, while children starve in Africa, while detainees in our own country are denied food and water.^{xi} It is impossible to sleep soundly in our beds while refugees are still imprisoned on our doorstep. Yes, "Give to them yourselves something to eat."^{xii}

"And having told the people to recline on the grass (in preparation for their meal), he takes the five loaves and the two fish, and having... blessed them and broken them, gives the loaves to his disciples, who give them to the crowds."^{xiii} Here is the eucharistic Lord presiding over this sacrament of social justice, insisting on enough and more than enough for everyone^{xiv}, sure that no human being need starve to death, laying the responsibility for fair distribution of the world's resources fairly and squarely on our own shoulders.

There is absolutely no way around it: the religion of Jesus Christ is to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

^{ix} Matthew 14:1-13

^x Matthew 14:15-16

^{xi} Matthew 18:20

^{xii} Matthew 14:16

^{xiii} *The Weekend Australian*, July 30-31 2005, p. 3

^{xiv} Matthew 14:16

^{xv} Matthew 14:18-19

^{xvi} Matthew 14:20.

X

Festival of Mary, Mother of our Lord

14th August 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Frequently, God speaks in the strangest people and the strangest places. This time last year, I had just finished conducting the retreat for seven new priests.ⁱ This involved praying with them, hearing their confessions, giving two devotional addresses each day, and then preaching at the ordination Eucharist. As you will imagine, living through such momentous days in the lives of these women and men is both utterly demanding and hugely enriching. At the end of our time shut away together, seven strangers had become quite intimate friends, companions, and colleagues. There is now a special and lasting bond between us: a bond we will celebrate over lunch together a few hours from now, a perfectly natural continuation of what each one of us is doing at this moment – standing at the Lord's table, presiding over the worship of the people of God.

One might expect, of course, that God has quite a lot to say in an ordination retreat, and I can only hope and pray God did manage to get a word in sideways through my own words, and, indeed, regardless of my own words! That, after all, was why I was there: to be a priestly medium, an open channel, a responsive mediator of the divine Word in the stillness of our hearts. Please God, I fulfilled this ministry as best I could. But if I had gifts to share with these new priests, they had first to be gifts I had myself received. Such reception happens by living our ordinary lives as disciples of Christ's way, slowly soaking up his truth, sharing in his life. It happens too as we hear the scriptures and study them, as we break bread together, as we fall in love and out of love, through all our joys and sorrows, our laughter and our tears. Out of all this we distill both who we really are and what we have to offer each other.

In preparation for the retreat, I didn't do a lot of reading. I just got on with my life and ministry as usual, but I found myself looking more closely than usual at our icon of Mary, and praying with her, so much so that she came with us on retreat and then to the cathedral.ⁱⁱ I wanted our seven new priests to look at her, but, more importantly,

allow her to look at them. For she is first among the faithful, the very first human being to respond to God's astonishing self-disclosure in Christ.^[1] Mary is the woman of faith and strength who opens herself fully to the mystery, giving the mystery human flesh. Like a flower before the sun, she allows God's warmth to embrace every bit of her. Supremely attentive to the word God speaks to every human being, Mary patiently listens when most of us are chattering, creatively responding while we are refusing. She is utterly unafraid, totally trusting, endlessly adventurous. In saying her joyful "Yes" to God^[2], she holds nothing back, risking everything by giving herself totally to God's future whatever it brings, wherever it takes her.

So much that we need in our priests, so much that we expect and hope for in those who serve and lead the church, is found in her right at the beginning, found in the Mother of all that is good, of all that is true and lovely. Insofar as we stand before God like Mary, with nothing to offer but empty, open hands, nothing to offer but our true selves when all the games have stopped, God can take us and grace us and use us. Insofar as we come to the end of ourselves, we touch God's face. Mary, clothed with the sun, standing on the crescent moon, crowned with twelve stars, knows first-hand the eternal secret, so she prays only that we may be ourselves.^[3]

Apart from this, there is no humanity worth the name, no authentic discipleship, no Christian priesthood. All this I knew in my bones; all this I wanted to pass on to the seven new priests. But something was missing still; still, I needed a word from God. Before I could speak, I needed God to speak to me. And that's when it happened - when I was looking the other way, not actively fretting about the challenge before me, not trying to solve the problem for myself. Actually, I was in a pub, a thousand miles from retreat preparation, enjoying a fabulous concert with fabulous friends. Suddenly, there was silence, and out of the blue one of the singers quoted a line from the French novelist Anais Nin: "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage". That's exactly what my priests needed to hear. That's what I needed to hear; what we all need to hear. "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage". But the singer wasn't finished yet. "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". Mary, woman of courage and trust, Mother of God, pray for us that we may be ourselves by being like you. May our commitment dance with our surrender, and may it be a smoochy dance.

^[1] David John Battrick; Graham Boyle; Janice Lynette Boyle; Lynette Jewell Eastoe; Clive Douglas McCallum; Evan Dunstan Pederick; Susan Ann Thorpe-Gudgeon.

^[2] Our Lady, Captive Daughter of Sion by Robert Lentz. See <http://www.bridgebuilding.com>

^[3] Frank Moloney SDB, *Woman First Among the Faithful: A New Testament Study* (Melbourne: Dove Communications 1984).

^[4] Luke 1:38.

^[5] Revelation 12:1-6.

X

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

21st August 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Everything began in great solitude. In 1940, at the age of 25, Brother Roger left his native Switzerland in order to live in France, the country of his mother. For some years he had felt an inner call to begin a community where Christian reconciliation might be lived out in daily life: "a community where kindness of heart would be a matter of practical experience, and where love would be at the heart of all things". He wanted this community present in the real world, embedded in human suffering, so he chose a small village in Burgundy, just a few miles from the demarcation line which cut France in two in those war years. Here he was able to hide refugees, particularly Jewish refugees, fleeing the occupied zone knowing they would find refuge in his house.

After the war, Brother Roger was joined by others, and on Easter Day 1949, the first brothers of the community made their commitment to a life of celibacy, community of possessions, and simplicity of life. During the long retreat in the winter of 1952-1953, he wrote *The Rule of Taizé*, expressing in writing the things necessary for living in community.

Today the Taizé Community is made up of over a hundred brothers, Roman Catholic and Protestant together, coming from twenty-five nations. The brothers accept no donations or gifts. If a brother inherits something from

his family, it is given by the community to the very poor. The community earns its living by the brothers' work. Their life is dedicated to work and prayer in the service of peace.

Every week from early spring to late autumn, young adults from all over the world arrive on the hill of Taizé, searching for meaning, searching for communion. Some weeks in summer, more than 5000 young people from different countries join in this common adventure, an adventure which continues when they return home determined to deepening their inner life and their readiness to take on responsibilities to make the world a better place to live in. Morning and evening in Taizé, these pilgrims gather with the brothers for prayer, and it was in their great Church of Reconciliation that Brother Roger was murdered. Last Tuesday evening, some 2500 people were gathered. The ninety year old Brother Roger was seated at the back, surrounded by children. Before anyone could stop her, a young woman stabbed him three times in the neck. He died very quickly.

At midnight, a liturgy was celebrated in the community church, a liturgy of songs and scripture readings and silence. Brother François, one of the oldest brothers, spoke briefly.

"In the Bible, we find these words: 'Costly in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his friends'.

"This death of Brother Roger is costly first of all for all of us, and terribly so. Death is like something being torn away, and a violent death even more so. And even when this death is caused by an unbalanced person, there is a feeling of unfairness that can even lead to a sense of hopelessness."

"In the face of violence, we can respond only by peace. Brother Roger never stopped insisting on this. Peace requires a commitment of our whole being, inwardly and outwardly. It demands our whole person. So this evening, let us communicate peace to one another, and do everything we can so that each person stays in hope."

As the world listened to Brother François, we knew that we were hearing the authentic Christian voice, the voice of Christ himself. But it is not so much this first part of Brother François' remarks, striking as it is, that rings all the bells for us. It is in the second half of his little homily that something more central still can be heard. When Peter says to Jesus at Caesarea Phillipi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"[¶], he is making a declaration not so much about Jesus himself, but about the One Jesus represents, the One for whom Jesus stands-in. Peter, and the church embodied in Peter, each one of us individually, and all of us together, here make the claim that God is Christlike, that indeed there never has been and never can be any other God but the patient, passionate, tender, endlessly loving God we meet in the face of Jesus Christ. And this is precisely the God of whom Brother François speaks now, with a voice all too rarely heard among us.

"These words from the Bible say that this death is costly not only to us. It is costly to God. God himself participates in our sorrow. He is suffering with us. This is how God feels 'the death of his friends', as the text says."

"And Brother Roger was certainly a friend of God. From the beginning, he used all his strength so that we should understand that God loves us with a love that has no end, a love that excludes no-one, a love that accepts us as we are, a love that has no limits."

"And if it is true that this death means a sorrow that touches God himself, we would like to do everything to express to him our gratitude, our thankfulness for all that Brother Roger has been among us".^{¶¶}

Now this is real Christianity: our search for meaning, for reconciliation, for communion brings us precisely to this place, to the very foot of the Cross, where God comforts us and we comfort God.

¶ Matthew 16:16

¶¶ <http://www.taize.fr/en>

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

28th August 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

"Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' If any wish to get behind me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."¹

What we have here is really the gospel in a nutshell, the gospel in miniature. Following Christ means getting behind him in every sense of the word - sharing his mind, walking his way. Following Christ means self-denial as opposed to self-assertion. Following Christ means embracing the cross, ultimate symbol of truth and our free surrender to nothing but the truth. And discipleship in this school of truth is a matter of loss and gain, of losing and finding, for what will it profit me to gain the whole world if my very self slips through my fingers?² In other words, our integrity is discovered and celebrated truly in Christ, whose service is perfect freedom.

Now, there are some surprises here. More often than not, we hear Jesus' rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan", as condemnation and dismissal. In this scenario, Peter is damned to hell and back. After all, calling your friend Satan is pretty strong stuff by any standards! But, as so often, we are in for some table-turning. Because this is not personal vilification. This is not our Lord behaving just like us, declaring himself out of relationship, or out of communion, with his chief disciple. This is not Jesus saying, "Just get lost, you evil creature, you have nothing to do with me." On the contrary, actually, for here we have the teaching Lord recalling Peter to his proper place as learning apprentice. In labelling him "Satan", he simply names what is really satanic, and this is precisely that human pride which thinks it knows better than God – setting our minds on human things rather than divine things. For no logical god of our inventing, no respectable god of human philosophy, would ever allow the atrocity of crucifixion to touch this beloved servant and son. That's all Peter is saying. "Good gracious God, no, never!" is what Peter exclaims.³ But the truth is that God, being good and gracious, can never protect us. God cannot wave a magic wand and remove the consequences of Jesus determining to be no one else but Jesus. The good and gracious God cannot magic away the consequences of me really being me and you really being you.

If we take our courage in both hands and become ourselves, there are consequences, some of them not very pleasant. After all, this is by no means always the best way to win friends and influence people, or the best way to make your first million. For conformity is prized over individuality, and this is a world of each for their own. In the struggle to be true, then, it is more than likely that we will get hurt, even that we hurt and disappoint others, and there is no avoiding such pain. Indeed, apart from selfless, suffering love, so it seems, nothing good and whole or wholesome ever comes to birth.

So whatever else today's gospel is about, it is about this necessary and bloody birthing into the supreme joy of being truly human, truly alive. Christian discipleship means treading in the tracks of the only truly human being as he goes on his journey, even to death on the cross. It means getting behind Christ every step of the way, and Matthew underlines this reality by using exactly the same word twice. "Get behind me..." is addressed to Peter; and "get behind me..." is then immediately addressed to us all.⁴

And if we go this way, when we freely and joyously choose to do so, we know there is a price to be paid. In a word, each one of us has our own cross to bear. What is common to all is a denial of self – not an attempt to extinguish natural pleasure and fulfilment in life, "but a refusal to acquiesce in the self-centred and ultimately futile attempts of the false self to grasp at the gratifications and ambitions a purely competitive view of life makes obligatory."⁵ So, self-denial is not about becoming a doormat. It is not the dishonesty of pretending I am worthless. Neither is it just a pious name for naked self-hatred, masochism by a religious tag. Self-denial, rejecting the false self - the grasping, greedy, insatiable self, promotes the interests of the true self – the generous, gentle, giving me. Emptying myself of ego is always the necessary prelude to receiving back my true identity, the prelude to being surprised by grace.

Ironically, it is the open-hearted and open-handed who are truly and substantially rich. Paradoxically, only those willing to risk giving up their life ever discover real life, "kingdom life" which not even death can extinguish.

▣ Matthew 16:23.

▣ Matthew 16:26.

▣ Matthew 16:22.

▣ Matthew 16: 23-24.

▣ Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 2004) p. 133.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

4th September 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

It's mostly true, I think, that insofar as we turn to the scriptures expecting enlightenment, we expect what they say to be immediately applicable to us. If so, then today's selection certainly knocks that idea on the head!▣ There is strangeness about this odd collection of material, reminding us that these ancient documents were not written for us. Matthew's little church, after all, was a very different place to our own little church. So his 1st century system of dealing with wandering Christians (those who left the congregation wilfully), and his system of dealing with sinners (those who misbehaved, but stayed within the congregation) will not necessarily translate well into this 21st century.

In any case, the New Testament is not really a "how to" book which we consult to see how to order our common life now, at least not in any detailed sense. It is the big picture rather than the specific detail which remains interesting after all this time. Indeed, this big picture retains its significance for all time. In other words, a first reading of today's gospel selection seems distinctly unpromising, while patient reflection on the surface text reveals its hidden depths. Isn't it true that the depth reading of this passage is all to do with the infinite value to God of the church's unity, the supreme significance of our togetherness?

This assembly matters somehow in the great scheme of things. So, if one of the "little ones", as Matthew likes to call his Christians, should stray, will the shepherd not leave ninety-nine sheep to seek and save one lost sheep? "What seems right to you?" Jesus asks.▣ And the answer is self-evident. "Of course" it seems right to abandon the flock and go after the stray, for each "little one" and all the "little ones" together are endlessly precious, so loss of even one is loss for us all, while gaining even one enriches us all.

The eucharistic body matters somehow in the great scheme of things. So, if one member offends - something bound to happen wherever very imperfect people live and work together! - it is worth taking all the trouble in the world to sort out the matter within the family rather than expose that believer to public ridicule.▣ Only as a last resort do you remove that troublesome person from your assembly, and even then your hope should be that this is just a temporary measure until they come to their senses. Treating someone like "a Gentile and a tax collector"▣ undoubtedly means excommunication, but no Christian community can avoid the irony: for the Christ who lives in us goes out of his way to welcome Gentiles and tax collectors!

All this stretching of forgiveness to its limits and then beyond its limits, speaks of how much our togetherness matters, how precious church unity really is. Embracing the strangeness and the prickliness of one another is never optional. Caught up in this community of the unlike, rubbing along together as best we can, goes with the territory of two or three gathered together. After all, we did not choose Christ, Christ chose us, and he gathers wherever we gather, present and active in all our assembling.▣

When we look at it this way, a text we have taken hold of for comfort and consolation takes on much sharper meaning. The real presence of Christ with us on the table and around the table requires that we genuinely be Christ to each other. His true presence demands our true presence. His reality inspires our reality, his realism kindling our realism. This gospel is actually a case of "Get real!" Stop mucking around here, paddling in the shallow waters, licking your own wounds, seeking attention. Get over yourself, look up and look around. When someone upsets us, or we hurt someone, stamping our little feet and running for cover simply will not do. If this is the infantile way we usually behave, we really will just have to grow up.

In this school of Christ we are to flower into his maturity and practice his generosity, like mirrors reflecting his grace and his glory, "little ones" becoming little lights in the darkness. In constituting all the fullness of the catholic church, no number beyond one is too small. Our union in Christ is the gift we have to share, the gift we offer to the

world. For right here and now the court of heaven stands open to us, as God's will is done on earth, and the kingdom comes.

- ▣ Matthew 18:10-20.
- ▣ Matthew 18:12.
- ▣ Matthew 18:15-17.
- ▣ Matthew 18:17.
- ▣ Matthew 18:20.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

11th September 2005

Father David Wood

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Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

Let me transport you to another world. We are standing in the glorious Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in Times Square, right in the very heart of New York City. It is a holy place some of us know and love very well, and about as far removed from our own little eucharistic community as possible.

The rector of St Mary's, Fr Stephen Gerth, is speaking - "Saint Mary's was founded to be a place that depended on the offerings of its members and friends – and not on pew rents. (That's the main reason why our corporate name is "The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin in the City of New York." We are a "free church" because pew rents can never be charged by this community to support itself.) There are days when I sinfully think it would be nice if we did charge pew rents. But Saint Mary's is founded on the belief that we are here to be thankful to God and to others".

"Reality: Most people give away very little of their income. *Reality:* The less people have the more they tend to give. *Reality:* Giving is up at Saint Mary's for 2005, but we've got a ways to go to cover the budget for the year. On July 31, 2004 pledged gifts received totalled \$130,924. One year later we've received \$220,850. But to meet budgeted needs we still have to receive \$48,000 more for 2005. *Reality:* I believe we can do it. Saint Mary's is growing in so many ways and I don't believe it's going to stop. One new sign of growth is coming: Children's Ministries at Saint Mary's".

"Beginning in October there will be a staffed nursery on Sunday morning. It's not in the budget for 2005, but children are already at Saint Mary's. The nursery is going to cost \$70.00 per week. Yesterday someone learned that the Board also approved an additional \$1,800 for a Sunday School program to begin here in October too. This morning my e-mail inbox had a note in it from this person that a check for \$1,800 is already in the mail. The donor doesn't have children, but he's committed to making a place for them here at Saint Mary's".

"Forty-eight thousand dollars is not that much money in this city. It's only that much money in this congregation because for too long we have thought that we couldn't grow, couldn't take care of our building, couldn't give money away, couldn't survive. I mentioned in the sermon on Assumption the story of the mission director for Apollo 13 who refused give to the President his opinion on the odds that the astronauts would return safely. He refused to consider that they would not return. I refuse to consider that Saint Mary's can't grow and sustain its mission. If you haven't made a gift to the 2005 pledge budget, I ask you to consider doing so – especially if you are new to this community, local or national, member or friend".

"If you don't know what a pledge is, I can help. Quite simply, a "pledge" is a promise to give a certain amount of money by the end of the year. The trustees count on pledges to know how we are going to pay our bills. It's a budgeting tool. A pledge can be increased or decreased without penalty of any kind at any time. Let's make budget for 2005. You can help. I can help. Let's give thanks in a way that matters. Let's give more money. Let's be sure all of our friends know the need to serve the gospel in Times Square is real."▣

It *is* another world, isn't it? It's a much bigger and richer world in so many ways. And yet, not. That city is also this city. That church is also this church. And the issues are the same, and the needs are the same. Both the people of Grace Church and the people of St Mary's need to be quite sure: we can grow and sustain Christ's mission. Neither there nor here need there be any anxiety at all: we can't do it alone, but we can do it together. Our budgets may be different, but we certainly have the capacity to fund them and then some. We both have so

many imaginative and committed individuals who continue to surprise us with their generosity. Let's be sure all our friends know the need to serve the gospel is real – wherever we are.

So as we make our pledges today, writing down the amount we determine to give each week, coming forward and laying these pledges on the altar of God, we offer more than just money. In this sacramental act, we offer our hearts. Freely, we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, surrendered afresh to the Lord in faith and hope and love. It is a sacred moment when we give into the pierced hands of Christ our small catch of loaves and fishes, trusting him to work once more the miracle and feed the hungry.

Today is the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and it falls for the first time on a Sunday, our weekly Easter, the first day of God's new creation. As we gather around the table of sacrifice, stories are coming in of volunteers giving themselves to help the victims of hurricane Katrina, and so many of them seem to be those whose own lives were devastated on 9/11. Their wounds might refuse to heal, the pain and loss are raw and real as ever, but they are reaching out as others reached out to them. Today's gospel of endlessly forgiving generosity speaks eloquently to us as we seek to build a world without violence, a world where there is enough and more than enough for all.[¶] It is all of a piece with what we do here this morning: building the community of faith and serving God's people. On this little Easter, we too are invited to put our hands to the plough and never look back.

¶ Stephen Gerth, "New Gifts for 2005", in *The Angelus*, Vol. 7, No. 40, 21st August 2005.

¶ Matthew 18:21-35.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

18th September 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

Time was, if I looked at the gospel appointed for the day, and found I had nothing much to say, panic would set in. Not any longer. I still want to preach from the gospel rather than one of the other readings, so it's not that I seek refuge there. The scriptures as a job-lot may indeed be profitable for our learning, but these books are not, after all, on an equal footing. The gospels control how we hear what is found in the remainder of the biblical library, and we stand to greet the gospel because here is Christ really present in our midst and speaking directly to us. Christianity is Christ in a way that Buddhism is not the Buddha and Islam is not Muhammad. For these reasons, I want to stay with Christ rather than Paul or Peter or Isaiah or Jeremiah, and if there isn't much to say I'm happy to be brief, and this is the case today.

The story Jesus tells is, of course, grounded in the industrial relations of the day.^[i] If this homily was a bible study, we might take a lesson in the detail of that first century world and the socio-economic situation in Israel at the time. As this is not a bible study, all we really need to know in order to understand the parable is that the denarius was a basic day's payment for casual labour.^[ii] It is also useful to know that the Torah stipulated that wages be paid before sundown.^[iii] Everyone listening to the story appreciates these facts, so all goes according to custom until the vineyard owner decides to be generous rather than equitable. The landowner's defence – "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"^[iv] – neatly poses the dilemma concerning justice. Does justice mean being paid the exact amount agreed upon? Or does justice mean being paid what others are paid for the same amount of work?^[v]

It is a fact of life that many good, committed religious people, now as well as then, work on a model of justice which sets us streets ahead of naughty, indifferent, opportunistic late-comers. This is perfectly natural, perfectly reasonable, perfectly just. Surely, we who have borne the burden and heat of the day and stayed the course – surely we should be more handsomely rewarded than this other lot? Its frightening how effortlessly the "religious" God becomes a just judge created in our own image, and hardly surprising that this imaginative portrait of God is deeply embedded in the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian. So it is a shock to the system when the landowner plucks us out of the sphere of strict equity in the name of his freedom to be liberal. The late-comers too had families to support; they too had to live; they too needed the subsistence wage, even if they hadn't really earned it, even if they didn't really deserve it.

What we have here, as so often, is our Lord refining the scriptural tradition, rejecting one picture of God, a very logical picture, and replacing it with something more accurate. Refining, rejecting, replacing the words of scripture

– this is the task of Christ our teacher and our Lord. And this, of course, is precisely what we expect when we really believe what we say, namely that Jesus is God's Word, fleshed out, living, and active. It means we are suddenly face to face with a God we didn't invent, a God we couldn't invent, for this God fits none of our carefully prepared moulds for casting idols.

The gospel is that God does not act out of cold logic in strict justice, exacting what is due, seeking retribution, issuing rewards and executing punishment, balancing the books like some demented celestial accountant. This old tyrant is dead: refined out of existence, rejected as monstrous and cruel, replaced with gracious reality.

Jesus lives and dies for this good news. And the good news is that God is not a religious judge! The good news is that God is human – truly and genuinely human, in ways beyond anything we can claim about ourselves. The good news is that God is love and always loving. The good news is that God meets our greedy world with generosity. The good news is that the last will be first, and the first will be last.^[vi]

^[i] Matthew 20:1-16.

^[ii] Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 2004) p. 153.

^[iii] Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

^[iv] Matthew 20:15.

^[v] See Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden*, p. 153.

^[vi] Matthew 20:16.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

25th September 2005

Father David Wood
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You are in New Orleans. There is chaos all around in the wake of hurricane Katrina, with a flood of biblical proportions. You are photo journalist working for a major newspaper, and you're caught in the middle of this epic disaster. The situation is nearly hopeless. You're trying to shoot career-making photos. There are houses and people swirling around you, some disappearing under the water. Nature is unleashing all of its destructive fury.

Suddenly you see a man in the water. He is fighting for his life, trying not to be taken down with the debris. You move closer. Somehow the man looks familiar. You suddenly realize who it is. It's the President, George W. Bush. At the same time you notice that the raging waters are about to take him under forever. You have two options - you can save the life of the President, or you can shoot a dramatic Pulitzer Prize winning photo, documenting the death of one of the world's most famous men. Here's the question, and please give an honest answer: would you select high contrast colour film, or would you go with the classic simplicity of black and white?

Now you hardly need me to point out that this "gallows humour", very plentiful just at the moment, is actually very serious in intent. Indeed, it arises in deep-seated frustration and desperate anger. As St Augustine says, anger is the daughter of hope; cynics hardly ever get angry! All the George Bush jokes seem to share this quality: expressing widespread frustration and anger over someone given great power and authority, who refuses it or directly abuses it. For the question about authority is not whether or not we have any. One way or another, we all *have* authority, so the question is always *how* we use it.

With all his God-given authority Jesus simply loved people and healed them, living out day by day God's passion and patience. Authority to him means authenticity, pure and simple. His transparency to the divine heart, so infuriating to those whose authority degenerates into naked authoritarianism is, therefore, in no way negotiable. The story of Jesus can be read from start to finish as a clash of civilizations, a war between kingdoms, a struggle of authorities.

By dint of his office, President George Bush is the most powerful man in the world, given immense authority, almost unlimited opportunity to do good. Instead, we count an endless procession of body bags – in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Israel and Palestine, and now in New Orleans and the Gulf States. Not that I am inviting you to sit in judgment on a man who appears to be totally out of his depth. That is much too easy, and all the time we need to look first to ourselves, to our own use of authority.

Parents, how do we exercise authority within the family? Do we bless or curse our children and grandchildren by the way we use our undoubted authority over their lives? At work, how do we relate to those subject to our authority? How do we relate to those set in authority over us? Every priest and bishop must be asking: is the authority given to us to free and empower the Christian community or keep it in chains?

Like the Temple authorities in old Jerusalem, are we consumed by our own needs, blind to human pain, scrambling to bolster our own egos?[¶] Or can we share some at least of the self-knowledge of those tax collectors and prostitutes, knowing they are at the bottom of the pile, knowing there is no way but up, knowing our need of repentance, throwing ourselves on the mercy of God?^{¶¶} The real authority of Christ sifts and judges us all. What authority do I have; what authority is given to me? Do I refuse it or abuse it? How can I use it well?

[¶] Matthew 21:23-32.

^{¶¶} Matthew 21:31.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

2nd October 2005

Father David Wood
Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup
Perth, Western Australia

Late one night this week, I found myself watching on ABC television a particularly chilling documentary on the evolution of Nazi methods for mass murder. At first they tried shooting men, women and children, usually at close range, but found this too distressing. Not, of course, that they were worried about the victims. It was the distress caused to the executioners themselves that concerned the leadership! Soldiers were being traumatized and brutalized by what they had to do, and this, they feared, could jeopardize the glorious future of the thousand-year Reich. There must be a better way, a sanitized way, a way they could feel good about. And it had to be cheap and efficient, both at home and abroad.

This is how they stumbled on the idea of gassing large numbers of people, deceiving their victims into entering what appeared to be shower blocks. All that then remained was to bury or burn the corpses. After coming up with this brilliant scheme, we watched one SS officer returning to his wife and four young children in their home on the edge of Auschwitz, very pleased with himself indeed. A cosy family night ensued, in their sinister little world of blond, blue-eyed, untarnished and uncontaminated Arian perfection. No need to shed a tear; after all, however much they looked like human beings, these were not really men, women and children. They were simply Jewish scum, leeches on civilized society.

Now, as we name this as sick and evil, it is important to remember that none of it would or could have happened without centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. None of it could or would have happened, but for texts like Matthew's addition to today's parable. "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."^{¶¶}

What could be plainer? Evidently, the kingdom will be taken away from the Jews to whom it rightly belongs and given to us. The technical word for this is "supersessionism", the idea that Judaism is superseded and replaced by Christianity. The somewhat overconfident presumption is that we produce the fruit of God's kingdom, so God casts the Jews aside. And if God treats these unfaithful Jews with contempt, we too may do so with impunity.

Consequently, Christian thinking is distorted by caricatures of Jews, and Christian history disfigured by abuse of Jews, by ghettos, and persecutions and pogroms. So when we read about the greatest holocaust of all the holocausts, or watch movies like *Schindler's List* or *Life is Beautiful*, we should never be surprised that millions perished, but that any good individuals remained to care for Jews at all. And, as Christians, we should come away

from such experiences determined to repent of our sins against God's Jewish people, determined ourselves to be more faithful to Christ.

For the gospel is not, in fact, anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, as Matthew himself makes clear. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that Jesus was speaking about them."¹⁴ Just so! He was not speaking about all the Jews of his time, for, after all, he was himself Jewish, as were all his family and friends and followers, as, indeed, were all the leaders of the early churches and all the writers of the New Testament. And Jesus was certainly not talking about the Jews of all times, all the Jews before and since his own time and beyond his own nation. His stories are, in point of fact, very carefully and precisely aimed. They offer a sharp critique of the established church of first century Palestine, reclaiming for ordinary people the things of God that bishops and religious professionals presumed in their arrogance to make their own. His parable stories offer a damning critique of any attempt at possession of God by right, by pedigree or by inheritance.

No one can be born into the kingdom, or acquire it by association, by belonging to the right tribe or even the right religion. The kingdom of God belongs not to those who claim it, not to those who talk the talk, but to those who live the life and walk the walk. The kingdom is given to absolutely anyone and everyone who produces the fruits of the kingdom, and to them alone.

This is the good news, the radical gospel of God. And as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

¹⁴ Matthew 21:43.

¹⁵ Matthew 21:45.

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

16th October 2005

Father David Wood

Parish Priest

Grace Anglican Church Joondalup

Perth, Western Australia

This is the classic gospel, or bit of gospel, which we know too well and quote at liberty, but with very little understanding. Like most of you, I can't remember when I first heard "*render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*"¹⁶, but I don't believe I have ever understood what it means! So, back to the text, the sacred text we know too well, asking "what on earth does it mean?" And I guess the place to start, taking Alice's advice, is at the beginning. The beginning, of course, is church. Jesus is surrounded by priests and archdeacons and bishops who are attempting to trip him up, and it's not a game for children. Like all ecclesiastical intrigue, this is in deadly earnest; the smiling teeth are actually clenched, it's a game with real consequences. In other words, there are winners and losers.

In the first instance, in the life of Jesus himself, the choice offered is no choice at all. If he says it's okay to pay taxes, he will lose face with the masses, the ordinary people who deeply and passionately resent the Roman presence and domination. If he says it is wrong to pay taxes, he immediately sides with rebels, revolutionaries and terrorists who seek political freedom by whatever bloody means are necessary. What, then, is he to do? Should he just dodge the question? Most of us, mostly, I think, assume this is exactly what happens. Jesus is intelligent, knows their game, and is quick witted enough to avoid the trap - so he sidesteps the issue and escapes mortal danger to live and teach another day. Indeed, those of us accustomed to adroitly lift the "rendering" quote from its context in any and every situation will go further, and say Jesus *eternally* sidesteps the issue - declaring himself and his church *for all time* apolitical, declaring himself and his church *for all time* neutral and passive in social and political matters. So we understand Jesus to be saying, "*Go ahead and pay the tribute, since that is legitimately Caesar's due, but reserve your ultimate loyalty for God, which is God's due*".

Now, this is very neat! But it is, in fact, straight-forward dualism. It separates into watertight compartments God and the Prime Minister, church and state, human and divine, material and spiritual, clean and unclean. In the twinkle of an eye Jesus' statement can now be quoted happily because we have entirely evacuated it of meaning

and it's business as usual. That's what I mean when I say I think I've never understood the saying: I've understood it this way, as saying nothing much, stating the bleeding obvious, but doing so pretty cleverly. Its neat, but it leaves me decidedly uneasy. It can't be right, but if it's not right, what is?

A bit of history helps plumb the depths of the story. It turns out there were several kinds of coin available in first-century Palestine. There were standard Roman coins, minted with the Emperor's head, much like the Queen on our own coinage. Some of these held the inscription "*Tiberius, Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, the majestic son of God, the high priest*". The image, naturally, was taken by pious Jews to violate the second word from God, the commandment prohibiting graven images. The somewhat less than subtle inscription, of course, simply twisted the knife in the wound. Precisely because of this, other coins were made available for their use. These allowed observant Jews to avoid blasphemy by contamination, simply through handling Roman coins.

Then as now, only a tiny minority worried about such things, but we are not surprised to find them in the foreground of the picture this morning. They are Pharisees - the bishops and priests and archdeacons of the day, members of the mothers union, ladies guilds and mens' societies, the diocesan trustees, churchwardens and synod representatives of that time. When Jesus asks them for a coin they unthinkingly bring out a Roman coin - image and inscription and all. And, naturally, the coin itself immediately accuses the accusers! For all their claiming of the moral high ground, they are already compromised. They have long-since yielded to necessity and convenience, they have long-since accommodated themselves to the prevailing political climate. So Jesus is very direct: he tells them, "if you enjoy the comforts of Rome you should pay for them". The tables are suddenly turned. In this contest: Jesus one, Pharisees nil. So what we do *not* have is a bland general principle about loyalty to whatever government happens to be in power. We have something far more important, and we must grasp this truth, this good news, this bit of gospel. We must grasp it with both hands and hang on tight. For what we have here is recognition by Jesus that even good, faithful, principled, concerned people are inevitably compromised, tarnished, shop-soiled, stained by life. This gospel says that no one is pure, no one is righteous, and none of us had better dare to be self-righteous. We all come to God rather grubby, a bit chipped around the edges, battered and bruised. I am reminded of Janet Morley's fantastic poem, "The Bodies of Grownups", because I'm sure now that this is what Jesus is really on about in today's strange story. He's recognising who we really are, and he's dealing remarkably gently with those who have no intention of handling him gently.

The bodies of grownups
come with stretchmarks and scars,
faces that have been lived in,
relaxed breasts and bellies,
backs that give trouble,
and well-worn feet:
flesh that is particular,
and obviously mortal.
They also come
with bruises on their heart,
wounds they can't forget,
and each of them
a company of lovers in their soul
who will not return
and cannot be erased.
And yet I think there is a flood of beauty
beyond the smoothness of youth;
and my heart aches for that grace of longing
that flows through bodies
no longer straining to be innocent,
but yearning for redemption.

The Jesus to whom those Pharisees came is the same Jesus to whom we Pharisees come, the living Word of God active always in creation and redemption. We all cut deals with our culture, and Jesus will not simply condemn us out of hand. Christ is the one to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden - yet Christ loves us all the same. Religion cannot be kept out of politics. Religion is always political because its about people. Material and spiritual inter-twine at every turn of the road; 'clean' turns out to be a near

neighbour of 'unclean', the divine is revealed in the very human. Christianity is not dualistic, its not just an incarnational religion. Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation, the story of the holy God shop-soiled in human flesh, tarnished by all our contradictions. And this means nothing can ever be totally secular, for nothing lies beyond God's longing and loving. So "render to God the things that are God's" includes everything and everyone; there's nothing left over, you see, not a single drop.

▮ Matthew 22:21.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

23rd October 2005

Father David Wood
Parish Priest
Grace Anglican Church Joondalup
Perth, Western Australia

God first, others second, self last. This is what we were taught as children: God first, others second, self last. Christianity is all about God and others, and involves leaving the self behind. It is all about getting over ourselves, getting rid of ego, sacrificing the childish image of myself as the centre of the universe, with all my selfishness and self-centredness.

A program such as this has considerable appeal, because it appeals to the fact that we really don't much like ourselves. We know how far short we fall of the glory of God, and we naturally want to be better and do better. We work hard at putting a good face on things, presenting ourselves as well as we can to the world, putting our best foot forward as often as possible, all the while secretly doubting our own worth and feeling increasingly like hypocrites. Religion which encourages renunciation of the self immediately attracts us, because we want to be someone other than ourselves, someone more human, less fragile and broken, someone more whole and holy. If God will only help us, we will leave all our failings behind in a flash, all our mistakes and misdeeds happily consigned to history, flying off into some bright new world, some unscarred future. It isn't exactly rocket-science to see why religious escapism sells so well. Play on someone's guilt, and you'll get them to do almost anything. Show people how irretrievably bad they are, and you'll have them queuing up to get fixed.

This is undoubtedly why some religious gurus major on sin every time they open their mouths, and with pretty impressive sales results. It's attractive, and it works; what more needs to be said? By my count, only three little words: "It's not Christian".

It's not Christian because Christ offers us no escape into another world. It's not Christian because Christ calls us to adult responsibility and maturity, not a second childhood. It's not Christian because ego needs to be transformed rather than trashed. It's not Christian because healthy self-love, healthy self-esteem, is the indispensable foundation for loving others as ourselves. If I hate myself - no, not if, but *when* I hate myself, on my self-hating days - I do no one any favours at all; I simply spread my doom and gloom around.

As so often in the gospels, Jesus today sails through the trick question put to him by the religious authorities to new vistas of understanding.▮ And we must do something similar, sailing beyond the ersatz religious clichés of our Sunday school years to something truer and better. The greatest commandment of God he takes from a very familiar text: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."▮ Nothing could be more familiar to faithful Jews, who recite every morning and evening of their lives the *Shema* prayer: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Jesus himself, no doubt, like other devout Jews covered his eyes with his hands at the start of the *Shema*, to shut out all distractions and focus entirely on God. No doubt he kissed the fringes of his *tallith*, the prayer shawl draped around his shoulders, to show his love for God's commandments. He and his conversation partners are on very familiar territory, touching the daily ritual of Jewish identity. But he goes beyond the original question, putting beside this foundation bedrock a second commandment like the first in the sense of being of equal weight. This distilling of the Torah to a single, all-embracing command, whether love of God or love of neighbour, was not entirely unknown in the Judaism of the time. This particular combination, however, appears to be distinctive. Loving one's neighbour as oneself seems to be a characteristically Jesus thing. We remember that he has already listed neighbour-love among the commandments for the young man who asks him about eternal life.▮ More significantly still, we recall two

instructions given to the disciples: the specific extension of the love command to loving instead of hating our enemies, and his summary of the law and the prophets as treating others as we wish to be treated ourselves.^[1]

So Jesus reaches for a radical unity in the two commandments. For him, these are the supporting pillars apart from which nothing stands. To love God with all our heart and soul and mind, with our whole being and life-energy, to love without remainder, is inseparable from active love of those God loves, and in the same way God loves them. We too are called to love with compassion, to love without boundaries or full stops, embracing even the hostile, even those who wish us ill, even those who would do us harm. And the bedrock foundation for all this involves transcending what we have been taught, embracing new vistas of understanding. Knowing ourselves loved and liked by God, we begin to love and like ourselves. Loving and liking ourselves, we can love and like others as ourselves. Self-respect means honouring the other, reverencing one another. We bend the knee, we take off our shoes, for our eyes are open and we are freshly careful now of trampling one another's dreams. Taking responsibility both for who I am and who I am not, opens me to God's future in which our wounds become worships. Perhaps this is neither as appealing, nor as easy as God first, others second, self last, but at least it has the virtue of being Christian! As the hymn has it –

Love is his word, love is his way,
feasting with friends, fasting alone,
living and dying, rising again,
love, only love, is his way.

Love is his name, love is his law.
Hear his command, all who are his:
'Love one another, I have loved you.'
Love, only love, is his law.^[2]

[1] Matthew 22:34ff.

[2] Deuteronomy 6:5.

[3] Matthew 19:9.

[4] Matthew 5:43-48.

[5] Hymn 534 by Luke Connaughton in *Together in Song* (Melbourne: HarperCollins Religious 1999)

Sermon for All Saints

30th October 2005

The Reverend Canon Theresa Harvey
Canon Pastor of St George's Cathedral
Perth

In nomine,

It is a pleasure to join you today. I have heard much of the saints at Grace Church Joondalup, so it is very good to meet you and on such an appropriate day!

If I asked you what you have in common with the planet Uranus, my guess is you wouldn't have a clue! Uranus was discovered in 1781, by William Herschel. When astronomers tried to plot its orbit, they found it was being pulled out of its expected path by another, invisible, planet, which they couldn't see, but knew must be there because of its influence on the planet they could see, Uranus. The invisible planet, which we can now see, with much more powerful technology, was Neptune.

And maybe you are still in the dark about how you are like this planet? Keep listening, and all will, eventually, be revealed!

Today we celebrate All Saints day. On this day for nearly 1700 years the church has celebrated all the Christian saints who have died, known and unknown. And in order to orientate us to sainthood we hear the passage from Matthew where Jesus tells us what sainthood is about.

Maybe it's just me, but it's not that attractive as a proposition. It's good in theory, not misunderstand me, but, in practice it seems to leave much to be desired. For the Beatitudes, [the familiar name for these verses from Matthew, coming from the opening word of each phrase, 'blessed'] pose a radically different set of values from those that bombard us for most of our lives. Nearly every condition that Jesus calls blessed is the opposite of our culture's viewpoint.

Some of these expectations may seem absurd to us. For someone living in the aching emptiness of deep grief, knows it feels anything but blessed.

Then, in the musical, Camelot, there is a line, "it's not the earth the meek inherit, it's the dirt!" and so it seems when the rich and powerful plunder and profit their way to fame and fortune.

And that's the point. Jesus wants us to understand that those who follow him have to develop a different set of values. For the Beatitudes offer a blueprint of the life of those who want to be a part of God's kingdom. They contain the essential teachings of Christ, modeled by the way he lived himself, and to the extent that we live them, we become citizens of the kingdom, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails.

And while they seem eminently practical guidelines, they are, in fact, primarily focused on our souls, our inward postures towards God, towards other people, ourselves and all creation. They direct our attention to our attitudes of mind and heart that actually drive our ways of being in the world. God's concern is with our inner being, the shaping of our inner perceptions, our hidden habits, our unspoken opinions, for our words and deeds come from the disposition of our soul. Get that aligned correctly and blessedness will follow more easily. And these are not eight different blessings, but one blessing seen from eight different angles, that of belonging to the kingdom of God. When we are able acknowledge our dependence upon God, our deep desire and need for God, then God's fullness can flow into our emptiness and the finite container that is the life of each of us can be a vessel for God's infilling grace.

And because we are together in this, we help and strengthen each other. One single life, mine, yours, is the greater blessed because of the grace of God that has flowed through others to us. You will have known many of those unknown saints, as individuals and as community. You are blessed and graced through and because of them. [pause]

These Beatitudes call us to new obedience. But more than that, they call us to celebrate and be joyous in our good fortune. This is a day of great celebration and not because of some old idea, that we maintain because we are a people of tradition and history; not because we think it is a good thing to remember others who have lived in ways that we can never emulate, but because we know we are welcomed and celebrated by God as saints in the making. We may have faith in God, but God has altogether greater faith in us, in our desire for God's presence in our lives and in our determination to welcome all into our community of love and faith as inheritors, with us, of the kingdom of God.

One of the things friends do, is eat together. We do that too. We gather around the table and share story, concerns, friendship, joys and sorrows, and the essential food for our journey. Some of us were on a journey together last evening, meandering our haphazard and jocular way around the streets of Northbridge, celebrating our common humanity with gay and lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-sexual, trans-gender people. You name it, they were there. Of-course, also present were some who wanted to put us all right about who is in and who is not in the kingdom, who God welcomes and who God can't welcome, until they repent, or some such nonsense, for their sexuality.

You will notice the Beatitudes says nothing about such exclusions, and nor does Jesus. Saints come in all shapes and sizes, all sexual orientations, all races, ethnicities, both genders. What saints have in common is a willingness to be open to the radical call of Jesus to reorient their lives, their souls, the better to point to God who is more extravagantly loving than we can even begin to comprehend.

And that's where you are like Uranus, whose orbit points to the existence of a much more distant, more mysterious entity. For we are charged, by living our lives, to point to the existence of God. Our orbits in the world must make people think, 'where is their focus that they think, respond, act like that?'

So we have a huge task/challenging responsibility. How people see us may just be how they begin to understand God. How are we doing?

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

6th November 2005

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"Then will be compared the kingdom of heaven to ten virgins, who having taken the torches of them went out to greet the bridegroom."¹ So opens today's gospel, word for word, in the original Greek text. Setting aside the rest of the story for a moment, already we have quite a deal of information given to us in this brief sentence.

For one thing, there is little doubt that the heart of Jesus' teaching and preaching did not concern the kingdom of heaven. It concerned the kingdom of God. Mark and Luke are quite clear about this. Only Matthew, in good Jewish fashion, prefers to avoid the divine name, using the word heaven as a circumlocution for it. So in this gospel, the kingdom of God always becomes the kingdom of heaven. This is not a small point. The kingdom of heaven sounds to our ears a bit unreal, otherworldly, as if it refers to some spiritual realm beyond the everyday world we inhabit, probably the heaven of later hymn writers. This is emphatically not what Jesus of Nazareth was on about. God's kingdom is definitely about this world here and now, not some other world which may or may not exist. So Jesus is saying that living under God's rule together right here today is rather like this story he is about to tell. Allowing God free reign here and now today may be compared to ten virgins who take their torches and set out to welcome the bridegroom. They will light the way for him, just as John the Baptizer prepares a way in the desert, levelling mountains to make a highway for our God to come quickly to us. These little lights are a hospitable sign that the Light of the world is wanted here, that here is a place prepared, hearts where this great Light may be welcomed home. Together, these flickering lights will drive back the darkness.

Already, then, we have two important clues. And a third clue is that these women are virgins. The text is actually very clear – they are pagenois – not bridesmaids, as the New Revised Standard Version rather coyly renders the word in English, but virgins. Virgins meeting the bridegroom evoke the whole rich Hebrew tradition of helpless, empty humanity greeting the Lord who comes as husband and lover. Scripture is full of virgins. The Blessed Mother is not the only one, merely the most prominent of the species. In scripture the virgin is the untried one, one who waits, expectant. The virgin is poor now, but will become rich. She looks out on the world from a position of not yet having entered it. In other words, the virgin has nothing but her potential, open to the future, free to choose, her life still ahead of her. And as soon as virgins are mentioned, the heavenly wedding banquet is conjured up before us as the mystical place of union between the human and divine, the place of celebration and satisfaction where Creator and creature kiss each other. We human beings are made, Jesus is saying, for nothing less than this.

So the story of the wise and foolish virgins revolves around just one question: do we want our true destiny or not? If we do, several qualities will be characteristic of us. First, we will be prudent and practical. In other words, we will not have our heads in the clouds, but will pay attention to the realities and necessities of life, little mundane things like having enough oil to keep our torches alight. It simply will not do for us to be so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use! Torches need oil. People need food and work and shelter as well as beauty and hope. We may not live on bread alone, but equally we cannot live on prayer alone. There is a lovely Chinese proverb: if you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy a lily. If, however, you start out with two lilies, what is there to eat? The kingdom of God demands feet firmly planted on the ground. That's the first point of today's allegory. The second point really rounds this out - feet planted on the ground and eyes wide open. "Be on the alert therefore for you do not know the day nor the hour"². Be alert, awake, attentive, watchful, observant. As the wise man says, don't just do something, stand there! Look up, look around, see beyond your nose, see the big picture, catch the vision.

For the bridegroom didn't just come once upon a time in Bethlehem. Neither will the bridegroom come again only at the end of the age, that day whose date no one can predict. This bridegroom never ceases coming to us, this bridegroom is always adventing among us, the God of surprises, always closer than breathing. So we never know when the burst of Light will overtake us. We can never guess when our torches will be needed.

Strange as it seems, the kingdom is a way of living where we actually practice being caught off guard. This Sunday liturgy is simply our weekly rehearsal for how we choose to live day by day, Monday to Saturday. We come here to practice our steps, trying out routines on each other, so that we may join the dance wherever the

music strikes up. We withdraw a little distance so that we can see better, coming to a place where blind eyes are opened, seeking help in making the necessary connections. We step back, not to escape reality, but precisely to become more fully engaged. Here we see Jesus at work, hear his voice, feel his touch. In the grace-cup all human experience is distilled into good red wine. Holding the broken bread out to us in pierced hands, he becomes so familiar to us that we see him and serve him in every broken heart, in every heart broken open by joy or by pain. At the hour of his coming, we do not want to miss the bridegroom, who may well be working anonymously at a carpenter's bench.^[1]

^[1] Matthew 25:1

^[2] Matthew 25:13

^[3] J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit & the Christian Mission* (London: SCM 1972) p. 40.

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Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

13th November 2005

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The trouble with today's parable is that it seems to endorse a sort of free market capitalism which sits at odds with what Jesus says about money elsewhere. And free market capitalists, like Maggie Thatcher and George Bush, do indeed love this story. At their hands, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, for their motto in all things is "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."^[1] The misinterpretation of biblical texts can have very serious and immediate and lasting consequences. Even more worryingly, however, this story appears to paint a very unsavoury picture of God: God as a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he scatters no seed.^[2] And if God is like this, what is to stop us taking the same ruthless and rapacious approach to the world around us?

At first sight, then, we might well wonder what on earth Christ can possibly be about in spinning such tales? The answer to that question is partly to be found in the context. The master goes on a journey. This story is being told as the gospel reaches its climax, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem and the cross. He is about to go away; he is about to leave us to it. Matthew's church is no different to our own church. Jesus has gone away, the kingdom has not fully come, and the world has been given into our hands. Just like a master who hands out money to be used, so God has given us life to use. We are to be faithful and fruitful. We are to grow into the image of Christ. We are to be partners with God in the coming of the kingdom.

The point of the parable is that we, the servants or slaves of Jesus, have been given different amounts of cash. Talents are coins. In sermons we often hear exhortations to use the talents God has given us – we should sing in the choir, or arrange flowers, or run the parish fete. But it's much more than that. Everything we are, everything we have, every setting in which our lives take place is what we have been given. It's here in this life that we will become fully alive human beings or not. There are all sorts of possibilities before us. The master in the parable doesn't spell out what the servants should do. He leaves it to them, to their imagination, to their making.

We're not puppets. God doesn't have a little blue-print for us that we just have to discover. There are hundreds of blue prints. There are thousands of paths we might take. The important thing in terms of the parable is that we're out there having a go, living fully, taking risks, making money, increasing what the master has given us. In other words we are living out our baptism, we are daily putting on Christ and becoming more like him. This means we are increasing the capital of the kingdom. Where there is darkness, we shine light. Where there is injustice, we are voices for liberation and freedom. Where there is sorrow, we give comfort. Where there is need, we are sacrificial givers. Where there is despair, we offer hope in Christ, speaking from personal experience.

This is how the kingdom advances, step by step, encounter by encounter, act by act, little by little. The master doesn't lend us a little bit of pocket money to play with. The money is given to us to keep.^[3] From the start, the master intended the amounts assigned to the slaves to be gifts for them to keep.^[4] He was not looking to get his

money back, only to see how well the slaves traded with what he gave them. Our talents are given into our hands to do with as we see fit. It's all up to us.

Now we might begin to see why the punch line of the story is so severe. The servant who does nothing, who is too fearful to step out into the unknown and do something, that servant is rebuked and punished. God is saying, "I gave you the world, I gave you life, I gave you myself, and you just sit there with buried treasure at your feet. You contribute nothing, you are barren, you are a waste of space." This story is about the urgency of the time, the preciousness of life, the fact that we pass this way but once and for a purpose – to become who we are, to achieve our potential as nothing less than adult daughters and sons of the Father, inheritors of the kingdom of God.

If we are not becoming, then we are shrivelling and dying. And this is not God's doing, it is our own decision. The kingdom, God's reign and rule, is a vision of us all fully alive and it begins here and now. It is this earth, this place, this me, and this you, who are capable of growing into the kingdom. The God of Israel speaks decisively to us in Jesus Christ: "I set before you this day life and death. Therefore, choose life."¹

¹ Matthew 25:29.

² Matthew 25:24.

³ Matthew 25:

⁴ Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 2004) p. 190.

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:15ff

Solemnity of Christ the King

Sunday 20th November 2005

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Some years prior to his ill-fated flirtation with being Governor of Tasmania, while he was still a United Nations trouble-shooter, Australian diplomat Richard Butler gave an extraordinary public interview. In part, this is what he said about his inner life - "Classical music speaks to me in a way that is sublime. What I have found virtually all my life since my beloved older brother introduced me to fine music when I was young is that there are moments in music that are simply transcendent. They take you to a place of beauty, purity and truth ..."

"I remember being in the middle of hideous discussions with the dictators of Baghdad and hearing some Mozart in my head and thinking: 'You people might think you're getting away with all your lies and brutality but what I'm hearing in my head is an aria from *The Magic Flute*, and that keeps me sane.' It was the contrast between their grotesque demeanour and that kind of beauty."

"At tough moments in my life, I would find myself remembering a phrase from Shakespeare or the Bible and thinking: 'This will sustain me.' One of the lines I thought of in dealing with materialistic, selfish people is from the Bible. I would sometimes listen to such people bending the truth for their own ends, and I'd find myself thinking about the wonderful little question Christ posed when he asked: 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? Music and literature have been absolutely essential to me. Even at the worst possible moments, I'd step aside and put on a fine piece of music. And I always carried with me on my travels a little set of machines that could produce that music for me – a Discman and a couple of little speakers."¹

Obviously, what caught my attention in this reflection was the experience of stepping aside from the world of lies and self-interest and brutality, and going to a place of beauty, purity and truth. That, in essence, is what we are doing right now. Seated at the Table of the Word where Christ teaches us Sunday by Sunday, gathering around the Lord's Table to be fed at his hand, is a deliberate stepping aside – not to escape the harshness of reality, but in order to survive it. And not only to survive reality, but to come again to it refreshed and renewed in order to transform and transfigure it.

Indeed, this holy place in all its simplicity is a place of sanity, a sustaining and energising oasis in the desert of affluent meaninglessness and confusion where we spend so much of our time. After all, if you want to change the world, do you start with someone else, or do you start with yourself? We retreat to see what really matters, before stepping forward to engage and to act. "There is another world", the great Australian novelist Patrick White liked to say, "but it is the same as this one." Here is surely a profound statement of faith, recognition of what transcendence really means, and one we assent to as we baptize Kira this morning. Along with every other baptized person, she is from today a living sign of our hope that life makes sense, embodying or fleshing out our shared hope for the future.

To create this future, however, demands of us all adult responsibility, courage and tenacity for building a better world. We will not achieve our objective without clear vision and patient commitment to what is beautiful and pure and true against all the odds. So we step aside. As we say with every candidate for baptism, "I turn to Christ". This means we turn toward the good, to face all that *can* be and *shall* be - triumphing over all that currently *is*. In a world of religious fanaticism and perversity, we make this declaration of human sanity and freedom. In a world of arrogant pride and self-destructive power, we choose balance and humour.

For in the end only one thing will matter: did we seek and serve the anonymous Christ in the least and the last? Did we see God in each other, and love God here and now? This is what Matthew's great parable of the last judgment is all about, and it offers us the secret of true and joyful vision. I don't suppose we have often thought of the altar of God as a Discman with two little travelling speakers, but, in truth, that's what it is. For here the music rings out loud and clear, lifting us up and sending us off afresh for the struggle. That's why we keep coming back here: to keep the music alive in us. As it lives in our hearts, as it sings in our very bones, as we touch the fiery heart of God's love here in the broken bread, we discover this self-same God meeting us at every turn of the road, waiting to be uncovered in every single cell of this sacramental universe. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, November 23-24, 2002, p. 66.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 25:40.