

INSIDE the FAULTLINE

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the  
FAULTLINE

a priest wrestles with faith  
in an earthquake-shattered city

DAVID MOORE

INSIDE the FAULTLINE

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With a grateful heart  
for Judy, Jacqui, Cathy & Leah

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# Introduction

The liturgy of commissioning of a priest in a parish community explicitly states a fundamental principle of the church's mission and ministry – namely, that whatever might be accomplished, it is the work of the whole people, all the baptised.

Thus what follows in these pages is deeply connected to all the baptised of the parish of the extraordinary parish of St Luke's in the City, Christchurch, New Zealand. To this precious and inspiring community I owe an immense debt of gratitude which cannot be repaid. In their honour, and with deep affection, I offer these reflections - and only hope that what follows does them justice!

Only the rarest few individuals are able to navigate on their own the potentially annihilating waters of the spiritual enterprise in its unromantic, raw, and at-times terrifying intensity. Not being one of them, I have depended throughout this ten plus years, at times for my life, upon the wise, persistent and devoted midwifery and encouragement of Jungian Analyst Joy Ryan-Bloore. In an era of religious extremes and destructive compartmentalism, Joy embodies an all too rare commitment equally to Christian spirituality and to modern insights about the human psyche made available through psychology. It is impossible to adequately express my debt of gratitude to Joy.

Joy's husband and Jungian Analyst Allan Bloore has been offering throughout these ten years annual seminars exploring the interface of theology, spirituality and psychology. I have been greatly assisted in my spiritual development through Allan's insights.

At a critical point in the development of some of what is expressed here I was blessed with the transformational experience of three intense months of analysis with Canadian priest, theologian, and Jungian Analyst John P Dourley, and embraced by the community of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) at the St Paul University Seminary in Ottawa. This was made possible through a grant from the St John's College Trust Board.

The parish of St Luke's in the City was forced out of its Victorian Gothic brick and stone church building on 4 September

2010, to which it never returned. Initially the parish celebrated the Sunday and feast day Eucharists at the Rose Historic Chapel, but was forced out of that fine Victorian Gothic building also, on 22 February 2011. Since then the parish has celebrated the Eucharist at the Mary Potter Community Centre, and the Knox Centre Chapel – both modern structures! Refugees never forget those kind strangers who open their doors and make their own homes a welcoming place to the homeless. I know I share the parish's gratitude to the Little Company of Mary and the congregation of Knox Presbyterian Church for their generous hospitality.

With first hundreds then thousands of 'aftershocks' to contend with, in the attempt to at least understand something of what was happening Christchurch people turned to online information from GNS scientists.<sup>1</sup> Just a few weeks into the seismic ordeal an enthusiast named Chris Crowe took GNS' basic information and created an amazing website called 'Canterbury Quake Live',<sup>2</sup> providing a wealth of user-friendly information by which many of us were greatly assisted to endure and understand mother earth's shocking forces. I am thankful for this complete stranger, whose gift reminds me that in fact there are always a great many 'strangers' who contribute in the task of development.

These reflections express an abiding commitment to spiritual development, evolution in spiritual understanding. Churches can be defensive of 'orthodoxy' and Biblically narrow; the culture at large in such a context is increasingly dismissive of the churches' narrowness. So a sense of evolution in spiritual consciousness seems vital. Many wise guides have assisted me to the liberation and grandeur of spiritual evolution. In particular, the twentieth century French priest and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has been my near-constant companion for a dozen years. I was first assisted to wrestle with the interface between science and spirituality by a number of wise teachers while studying chemistry, communication studies, education, and theology at Murdoch University in Perth.

I am most grateful for the careful and thoughtful comments on the text by The Venerable Dr Ken Booth and Mark

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<sup>1</sup> GNS Science is New Zealand's leading provider of Earth, geoscience and isotope research and consultancy services: [www.gns.cri.nz](http://www.gns.cri.nz)

<sup>2</sup> [www.canterburyquakelive.co.nz](http://www.canterburyquakelive.co.nz)

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Murphy, for their assistance in clarifying the ideas and tidying the text. Likewise for the encouragement of The Reverend Dr Geoff King and The Venerable Carole Graham.

It hardly needs stating that none of these friends and companions on the way can be held responsible for whatever is found in these reflections to be in error – a responsibility that is entirely mine.

David Moore

*Feast of St James the Apostle*

25 July 2013

# Wrestlings

Jacob said [to the angel], “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”<sup>3</sup>

I’m a priest. So I wrestle with faith and with myself by preaching sermons. That possibly seems like strange behaviour – it does to me sometimes! And perhaps all the more so since many people probably think that the purpose of a sermon is to tell people things – correct information about the Bible, Christian doctrine, morality, for instance. But I don’t think that’s the purpose of a sermon. Which means that what I offer here I do not imagine to be the communication of some ‘facts’, to some people who don’t have those facts, from someone who does – which in any case feels presumptuous. Rather, I regard this cultural phenomenon called ‘sermon’ to be a self-disclosure of a *wrestling by one who wrestles*, and an *encouragement to others to wrestle*. This makes a sermon rather more like a poem than a news bulletin.

So here I am wrestling, week by week, because I’m required to do so. Well, yes, I am required to do so because I’m a parish priest with an obligation to the faithful, who gather week-by-week for the community’s principal act, the Eucharist. But there’s more than that. I think wrestling is a human act. Wrestling with faith, with one’s self, with life, is as basic, I would say, as eating, sleeping, working, recreating.

If you can accept this general idea, then perhaps you may find here some encouragement for your own wrestlings with faith, with yourself, and with life. I hope so.

Wrestling with faith and with one’s self and with life is necessarily context-determined. The wrestlings of a teenager are bound to be quite different from those of a mid-lifer. The wrestlings of a person in a comparatively settled position in life are bound to be quite different from a person in the midst of an ordeal, a person intoxicated by love, a person preparing to die, and so on.

These particular wrestlings are idiosyncratic, as they are bound to be, insofar as they reflect the particularity of this particular wrestler. They are also communal, insofar as they have

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:26

been forged in the circumstance of a small and modern Western city devastated by an extended sequence of earthquakes – at the time of writing more than 13,000 seismic events, and counting. Everyone living through this particular experience is changed, as those living through war and famine and plague must be changed – our wrestlings with faith and self must be affected, varying only by degrees of consciousness.

Much has already been written about the experiences and consequences for this city of Christchurch as a result of the earthquakes which began at 4.35am on Saturday the fourth of September 2010. These particular writings, however, came to birth initially as weekly sermons for a parish community undergoing these same events. So here there is no attention given to external details about liquefaction ejecta, shattered sewers, drains and roads, to geological measurements and predictions, or building collapses and engineering standards, or tragic fatalities and heroic and astounding escape and rescue and coordination efforts - aside from in passing. Others have written eloquently and movingly about these things in ways I am unqualified to do.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, these are writings about the inner correlates of all these outer phenomena. The inner liquefaction. The inner faultline. The inner broken buildings. The inner death. The inner heroism. The inner rebuild. They're offered as a contribution to the totality of well-being, complementary to the outer task.

A brief word about the Richter scale. As a measure for seismic activity it employs a logarithmic scale, which almost none of us use in our day-to-day lives. So it's not easy to fathom the immensity of the difference between, say, a 3.5 and a 7.1. A local website did us all a great service by converting the logarithmic Richter measurements into a linear scale - which most of us think in – by converting to an amount of TNT exploding. A 3.5 is like 3 tonnes of TNT exploding – enough to give you a jolt if you're not too far away. But a 7.1 is like 671,000 tonnes of TNT exploding - that's about 224,000 times the explosive force. By comparison, the bomb dropped by the USA on Hiroshima, Japan, on 6 August 1945 released the explosive equivalent of 16,000 tonnes of TNT. This

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<sup>4</sup> The reader is recommended to consult: Jane Bowron, *Old Bucky and Me*, Awa Press, 2011; *Earthquake – 22 February 2011*, The Press: Christchurch, 2011; NZ Police, *Christchurch 22.2 Beyond the Cordon*, Hodder Moe, 2011; Gerard Smyth, *When a City Falls* (DVD), Frank Film, 2011; Martin van Beynan, *Trapped: Remarkable Stories of Survival from the 2011 Canterbury Earthquake*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2012.

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means that the initial seismic event on 4 September 2010 released the energy equivalent of forty two Hiroshima bombs.

# MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM

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Let us consider the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion... We shall find we are dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression, '*mysterium tremendum*'. The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.<sup>5</sup>

*Rudolph Otto*

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolph Otto (Harvey J W trans.), *The Idea of the Holy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959, pp26-27.

It began peacefully. Perhaps a little idyllically? That's the kind of thought, of course, that only arises afterwards, after the fact...

On Easter Day in 2010 all was well in Christchurch, and at St Luke's in the City. An attractive 'garden city' in the south Pacific, mecca for lovers of Victorian Gothic buildings and picturesque gardens. A very large, gracious and spacious Victorian Gothic Halswell stone and brick building constructed in 1909, the second church building on the corner of Manchester and Kilmore Streets. We had celebrated a joyful 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the parish on Sunday 18 October 2009, the culmination of several years of planning and fundraising, newly completed restoration works and new additions blessed by the Bishop and many friends old and new. During the first quarter of 2010 we prepared five adult candidates for baptism and confirmation. On Easter Day three of them were baptised in the great stone font. What is there to say about Easter faith to mature and thoughtful adults, whose lives and experiences and intelligences are rich? What does it mean for these mature adults to be baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ?<sup>6</sup> This was the question which exercised my mind and heart as I prepared for those baptisms and that Easter day.

A less-than-peaceful and lengthy process during the several years before that Easter Day had brought me to the conclusion that if Easter faith is not an organic, naturally-arising development, from the deepest reality of our being, it is bound ultimately to be oppressive, possibly lethal. Beliefs imposed from without, and the alien divinities upon which they depend, cannot ultimately endure, because they have no natural ground in the individual, I had begun to suspect. True, it may well be possible for an adult to go through all the motions, and for many years. And such beliefs may even provide something of a safe buffer against the harshness of reality. And the acceptance of externally-originating belief does offer other rewards, because it helps us to belong with other people, who apparently all believe the same thing – reading the authorised texts, praying in the prescribed manner does create a bonding and therefore comforting effect.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:4

However, there comes the moment of crisis. Sooner or later it becomes apparent that externally-imposed divinities and beliefs do not actually connect a person to their own natural ground, to their own soul. The realisation may be precipitated by education, or spiritual enlightenment, or by a sudden event such as accident, illness, death, or so many other life event possibilities. In such crises we discover that we have been going through the motions of something which is not actually native to ourselves, a belief which is someone else's which we have tried to accept. Then it all collapses, like a straw man or a house of cards – actually, because it needs to for the sake of our soul!

With this encouragement I assured the candidates that in baptism they are not imposing upon themselves some alien reality, which they can make themselves believe in by sheer force of will – and certainly not an alien reality presumed to be capable of bending the forces of the cosmos in the service of their personal protection and interests. Because, contrary to all popular opinion on the matter, the Christian Paschal Mystery, the resurrection proclamation, is not an alien reality at all. It is not an imposition of ideas falling out of the sky 2000 years ago, something in fact unbelievable which we force ourselves to believe in.

Quite the opposite – the Paschal Mystery does not need to be imposed upon people, contrary to popular opinion, because it is a reality that arises from the depths, from the earth. Not lofty and over-spiritualised ideas floating up in the stratosphere, no. Look at the story itself – the risen Christ erupts from the lowest place, from the tomb, from the ground, from the depths of the earth! Christ's tomb is another expression of the same fundamental reality as the formless void, which Genesis describes as the womb of creation.<sup>7</sup> The great spiritual teachers of the tradition have found a range of metaphors to give expression to the inexhaustible dimensions of this experiential reality, this formless void – terms like the cloud of unknowing, the dark night of the soul, the Abyss, the Nothing.

The Great Three Days of Easter only come to completion on Easter morning because of the preconditions, the tomb preconditions, which make it possible: the necessity of Thursday night's conscious and deliberate enfleshing which precipitates the

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:2

crisis; the necessity of Friday's conscious and voluntary suffering of the opposites which are the very fabric of our humanity and the whole creation. Jesus does not emerge from the tomb because he believes in certain propositions, or because he has been a faithful attendee at the synagogue, or because he can quote chapter and verse from the Torah. No! He emerges from the tomb because he willingly, consciously consented to the descent into the tomb, into the depths, into the great Abyss which is a formless void, the Nothing. Likewise, resurrection faith arises not from a Bible or a liturgy or a church teaching, or from what someone else apparently believes in – and certainly not from an alien divinity. Rather, resurrection faith is the rich fruit that mysteriously is produced when a grain of seed falls into the earth and dies!<sup>8</sup> Resurrection faith, baptismal faith is the opposite of an alien imposition upon an unwilling mind. That would be bad news! Baptismal faith is, rather, the rich fruit that is mysteriously produced when we consent to a conscious and willed descent into our own Abyss, the depths, the ground, the tomb. This is, of course, what Jesus calls the 'way of the cross'.<sup>9</sup>

So in dawn's first light, preparing to go to the font, I concluded my thoughts by suggesting to the candidates that those who enter into the Christian Pascha must go the same way as the Christ, the one who leads the way through the shadow of death, the pioneer and perfecter of salvation.<sup>10</sup> And those baptised into the Paschal Mystery are those who are discovering that what is truly needed, what is fully life-giving, arises from their own ground, their own depths - an organic development, naturally arising from the Ground of All Being, firmly rooted in the *Mysterium Tremendum* which is native to the human soul. This term *Mysterium Tremendum* was Rudolph Otto's, an early twentieth century German theologian. For me it seemed to catch the expansive sense of the Divine Other, the unnameable, unutterable and ultimately inexhaustible and uncontainable Holy Mystery before which all human life falls in silent awe – but which, paradoxically and mysteriously, is the very stuff of which the human is made. It articulates what the English word 'God' may be

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<sup>8</sup> John 12:24

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8:34b

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 12:2

meant to convey, but which perhaps no longer does for many people – certainly not for me.

To conclude my sermon, I wanted to make the connection between baptism and the Eucharist in which they and all of us would participate at that dawning day. I'd added a hand-written note to the typed text when I was running through it one last time shortly before the liturgy. Those who share in the Eucharistic feast which Christ offers to all, I wanted to assure them, are not swallowing an alien reality. No! The Eucharist, which is always a celebration of the Paschal Mystery, is a communion with the deepest truth of our being. The Eucharist, I summarised, is a communion with the deepest truth of our being - which is rooted in the depths, the Abyss, the...

Then something happened. Something not coming from within that church building. At precisely this moment, just as I was about to complete that sentence, indeed just as I uttered the next two words, there was a loud 'crack' in the massive roof timbers 30 metres or so above us. The roof cracked at this phrase: the *Mysterium Tremendum* which is native to the human soul. I was greatly shaken by the unnerving 'coincidence'. After a pause to recollect myself, I spoke my final sentence: This is Easter faith - good news, *evangellion*, gospel.<sup>11</sup> I returned to my seat glancing at the roof, wondering if I had imagined it. Later, at home, I checked 'Geonet', New Zealand's official source of geological hazard information, partly because I needed to satisfy myself that nothing had happened. However, Geonet reported that at 7.10am (NZST) on Sunday 4 April 2010 there was a magnitude 3.5 seismic event 30Km north of Christchurch, at a focal depth of 35Km. At 7.10am. That was the precise moment at which I spoke these words: "The Eucharist is a communion with the deepest truth of our being - which is rooted in the depths, the Abyss, the *Mysterium Tremendum* which is native to the human soul." Something had definitely cracked! But what? I was shocked by this 'coincidence'. What had happened?

What merely 'cracked' on Easter Day, exploded with unbelievable violence at 4.35am on Saturday 4 September 2010.

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<sup>11</sup> Greek: **ευαγγελιον** *evangellion*, from which is derived the English words evangel, evangelism, evangelist, and evangelical. This word belongs to the whole Christian community, and should not be confused with the manner in which it tends to be illegitimately conscripted into the purposes of narrow church party politics. I will use it frequently throughout these wrestlings because it is a life-giving word for all the baptised.

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Yet even that day, no one could foresee the even more catastrophic eruption just five months later, at 12.51pm on Tuesday 22 February 2011.

In the sermons which followed during the two plus years since September 2010 I have wrestled with what first cracked, and then exploded. What follows are those wrestlings. The sermons are reproduced here mostly as originally presented for the parish community of St Luke's in the City, though it has been necessary to make a number of corrections and alterations. I did not choose the Scriptural texts on which they are based, but simply followed the prescribed set of Bible readings which are read in churches of many types and traditions around the world – from what is known as the 'Revised Common Lectionary'. The locations in which they were presented vary, as the parish was initially forced out of its own building on 4 September 2010, then out of its first temporary home, the 'Rose Historic Chapel', on 22 February. The parish has gathered mostly since then at the Mary Potter Community Centre, though has also celebrated the Eucharist at St Michael and All Angels (Anglican), and at the Knox (Presbyterian) Centre.

The sermons have been gathered under six themes. The first theme, Encounter, explores the experiential priority of faith. In the second theme I reflect upon that unnameable and wholly Other mystery before whom all images and ideas fail. The third theme focuses on the developmental aspect of faith. 'Sacrifice' reflects upon the toughest aspect of Christianity. In the fifth theme, Christ Consciousness, the fruits of sacrifice are considered. Finally, in the sixth theme, I consider what might be considered the ultimate goal of this undertaking, fullness, completion.

# ENCOUNTER

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Faith is about relationship sustained without the use of power.<sup>12</sup>

*Jonathan Sacks*

Orthodoxy found in the construction of dogma and doctrine [in] no way do justice to the non-rational aspect of its subject. So far from keeping the non-rational element in religion alive in the heart of the religious experience, orthodox Christianity manifestly failed to recognize its value, and by this failure gave to the idea of God a one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

*Rudolph Otto*

All around us, to right and left, in front and behind, above and below, we have only had to go a little beyond the frontier of sensible appearances in order to see the divine welling up and showing through. But it is not only close to us, in front of us, that the divine presence has revealed itself. It has sprung up so universally, and we find ourselves so surrounded and transfixed by it, that there is no room left to fall down and adore it, even within ourselves. By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.<sup>14</sup>

*Teilhard de Chardin*

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011, p169.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolph Otto, *op cit*, p17.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, London: Fontana Books, 1964, p112.

I have already alluded to the fact that many people think that religion means believing in things. You know, things in the Bible, or church doctrines. Many people find that the things they think they're required to believe in are impossible to believe in. In spite of what many people have been led to believe, the Christian breakthrough was not the work of Bible study! The Biblical record in fact tells us that the Christian revelation was instead an experience, a fully human experience.

The source of all religious practice and faith is encounter. That is to say, everything flows out of an actual lived experience. As a result of actual experience the One whom Christians follow re-defined the prevailing religious rules, re-arranged the religious furniture, upset the religious minders. Moreover, the Biblical record makes it quite clear that those religious persons claiming to know infallibly the mind of God on all matters could not bring themselves to accept the reality of Jesus' experience.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was invited to address Pope Benedict XVI and many of his bishops at a Synod on the 'new evangelisation', to mark the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the convening of the Second Vatican Council. He suggested to them that evangelisation is not a 'project' but must flow from experience.<sup>15</sup> The Christian witness is that new insights require the priority of experience. Scholarship and 'believing in' things always tag along later, in an effort to find a language to describe what has already happened.

I am emphasising experience, but I need to clarify that I do not mean by this that 'experience trumps tradition', that my experience supersedes Scripture and tradition. This is a crucial distinction. In everything which follows in these wrestlings that distinction should be kept in mind.

Tradition, of one kind or another, precedes the existence of the individual. For the purposes of these wrestlings I am assuming a grounding in a religious tradition, in which sacred texts are foundational. Yet in spite of the wisdom of the tradition the Spirit of God erupts in the experience of individuals, and this eruption may seem to completely overthrow their tradition – the experiences of Saints Paul and St Peter come to mind. But this

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<sup>15</sup> Cited at <http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=33504>

does not mean that their experiences replace tradition, nor do they leave the tradition and become solo practitioners. Rather, their experiential breakthrough causes them to re-read the Scriptures and their tradition, in the light of their experience. Furthermore, in an additional step, now illuminated by an experience-sponsored fresh understanding of the Scriptures and the tradition, their own lives come to be radically reassessed in the light of the reinvigorated Scriptures and tradition. This process is both cyclic, and progressive. The person who takes spiritual experience seriously is likely to undergo a period of felt separation from their tradition – as can be observed in the life of Jesus and a great many saints – yet returns to the community breathing new life into their tradition.

In a religious environment which places such a high priority on believing in religious propositions, it's not easy to take one's own actual experience seriously. But some experiences are just too big to be ignored. Certainly, when the ground on which one stands heaves violently, taking 185 lives, shattering buildings, people, and business, crippling an entire city, destroying much of its central business district, one ought to pay attention!

# Experience First

Matthew's Magi symbolise the spiritual search.<sup>16</sup> The Magi employ their own methods, their own wisdom and insight, their own symbols. In the Magi the spiritual search begins with their own experience, trusts that experience. They are most likely astrologers. This means that sacred revealed texts are not their only, or primary, data – they attend to the external signs. They detect the arrival of the 'king of the Jews' by faithfully applying their own practice and art.<sup>17</sup> This is the first, crucial, aspect of the Magi.

The second is related and consequent upon this. The method of their searching is open enough as to be able to enquire widely.<sup>18</sup> That is to say, all relevant and available data is to be examined, nothing ruled out without first being put to the test. In our time this has come to be especially valued by science – consider all the data. This is a fearless stance, not at all regressive: open, not closed. Christianity has yet much to learn from the Magi in this regard.

The third critical aspect of the spiritual search shown us in the story of the Magi is the very great difference between this true and open searching, and the narrowness of the mere information which religiously-minded people can store up as possessions. The frightened Herod calls together all the chief priests and scribes.<sup>19</sup> These are those with a vested interest in power, and who imagine themselves to know all the facts. They do, indeed, regurgitate some information they have gleaned from the sacred texts. They do know *some* bits of data. But, in stark contrast to the Magi, these guardians of the religious tradition, these who imagine themselves to be 'orthodox', can only regurgitate dis-embodied information – there is no wisdom in them.

Nevertheless, Matthew's narrative does employ their meagre data as part of the overall programme to assure the Jewish community that Jesus' somewhat unorthodox origins can be seen

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<sup>16</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Epiphany, 2 January 2011, at the Rose Historic Chapel. The lections: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 2:2

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 2:1

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 2:4

to fulfil Scripture.<sup>20</sup> But as for the scribes and chief priests themselves, they are in fact ignorant; spiritually, they know nothing of any real value or significance about the new-born king. What they do know merely serves the regressive ruling power, the murderous king. Worst of all, their apparent orthodoxy actually makes them ‘white-washed tombs’, as Jesus will later declare, looking good on the outside, but full of dead men’s bones;<sup>21</sup> tying up heavy burdens and laying them on the shoulders of others;<sup>22</sup> locking people out of the kingdom, failing to enter themselves;<sup>23</sup> crossing land and sea to make a single convert, but making the convert twice as much a child of hell as themselves;<sup>24</sup> blind guides, straining out gnats while swallowing camels.<sup>25</sup> Such supposedly ‘orthodox’ religionists always serve unjust and cruel ruling powers – in that age and every age. They do know some bits of information, but are not true seekers for the Divine child, and prevent others from becoming so.

Matthew’s Magi, however, are the symbol of true seeking, honest and courageous searching – and its great reward, finding the divine child! They trust their own experience. They follow their star, “more lovely than the noonday light.”<sup>26</sup> Thus faithfully following the mystery which was formerly hidden – the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things<sup>27</sup> – is made know to them by a revelation.<sup>28</sup> And they travel prepared, with precious gifts – not for those in powerful positions, but for the divine child who is found in “such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding.”<sup>29</sup> Unconstrained by the narrowness and fearfulness and jealousy of supposed ‘orthodoxy’, their hearts are truly open to joy. Thus they are able to pay homage to the tremendous mystery of the Divine being birthed in human flesh – all nations in the flesh coming to the Divine light.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, such a stance enables them to be neither fearful of the ruling powers, nor beholden to them. Herod

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 2:5-6,15,17-18,23

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 23:27

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 23:4

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 23:13

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 23:15

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 23:24

<sup>26</sup> From the hymn by Charles Coffin, “What star is this?”, *With One Voice*, New Zealand Hymn Book Trust.

<sup>27</sup> Ephesians 3:9

<sup>28</sup> Ephesians 3:3

<sup>29</sup> from the hymn by W C Dix, “What child is this?”, *With One Voice*.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 60:3

instructs them to return to Jerusalem with information, but they are wise enough to put more trust in the direct experience of the Divine appearance manifest in the dream.<sup>31</sup> Trusting the experience of the dream makes them free from the ruling powers, free to return to their own country 'by another road'.<sup>32</sup> They *know*, not because they have heard about some truth or read it in a book, but because they have *experienced* it themselves, firsthand. And thus knowing, avoiding the cruel and ignorant, they keep their counsel for those who might have ears to hear.<sup>33</sup> Indeed they are sufficiently free and wise so as to avoid casting their pearl before swine.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in the Magi, we are given a profound symbol for the true search for Jesus, for the proclamation of the Divine coming to birth in all human flesh. The true search for 'God with us'<sup>35</sup> employs the wisdom of the Scriptures but is *guided by direct experience*. The primary data is first-hand and experiential. An attitude of openness to all the data is vital, a fearless and open stance, not stifled by fearful and regressive traditionalism and grasping at power. The true search requires the seeker to accept that what he or she already knows is but a fraction of the totality of what is to be known. The seeker thus employs what they do know in the service of making her/himself open to yet more reality and more truth.

This is the great gift to us of Matthew's symbol of the Magi – truly a precious gift for the spiritual search.

"While outward signs the star displays,  
an inward light the Lord conveys,  
and urges them, with force benign,  
to seek the giver of the sign."<sup>36</sup>

The giver of the sign conveys an *inward* light. If we are willing to risk it, the Magi enter the house of our own soul, with precious gifts for the Divine child coming to birth we who are destined for adoption as Divine children.<sup>37</sup> And in that inner house, courageous seeking, openness to experience and Scripture,

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 2:8,12

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 2:12

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 11:15

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 7:6

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 1:23

<sup>36</sup> from the hymn by Charles Coffin, "What star is this?", *With One Voice*

<sup>37</sup> Ephesians 1:5

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

and joyful homage meet – all things gathered up according to God's eternal purpose from before the foundation of the world.<sup>38</sup>

This Divine revelation is at the heart of the Eucharistic banquet – where seekers offer themselves, and simultaneously receive their true selves. And having been warned by direct Divine encounter, perhaps in a dream, the seekers return to their home country but by a different path.

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<sup>38</sup> Ephesians 1:10, 3:11

# All are Made for This

Religious ideas, theology, can be powerful, beautiful, enthralling.<sup>39</sup> A sound moral code can be compelling, and is vital for life. Larger-than-life mentors can be mothers and fathers in the faith, who have assisted us into and who have encouraged us on the Way. Yet though these all play their part, I suspect that the decisive factor is actual encounter with the Transcendent – experience of Spirit; being caught up in the *Mysterium Tremendum*; the overshadowing of the Holy. Such an encounter is pure, unmediated. It is quite literally a transfiguration<sup>40</sup> – a metamorphosing<sup>41</sup> of one thing into another. For but a moment – and it is, generally speaking, fleeting – everything disparate, fragmented, and divided is united, harmonised. All pain and suffering, all of life’s fractured pieces, all anxious attempts to secure us – momentarily drawn into an ecstatic and eternal union.

Now it may sound like I am speaking about something which only a few especially ‘religious’ people experience. But I am not. All who are made in the image and likeness of God are made for this ecstatic and eternal union – it is our shared human destiny, intensified by the Christian dispensation under the sign of the great wedding banquet of the Lamb; of which this and every Eucharist is foretaste and promise. Within the experience of each of us there is a particularly dazzling and transfiguring encounter – no matter how fleeting or ephemeral. It may be a source of embarrassment, or pride, or sheer incomprehensibility – just as it was for Jesus’ first disciples, and all disciples since.

It is commonly observed that the men Jesus chose as his disciples were not particularly ‘religious’ men. Moreover, throughout the gospels, Peter, James and John are exposed in a very dim light. Yet in spite of these apparent ‘weaknesses’, and their lack of ‘religious’ credentials, Jesus takes the three of them “up a high mountain, apart, by themselves.”<sup>42</sup> And there they are given an encounter with the *Mysterium Tremendum* – they are overshadowed by the immensity of the Holy. Mark conveys this by

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<sup>39</sup> Preached on the Last Sunday before Lent, 19 February 2012, at *The Mary Potter Community Centre*. The lections: 2 Kings 2:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

<sup>40</sup> Mark 9:2

<sup>41</sup> Greek: μεταμορφωθη *metemorphōthē*

<sup>42</sup> Mark 9:2

the use of well-known symbols: mountain top; separation from the collective; dazzling whiteness; transfiguration, which is like seeing through an ordinary thing to the extraordinary beyond it; overshadowing<sup>43</sup> appearance of the three figures of Jesus, Moses and Elijah, which is an expression of unification.

No further mention is made of this overshadowing encounter with the Holy. Yet it's inconceivable that Peter, James or John could possibly have forgotten such an arresting experience. Rather, as for Mary, the overshadowing,<sup>44</sup> though fleeting, must surely have become a crucial aspect of their spiritual life thereafter. It is reasonable to suspect that everything which subsequently happens to them was coloured by the light of this dazzling whiteness. Just as all of the physicist's careful observations are filtered through the lens of the intuition which has been the source of their searching. Eventually, Peter, James, and John would come to interpret their experience of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus – and even the conception and birth and baptism of Jesus - through the lens of this religious encounter.

And the vital difference between this transfiguring encounter and all the recorded healing and miracle stories is the complete lack of 'proof'. Like the resurrection, there were no other witnesses to verify the experience – no photographer or public relations consultant at hand! Indeed, their own attempt to concretise the experience was expressly forbidden by Jesus.<sup>45</sup> No, they are simply given an encounter of eternal union – and instructed to meditate upon it until after the "Son of Humanity has risen from the dead".<sup>46</sup>

And we may well wonder why it must be this way! In the religious marketplace there is no end to advertised techniques which will supposedly guarantee spiritual ecstasy. Yet why is it that our attempts at manufacturing it, conjuring it up, ultimately fail so dismally? And cause great injury to ourselves and others! Why is pure experience so fleeting, so ephemeral? Why must we be like St Paul who confesses that:

"I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven – whether in the body or

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<sup>43</sup> Mark 9:7 Greek: **επισκιαζουσα** *episkiazousa*

<sup>44</sup> Luke 1:35 Greek: **επισκιασει** *episkiasei*

<sup>45</sup> Mark 9:5,9

<sup>46</sup> Mark 9:9

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”<sup>47</sup>

Every year on this last Sunday before Lent we are given this story of transfiguration. Incarnation behind, crucifixion-resurrection ahead, we are reminded that encounter with the All is not within our power to manipulate. Transfiguration is pure gift – the gift of unmediated experience of the *Mysterium Tremendum* by which all the data of our lives may be interpreted and understood. The experience itself is in fact too high – too lofty, too inflating, always at risk of being misused for ego-centric ends. Spiritual ecstasy is dangerous, lethal even, except by being grounded in it’s opposite – descent, down the mountain, into the valley.

Grounding is a life’s work – our life’s work. All of us living through these momentous times in this city and in this anniversary week, if we have eyes to see, know that grounding is the vital work. Grounding is the fruit of descent – to the desert, wrestling with ‘Satan’ and the wild beasts hidden within our deepest selves;<sup>48</sup> to passion, suffering and crucifixion – the result of which is true understanding of the metamorphosis which is participating in the resurrection.

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<sup>47</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

<sup>48</sup> Mark 1:13

## Where Did He Get All This?

It is in our nature to seek truth.<sup>49</sup> We are hard-wired, so to speak, to search for wisdom. But where do we find truth and wisdom?

Religious traditions claim to supply the answer. What is not acknowledged by those who claim to have no religion is that all the pseudo-religions also claim to supply the answer – the most graphic example being the religion of the ‘free market’, which, according to its disciples, *is* ultimate truth and wisdom.

For those of us who do still remain connected to a religious tradition, we are instructed that truth and wisdom are revealed by God in Christ to the Church. Truth and wisdom are proscribed by what the Bible and the Church teaches. Many Christians seem to believe that *all* truth and wisdom is contained in the Bible – and *only* in the Bible. Other Christians seem to believe that truth and wisdom is also confined to the teaching authority of the Church. As we gather here this morning, the General Synod of this Province is meeting in Fiji – an expression of such authority. So, if it’s not in the Bible it can’t be true. If the Pope or the Church Council or the General Synod doesn’t declare it, it can’t be true. Either way, truth is only revealed to the Church as collective phenomena. The individual’s task is to line up with this collectively-accepted revealed truth. The individual is to accept and follow the authorised truth and wisdom as defined by Bible and teaching authority of the Church – which many regard as the only way to ‘heaven’.

It has to be admitted that this is a great saving. For if all truth and wisdom are derived from these external collective authorities, then I am spared the effort of searching for myself. Historically speaking – taking account of the development of the major religious traditions during a period of between, roughly, five and one thousand years ago, and given that most people in nomadic and early agrarian cultures simply didn’t have the luxury of time for philosophic speculations – it was probably essential to that stage of human evolution for truths to be handed down by some form of collectively-agreed means. It was probably

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<sup>49</sup> Preached on the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, 8 July 2012, at the Mary Potter Community Centre, Christchurch. Lectons: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

necessary for the prohibition of child sacrifice, for instance, to have been mandated with collectively-revealed religious authority.

Likewise, if we consider the realities of childhood we can also see that this is a necessary developmental stage. The parents' version of truth and wisdom is bound to have an almost numinous quality about it for the child – and certainly a feeling of the absolute and authoritative. The acceptance of parental truth and wisdom is a great saving to the child – which is thus liberated from the onerous demands of adult consciousness, so as to be able to get on with the business of child development.

Thus, it is widely assumed that a person looking for truth and wisdom will both turn to, and accept, the Church's official, 'orthodox' claims. The individual is simply required to accept and follow the authorised truth and wisdom – as defined by Bible and teaching authority of the Church. All very straightforward.

Today's lections remind us, however, that there is more to truth and wisdom than the Church sometimes claims. Ezekiel's very individual religious experiences were obviously not derived from a collectively-accepted revealed source. Nor were they initially welcomed by the religious authorities – as the text clearly demonstrates by stating this twice.<sup>50</sup>

People in Jesus' hometown are sufficiently disturbed by Jesus to ask: "Where did this man get all this?"<sup>51</sup> Their problem is not merely that he's a local boy – which tends to be the focus of attention when this gospel story is read. From many gospel episodes we can see that Jesus has access to a wisdom and truth which confounds collective expectations. Again and again he seems to be outside the bounds of what was accepted at that time as revealed truth – according to Torah and teaching authority of Temple and synagogue. Frankly, Jesus would never qualify as a 'simple Bible believer', let alone accept the claims of supposed 'inerrancy' of the Bible.

Similarly, St Paul's letter to the church at Corinth gestures towards a source of truth and wisdom well outside what was 'authorised' by collective-institutional religion: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know;

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<sup>50</sup> Ezekiel 2:5,7

<sup>51</sup> Mark 6:2

God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”<sup>52</sup> This is hardly a description of Biblical infallibility! It would not pass the Reformation’s famous dictum *sola Scriptura*! Whatever the wisdom and truth was about which St Paul wrote, he certainly didn’t get it out of the Bible – nor from the rabbis; nor from the Lambeth conference or the General Synod. And his description of his source is undeniably obtuse. In fact, he even declares that one cannot, must not, ‘reveal one’s sources’!

Well, as a wider examination of the Christian tradition reveals, in fact the experiences of Ezekiel and Jesus and St Paul are not isolated. Indeed, I think it can be argued that it is in fact normative for truth and wisdom to be the fruit of an *individual’s attentiveness* to the Divine reality. Such an individual *begins* with ‘the Bible’, yes, the authorised texts and teachings as the good soil. The individual comes out of somewhere, growing up out of a received tradition. Yet truth and wisdom are the rich harvest which grow out of this good soil – not the soil itself.<sup>53</sup> It’s not surprising that Jesus’ hometown family and friends had no idea where he got this wisdom – for they were obviously confusing the soil with the harvest. Likewise, we can be very thankful that St Paul was wise enough to discern between the soil of his religious tradition and the harvest of his own experience of Holy Mystery.

Thus, being sent out as the baptised – having authority over unclean spirits<sup>54</sup> – cannot mean simply telling people about the contents of the Bible. That would be like a parent telling their child to accept for their whole lives the parental version of wisdom and truth as the *only* truth there is – a sure recipe for infantilism and psychological regression; thwarting the evolution of consciousness.

Rather, being sent as the baptised must mean becoming the rich fruit which grows out of the soil of the received truth. The fruit is not the soil. The fruit is bound to be a great mystery to the person who has assumed that the soil is all there is. The fruit cannot be ‘explained’ in terms of the soil – its genesis is a mystery

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<sup>52</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

<sup>53</sup> Mark 4:1-9

<sup>54</sup> Mark 6:7

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

which 'cannot be told', it's fulfilment the result of absolute attentiveness to the inner experience of Holy Mystery. And this fruit is the very means by which unclean spirits are cleansed – demons cast out, the sick anointed and cured.<sup>55</sup>

The disciple, the one who eats this Bread, is to be such fruit: attending as fully as possible to the inner Holy Mystery; growing out of the soil of the received tradition; and for the life of the world.

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<sup>55</sup> Mark 6:13

# The Possibility of Encounter

The oldest and deepest strand of Christian faith, like all true religion, is motivated by the quest for union with God.<sup>56</sup> Such a union is primarily experiential. Union with the Divine is not a treatise, a law, a doctrine, a formula. The witness of the Scriptures testifies, time and again, to its experiential basis, there being a veritable deluge of well-known examples: Moses before the burning bush, ascending the holy mountain shrouded in smoke and fire; the boy Samuel's night-time visitation; Isaiah's lips scorched with the burning coal in the temple filled with smoke; Ezekiel's astonishing flaming chariot and the four creatures of the Divine throne-room; Jacob's all-night wrestling match with God's messenger, resulting in a new name as well as a broken hip; Abraham's encounter with the three angels by the oaks of Mamre; the Israelites' deliverance through the Reed Sea<sup>57</sup> and their 40 years in the Sinai wilderness, guided by the pillar of smoke and fire; Mary's disturbing encounter with the angel Gabriel; Joseph's numinous dreams – the list could go on.

All such experiences, and the many more, are above all mystical. That is to say, they are manifestations of the mystery of the possibility of direct encounter with the Divine. The goal of all religious life is precisely this state of affairs – the possibility of direct encounter with the Divine. Union with the Divine ultimately means union with all things.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, for the Christian, any account of mystical experience must take account of the experience of Jesus: born into poverty and exile, yet visited by angels; submission to the baptism of John, yet named as the beloved Son; driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, to be tested and tempted; repeated retreats into the silent wordlessness of mountains and deserts, in spite of, and because of, the adulation of unconscious crowds; taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of his own flesh for his disciples; sweating blood in the Garden of sorrows, accepting the cup which he did not want to drink; silence before religious and political authorities; cries of desolation, forgiveness, and ultimate hope

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<sup>56</sup> Preached on the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 19 September 2010, at the Rose Historic Chapel. The lections: Amos 6:1a,4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

<sup>57</sup> English translations of the Bible have tended to erroneously translate this proper noun as 'Red Sea'.

<sup>58</sup> Colossians 1:16

from the apparent hopelessness of the cross. The goal of Jesus' work is two-fold: desire for intimate union with the Father; and the desire that those who have seen him would see beyond him to the Father, to experience that same union – not only with the Father, but with all things.

This is our goal too. As those baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ we long for intimate union with the Ground of All Being, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the God who can be intimately known as 'Abba'. And, equally, we are to live out this longing in such a way that, as living witnesses, we might always point beyond ourselves towards the Great Other. Such an undertaking is, in fact, the foundational meaning of human life.

When people ask what is the meaning of life it is usually expected that it will be expressed in some tidy doctrine, some rational explanation, or some set of rules for living, some formula for success. But this is *not* the Christian mystery, and thus not the Eucharistic mystery. Living the Eucharistic mystery is living towards intimate union with Jesus, *becoming* his Body and Blood, by *consuming* his Body and Blood. Such union, such a communion, is first and foremost an experiential encounter – beyond words, formulas, rationality, rules, doctrines, morality even. And its ultimate purpose is the experience of communion with all things, all creatures, all matter.

So what happened? How come most people in the Christian West would find this statement surprising, incomprehensible even? Do not most people labour under the notion that Christian faith consists in keeping the rules, in moral standards - especially sexual standards - in submission to complex doctrines which cannot be understood, rationally, by 'ordinary' people? Or as yesterday's dismal deluge of letters to the editor of *The Press* reveal, religion as either defence of an interfering deity directing earthquakes, or the rejection of such extra-terrestrial manipulation.

In fact the earliest and most primitive Christianity certainly did not understand their discipleship in Christ like that. Within St Paul's corpus can be found, again and again, an expression of the mystical union in Christ: "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."<sup>59</sup> "I have been

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<sup>59</sup> Romans 6:8

crucified with Christ... No longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”<sup>60</sup> “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven...”<sup>61</sup>

So what happened? Some have argued that what happened was Christendom – the apparent conversion of the emperor Constantine, which resulted in Christian faith, previously outlawed, becoming effectively state religion. And, beginning with this unfortunate development, mystical encounter with Christ has been endlessly sidelined by law, rules, a one-sided dry and rationalistic and moralising theology, and subservience to the agenda of the state and ecclesiastical authority. Uncomfortably close to home, our Anglican Church’s lingering state-religion status remains an impediment to our true calling as disciples of Christ. In this post-quake situation this may become all the more acute for us, with the possibility of financial support from the state to restore our buildings.

Like last week’s parable<sup>62</sup>, commentary on today’s parable concentrates on the moral and legal aspects, which themselves are obvious enough to anyone (Does one really need to be ‘religious’ to do this!): an excessively-wealthy man contemptuously ignores the plight of the poor man at his gate; at the resurrection the poor man is elevated, while the rich man loses everything; yet in spite of the seriousness of his condition, even in Hades, the rich man still fails to recognise Lazarus as his brother, maintaining his landed-gentry attitude towards those he is accustomed to ordering around. Ah yes, the wealthy will get their comeuppance, the poor will get their reward for putting up with being downtrodden! It is almost impossible for us to read this parable in any other way apart from legal and moral terms. Such reading is the product of centuries of loss of the mystical dimension of our faith.

The key is remembering that for Christ’s disciples Scripture only makes sense in the context of the Eucharistic feast – which is not an intellectual or legal or moral formula, but an experience, an encounter, intimate union with and in the Mystical Body of Christ. Then, in this light, we can hear the Scripture quite differently.

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<sup>60</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>61</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:2ff

<sup>62</sup> Luke 16:1-13, the parable of ‘the unjust steward’

Jesus' concern is for union with the Father – which is a way of saying, for union with the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the Ground of All Being, the intimacy of which is so complete that it has a thoroughly personal quality – and that all humankind might be raised up with him to such an intimate union. Now we see Lazarus as one of us at the Table of Christ, sharing, with us, in the Body of Christ. Equally, we see the rich man as one of us at the Table of Christ, sharing with us in the Mystical Body of Christ. The sin of the rich man in all of us is failure to seek such union, to retreat into family tribalism. The gift of Lazarus in all of us is non-vengeful and pacific acceptance of such union.

The challenge of Jesus to those religious people with whom he has been sparring, throughout these chapters in Luke's gospel, is to repent of their legalism, moralism and possessiveness – and to turn towards whole-hearted desire for mystical encounter with the Divine. For legalism, moralism and possessiveness are manifestations of our attempt to control and manipulate. Whole-hearted desire for mystical encounter liberates us from this great sin. Ultimately, it is only this whole-hearted desire for mystical union with the Divine which opens our hearts to experience all humankind as sister and brother.

# THE OTHER

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And one sole encounter or one meeting with that ultimate eternal ancient and ever-new goodness is more worthy than anything a creature might do, or even the whole Holy Church, in a hundred thousand years.<sup>63</sup>

*Marguerite Porete*

Christ became what we are, that he might make us what he is.<sup>64</sup>

*Irenaeus of Lyons*

... And so, for the first time in my life perhaps (although I am supposed to meditate every day!), I took the lamp and, leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seems clear, I went down into my inmost self, to the deep abyss whence I feel dimly that the power of my actions emanates. But as I moved further and further away from the conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet, and out of it came – arising I know not from where – the current which I dare to call *my life*.<sup>65</sup>

*Teilhard de Chardin*

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<sup>63</sup> Marguerite Porete (ed. Ellen L Babinsky), *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993, Chapter 135, p218.

<sup>64</sup> Attributed to St Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130 –c.200), in Alan Richardson (ed) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM, 1969, p175.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, pp76-77.

No matter how hard we may try, no matter how rationalistic and materialistic we may be, eventually we cannot escape the profound sense of other-ness. All experiences of crisis expose us to the mystery of other-ness. A calamitous ground explosion, a massive earthquake, which takes a large number of lives, renders many thousands homeless, reduces much of a city to rubble and strips it of much of its self identity is bound to expose its inhabitants to the mystery of an uncontrollable and menacing other-ness – whether people are conscious of this fact or not.

It is perhaps only this sense of other-ness which spares us from unbridled self-centredness. In the wake of a national tragedy we rightly sing choruses of praise for acts of selfless generosity and for a new sense of ‘community’. We hear tales of previously isolated individuals emerging from their private bunkers into the lakes of liquefaction armed with shovels, with food parcels, or simply with a comforting presence. However, unless we bother to attend to the other-ness which was the prompting experience such acts, good and wonderful as they are, are unlikely to be sustained in the long term, once life begins its slow return to ‘normal’.

Like all decent citizens, people of the faith community respond to Mother Earth’s disruption of ‘normality’ with practical acts of compassion. But wrestling meaning out of such events requires something in addition to such necessary and worthwhile acts of charity. What’s required, sooner or later, is the age-old search for the dark and inexplicable Other, the *Mysterium Tremendum*.

# The Question About God

From my vantage point at the National Memorial on Friday I watched a mass exodus commence the moment the 'religious' component began.<sup>66</sup> And it continued throughout, even while people were praying. The crowd's attentiveness and enthusiasm – so evident when the emergency services personnel entered and while watching the 14 minute video of the CBD – dematerialised, even among many of those who remained. Throughout the prayers, readings, and the Bishop's address people were chatting. Demonstrable sacrificial love of neighbour galvanised the crowd's undivided respect and attention. Talk about God and faith was clearly a turn-off. Actually, one can observe the same phenomenon, in microcosm, at many a funeral.

And yet in spite of its almost repellent effect, the question about God clearly won't just go away. Media interviewers still ask religious leaders where God is in the midst of all this hardship and calamity. And the standard answer given by mainstream religious leaders these days is, in essence, an attempt to rebut that long-standing, 'traditional' religious view – that natural disasters are caused by God as punishment for some kind of sinfulness. We liberal-minded, well-educated, sophisticated post-modern Christians are these days embarrassed by talk about God's wrath against sin breaking out in natural disasters.

Well, this is understandable. But when we react against something we are inclined to over-compensate. So now we have the voice of so-called 'liberal' theology working very hard to extricate God from nature altogether. The standard answer now to the question about God and natural disasters is to claim that God has nothing to do with earthquakes and tsunamis – and that God is only to be seen at work in the compassionate, sacrificial and loving acts of humans, one for another.

This apparently satisfies the media. And everyone can supposedly breathe a sigh of relief. But this is seriously deficient sleight-of-hand theology – and the price of this sleight-of-hand is very high. For the consequence is the division of the cosmos into two non-related compartments – God is involved in the processes

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<sup>66</sup> Preached on 2nd Sunday in Lent, 20 March 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; Matthew John 3:1-17

of human love; but God has nothing to do with the processes of tectonic plates. The one, undivided, creation is now carved up into two. God is involved in humankind. God is not involved in nature.

But in this country, perhaps more than most, many people will report that they feel closest to God when they are in the mountains, or the bush, or by a lake or the sea or a waterfall, or when listening to the bird song in the forest. While they find it difficult to recognise God in human company, they immediately recognise God in nature. So while our motive may be understandable, the insistence that God has nothing to do with tectonic plates is both an inadequate theological statement as well as a disaster for faith. It's an incomplete statement because it's an over-compensation for a primitive theology. It's a disaster for faith because it carves up the cosmos and banishes God from nature.

On this second Lent Sunday we get the first of a number of excursions away from Matthew<sup>67</sup> and into the gospel of John. "I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" "I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."<sup>68</sup>

The unitive dimension of the Kingdom of God is a central tenet of Christian theology. The dynamism of the Kingdom is its very capacity to unite opposites – heaven and earth, flesh and Spirit, human and divine. The Kingdom is a symbol of wholeness, oneness, completion. But – and this is a very great mystery – a unity which does not cancel out the distinctiveness of all the elements of which it is composed. The unity of the Kingdom does not homogenise everything – rather, it draws into its unity the complexity of things. Entry into the Kingdom of God is by the way of opposites – by water and Spirit. Being born again is the outcome of entering again into Mother Nature's womb from which all is created. This immersion in the totality, by water and Spirit, unites and reconciles everything which is fragmentary – all one-sidedness, all partiality, all incompleteness, all suffering and loss.

"How can these things be?" sputtered the learned religious leader who is meant to know about divine matters. "Are

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<sup>67</sup> The Gospel of Matthew is read during 'Year A' of the three-year liturgical cycle. 2011 is Year A in this cycle.

<sup>68</sup> John 3:3-5

you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"<sup>69</sup> What stinging irony! The religious question cannot be solved by neat and tidy one-sided solutions, no matter how well intentioned nor how pleasing to the mainstream media's understandable distaste for a theology of Divine retribution. The kingdom will not be reduced to a neat formula, a ten second sound-bite suitable for TV audiences. God cannot be banished from nature, from the wild and unfathomable process of the cosmos.

A more complete, and dynamic, theological discourse is needed for our time. And this requires not supposedly neat theological 'answers' and tidy 'solutions' – but an entering into an experience of the Divine ground of being, being born again through the depths of Mother Nature's earthquake, a plunging of Spirit down into the waters.

I find myself having to admit that being thus plunged does not supply a tidy answer to questions such as 'where is God?' and 'why this suffering?' But this unknowing seems more honest to me than the attempt to resolve the tension by separating God from tectonic activity.

Those who walk out on the church's prayer need a more complete symbol for the action of God in the world. And we, all of us, are charged with the responsibility of wrestling and struggling to come to a deeper understanding of the revelation which is emerging in the midst of our calamity and suffering.

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<sup>69</sup> John 3:10

# God Projections

We humans construct for ourselves and depend upon some kind of holy place, holy ground.<sup>70</sup> Even those who deny the existence of God nevertheless make holy places and things – which bear a luminous quality that defies mere rationality. Holy places are highly varied in their physical characteristics – churches, temples, mosques, are the obvious ones; ‘heritage buildings’, national monuments, cemeteries, battle fields, football stadiums; rivers, mountains, lakes, beaches; gardens, parks, walking tracks also qualify. No matter how widely the external characteristics may vary, the holy place has the capacity to lift a person above the mundane and ordinary – offering meaning and purpose to life and the cosmos - because the holy place mediates a reality beyond the material domain.

It is commonly reported, in this country especially, that people find God in the mountains, or in their gardens, or by a river. This is, of course, an expression of the earliest forms of religion – in which the Divine is encountered through the natural order and its rhythms.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, as in other ancient religious texts, this sense of the Divine Presence initially experienced through the luminosity of mountain top or in a dream gradually became transformed into human-made objects – a pillar of stone, a box containing commandments, an altar, a temple. Onto these objects was bound to be projected the intangible, ineffable presence of the Divine. And of course civilisation, human evolutionary development, produced increasingly sophisticated temples, mosques, and churches.

Thus, the same religious intuition which inspired Abraham’s wanderings with wives and flocks led to a holy place in the Sinai wilderness where water magically flowed out of rock;<sup>71</sup> a divinely-given well at which Jacob watered his herds;<sup>72</sup> a mountain on which Moses would communicate directly with the

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<sup>70</sup> Preached on 3rd Sunday in Lent, 27 March 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

<sup>71</sup> Exodus 17:1-7

<sup>72</sup> John 4:7,12 There is in fact no specific reference to this well in the Hebrew Scriptures, but which first comes to be mentioned in Christian pilgrim sources in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Divine Presence, and receive God's law;<sup>73</sup> an altar upon which God would accept sacrificial offerings in exchange for forgiveness from sin;<sup>74</sup> and eventually end up with the grandeur of the temple built by King Solomon in Jerusalem.<sup>75</sup>

And, not surprisingly, all this projection of the intangible Divine Presence onto tangible human-made objects was also bound to generate rivalry – a trace of which we hear in the woman's comparison between the competing holy places of Samaritan and Jew.<sup>76</sup> Rivalry between the various claims of holy places and their capacity to mediate the Divine Presence is not surprising – since no matter how simple or sophisticated, how small or how grand, all are mere projections of the intangible Divine onto some tangible object; and a projection is, by definition, mere projection and not actual reality; and my projection is bound to feel more luminous to me than yours.

Well, my argument for universality of projection of the intangible Divine Presence onto a tangible place or object may be claiming too much. But I do know something about my own projection of the ineffable Divine Presence onto external places and objects. When hardest pressed, struggling most with life's challenges, I have especially sought the Divine Presence in the grandeur, the stark beauty of the southern alps. Yet I know that God is not contained in or limited to that physical landscape. Furthermore, if the alps were to disappear tomorrow into the Pacific Ocean in one gargantuan seismic convulsion it could hardly be said that God no longer existed.

I said 'projection', singular, as though there is only one object onto which I project the Divine Presence. But of course there are in fact numerous external objects onto which I project the intangible *Mysterium Tremendum*. The first such external projections are without doubt Mother and Father. And coming to grips with the potency and far-reaching consequences of these projections is a life-long task for all of us.

When I was seven I spent some time in a boarding school while my parents were overseas. It was a terrifying place. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the school in question had been gifted a beautiful chapel of neo-gothic form, modelled on the chapel at

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<sup>73</sup> Exodus 19:16-20

<sup>74</sup> Exodus 27:1-8, Leviticus 16

<sup>75</sup> 1 Kings 6-7

<sup>76</sup> John 4:12,19-20

Kings College Cambridge. Given what I now know, onto that tangible external structure I projected the intangible Divine Presence – a presence which I sorely needed as a lonely, frightened little boy, my first God-projections, my parents, having disappeared overseas for a year.

Of course, I was not conscious of this projection-making at that time – it is simply the natural, unconscious action of the child. But what is clear to me now is this: that external structure was, for me, tantamount to the Divine Presence – it was the rock in the wilderness, the mountain of encounter, the sacrificial altar, the temple of God. Unsurprisingly, when I walked into St Luke's in mid 2002 that elegant structure instantly mediated to me the Divine Presence.

Well, what follows from all this is also just as clear to me, now: the loss of such an external, physical structure amounts to the loss of the God image thus projected. I am, of course, speaking about the life of the spirit, the inner reality. When an object carries the Divine projection it makes not the slightest bit of difference to dismiss it as 'only a building'. Just as when a man or a woman carries the Divine projection, and that person is lost to me, no amount of rationalising changes the inner fact – the goddess, or the god, is dead *to me*.

And so it appears to me that the external structures which have been the carrier of the God-image in projected form most of my life is now shattered and in ruins. And not only on the corner of Manchester and Kilmore Streets, but right across our city. And I hear in Jesus' address to the Samaritan woman my own heart broken open, my name spoken: "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 here now, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."<sup>77</sup>

This appears to be the spiritual task for me, and perhaps for all of us, in this particular Lenten season of the soul. My projections are to be recognised *as projections*. The object onto which I have projected the Divine is not God's actual presence – which is infinitely greater. My projection, fine enough in itself as a first approximation, is bound to be too small, too limited.

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<sup>77</sup> John 4:21,23

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

Thus, regardless of what happens now to the external object – that greatly-loved building whose potential deconsecration and demolition we now have to face<sup>78</sup> - we know that God is always calling us into true worship. In spirit and in truth, we are called beyond our projections, towards the fullness of the Divine Mystery. The Eucharist is sign and foretaste of this fullness. Let us pray that we may become what we eat.

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<sup>78</sup> Following the liturgy at which this sermon was preached the parish met for a Special Meeting of Parishioners, with Bishop Victoria Matthew and Church Property Trustees Property Manager, Elizabeth Clarke, at which the future of the Mountfort church building was to be decided. The people resolved to accept a recommendation from engineers and the Church Property Trustees that the building be deconstructed. Two Sundays later, at 8am on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2011, the Bishop and parish people were driven into the 'Red Zone', under Civil Defence supervision, for the deconsecration of the building. Deconstruction of the building to safe height was undertaken over three days, Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> to Friday 8<sup>th</sup> July 2011. The task of deconstruction and cleanup of the site was completed by the beginning of October 2011.

# Nothing is God

Most so-called ‘moderns’ – or ‘post-moderns’, or ‘post-post-moderns’, if that is what we are now – claim to have no further need of God.<sup>79</sup> God, it is commonly asserted, is merely a construction of human psychology – a phase in human psychological development which we have now grown out of. Yet, when the earth heaved and spewed and smashed our fine buildings and extinguished lives, people immediately asked ‘Where was God?’ It’s one of those lovely ironies – a people who supposedly do not believe in God ask where God was in a time of calamity!

There are, of course, some whose stance is more consistent – even in the face of such death and ongoing destruction as we are experiencing, having dispensed with all notions of the transcendent they remain steadfast. There is simply no place for anything non-rational, no Other, no ineffable mystery. They will neither look to God, nor blame God. Perhaps this stance is the more admirable, for at least being consistent!

Nevertheless, no matter the rationalisation, all persons are religious – in the technical sense of the word *religere*, literally means tied to something. Regardless of what people say, we are subject to powerful ties all the same. We post-post moderns may have liberated ourselves from old-fashioned ideas of the deity, but are all the more enslaved as a consequence. We are quite literally tied to all other powerful forces which have usurped the place of the old gods – ‘market forces’, ‘supply and demand’, ‘global capital’, ‘celebrity’, ‘might is right’, populism, nationalism, consumerism, rationalism, materialism, fashionism, and so on. And such mini-gods are in fact all the more tyrannical because of our unconsciousness of them. It is an astonishing thing that presumably well-educated and sophisticated post-post moderns are apparently so blind to the tyranny of such demi-gods as now rule what we now call the ‘global marketplace’. A glance at mental health statistics and anti-depressant medication consumption in the Western world should surely supply all the evidence necessary to demonstrate the extent of the soul sickness.

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<sup>79</sup> Preached on Trinity Sunday, 19 June 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre, Christchurch.  
Lectons: Genesis 1:1-2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

The religious quest, in its uncluttered essence, is that longing to be tied, grounded to what Paul Tillich helpfully called the 'Ultimate Concern'. What is ultimate, enduring, truly liberating, truly Love – and what is its sign?

This Trinity Sunday expresses the Christian effort to articulate something about the nature, the essence, of that Ultimate Concern. Arising from deep and sustained reflection upon the experience of encounter with the unknowable, unnameable, ineffable Mystery - Christians have intuited an eternal *perichoresis*, a dance of Love, of intimate communion and ultimate union. But what might be easily forgotten is that even this great expression is but an approximation – not unlike physicist's beautiful models. The wisdom of the mystics of every age is the intuition that such verbal-linguistic-symbolic approximations ought not to be confused with the reality itself. And because this is so, all symbolic representations are to be recognised as mere approximations. To invest any symbol with ultimate value is, technically, idolatry.

Thus, even the Christian symbol of the Trinity must not be confused with the Ultimate Concern towards which it gestures. If devotion to the doctrine of the Trinity leads us into a deeper union with all other humans, with all creatures, and even with the planet itself – that is, into complete Love – then it is serving its purpose. But when we defend the doctrine of the Trinity in itself, we inevitably become less loving, less united with all creatures – for we have fallen into an idolatry and we are defensive.

John of the Cross was just one of the many mystics who observed that all our ideas and images of God must in fact die – because nothing, *nada*, is God. To be tied to anything – whether it be the consumerist-rationalist-materialism of the congruent atheist, or the aggressive-defensive religiosity of the supposedly 'orthodox' believer – is to have created a false god. And freedom necessitates the death of all false gods – not only the gods of rational-materialism, but also the false gods of 'belief'. What is being asked to be a god cannot bear it. No possession, no thing, no community, no ministry, no building, no future plan, no relationship or reputation can sustain that kind of role. The expectation is too much for any part of the creation to bear, and it begins to die under the pressure. Furthermore, a lesser god means a lesser human. We cannot grow past our little gods. Self-

transcendence is thwarted when Ultimate Concern is attributed to something which is not truly Ultimate. The personality stops growing, becomes distorted – perhaps malignant, defensive, regressive, and even lethal.

The only solution, according to John of the Cross, and a great many mystics, is to release our hold on that which is partial. Whatever it is that we first fall in love with – whether that be a person, our possessions, our imagined freedom, or our religious objects and doctrines – needs to be relinquished in order that we may be open once again to the deeper Love which drew us to these loved ones in the first place. Meister Eckhart famously wrote, “So let us pray to God that we may be free of “God”.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus, on this particular Trinity Sunday – confronted with such ongoing hardship as our city is experiencing and feeling overwhelmed, tired, despairing, and longing for hope – releasing our grip on our many small gods is all the more pressing. This relinquishment is the narrow way to freedom and life.

For nothing, *nada*, is God. Through the death of all mini-gods – including everything we have depended upon as ‘iconic’ – we may be open more fully to the deeper Love which first called us into life, and in which is to be found true and abiding hope. In the great Christian doctrine celebrated in this feast we are given not a theological formula to be rationalised and defended – but a life-giving symbol, albeit partial, which gestures towards the Ultimate Concern; and access to the Love which guides us through the narrow way which is the death of all our gods. As we will sing during the Sending rite:

Love releases us for taking  
 one more risk than we might dare;  
 glory breaks through dark and danger,  
 shows the Lord transfigured there.  
 God who planted our affections,  
 help your gifts to grow more free,  
 fan in us the fires of loving,  
 daring, dancing Trinity.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Edmund Colledge, Bernard McGinn (trans.), ‘Sermon 52’, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, New York: Paulist Press, 1981, p200.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Hare Duke, ‘Daring, dancing, Trinity’, in Hannah Ward, Jennifer Wild (eds), *Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change*, London: Mowbray, 1995, pp33-34.

# Deep Darkness

Even the casual observer can hardly fail to notice that though Christianity's two principal feasts are celebrations of light – yet they depend upon the dark.<sup>82</sup> At the Christmas Midnight Mass the birth of Christ the 'Sun of Righteousness' illuminates the (northern hemisphere) longest, darkest night. The Paschal Candle's light pierces pre-dawn darkness, the Easter Triduum's joyous conclusion a movement from dark to light. 'Silent night, holy night.' 'While shepherds watched their flock by night...' 'Born in the night, Mary's child...' 'O star of wonder, star of night...' The Christmas proclamation's native ground is the night, darkness – which cannot be fully appreciated in this bright mid morning, when nothing looks or feels like night, when the day's many tasks are well underway. If you've endeavoured to attend to your dreams you will have noticed that they are most graphic and memorable in the night – or perhaps, on first waking in the early hours – and that their potency and their images quickly fade as the day's light and busyness take over.

Our tradition has long understood and articulated the centrality of the dark – both its impenetrableness and its ultimate relativity: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it"<sup>83</sup> - as the Greek literally says. The entire creation is fashioned out of chaos in the complete absence of light.<sup>84</sup> The Spirit's seed promised by Gabriel flourishes in the darkness of Mary's womb.<sup>85</sup> In the night the heart and mind of Nicodemus is penetrated by the Spirit who blows where she will.<sup>86</sup> When Judas left the upper room to do what was necessary for salvation, it was night.<sup>87</sup> Darkness came over the entire land as the Temple curtain was torn in two.<sup>88</sup> Passover meal, garden of sweat and blood, trial, burial, and resurrection – all in darkness. Little wonder John the evangelist summed up all these narrative fragments in that bold

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<sup>82</sup> Preached on Christmas Day, 25 December 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: Isaiah 52:7-10, Hebrews 1:1-12, John 1-14

<sup>83</sup> John 1:5

<sup>84</sup> Genesis 1:1-3

<sup>85</sup> Luke 1:31

<sup>86</sup> John 3:1-10

<sup>87</sup> John 13:20

<sup>88</sup> Matthew 27:51

theological declaration: the light shines in the darkness, *and* the darkness cannot grasp the light.

This has certainly been a year of deep darkness. Of course, every year there is a great darkness – in reality, many darknesses. It's just that this year it has been Christchurch's turn – well, and Tohoku-Sendai, and Greymouth, and Oslo-Uttoyaa... and too many places to enumerate! For us, the ordeal began, indeed, in that dark fourth of September hour. Yet, in spite of what the watch told us, the darkness deepened beyond our worst imaginings shortly after that February noon. That the hours of darkness continued to be a terrifying ordeal was evidenced in so many ways – including the much-discussed unorthodox sleeping arrangements; or indeed the lack of any truly restful sleep for months. And in case we had forgotten, on Good Friday our world was plunged again into darkness – in spite of it being a sunny afternoon. An entire city and its people plunged into a deep and overwhelming darkness – which could well endure for some years. Well, perhaps not the entire city, for we are now more than ever a city of two very unequal halves – another aspect of the darkness. Even so, the blood of our 185<sup>89</sup> – and the life-changing injuries of the untold thousands – is borne on all our hearts. The central city and its many precious icons stripped from all of us.

Yet this feast declares that light shines in the darkness – and that darkness cannot grasp the light.

We are conceived and born in complete darkness – it may be helpful to recall this fact. There is a rich seam running through our tradition, which has long looked into the darkness in search of God. “The Divine ray,” declared the 5<sup>th</sup> century Dionysius, “cannot illumine us save as hidden beneath many veils.”<sup>90</sup> “O guiding night!” sang John of the Cross, “O night more lovely than the dawn!”<sup>91</sup> Just as the Genesis poet intuited, the Spirit of Divine Life breathed over the waters of the world womb's complete and total darkness. That absence of light turns out to be necessary, essential, the inescapable and vital containment for creation. The people see a great light, *because* they are in darkness!<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> At the time of preaching this sermon the official death toll was 182, and was subsequently revised to 185.

<sup>90</sup> Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, quoted in Edmund Colledge, Bernard McGinn (trans & eds), *op cit*, p149.

<sup>91</sup> John of the Cross, ‘The dark Night’

<sup>92</sup> Isaiah 9:2

On the other hand, we would have to admit that our tradition has a very uneasy attitude to the darkness. Over-emphasising the triumph of light, we have endlessly projected outwards our unacknowledged darkness, with at-times lethal consequences – the litany of Christianity’s destructive tendencies is too long, and too depressing, for such a day as this. Yet it could be said that it is vital to the prospects for faith in our time that we do in fact make every effort to come to grips with this projecting – of our unacknowledged darkness onto our enemies.

Though this feast declares that darkness cannot grasp the light – yet it does not declare that the darkness will cease to exist. In like manner, the Eternal and Divine Word becoming flesh does not annihilate flesh – our tradition had to fight hard to hold to this paradoxical position. The Word requires flesh, yet flesh cannot ever fully grasp the Word. Flesh can only kneel in awe and obedience before the great and impenetrable mystery of the Eternal Word – who was in the beginning with God; and without whom nothing came into being.<sup>93</sup> Thus, light requires darkness – matter requires anti-matter; the cosmos depends upon black holes, so it would seem. There are reckoned to be 100 billion black holes, far exceeding the number of visible stars – the effect of which could mean that black holes may well be the major force determining the rotation of our galaxy!<sup>94</sup> Modern science seems to be moving towards an apprehension of reality which has long been expressed in the mystical tradition. The light shines in the darkness - which though it cannot grasp the light, is nevertheless an essential aspect of creation.

Whatever it was that John the evangelist might have had in mind, to which we do not have direct access, that writer’s insight accurately expresses a fundamental dynamic of felt spiritual experience. We know that we are a people who have walked in a great darkness – and we are feeling a great darkness here. We know that in many and varied ways Light has penetrated, illuminated, transfigured that very real darkness – for which we can but fall on our knees in thankfulness and gratitude. We also know that that very real darkness cannot be annihilated, cannot be made to *not* exist. It is the very nature of being, the

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<sup>93</sup> John 1:2,3

<sup>94</sup> Diarmud O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, New York; Crossroad, 1997, p125.

structure of the cosmos. "There is in God – some say – A deep, but dazzling darkness."<sup>95</sup>

Any person can undertake the most basic spiritual experiment – so long as we are willing and sufficiently prepared – making the necessary descent into the dark depths of our inner being. And if we do, we inevitably find what Teilhard de Chardin found: moving away from all that is merely superficial; down into depths without bottom, fathomless, deep and dazzling darkness; and, most mysteriously of all to discover the unexpected: "the current which I dare to call *my* life."<sup>96</sup> The dark cannot grasp the light. Yet the darkness is that reality from which light illumines and penetrates and transfigures. Our tradition boldly declares that every person is an aspect of the Divine Word, shining in the darkness.

Christmas can only support this spiritual undertaking when we resist the widespread temptation to reduce it to mere light - tinsel and baubles and trivial songs and the rest. Jesus being born 2000 years ago is of little value or relevance unless the Eternal Word is equally being born in you and me, here and now. What use is it to me – to paraphrase Meister Eckhart - if Jesus was the Light shining in darkness, but I am not also a shining light, which also cannot be grasped by darkness?

Thus, each of us is a 'midnight mass in little' – each a midnight birthing of Divine sons and daughters; beings fashioned out of deep and dazzling darkness, within and without. Each a shining midnight mass – a living sacrifice offered for transformation; taken, blessed, broken, given, in the night – illuminations who cannot be grasped by the darkness; but who shine out of the deep and dazzling darkness which is the eternal Divine life, of which we are an image.

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<sup>95</sup> Henry Vaughan, 'The Night'

<sup>96</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, London: William Collins, 1960, pp77.

# EVOLUTION

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People have sought in the religious life the kind of certainty that belongs to philosophy and science. But it is not to be found. Between God and man there is moral loyalty, not scientific certainty.<sup>97</sup>

*Jonathan Sacks*

While, in the case of a static world, the creator ... is still, on any theory, structurally independent of his work, and in consequence, without any definable basis to his immanence - in the case of a world which is by nature evolutive, the contrary is true: God is not conceivable (either structurally or dynamically) except in so far as he coincides with..., but without being lost in, the centre of convergence of cosmogenesis.<sup>98</sup>

*Teilhard de Chardin*

By separating evolution from God, placing God over and against evolution, we separate creation from Creator and wind up with an irrelevant God and a self-sufficient materialism.<sup>99</sup>

*Ilia Delio*

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<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *op cit*, p73.

<sup>98</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (trans. Rene Hague), 'The God of Evolution', in *Christianity and Evolution*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, p239.

<sup>99</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011, p34..

Religion and science have been unnecessarily constructed as opposing truths – instead of the complementary truths which they surely are. One of the tragedies of the current resurgence of religiosity is the spectacle of an adult attempting to live in the spiritual stage of development suited to an adolescent. Its opposite is the supposedly intelligent and enlightened post-modern who, incapable of discerning the difference between the mutually complementary truths of science and religion, attempts to live as though scientific materialism can answer the questions of the meaning of life. Both are in fact tragic distortions, unbalanced over-compensations which have failed to take account of the mutuality of *mythos* and *logos*.<sup>100</sup>

No one gives up a meaning-making system lightly. This is probably reasonable and sensible. I suspect that most of us are dragged along ‘kicking and screaming’, that it’s not so much we who give up such systems, but that such systems simply fail on us. Certainly I cannot claim to have woken up one morning and bravely decided ‘to evolve’, spiritually or any other way. Generally speaking, something happens – sometimes ‘supernaturally’, as it did for Peter the apostle on a roof top in Joppa,<sup>101</sup> but frequently it is a ‘natural event’ which sponsors spiritual evolution.

What we can know from both science and religion is that meaning-making systems are subject to the same evolutionary principles as everything else in the creation. Science has found it necessary to evolve in its understandings of natural laws. Religion has found it necessary to evolve in its understandings of its sacred received texts and its dogmas. I have yet to meet any person who applies a truly and fully literal interpretation of the entire body of their sacred texts or dogmatic tradition – I mean in their entirety, without excluding something. Those relatively few who claim to do so are rightly regarded as dangerous and deluded even within their own traditions.

In all that follows here I am resisting a reductive understanding of the term ‘evolution’ as though it were a phenomena restricted solely to matter, observable merely in genes and molecules, or under a laboratory microscope or

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<sup>100</sup> See Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Matters*, London: The Bodley Head, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Acts 10

through a Hubble telescope. Rather, these wrestlings make the assumption – which I make no attempt here to prove – that what is true in the domain of matter is also true in the domain of spirit. Evolution of consciousness cannot be observed through a microscope, but we can know it to be a reality all the same.

As it has always been, actual encounter with the *Mysterium Tremendum*, in contrast to easy talk about God, is bound to force us to evolve spiritually. We do not choose evolution – evolution chooses us. And spiritual evolution is as costly as every other aspect of evolution – it exacts its fair price.

# Spiritual Evolution

We do not understand what is happening, around us, and to us.<sup>102</sup> We have no complete explanation for the tumult, the upheaval, the terrifying and magnificent forces at work – in the world beneath us, nor in the ground of our own individual souls. We are shocked, appalled, overwhelmed. We remain as those who grope in the dark – guided only by incomplete sciences and the vaguest of intuitions. Yet propelled also by the evangelical counsels of faith, love, charity, hope.

All that we can know with certainty – against this backdrop of tragedy and overwhelming uncertainty – is that something of immense significance is nevertheless taking place in the depths of the earth. And not only the depths of the earth outside of us – but also in the depths of human consciousness. What we can know with certainty is that the forces of evolution are universally at work – the engine beneath us somehow part of the same engine within us. Evolution in the earth beneath us. Evolution in human consciousness. Evolution, indeed, in the human spirit, in human spirituality. Something immense, something overwhelming and yet full of promise – a spiritual evolution of divinising proportions.

At the most immediately recognisable, and perfectly obvious, level, everyone in this city, and now in Japan, can observe a flourishing of humanity – a flowering of charity, a love of neighbour in the midst of terror, chaos, death, in piles of rubble and lakes of silt. All can see this, and celebrate this most obvious effect. Yet this is but the surface detail, beneath which we and the whole of humankind are subject to something infinitely deeper, richer – indeed salvific! Of course we can barely grasp its solemn traces, let alone the vectors of its earth-building influence. But of course! For now we see but dimly... Yet in spite of our lack of clarity of vision as to where these immense forces are leading us – and under the inevitable influence of our very real and perfectly understandable shock, fear and uncertainty – nevertheless a new earth is in the making.

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<sup>102</sup> Preached on the 1st Sunday in Lent, 13 March 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Though we cannot grasp the direction in which we are being led by evolutionary forces of immense proportions – yet we who gather at the altar of Christ are given the greatest of all signs; the sign greater than Jonah, the only sign that will be given.<sup>103</sup> And on this first Sunday in Lent our sharing in the Divine life in Christ is a sharing in that spiritual evolution which is forged through temptation in the wilderness. Under these conditions the great spiritual evolution is being worked – under the influence of both sin and grace, the devil and the Holy Spirit.<sup>104</sup> And we are gradually waking up to the full implications and responsibility of being made in the image and likeness of the Divine. As for Christ, so for those who would drink his cup, who would be his disciples – that is what the Christian tradition teaches throughout its breadth and depth, and in its finest doctrines and liturgies.

Three foundational principles of this evolution in spirituality are again presented before us on Lent's first Sunday. The temptation to attempt mastery over the elements of the world, even with the best of intentions, has to be sacrificed: "Humankind is not to live on bread alone."<sup>105</sup> The temptation to misuse the Divine power consequent upon the mystery of Incarnation, to misuse our status as sons and daughters of God magically, is to be sacrificed: "You are not to put the Lord your God to the test."<sup>106</sup> The temptation to forget that our divinity is wholly dependent upon *Another* is to be sacrificed: "You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship God alone."<sup>107</sup>

Whatever expectations existed as to the nature and capacity of the long-expected Jewish Messiah, these had to be sacrificed. Jesus himself had to resist that which his people expected. Jesus' own temptation, his inner fault line, had to be exposed, in the wilderness.

As for Jesus, so for those who would be baptised with his baptism, who would drink his cup. For each of us there is a particular inner fault line which has been exposed – perhaps as shockingly and as violently as the outer events. The very ground of our being, shaken. A great spiritual evolution being worked in us.

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<sup>103</sup> Matthew 12:38-42

<sup>104</sup> Matthew 4:1

<sup>105</sup> Matthew 4:4

<sup>106</sup> Matthew 4:7

<sup>107</sup> Matthew 4:10

We cannot know where this evolution will lead us. As a parish we do not know at this point what will become of the beautiful, elegant, gracious, spacious, physical, external structure which has so shaped and formed our spirituality as a people. Everything hangs in the balance. Our hearts in our mouths as we wait for the best advice. Likewise, as individuals we do not know what new ground is being formed in us as a consequence of the outer events. We can only trust and hope, like Jesus. If we can faithfully and hopefully undergo our time of temptation and trial, angels will minister to us.<sup>108</sup> We can only know – or we can only do our best to remind ourselves, strengthened by our sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ – that the spiritual evolution being worked in us is the outcome of the Divine fullness which draws us ever forward. We long for the coming of the Kingdom – even though we cannot know its shape or contour, its final proportions and content.

But by Word and Sacrament we are sustained, supported, contained, and guided into the new humanity. As those who share in Christ's Body, who drink his Blood, we know that the new humanity is coming to birth in us – individually and collectively – that through our time of trial and by our faithfulness in Christ we are undergoing an evolution in human spirit – there is being worked in us a new earth and a new heaven.

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<sup>108</sup> Matthew 4:11

# Otherness Graspable

“This will be the sign for you, you will find an infant wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”<sup>109</sup>

And so the shepherds, terrified and dazzled by the glory of the Lord interrupting their gainful employ, are directed to find the Messiah in the lowest place – in an animal feeding trough. In this sign the very ground upon which all Israel stands is shaking to the foundations.<sup>110</sup> This is a seismic shift in human consciousness of monumental proportions. An earthquake at the top end of the Richter scale is rearranging the ground, indelibly. The long-expected ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace’<sup>111</sup> is coming – but not as expected. Forces of infinitely greater power than those anticipated by Isaiah and all the other prophets are thrusting to the surface of human consciousness from the unfathomable, molten depths of the *Mysterium Tremendum*.

Nothing has changed – an expected Messiah comes. And yet everything has changed – the Messiah appears not on the expected heights, but in the depths. Nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed. And it is just as possible to reverse the equation: everything has in fact changed, and yet nothing *appears* to have changed.

This is the strangeness of the situation in which we find ourselves. An astonishing seismic shift has altered the very ground on which we stand. Not only have our human-made structures been levelled by these tremendous forces – the ground itself has been permanently rearranged. But what makes this so strange an experience is that in many respects life continues as though nothing has happened - everything has in fact changed, and yet nothing *appears* to have changed. Life is drastically altered, the effects of the shaking earth felt by everyone, varying only in intensity and degree. Yet life seems to continue as before, mostly, an apparent normality having returned to much of day-to-day life - life appears to have resumed its ‘normal’ course. The strangeness is that both these descriptions are true – one does not

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<sup>109</sup> Luke 2:12

<sup>110</sup> Preached at the Midnight Mass, 25 December 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel, Christchurch.  
Lectons: Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

<sup>111</sup> Isaiah 9:6b

invalidate the other. And so we live in this very odd state, caught between the old and the new, the same and the different, the 'usual' and the crisis, the ordered and the chaotic.

The announcement by the four evangelists that the long-expected Messiah had arrived was to be called an *evangelion*, good news. The seismic shock of this gospel announcement has toppled religious, political and economic structures, many now in ruins. Monumental forces from within Creation were unleashed, so great indeed as to rearrange the very ground upon which humans stand. The Messiah was found in an animal feeding trough – alarming not only Herod, but also the religious leaders who reckoned they knew what a Messiah looks like. The impenetrable membrane separating the Divine and the human permanently ruptured – the Temple curtain torn in two, the earth shaken,<sup>112</sup> liberating the dead from their tombs!<sup>113</sup> The overshadowing Most High<sup>114</sup> found in humility, in an ordinary human womb, embedded and secreted into human flesh – though divine, yet emptied, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, found in human form, obedient even to the point of creating life through dying.<sup>115</sup> This seismic event levelled all that was previously considered the 'normal' structure of the Divine.

Little wonder that people were quite literally shocked to the core, staggering around and disoriented. For what had seemed to be solid ground, predictable ground, seemingly safe ground - a god who was thought to be elsewhere - proved to be decidedly unstable, and very frightening.

Not surprisingly, reaction to the gospel's announcement varied. Enthusiastic acceptance by the least,<sup>116</sup> an openness to the evolution which it announced. Violent reaction from those who had imagined themselves to be great,<sup>117</sup> a fearful regression to an imagined 'safe' ground. People were indeed very afraid – for God cannot possibly belong in an animal feeding trough!

Moreover, following the initial seismic cataclysm there have been countless aftershocks down the two millennia since -

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<sup>112</sup> Greek: **εσεισθη** *eseisthē*

<sup>113</sup> Matthew 27:51-2

<sup>114</sup> Luke 1:35

<sup>115</sup> Philippians 2:6-8

<sup>116</sup> Matthew 21:31

<sup>117</sup> Matthew 23:34-37

powerful enough to assure the ongoing rearrangement of the landscape of human consciousness.

Yet compounding the strangeness, while the church was born out of this seismic event of civilisation-transforming proportions - and while the church may have developed a sophisticated structure of doctrine by which this God-in-the-manger could be intellectually grasped, creating convincing-sounding theologies of Incarnation - nevertheless in certain ways we continue to live as though nothing has changed. An all-powerful deity, a Messiah with a big stick, cracking heads together,<sup>118</sup> remains appealing. Prayer envisages an externalised, manipulating deity to change the structure of the cosmos to give us what we want - even to prop up our success doctrines and market economics which are actually the root of systemic injustice.<sup>119</sup> The divine is projected upwards, backwards, and outwards. Moreover, in spite of all our piety and our religious posturing and 'evangelising', we continue to rend asunder that which God has joined - we divide human from divine, flesh from spirit, earth from heaven, black from white, female from male.<sup>120</sup>

Perhaps we do this because we are still shocked and frightened by the initial seismic event - or because we just wish the ground would stop shaking; or perhaps because we want to return to our old dispensations, to our old 'certainties' and imagined security - not yet mature enough to accept the responsibility of being fully human after the pattern of the Christ. Perhaps all this was bound to be so, since the evolution of human consciousness could hardly be accomplished in even a few hundred generations - for this is a seismic event of aeon-altering proportions, which surely is the work of millennia.

And so it commonly appears to us as though the divine and the human remain the separate categories of reality first apprehended when humans climbed out of the swamp - as though the Messiah was never found wrapped in cloths in an animal feeding trough. And indeed our problem is compounded by the fact that, paradoxically, it is also true that the divine remains unreachable, untouchable, inscrutable, utterly Other. The fullness

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<sup>118</sup> Luke 9:54-55, 22:49-51

<sup>119</sup> Luke 1:51-53

<sup>120</sup> Matthew 19:6

of the divine reality which cannot be grasped, reached, fathomed – a fact attested to by countless mystics down the centuries.

And yet – and this truly is a paradox – the earthquake *has* altered everything. In spite of received tradition and appearances, the ground itself has been deformed, transformed – and there's no putting it back to where it was before! Evolution cannot be reversed. Salvation moves not backwards to Eden, but forwards to 'the eschaton', to creation's completion. The human vocation consists in learning to live on an astonishing and surprising rearranged ground - namely, this same untouchable Otherness is in fact graspable, touchable, found in the lowest aspect of our being, in our very depths. And only by consciously, willingly, and hopefully descending to that lowest of places can the untouchable be touched.

Thus the eucharistic liturgy celebrated tonight – and every time the Christian community gathers - is the sacramental reminder of that tremendous *seismos*, the sign of that deep structural reality of the ground of human consciousness - from the lowest place we are fed, we receive what we truly are. And as we receive, so we are to become what we eat – 'Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing',<sup>121</sup> the living flesh and blood which is the Divine coming to birth in all human flesh, all human ground.

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<sup>121</sup> John Francis Wade, 'O Come all you faithful', in *With One Voice*, 1982

## Growing Up

“I will ask the Father,  
and the Father will give you another Advocate,  
to be with you forever.  
This is the Spirit of truth,  
whom the world cannot receive,  
because it neither sees the Father  
nor knows the Father.  
You know the Father,  
because the Father abides with you,  
and will be in you.”<sup>122</sup>

By this sixth Sunday in Eastertime our attention is gently but firmly directed away from the historical Jesus – towards the ongoing work of the eternal and ever-present Spirit of Christ who is embodied in those who would be his disciples.<sup>123</sup> The great work of crucifixion-resurrection *begins* in historical time and place, and in an historical personage – but is meaningless unless it is in me and you. This Spirit of truth is the eternal gift to all humankind, the new humanity.

So the task and the vocation and the joy of the baptised is to *abide* in the Father.<sup>124</sup> The task of all the baptised is to be as intimately connected to the Godhead as the one in whose name we gather. This is, in fact, ‘the hope that is in us’<sup>125</sup> - that we should be like ‘living stones’, a ‘spiritual house’, a ‘holy priesthood’, ‘offering spiritual sacrifices to God’, ‘God’s own people’.<sup>126</sup>

The tremendous breakthrough of the Christian tradition is this affirmation of the supreme value of the individual – who is given this Spirit of complete intimacy with the divine Godhead. That is what it means to ‘abide’ in the Father – a state of complete, total union, intimacy, oneness. No longer the sole preserve of anointed kings – but the birthright of every person! That is the gift of the Spirit who makes every person a member of the holy

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<sup>122</sup> John 14:15-16

<sup>123</sup> Preached on the 6th Sunday of Easter, 29 May 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre.  
Lectons: Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

<sup>124</sup> Noting and excusing for now the one-sided inadequacy of the exclusivity of the Bible’s masculine metaphor as a product of a patriarchal age.

<sup>125</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>126</sup> 1 Peter 2:5,9

priesthood – every person a mediator between the divine and the human. Because of the work of God in Christ this is the inalienable birthright of every person – though it has to be admitted that not all experience this birthright.

We are made for this. And we are made to long for this complete and total union: “Our heart is restless, O God, until it rest in you.”<sup>127</sup> “As a deer longs for the flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God.”<sup>128</sup>

“O Living Flame of Love  
That, burning, dost assail  
My inmost soul with tenderness untold,  
Since thou dost freely move  
Deign to consume the veil  
Which sunders this sweet converse that we hold.”<sup>129</sup>

But we know, experientially, that there is much that thwarts that ‘sweet converse’, that blessed union. An obvious impediment is the frustration of timing and the limitation of our impatience. In fact, it is important to remember that this state of complete union for which we long is a lifetime’s work – and certainly not attained in the way that we acquire possessions. This is the Life that is found by losing it.

A more problematic barrier to ‘knowing the Father’ is a matter of spiritual-psychological development. Put simply, we are inclined to project the entire freight of being ‘sons and daughters of humanity’ onto the historical, externalised Jesus. That projection is an important stage in development – since as children we only come to know what is the potential in us through the heroic adult figures in our lives.

The problem is that we can get stuck in an infantile stage of development. Motivated to guard and protect the revelation handed down to us, we Christians can inadvertently prevent people from growing beyond the spiritual state of the child. This seems to be a besetting sin of organised religion. It would seem that the more the church worries about its institutional future the more inclined it is to reduce the faith to a package suited to the psychological development of children and teenagers.

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<sup>127</sup> Augustine of Hippo, in George Appleton (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p361.

<sup>128</sup> Psalm 42:1-2

<sup>129</sup> John of the Cross (Trans. E A Peters), *The Spiritual Canticle & Poems*, London: Burns & Oates, 1978, p448.

Even so, I remind myself that it is my own reluctance to grow up – to leave behind the dependence of childhood and take responsibility for being a son of God – which is the greatest impediment to spiritual evolution. It is me who resists taking up the cross that is mine to bear, who baulks at the necessary price of my birthright.

Almost certainly, Jesus and the evangelist knew this about my condition, about our shared human condition – to which the whole of chapter fourteen of John’s gospel readily testifies. It’s true, our hearts are troubled by the prospect of the responsibility of being sons and daughters of God.<sup>130</sup> It’s true, we do want Jesus to do for us what is in fact ours to undergo.<sup>131</sup> It’s true, we do want someone to give us a recipe, an answer, a way which would spare us from having to find it ourselves.<sup>132</sup> It’s true, we baulk at the prospect of not only doing the works Jesus has done, but doing even greater works than his!<sup>133</sup>

Thus, the *evangelion*, the good news in Jesus Christ is this astounding promise - that under the influence of the Spirit of truth we *do* abide in Christ: “On that day [when the Spirit comes upon you] you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.”<sup>134</sup> That is why we can rejoice that the historical and resurrected Jesus ascends to the Father<sup>135</sup> - leaving us, and sending the Spirit. Receiving the Spirit is a matter of maturity, of evolution – of accepting responsibility as sons and daughters of God; of doing the works that Jesus did, indeed greater works even.

By Love we were made for this. By love we long for complete union with the Father – through Christ and by the power of the Spirit. By this work of love we become what we eat – the living Body of Christ; knowing and abiding, knowledge and complete union, in the Divine Ground of Being.

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<sup>130</sup> John 14:1  
<sup>131</sup> John 14:10, 21  
<sup>132</sup> John 14:8  
<sup>133</sup> John 14:12  
<sup>134</sup> John 14:20  
<sup>135</sup> John 14:28b

# Leap into the Unknown

Spiritual development is always a leap into the unknown.<sup>136</sup> Just as evolution, in its fullest sense, can be nothing other than a wild and foolish and reckless experiment – the results of which cannot be seen in advance. We cannot see around corners. In the wake of the long, slow climb out of the primeval soup there is a vast trail of extinctions and dead ends in evolutionary development. Indeed, the number of dead ends far exceeds the number of growing shoots.

Spiritual development, human consciousness, is an integral aspect of the entire evolutionary process. Each new evolutionary leap in spiritual consciousness is a leap of faith, a leap into the unknown. And there is something profligate, extravagant, even wasteful about this great enterprise. No one can say in advance, for sure, which line of evolutionary development is the ‘leading edge’ – and which will be the dead end. We do not have the necessary sight. And because no one can say for sure, then all lines of possible development must be tested.

And it follows from this that if I cannot be sure that a potential line of development is the future, inertia is inevitable. We are inclined to regard Pharisees and other religious leaders in the gospel stories in strictly moral terms. But there is another criterion, a non-moral one – in terms of spiritual inertia. As those responsible for passing on the traditions, spiritual inertia is in fact a necessary quality.

“This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.”<sup>137</sup> Absolute respect for the holiness of the Sabbath is not the action of a perverse man. Rather, it is the action of a holy man who respects the line of spiritual development upon which he stands. The genuine and very real problem for the holy man and woman, as Gamaliel understood,<sup>138</sup> is that he or she cannot know in advance whether a new spiritual development might be the leading edge – or a terminal phylum, a dead end, the path to annihilation and death.

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<sup>136</sup> Preached on the 4th Sunday in Lent, 3 April 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre, Christchurch. Lectures: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

<sup>137</sup> John 9:16

<sup>138</sup> Acts 5:33-40

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”<sup>139</sup> Absolute respect for the causative moral principle upon which human civilisation has depended is not the action of a perverse man or woman. Rather, it is essential to good order. Moreover, it is also a means by humans attempt to make sense of their lives.

However, causation is not the *only* operative principle in the universe by which to describe the connection between two phenomena – “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him.”<sup>140</sup> The one event, sin, did not cause the other, blindness. The two events *are* connected, yes, but *in a non-causal way*.

So the disciples and Pharisees are being shown the leading edge of spiritual development – but of course this leap into the unknown alarms them and neither group can accept it. If we take a harsh view of them, it is really ourselves who we are viewing harshly. Since it is we who still cannot accept a non-causal spiritual principle – as the recent flurry of media commentary about God and earthquakes illustrates.

Yet an outcast, an unclean man, one of the uneducated and marginalised who was physically blind *can* see: “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where [the man who gave me sight] comes from, and yet he opened my eyes!”<sup>141</sup> In this encounter, as elsewhere in the gospels, the terminal development and the leading edge of spiritual development turn out to be topsy-turvy: “I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”<sup>142</sup>

Spiritual development, like all development, is always a leap into the unknown. You and I, good and faithful Pharisees that we are, find ourselves being pushed by the Holy Spirit in directions we ourselves could not have devised – and for which we can never claim credit. Jesus himself is very careful to declare that the development in human spirituality taking expression in him is not of his own making – and refuses to take any credit – he only declares what the Father has declared to him.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> John 9:2

<sup>140</sup> John 9:3

<sup>141</sup> John 9:30

<sup>142</sup> John 9:39

<sup>143</sup> John 12:49

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

As the fully human one, Jesus indicates that this is the way for *all* human ones. Every person is pushed by the Holy Spirit into the unknown – along a line of development in which the outcome remains unknown. Like the disciples and the Pharisees we find that we are being led beyond the spiritual principles and structures upon which we have come to depend – and upon which our life thus far has been constructed.

In Lent we hear, once again, the call into the unknown, the wild and reckless and life-giving call of spiritual development. And this particular Lent perhaps more than any other, the call is insistent and confronting – and unavoidable. What we had assumed to be the direction of spiritual development is dying – we have made the impossible and heart-rending decision to deconsecrate the Mountfort church building in preparation for its demolition - and we are called to accept that it played its part in our development, and now lay it to rest.

This task has always been the greatest and the most difficult of all human tasks – so we should not be hard on ourselves if we are struggling with its immensity. Insofar as an act of will and choice are relevant, it is the conscious choice to accept that call into the unknown which is set before us. Sin is our refusal to accept the spiritual development into which we are being called.

Together, and by the grace of communion in Christ, the new creation is coming to birth in and through us – if we can accept the leap into the unknown. Yet no spiritual development arises from nowhere, but is always founded upon what preceded it - the ground itself, the dust from our old and decaying structures, forms the miraculous paste which brings sight to our spiritual blindness.

# Leaving Feudal Faith

The fragile vessel which bears the little disciple through the turbulent waters of the cosmos is battered by tremendous waves.<sup>144</sup> Waves, as we ‘moderns’ now well know, are carriers of energy. The Greek literally says that this energy ‘tortures’<sup>145</sup> the vessel – such is its immensity. The Greek verb was originally employed to describe a commercial term for checking calculations. But eventually came to signify putting to the test by torture!<sup>146</sup> The disciple is put to the test – by means which at times feels very much like torture.

The Scriptures come to life for me as expressions of the eternal spiritual struggle of humankind. Today’s gospel story expresses something of the immensity of the human task. We are put to the test. The enormity of cosmic forces press upon us – threatening to destabilise our equilibrium, to swamp the fragile vessel of our small lives.

This universal human experience can be witnessed in every time and place, in every age, in every land and people. It can be observed in the individual traumas and tragedies which are daily occurrences around the world – only a small proportion of which are reported in the newspapers. It can be observed in the collective traumas which may assail entire cities or nations – the torturous waves taking any number of outer expressions.

We can witness it in this city, now. For eleven months the vessel of our previously charming city has been battered, tortured even, by vast cosmic forces. Such forces defy comprehension. Who can truly fathom what goes on beneath the crustal surface of this blue-green planet, sufficient to produce such cataclysmic convulsions? Even here, in this quiet little tucked away corner of the world! Who can truly fathom what goes on deep in the depths, beneath the outer, materialistic layer of our well-presented individual lives?

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<sup>144</sup> Preached on the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, 7 August 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: 1 Kings 19:9-18, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

<sup>145</sup> Matthew 14:24, βασανιζομενον *basanizomenon*, “testing afflictions”, “judicial sufferings”, “to test”, “to torment”.

<sup>146</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich (trans. & abridged) Geoffrey W Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1985, p96.

For those with eyes to see, the Scripture witnesses to a timeless truth – to a truth of archetypal proportions; a truth of *first principles*.<sup>147</sup> Having been fed by the Lord of life – from what appears to us to be mere fragments out of a wilderness of nothingness<sup>148</sup> – we are left, suddenly and without explanation, to our own devices.<sup>149</sup> The community for whom the gospel was written – probably in Antioch some time around 70CE – faced the same fundamental spiritual crisis. They are together, in the little boat only recently formally named *ecclesia*, having caught a glimpse of the Paschal Mystery, the new humanity. But ‘the wind’ feels very much against them!<sup>150</sup>

The Greek text literally says that the wind was ‘contrary’. The wind and the waves are against us. All the primal forces are contrary, in opposition. We recall that in Genesis it was the wind which swept over the face of the waters – creating by the means of dividing, discriminating. From chaos to creation – a reversal, a contrary on a cosmic scale!<sup>151</sup>

For us in the little boat called Christchurch a new creation is being fashioned – by the timeless means of dividing and discriminating. From our human point of view, the wind and the waves, all the cosmic forces, are battering us, torturing us. Jingoism, cheer-leading, and false optimism cannot save us from such powerful forces.

So, the Lord of Life comes to us ‘early in the morning’ – that is, at the dawning of a new day, a new creation. Surely we can hear a prefiguring here of the Easter morning events? And it is faith which is the vital factor in such a tortured environment. But this is where Matthew’s story opens its most revolutionary and potentially-liberating passage on the cosmic enterprise. What faith? Or, faith *in what?*

‘Faith’, prior to the spiritual revolution which is the Incarnation, is feudal. By this I mean that the human subject submits before a Lord – an externalised personage who bears the projection of the deity. Emerging out of the millennia which had given birth to myriads of such lords, the Jewish peoples intuited

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<sup>147</sup> Greek: **ἐν ἀρχῇ** *en archē*, “In the beginning...” John 1:1

<sup>148</sup> Matthew 14:13-21

<sup>149</sup> Matthew 14:22-23

<sup>150</sup> Matthew 14:24

<sup>151</sup> The Greek **ἐναντίος** *enantios*, ‘contrary’, is related to the word ‘enantiodromia’, that tendency in all observable entities to possess an inherent tendency to turn to their opposite.

the singularity which became known as monotheism. From many lords to one Lord alone.<sup>152</sup> The human task is to submit to this externalised and singular Lord.

But with the Incarnation comes the astonishing spiritual revolution – the Lord is ‘Emmanuel’, one of us, bearing human flesh! John the evangelist will express the revolutionary nature of this revelation most clearly when he has Jesus declare that just as he and the Father are one, so are disciples – and that the disciple will do even greater works than he himself.<sup>153</sup> Thus, ‘faith’ can no longer be mere attachment to an externalised, historicised projection of the deity. Faith requires an embodiment, an undergoing, of the divine work.

Yet the movement from the feudal dispensation to the spirituality of Incarnation is clearly a quantum leap – a paradigm shift of monumental, cosmic proportions. Two thousand years after the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ it is clear that humankind has not yet completed the crossing over into the spiritual dispensation Jesus ushered in. For this reason, two kinds of faith are bound to co-exist, side by side. The old faith is feudal – and depends upon externalising and projection of the deity onto a singular historical personage. We can observe a parallel in the child’s need of mother and father’s protection. The new faith is cosmic – no longer dependent upon such an externalised and historicised personage; embodied, rather, introjected not projected. Such a faith is able to withstand the torturous waves and winds of cosmic forces without panic and fear.

It should not need pointing out that the faith which Jesus the Christ ushers in is obviously *not* to be confused with self-centredness, ego-centrism, materialism, megalomania, or greed – for this emerging faith is characterised by *kenōsis*, self-emptying. Indeed, the *evangellion*, the Christian evangel, tells us the fruit of such self-emptying is that this “truth becomes a rock: you can stand on it while people think you are walking on water.”<sup>154</sup>

Nevertheless, we are a work in progress. Creation continues. The spiritual evolution taking pace in human consciousness proceeds according to the same dynamics of every other aspect of evolution – incrementally, in circles, by forward

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<sup>152</sup> Exodus 20:3

<sup>153</sup> John 14:12

<sup>154</sup> Fritz Kunkel, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p175.

and backward steps, by trial and error, old and new forms existing side by side like weeds and wheat<sup>155</sup> – until, eventually, at the appointed time, which none can predict, suddenly, with a leap, all the old forms disappear completely from the fossil record! Then, the new dispensation, the new humanity emerges out of the chaos and confusion of the wind and waves tumult.

Thus, until such time, it is to be expected that feudal faith in an externalised and historicised personage and the cosmic faith expressed by the Incarnation will coexist. Furthermore, 'tis better to face the torturous winds and waves battering our small boat with feudal faith than none at all! The Lord of Life does still hold out a hand to us as we sink into the waves.<sup>156</sup>

Even so, such a battering is not without its moment. The Lord of Life does also, and more crucially, call us out of the apparent safety of the boat – away from feudal faith; to the new spiritual dispensation which is neither feudal, external, nor merely historical. Furthermore, the gospel pulls no punches: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

<sup>156</sup> Matthew 14:31

<sup>157</sup> Matthew 14:31

## Separation & Reunion

Jewish Messianic expectation envisaged that God the Father would send a son of David to be Messiah, Saviour, Christ.<sup>158</sup> Christian meditation upon both the Jewish expectation and the experience of encounter with Jesus transfigured the Messianic imagination. Indeed, the Christian imagination resulted in nothing less than a quantum leap in symbolic expression. Not just a son of the historical David, but an actual Son of God! We could even say that in the Christian imagination the Messiah has been transubstantiated – now the Messiah is actually *homoousios*, as the ‘Church Fathers’ put it, of the very same substance with the Father.

Leaving aside for now the technical arguments upon which the creeds and liturgies and doctrines became based – the sum of all such amounts to a statement of profound, sublime, far-reaching symbolic truth intuited by early Christian writers: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”<sup>159</sup> “The Father and I are one... I am in the Father and the Father is in me... you will know that I am in the Father... so that they may be one as we are one.”<sup>160</sup> “Christ is the image of the invisible God... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.”<sup>161</sup> “[Christ], the fullness of the One who fills all in all,”<sup>162</sup> “...so that God may be all in all.”<sup>163</sup> Clearly, the Christ figure symbolises complete and total unity with the Divine Source of All Being – that is the inescapable conclusion of the Christian revelation.

As if that were not dramatic enough a leap, the early Christians imagined a yet higher leap: “On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.”<sup>164</sup> “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”<sup>165</sup> “I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I

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<sup>158</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Ascension, 2 June 2011, at The Knox Centre. Lectons: Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

<sup>159</sup> John 1:1-2

<sup>160</sup> John 10:30 & 17:11, 14:10, 14:20, 17:11

<sup>161</sup> Colossians 1:15-16

<sup>162</sup> Ephesians 1:23

<sup>163</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>164</sup> John 14:20

<sup>165</sup> John 6:56

do, in fact, will do greater works than these.”<sup>166</sup> ‘We break this bread.’ as we say in the liturgy, ‘to share in the Body of Christ.’ The total unity in the Divine Ground of All Being which Christians first intuited in the revelation through Christ turns out to be the human birthright of those who would abide in Christ! This is really quite astonishing – probably more than we realise, so familiar are we with the words.

The nature of this complete and total union is without doubt paradoxical. Christ, who existed in complete union with the Father from before time, has to be separated from that idyllic and perfect state by the means of Incarnation. “Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness...”<sup>167</sup> Without this separation from the Divine bliss there could have been no advance, no creation – for the blissful Eden state is a state of unconsciousness, inaction, non-discrimination, stasis. Beware the rigidity of what sometimes calls itself ‘orthodoxy’ – which may be an attempt at an Eden state of (un)consciousness.

The consequence of separation is this: that which is heavenly and that which is earthly, that which is Spirit and that which is matter, can be clearly discriminated. Only by Christ’s separation from the Father does the work of redemption become possible. Now light and darkness are separated, and the agony and freedom of choice can participate as co-creators with the Divine. Thus differentiated it becomes possible to choose to take up the cross, to drink the cup. This differentiation is the necessary basis for the prayer ‘Not my will, but yours be done.’<sup>168</sup>

Yet the paradox is that in spite of this necessary separation, nevertheless Christ *is one* with the Father – the paradoxical synthesis being the birth of the new humanity. Heaven and earth, initially unified, then separated, are now united once again – yet not the original state of bliss, now a new creation, the ‘new heaven and new earth’.<sup>169</sup> Blissful unconscious unity must become separated in the service of consciousness, development. What is now separated must become re-united, but now creating an entirely new thing, a new development.

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<sup>166</sup> John 14:12

<sup>167</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

<sup>168</sup> Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42

<sup>169</sup> Revelation 21:1

The symbol for this re-union is the Ascension. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says to Nathaniel, “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Humanity.”<sup>170</sup> “I am ascending,” the risen Christ tells Mary, “to my Father and your Father.”<sup>171</sup> In the Ascension Christians have found the symbol of the re-uniting of that which was thought to be permanently separated.

Thus, the *imitatio Christi* is participation in this great and eternal dancing around and around of life, the Church Fathers’ *perichorēsis*. Our very origin is in the Divine Ground of All Being. We are the creature made in the image and likeness of God.<sup>172</sup> We are born out of the eternal and unified bliss. With our birth begins the necessary separation from the bliss of Divine Mother and Mother. The means by which this separation takes place is greatly varied, according to the particular details of our personal histories – but separation, leaving blissful unity is universally necessary.

We are, each of us, called to undergo a particular way, to take up a particular cross, to drink a particular cup – and in this way find life by losing it<sup>173</sup> - the mysterious and paradoxical result of which is coming to know complete and total union with the Divine Ground. Thus we enter into and sustain the eternal dance of separation and reunion. Thus we participate in the eternal cycle of immersion emergence foreshadowed in drowning in the waters of the font. And thus ascended to the Father and Mother, the Ground of All Being, we come to join with St Paul in his strange declaration: “No longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> John 1:51

<sup>171</sup> John 20:17

<sup>172</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>173</sup> Matthew 10:39, Luke 17:33, John 12:25

<sup>174</sup> Galatians 2:20

## Tribalism & Titillation

On this Pentecost feast day<sup>175</sup> it helps to clearly identify and dispense with two prevailing distortions in Christian thinking about the Pentecost phenomena.<sup>176</sup> Namely, the distortion of tribalism, and the distortion of titillation. Tribalism is that tendency to see in the Pentecost phenomena a supernatural means of expanding the membership of the tribe. Membership is enlarged, which is an improvement, nevertheless the tribe remains the focus of attention. Under the influence of this distortion Christians are inclined to employ certain well-worn proof texts that emphasise numbers of converts. According to Luke, on the day of Pentecost Peter's Spirit-powered speech in the Jerusalem streets caused about three thousand persons to join the apostles.<sup>177</sup> Later, when Peter and John spoke to the crowds it was about five thousand.<sup>178</sup> The distortion which misuses these proof texts leads directly in our contemporary period to an evangelism measured by 'market share'. A powerful speech or teaching has the capacity to do what Apple does with its seductive marketing, so we are easily fooled. We should be clear that, though perennially popular, and almost completely irresistible, this is a distortion of the gospel. This approach makes of the gospel of Jesus Christ a brand to be sold, to a market which is to be conquered. In truth, this represents a complete perversion of Jesus' call to lay down one's life, to take up one's cross, to be baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, to drink the cup.

Titillation, on the other hand, is that tendency to reduce the Pentecost phenomena to an experience of self-focussed euphoria. The Spirit is experienced, which is a good thing – but the experience itself and its effect on me is the focus of attention. Such a distortion is in truth entirely egocentric. Furthermore, the experience of the Spirit becomes a badge of honour, a means by which groups can define themselves against others. We should be clear that this also is a distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who

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<sup>175</sup> Pentecost Sunday is celebrated as the conclusion and culmination of the fifty days of Eastertime. Originally a Jewish festival of harvest, in the Christian dispensation it signifies the giving of the Holy Spirit and the empowering of the community of Christ disciples, the church.

<sup>176</sup> Preached on Pentecost Sunday, 12 June 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Acts 2:1-21, 2 Corinthians 12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

<sup>177</sup> Acts 2:41

<sup>178</sup> Acts 4:4

emptied himself – even of heightened, ‘spiritual’ experiences. This approach to Christian religion makes of the Holy Spirit a mere device, a conjuring trick by which I can attain a ‘high’ for myself. In this way, there may not be that much difference between the Holy Spirit and sex, drugs, alcohol, money, and all the other means by which we attempt to bring about moments of euphoria for ourselves. Forgiveness, not spiritual euphoria, is the mark of the Spirit.<sup>179</sup>

All the great spiritual teachers warn us against these two distortions. Jesus, they point out in a myriad of ways, resists the temptation to conscript the activity of God to the benefits of tribe – even an expanded tribe. Likewise, Jesus resists the temptation to seek euphoric experiences, to seek the titillation of the Spirit. The Pentecost experience in fact implies the dissolution of all previous images, methods, standards, limits. Our desire to know that we are on the ‘winning team’, to increase market share, is exposed by the Spirit of Christ as an impoverished, puny, fearful vision of humanity. For the vision of Christ is a vision of the whole world, the *cosmos*<sup>180</sup> – poured out on all flesh.<sup>181</sup> Christ’s vision necessitates the complete dissolution of the old religious worldview in which some belonged to God and some did not.

Thus, it should be obvious that ‘market share’ is exposed by the Spirit of Christ as a tragic and pitifully limited distortion of the Divine heart. Likewise, our desire for spiritual euphoria, to be spiritually titillated, is exposed by the Spirit of Christ as self-serving, egocentric. As such this desire is exposed as another form of idolatry – wherein the place of the Divine Mystery is usurped by the hopelessly constricted and partiality of subjective feeling. Encounter with the Spirit of God dissolves all such self-serving titillation and small-hearted tribalism. The Spirit’s dissolution of ego-centric titillation and narrow tribalism is necessary in order to liberate the soul – and ultimately the whole of humankind – in order that all may abide in Christ, and thus be one with the Father. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.”<sup>182</sup> And the Spirit, we should never forget, is experienced as a consuming fire, an overshadowing, a cleansing, a sword that

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<sup>179</sup> John 20:22-23

<sup>180</sup> Greek: ο κόσμος *ho komos*

<sup>181</sup> Acts 2:17

<sup>182</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13

pierces the heart, a complete transformation. Needless to say, such an apprehension of the Pentecostal Spirit bears little resemblance to the somewhat sentimental, warm and fuzzy representations of the Divine which abound in the religious marketplace.

So here we are on this Pentecost Sunday for the first time without a church building – somewhat disoriented, staggering around, so to speak, forced out of our safe upper room into the city’s streets.<sup>183</sup> What now is our call in this earthquake-ravaged environment? How are we to manifest Christ’s presence by the power of the Spirit in this city without a CBD? And how will we know if we are doing so? One thing at least should be clear – we can be sure that a renewed tribalism, an attempt at increased market share, will be a distortion of the Pentecostal Spirit. Likewise, we can be sure that spiritual titillation will also be a distortion. When our forebears built that fine and gracious stone church on the corner of Manchester and Kilmore Streets Christendom was assumed, and the sun never set on the British Empire. Christian faith remained captive to many centuries of religious tribalism. The church building was a tangible, Victorian Gothic physical expression of Christendom’s claim to exclusive truth, as the elect tribe. There may have been an acceptance of the reality of other faiths – nevertheless the task of the Church was to convert them to the one true faith, expanding the tribe, scalp hunting, increasing market share. Also, religious experience was highly privatised. As worshipper I came to make ‘my communion’ with God – concretised in the physical structure of Gothic architecture.

In this completely re-arranged, Mother-Earth-disrupted world, what aspect of our Christian inheritance is being dissolved by the Spirit who blows where she will? What now is the Spirit calling us to manifest, to embody – through action in our community; by means of a new built environment; in attitude towards other faiths; in short, in our entire spiritual horizon?

Staggering out in to the street, what new language, now, does the Spirit prompt in us?<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Acts 2:5ff

<sup>184</sup> Acts 2:4

# SACRIFICE

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For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the good news, will save it.”<sup>185</sup>

*Gospel of Mark*

You see, this is the crux for us. Men and women have to cope with the problem of suffering. The Oriental wants to get rid of suffering by casting it off. Western men and women try to suppress suffering with drugs. But suffering has to be overcome, and the only way to overcome it is endure it. We learn that only from him [pointing at a crucifix].<sup>186</sup>

*Carl Jung*

Over every living thing which is to spring up,  
to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day  
say again the words:

This is my Body.

And over every death-force  
which waits in readiness to corrode,  
to wither, to cut down,

  speak again your commanding words  
which express the supreme mystery of faith:

This is my Blood.<sup>187</sup>

*Teilhard de Chardin*

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<sup>185</sup> Mark 8:35

<sup>186</sup> Carl G Jung, *Letters, Volume 1 1906-1950*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p236n.

<sup>187</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Mass on the World' in *Hymn of the Universe*, New York: Fontana, 1970, pp22-23.

Spiritual truth is to be found everywhere, sometimes in the most unexpected places. Religious claims to an exclusive purchase over the truth are bound to be inflated. It is possible to stand within a religious tradition, to honour and value its integrity, yet to recognise that the Creator of heaven and earth has many witnesses, that the Divine *Mysterium Tremendum* is bound to transcend even our most sophisticated and beautiful doctrines and dogmas.

Having said that, the Christianity expresses particular and unique aspects of truth, especially with regard to the subject of sacrifice – Jesus the crucified and risen Christ being the cornerstone. Only by dismembering the Christian tradition is it possible to escape from the fact that at the heart of the Christian system is the sacrificial death of Christ. Christians claim that in death is a birth. And, though paradoxical of course, without in any way compromising Christ's uniqueness, the disciple is also called to take up the cross - to drink the cup, to following in the narrow way that leads to life.

For this reason, encounter with the Divine Mystery is bound to plunge a person into the profoundly uncertain terrain of sacrifice. Perhaps this is what lies behind the teaching strange to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"? Anyway, if I am honest I'd have to admit that I long for an experience of the *Mysterium Tremendum* in a consoling, uplifting, reassuring mode – to employ a popular idea, bliss. But, as Rudolph Otto so acutely observed, the experience of the *Mysterium Tremendum* is just as likely to be shocking, disturbing, threatening, destabilising, appearing in 'wild and demonic forms [which] can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering'.

When the earth heaves – in whatever guise that takes – smashing old forms, stripping us, against our wishes, we stand before the great mystery, by whatever name. We do not choose such a path – it chooses us. To claim otherwise is hubris. Nevertheless, faced with such a threatening and disturbing *Tremendum* we are free to choose whether or not to cooperate with the spiritual evolution being worked by it, through and in us. This is neither a pious thought nor a work which someone else does for us – it requires embodiment, undergoing. Spiritual evolution exacts its fair price.

## Treasure in Dust & Ashes

On this Ash Wednesday we are a divided city.<sup>188</sup> Not only divided as east and west, gravel and liquefaction-prone swamp, poor and rich. Also by how to mark this anniversary. Over the last week the pros and cons of marking this day have been rehearsed and re-rehearsed. Everyone agrees that those for whom the fateful day ended in death deserve to be remembered – prayed for, even by those who don't normally pray. But when it comes to a public memorial event, now that's quite another matter. As someone said to me this week: "I'm not interested in a memorial, I'd rather just get on with things." There seems to be a fear that stopping to recollect, to look back and reflect on the horrendous enormity of the event – as well as its causes, and its meaning – might somehow thwart forward movement.

Yet my friend who prefers to bypass this day, in favour of 'just getting on with things', then confessed; 'But actually in recent days I just have a heavy feeling that won't go away.' That heaviness pervades our city – inevitable in light of the shocking losses, the ongoing seismic uncertainty, and the excruciating processes of recovery and rebuild. I've spoken to big tough builders and contractors who are feeling overwhelmed. It seems that whether we approve or not, the immense power of the event is no respecter of the mind's willed determination to 'carry on and keep calm'. We *are* a traumatised population – there's just no getting around the fact - the trauma varying only by degree. Whether our minds consent or not, we are the city that is rising, yes – yet still very much the city in dust and ashes.

Last year Ash Wednesday fell two weeks into a national state of emergency. There was no Liturgy of Ashes in our parish that day – possibly the first time it had been missed. Though probably, we didn't actually *need* a liturgy – we were in fact undergoing it, quite literally, each in our own particular way. That state of emergency now seems a strange and somewhat scrambled memory – what happened to all those weeks! We are still caught somewhere between dust and ashes, and Paschal Light – and it's gradually sinking in that we are likely to be in dust and ashes for

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<sup>188</sup> Preached on Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2012, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Joel 2:1-2,12-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

some time. It's as though we are all stranded in the treacherous waters between a kind of Scylla and Charybdis: caught between taking seriously and learning from what has been; and looking hopefully and energetically to tomorrow – vessels can easily founder in such turbulent waters.

According to the ashen symbol given to us by our tradition, it is in fact this state in which we will find our treasure! And for this reason it is called an evangel. Moreover, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>189</sup> A discreet piety, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – and a determined resistance to the lure of over-valuing external treasures – this is the Jesus-way to the eternal, rust-proof, moth-proof... and earthquake-proof treasure! Here in our city's dust and ashes we will find our treasure. “Having nothing,” – as it feels to so many people in our city – “and yet possessing everything.”<sup>190</sup> Incredible! Unbelievable! Gospel!

Moreover, finding our treasure, will we be centred in the heart – which in the Hebrew thought-world is the sacred centre of human existence. So, dust and ashes the way to the treasure; treasure reveals the sacred centre, the Paschal Mystery - truly an *evangellion*!

“Believe the gospel,” sounds to our overly-rational minds like an idea to be subscribed to. But we can see that ‘belief’ in this gospel is in fact encounter with the sacred centre – which is the fruit of knowing the treasure found in the dust and ashes of life.

Thus, Ash Wednesday initiates us, again, and in a very particular way this year, into this sacred reality. Submitting joyfully to the dust and ashes – in all the detail of our particular experience, exterior *and* interior – at the same time, trusting hopefully in the treasure, the Sacred Centre which is the Paschal Mystery.

“Remember that you are but dust,  
and to dust you shall return.  
Repent, and believe the gospel.”

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<sup>189</sup> Matthew 6:21

<sup>190</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:10

# Stripped by Mother Earth

This Holy Week we face a stripping like no other, as a parish and community.<sup>191</sup> No doubt in other years we will have faced personal strippings of this order of magnitude, or greater. But this time we are being stripped together. Our collective outer garment, our communal protective layer, has been unceremoniously torn away from us. We are exposed as never before. When the people of this parish made the decision a little over a hundred years ago to tear down their first church building, they made that decision. We have made no such decision – it has been made for us, by Mother Earth. And we are all the more vulnerable for that. This is not our plan, our scheme!

So we stand naked now, as parish, like never before. We have lost the religious clothing which has protected us, given us identity, and mediated us to the world and the world to our souls. Who are we, without our accustomed clothing?

We are not alone in this nakedness, of course – our very city has been stripped, not only of many of its churches, but of its very life as a city. Even so, as the parish of St Luke's in the City we enter this great Holy Week as never before – closer than ever before, communally, to the events described in the gospels. Moreover, many of us are now homeless, and many more have homes with uncertain futures. And all of us live in a city with an uncertain future – the very ground beneath us in question.

Something is being asked of us. Our new nakedness is not without meaning. Our task is to wrestle towards whatever meaning is in this stripping. In our nakedness we are being called into a much deeper encounter with the very ground of our being – with the Ground of all Being. We stand now before the *Mysterium Tremendum* as never before. For each of us this calling has a very particular shape and contour – uniquely, according to our individual histories and personalities. This nakedness is an invitation into the nature of our sonship and daughtership of God at a whole new level. As parish, it is an invitation to become the Body of Christ as never before.

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<sup>191</sup> Preached on Palm Sunday 17 April 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

Without doubt this is a time of immense suffering. We are invited to take up the cross of our being, of all being, as never before. "You see, this is the crux for us. Men and women have to cope with the problem of suffering. The Oriental wants to get rid of suffering by casting it off. Western men and women try to suppress suffering with drugs. But suffering has to be overcome, and the only way to overcome it is endure it. We learn that only from him."<sup>192</sup> The icon of Christ crucified before us on this Passion Sunday of Palms visually represents that eternal truth.

The symbols and rituals, the communal action, of this great and Holy Week not only describe the universal human experience – pioneered by the historical Jesus – they also hold and transform what we ourselves could not by our own efforts. The gift of the Kingdom, fullness of life, is always the work of Another.

Our part is to give ourselves as fully, as consciously, as willingly, and as hopefully as we can to that universal work – which can only begin with our being stripped of our old humanity – that we might stand clothed in the new humanity with Christ.

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<sup>192</sup> Jung C G, *op cit*

## Death & Rebirth

It was a most unnatural sight – one that I’m unlikely to ever see again; a sight I don’t want to see again!<sup>193</sup> That magnificent roof, hovering above a mountain of rubble, floating across the sky. Was it a giant bird? Was it a spaceship? Were we the ones who were upside down, looking down into an enormous timber ark floating on a sea of sky? There is no place in the brain to make sense of the bizarre things we are seeing in this city at this time. That gracious and beautiful church building which was constructed in 13 months – an amazing feat in itself! – deconstructed in three days. That fine hand-crafted masonry smashed into thousands upon thousands of pieces. No one expects to see such things. No one wants to see such things!

How can such a destructive event possibly have any beauty? And yet, the extraordinarily delicate manouvres with large hydraulic machinery were at times so moving – single pieces of stone delicately lifted away; that giant transept roof gently floating past organ pipes; more of the precious things than I thought would be retrieved respectfully carried out of the rubble by big burly men with proud smiles. Of course, I am so thankful that the Norman, Hill & Beard organ is being removed, even as we meet here this morning – with less damage than first thought. But that for which I am more thankful is the safe retrieval of those three things that most matter. Amazingly, the font, the lectern, and the altar are all now safely housed in a locked shipping container on site. And in announcing to us that they had managed to dig the font out of the rubble, unbroken, the Graceworks<sup>194</sup> man knew how important that was to us – his broad smile the sign of a job well done.

These are very strange events, laden with poignancy and ambivalence. Such sadness at the loss of a structure so fine and so gracious, which we know we’ll never see here again. Such a relief that the poor old lady is finally, after four and a half months, out of her misery. Such outrage that she was left to decay and degrade as a consequence of the procedures of the very agencies which are

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<sup>193</sup> Preached on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, 10 July 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: Isaiah 55:10-13, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

<sup>194</sup> ‘Graceworks’ is the name of the demolition company which was contracted to deconstruct the church building.

the guardians of heritage. Such a burden lifted that fifteen homes can at last be accessed. Such gratitude for the large team of men who exercised such skill, and showed great respect. All this is very good. Yet what matters most of all is the faithfulness of a community who have kept vigil – on site and at home. Your faithfulness in prayer. Your commitment as the local Body of Christ – to the promises of your baptism; to the breaking open of the Word; to the breaking of the Bread. It is such a privilege to be with you who are sprinkled in this water, who are gathered around these Tables of Word and Sacrament. Such a privilege to pray the Morning Office in the crisp darkness, the silhouette of the church remains against the pre-dawn sky. Such a privilege to have kept vigil with you this week as we have watched and waited and held our breath – like waiting at the bedside of someone who is dying; or standing by a woman in labour!

Yes, there has been a death – of that there can be no doubt whatsoever. Together we anointed her on the tenth of April, gave her last rites in preparation for her burial. Now we have held her hand as she took her last breath. Over the coming weeks others will dismantle her remains for the final burial.<sup>195</sup> And yet in this dying there is also a birth. Something new is being born. On Wednesday, late in the afternoon, when finally the nave roof had been separated and began her flight away from the transept, she came to a sudden halt. A single piece of electrical conduit in the roofing was holding the two giant pieces together. Someone remarked, “The umbilical cord!” “They need a midwife to cut the cord!” Yes, there is indeed a birth! And that birth is taking place in the ground of you, the living Body of Christ. That to which the gracious old lady always pointed was always beyond herself, beyond her fine physical features – towards the mystery of the Living Christ in the individual soul. You are the good soil into which the eternal seed is being scattered.<sup>196</sup> The Sower is entrusting this seed to you, to us. Only lack of understanding, rootlessness, and concern for our wealth or position can cause that seed to die.<sup>197</sup>

I am so thankful, so very grateful, for your good soil, for you who are bearing such good fruit.<sup>198</sup> To us, together, is

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<sup>195</sup> The demolition was not completed until early October 2011.

<sup>196</sup> Matthew 13:8

<sup>197</sup> Matthew 13:19,21,22

<sup>198</sup> Matthew 13:23

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

entrusted this astonishing gift, this seed bearing fruit. This, above all else, is that to which all the external structures and symbols have always pointed. And this astounding fruitfulness is not confined by any such external structures or objects – no matter how fine they might be. “Let anyone with ears listen!”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Matthew 13:9

# Undergoing the Appointed Hour

As we all know, there is a world of difference between religious *ideas*, and religious *life* – between religious *thinking*, and religious *doing*.<sup>200</sup> This gap is most readily observable at the outer level, in the domain of social, political and economic behaviour. It was this glaring gap to which Gandhi must have been referring in that saying: ‘If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today.’ This is obvious enough. And is there anyone who is not painfully aware of the gap between what we say we believe and what we actually embody? Yet, to be fair, and compassionate, how could it be otherwise! It is in the very nature of religious ideas to present not a fixed and completed state, but a spiritual trajectory – and in the very nature of humanity not to be complete at birth, but to be in a state of evolutionary development.

On this fifth and final Sunday in Lent we hear Jesus agonise: “Now is my soul<sup>201</sup> troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”<sup>202</sup> This would be John’s equivalent to the synoptic gospels’: “Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.”<sup>203</sup>

Remove this cup. Save me from this hour. In its most intense experience this is an inner agony, an interior struggle. The human heart of Christ agonises because he now knows to what he is called. He knows what cup has been given him to drink. He knows that he is at the moment of Divine time, the hour which demands a decision. And knows enough to be aware of what ‘the hour’ will demand – to undergo in his flesh everything he has been talking about. A law written not in Scriptures, but in his heart.<sup>204</sup> This is the way of spiritual evolution.

It’s not really a question of moral or ethical behaviour. There are moral consequences, yes, but it’s really an interior matter – of identity and being. Who is he, really? The plea to be

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<sup>200</sup> Preached on Lent 5, 25 March 2012, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

<sup>201</sup> Greek: *ψυχη* *psyche*, translated in English Bibles as both as ‘soul’ and ‘life’, and from which is derived the word ‘psychology’.

<sup>202</sup> John 12:27

<sup>203</sup> Mark 14:36 & parallels

<sup>204</sup> Jeremiah 31:33

spared from this hour is a plea to not have to embody his true identity – the grain of wheat which must fall in to the ground and die.<sup>205</sup> It is the plea to remain in an outdated ‘old wineskin’<sup>206</sup> state of evolutionary development. The plea is perfectly understandable. Who, in his position, would not want to be spared from this hour! Who would want to fall into the ground and die!

Then we must remind ourselves, once again, that the Christian life is not a matter of believing certain things about the historical Jesus. Those who wish to “see Jesus”<sup>207</sup> can only ‘see’ him by becoming one with him in ‘the hour’. It is said that ‘seeing is believing’. But perhaps it’s more true to say that ‘seeing is undergoing’ – that true seeing is the fruit not of what the mind can accept, but what the heart is willing to sacrifice; in the service of spiritual evolution. Seeing is in fact ‘the hour’ of self sacrifice. ‘Seeing’, therefore, is the willing acceptance that it is for this reason of the necessary disturbance in the soul that I have come to this hour. ‘Believing’, then, is the fruit of undergoing the appointed hour which each of us faces – repeatedly!

Now honesty requires that I confess how great is my resistance to all this. Of course I want an escape hatch from this hour - a ‘saviour’ even, to spare me from having to undergo the sacrifice which I am called to make. The little boy in me would be happy for Jesus-the-saviour to rescue me from having to make the mature adult’s divinely-appointed sacrifice – to rescue me from the hour which calls me to consent to a falling into the earth and dying. ‘Now indeed is my soul troubled – yet it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.’

Self honesty is one thing. Its necessary partner, compassion, shows me that it is natural to resist this hour – that it is in fact against nature to accept this hour; this hour, which is the offering our very selves as a living sacrifice.

Nourishment for this great undertaking, every Eucharist is an expression of this unnatural and overwhelming hour – “Can you drink the cup that I must drink?”<sup>208</sup> In the words of a Thanksgiving Prayer: “For in this holy and dangerous meal You draw us into the homeland of Your life...” a ‘homeland’ which is falling into the earth and dying.

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<sup>205</sup> John 12:24

<sup>206</sup> Mark 2:21-22 & parallels

<sup>207</sup> John 12:21

<sup>208</sup> Mark 10:38

This is the Paschal Mystery – and it contravenes everything we take to be normal, sensible, reasonable, and prudent. It is not ‘normal’ for us to consciously, willingly fall into the earth and die. Paschal Mystery indeed – for unless this human grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains but a single grain. But if it does die, it bears rich fruit. Though biologically we do eventually return to the earth, yet psychologically, spiritually, it is against our human nature to accept this willingly. So we can ‘cut ourselves some slack’.

I said ‘consciously, willingly’. Yet this is not an hour we choose for ourselves - as though it were just another strategic plan we can heroically claim as our own invention and print on our letterhead. “Christ did not glorify himself in appointing himself a high priest, but was appointed by the One who said to him: “Today you are my Son...”<sup>209</sup> There is truly a very great Mystery here. Christ lifted up will draw all peoples to himself.<sup>210</sup> And yet the hour is given to Christ. He did not appoint himself to this hour, this priesthood. His unique Son-ship was appointed, given – by an Other.

As for Christ, so for Christ’s disciples. For, according to the Christian proclamation, the pattern of the Christ is the pattern of all humanity’s true fulfilment. The particular ‘hour’ which each of us faces is not our own invention. Our unique daughter-and-son-ship is appointed, given. Likewise, it is for ‘this hour’ – whatever it may be for each of us personally, as parishes, as city – that we are made. For only by resisting the temptation to be rescued from this soul-troubling hour are we able to undergo the necessary spiritual evolution. It is for this reason that we have come to this hour – to undergo ourselves the Paschal Mystery; which bears much fruit.

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<sup>209</sup> Hebrews 5:5

<sup>210</sup> John 12:32

## Real Flesh

Recent lectionaries have chopped today's feast in half by calling it 'The Naming of Jesus'.<sup>211</sup> I don't know why the Church's Lectionary compilers chose this half-title – perhaps the result of a general prudishness, a sanitising tendency in Christianity. The single verse which gives today's feast its name is very specific and clear on the matter: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."<sup>212</sup> Indeed, if we look closely at the sequence of events in that verse it's obvious that latter action is contingent upon the former – naming is possible because of circumcising!

One does not mention circumcision in polite company, I suppose. The practice of circumcision of women among certain African tribes fills us Westerners with horror. The practice of circumcision of baby boys is hardly a straightforward matter now either. In such a climate it's probably very difficult for us to appreciate the profound and far-reaching religious significance of circumcision. To do so, some understanding of its origins is helpful.

We recall that the covenant between YHWH and Abraham was to be sealed by the act of the removal of the piece of skin at the end of the penis.<sup>213</sup> Though we probably puzzle as to why such a strange act? Forget contemporary ideas about bodily cleanliness! Predating the rise of Hebrew religion, from a more ancient past, the dark aspect of the divine and creative feminine is the terrible mother, or the great dragon – who must be appeased with the annual sacrifice of the most beautiful maiden. Under the gradual influence of human evolutionary development this practice seems to have been replaced, first, by the sacrifice of first-born children, along with various domestic animals – hence the sacrifice of animals as the revolutionary development in a Hebrew religion which replaced human sacrifice.

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<sup>211</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Naming & Circumcision, 1 January 2012, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Numbers 6:22-27, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:15-21

<sup>212</sup> Luke 2:21

<sup>213</sup> Genesis 17:9-14

Then, a more moral alternative to sacrifice of the first-born - as we see in the story of Abraham and Isaac<sup>214</sup> - is the higher ideal of self-castration. This is necessary because it represents the sacrifice of male concupiscence - reckoned to be the root of 'original sin'. Circumcision could be a milder, and more symbolic, form of this rather radical sacrifice.

This is an evolutionary development which amounts to the replacing of animal sacrifice with a symbolic act. Instinctive desire, represented by the male penis - or, in its restricted form, the piece of flesh at the end of it - is given up, relinquished; in order that its natural energies may be regained in a higher form. This would constitute the sacrifice of instinctual energies for the sake of the development of the higher moral and spiritual energies. In the Hebrew dispensation this sacrifice is involuntary - the child is simply presented to the rabbi on the eighth day after birth.<sup>215</sup> But in the Christian dispensation the sacrifice of instinctive energy, life itself, must become a completely voluntary act - Christ freely offers himself as the sacrifice.

All this requires real flesh, real skin, real blood - hence the medieval and renaissance interest in Christ's foreskin, albeit in a literalised form. Birgitta of Sweden is said to have received a revelation indicating where the foreskin of Christ was to be found. (People were looking for it!) Catherine of Sienna's wedding ring was reckoned to have been made of Christ's circumcised flesh. And proving how much better connected were the medievals to their bodies than us - not to mention how prudish we have become - the Beguine Agnes Blannbekin received in a vision Christ's foreskin in her mouth, and she reported that it tasted as sweet as honey! In a 1400CE painting by Jean Malouel entitled 'The Lamentation of the Holy Trinity' the dead Christ is depicted being held by three witnesses. The blood which flows from Christ's side does not flow into a chalice held by Mary - as is typically the case in icons. Rather, it flows, somewhat unnaturally, down into Christ's crotch - an artistic device linking the first wound of circumcision with the last wound of crucifixion.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Genesis 22:1-19

<sup>215</sup> Genesis 17:12

<sup>216</sup> Martin Percy, 'Babe, the First Cut is the Deepest', in Cotter J (et al, eds) *Darkness Yielding: Liturgies, prayers and reflections for Advent, Christmas, Holy Week and Easter*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2001, pp69-70.

Such theology was emphatic about the real flesh of Christ – in which the blood sacrifice of Christ’s circumcision prefigured crucifixion and eucharistic theology. It has been claimed that “what we have here is a devotion to the ‘Body of Christ’: a host-shaped piece of flesh that spoke of ritual, gift, suffering, redemption.”<sup>217</sup>

The Christmas message that God has come among us as a human being is a message of incarnating, flesh-taking. “Though [Christ] was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself... being born in human likeness...”<sup>218</sup> There is no Christmas gift without sacrifice – in the flesh. This amounts to a voluntary, freely-offered limitation of natural instinctual energies – in order that those very natural and God-created energies might be transformed into a higher form.

Herein we can see the Christian evolutionary elevation and transformation of the ancient sacrificial act. Instinctual, ‘natural’, energies voluntarily sacrificed – now in the service of the evolution of consciousness. Christianity thus proclaims a lofty ideal – a high ideal which has been the engine-room of the development of Western consciousness. This astonishing accomplishment is not without its losses, of course, observable in the widespread separation of rational consciousness from its instinctual foundations, the separation of mind from feeling – resulting in widespread violence against the feminine, and the earth. Perhaps it is in our time that the necessary correction to Christianity’s somewhat one-sided rationality is undergoing the necessary re-grounding in the instincts, in the earth, in the feminine, in matter? Only time will tell.

When today’s feast is fully named we are reminded that what’s required is a real sacrifice, not a theoretical or merely idealised one – real flesh, real skin, real blood. Jesus receives his name – ‘he saves’ – as an outcome of real sacrifice, of his real flesh.

How apt on this first day of a new secular year – to be recalled that as for Christ, so for all Christ’s disciples. Each person a divine son or daughter, a saving mystery – each a Spirit-breathed vessel of real sacrifice; real flesh, real skin, real blood. Well may we this year, with Augustine, say “Amen!” to what we are.

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<sup>217</sup> *ibid*

<sup>218</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

# The Shape of a Sacrifice

The idea that our lives are in some way determined from a very young age is a scandalous one in our culture.<sup>219</sup> While some concession is made to genetic inheritance and upbringing, we mostly like to think that we make all our own choices – that by ingenuity, hard work, perseverance, ‘positive thinking’, ‘mission statements’, ‘strategic plans’, and so on, that we construct our lives. Thus, the essence of today’s gospel story is for our culture completely scandalous – it is quite unacceptable that this child’s future should be in any way be known when he is a mere forty days from birth. But that is precisely what Luke is saying.

His parents do what is required ‘under the law’. Forty days after the birth the mother – who, ritually unclean, has been required to stay away from the Temple – is now obliged to present herself for purification.<sup>220</sup> And, being their first-born son, Mary and Joseph are required to present Jesus in the Temple as an offering to the Lord.<sup>221</sup> No surprises here.

But then an old man appears – not the first time such a thing has happened in Israel’s history – with a prophecy about the child’s future. The purpose of this child’s life is summarised thus by old Simeon: a light for revelation for outsiders,<sup>222</sup> and the glory of Israel; the cause of the rising and falling of people; a sign to be opposed; through whom the hearts of people will be revealed; and as a consequence of which his mother’s soul will also be pierced.<sup>223</sup>

So the parents go to the Temple with what they understand to be the proper sacrifice – only to have Simeon declare what will be the true nature of the sacrifice. A sacrifice is made, yes – but not the one they thought they were making! The child will be a sign to be opposed, causing the rising and falling of people, exposing the thoughts of hearts – all of which is both a great revelation, and a sign of immense suffering; costing not less than everything.

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<sup>219</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ, 5 February 2012, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Malachi 3:1-4, Psalm 24, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

<sup>220</sup> Leviticus 12:2-8

<sup>221</sup> Exodus 13:2,12

<sup>222</sup> Greek: **εθνων** *ethnon*, usually translated as ‘Gentiles’.

<sup>223</sup> Luke 2:32,34-35

Now the reason this story is not merely a 2000 year old Bible narrative but called 'gospel' is this: here we have an account of the human situation. The fulfilment, the completion of each and every human child's life bears the shape of sacrificial action. Life itself is sacrifice. The evangelists will go on to employ a great many parables, teachings and sayings by which to express this truth. And the very essence of the Christian evangel, the Paschal Mystery, is an icon of this fundamental truth. Which is why the central Christian communal action – the Eucharist – bears the shape of sacrifice. Those who present themselves at the Table of Christ are – like the One into whom they are baptised – both the sacrifice itself, as well as those who participate in the act of sacrificing; both offering, and offerer.

Now the idea of 'sacrifice' has caused not a little heat in the church. One of the great tragedies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformations and their aftermath is a distorted reaction to the concept of sacrifice. A lop-sided judicial, penal, and violent interpretation of atonement argues that Christ's suffering and death is the one and only necessary sacrifice for the sins of the world – because of which *all* other sacrifices count as nothing. The Eucharist, therefore, cannot be regarded as a sacrificial action – according to this one-sided dogma – because that might give the impression that Christ's sacrifice was not complete, 'once and for all'.

This is actually quite important, a critical matter for Christian faith. A one-sided interpretation of Christ's sacrifice as 'full and sufficient' risks fostering a calamitous irresponsibility - I don't have to make the sacrifice because 'Christ has done it all for me' – this is in fact an infantile attitude. But such a stance fails even the most basic experiment in ordinary experience. Ask any parent, any husband or wife. Take just glimpse at the national religion of ANZAC. We all know that sacrifice is integral to life. Yet even if one feels the need for a 'biblical proof', there is more than ample evidence in the teachings of Jesus himself – as well as St Paul – that each of us are co-workers in his cosmic sacrificial action; completing in our flesh the sufferings of Christ;<sup>224</sup> doing even greater works than his;<sup>225</sup> being Christ's mother, sisters, and

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<sup>224</sup> Colossians 1:24

<sup>225</sup> John 14:12

brothers by doing what he does;<sup>226</sup> by taking up not his cross, but our own.<sup>227</sup>

So today's feast declares that the pattern, the shape, of this forty day old child's life is already known. Some very specific sacrificial action is required of this life. And, by baptism, the uniqueness of Christ's particular sacrifice is to be mirrored by those who are members of his Body: "We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ. We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread."<sup>228</sup> Just so, some very specific, unique and particular sacrificial action is required of every human life - yours and mine.

And the astonishing thing - and perhaps for some the scandalous fact - is that even as infants there can be early signs of the shape of the sacrifice that will be required. Psychology has taught us a great deal about this. Modern physics also has taught us a great deal about this - the very shape and structure of the cosmos as we know it having been determined in the first milliseconds following the Big Bang.<sup>229</sup>

For each of us there is an invitation to offer ourselves as a 'living sacrifice' - the work of which is both assisted and enacted in this eucharistic sacrament. There is a particular and unique sacrifice which each of us is invited to freely make - the signs of which may well have been signalled even from our birth.

And at this hinge-point feast in the liturgical year we are invited to make Christ's words in the garden our own: "Father/Mother, if you are willing remove this cup from me yet, not my will but yours be done."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Luke 8:21

<sup>227</sup> Luke 14:27

<sup>228</sup> The prayer at the breaking of the bread in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, The Church of the Province of New Zealand, *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, Auckland: William Collins, 1989, p425.

<sup>229</sup> See, for instance, 'The Origin and Fate of the Universe' in Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York: Bantam Press, 1998, p151.

<sup>230</sup> Luke 22:42

## We Are the Food

Matthew the evangelist has picture-framed two banquets side by side.<sup>231</sup> At the first, a tyrant king orders the head of John the Baptist to be served up on a platter – for a sycophantic court in a bloated palace; to save his egotistical skin; precipitated by lust for his wife’s daughter in the meanness of the self-centred now.<sup>232</sup> At the second, an itinerant rabbi orders his disciples to serve up what little they have – to feed a confused crowd of the poor and the lost; an act of pure compassion and self-offering; precipitated by complete trust in the graciousness of the Eternal Beyond.

The listener can hardly fail to notice the evangelist’s purpose. Indeed, the listener can hardly fail to notice *evangellion*, good news. No mere worthy instruction, teaching, idea, dry doctrine - *evangellion* is being acted out. The disciple who wants to know what it means to be blessed, to be salt of the earth, light of the world, to love one’s enemies, to be good soil receiving the seed, to be mustard seed and leaven, to find and to be the treasure of great price... *here* is what it means!

“This is a deserted place,” the disciples complain, “and the hour is late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”<sup>233</sup> Do we recognise ourselves? We are tired, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, unable to see how this desert in which we find ourselves can sustain us.

“You give them something to eat!”<sup>234</sup> This is the new dispensation, the new humanity, the dawning of the Kingdom, ‘Emmanuel’, God with us. With what little there appears to be, reaching into the Eternal Within, the old way of ego dies to a new era of *kenōsis*, self-emptying. You give them something to eat! The disciples are being taught, in this deserted place, the way of the Human One: “Having taken the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples...”<sup>235</sup> Later, on the night before his state-sanctioned

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<sup>231</sup> Preached on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, 31 July 2011, at the Mary Potter Community Centre, Christchurch. Lections: Isaiah 55:1-5, Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

<sup>232</sup> Matthew 14:1-12

<sup>233</sup> Matthew 14:15b

<sup>234</sup> Matthew 14:16b

<sup>235</sup> Matthew 14:19a

murder, it will become explicit that he will give himself as the food: “Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take and eat, this is my body.”<sup>236</sup> Even as he gives food – in this four-fold action, taken, blessed, broken, given - he is himself the food. Even as he eats, he is eaten!

This is the new way, the new humanity – not only to eat, but to be eaten. Just as Jesus the Christ is the food, so the disciple is to offer her or himself as the food – to be the food for the life of the world.

It should be abundantly clear from all this just how tragic is the church’s empire stance, in all its forms, historical and contemporary – for rather than entertain delusions of grandeur and importance, the disciple of Jesus is to offer what little he or she has, as the food, trusting only in the Eternal Beyond who is at the same time the Eternal Within. ‘This is the Body’... ‘We are the Body’... Two aspects of the one Eternal reality.

In this shaken and devastated city, now more than ever there is the need for the vocation of the disciples of Christ. We are the Body. We are to offer ourselves as the food, to be eaten. We will begin today our conversation about how we might go about this, communally speaking – how we will be food for a broken city.<sup>237</sup> We will consider what might be the outer and visible expression of this Eternal Banquet.

But the outer expression can only be authentic - and safe! - if it’s congruent with the inner reality. From Jesus the Christ we are learning how to eat, and how to be eaten – how to be eternal food. “The more we learn from Jesus how to eat, the more we shall be able to be eaten properly, giving more than ourselves.”<sup>238</sup>

We have inherited a long history of approaching the Eucharist as a spiritual top-up station, at which we receive strength and grace to do or work for the following week. While this is true, it’s only part of the truth. We not only receive food at this Table. *We are the food* at the table of the world.

‘You give them something to eat!’

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<sup>236</sup> Matthew 26:26

<sup>237</sup> This was a 4 week series whole-of-parish education-formation series called ‘Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry’.

<sup>238</sup> Fritz Kunkel, *op cit*, p174.

# CHRIST CONSCIOUSNESS

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It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.<sup>239</sup>  
*Saint Paul*

We must no longer understand by 'the holy' or 'sacred' the merely numinous in general, nor even the numinous at its own highest development; we must always understand by it the numinous completely permeated and saturated with elements signifying rationality, purpose, personality, morality... Almost everywhere we find the numinous attracting and appropriating meanings derived from social and individual ideals of obligation, justice, and goodness. These become the 'will' of the numen, and the numen their guardian, ordainer, and author.<sup>240</sup>  
*Rudolph Otto*

Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first.<sup>241</sup>  
*Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*

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<sup>239</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>240</sup> Rudolph Otto, *op cit*,127.

<sup>241</sup> Cited at:

[http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/\\_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf)

How do we grow into Christ consciousness? The dawning of all spiritual intuition seems to require a projected form in the first instance. Mountains, rivers, animals, and many other natural phenomena constitute the earliest forms of such projection. Later, humans developed 'fabricated' external structures of one kind or another - Scriptures, doctrines, liturgies, sacred buildings, spiritual techniques and methods of every kind. These external, material objects are necessary in the evolution of spiritual development.

Yet, no matter how intellectual or physically elegant and precious they may be, we have to face up to the reality that all such external, material objects are mere projections. Bearing truths, yes, but projections all the same. Christ consciousness involves the dismantling and loss of all such projections.

It is hardly surprising that we experience profound grief when these projected forms are threatened - or, worse still, when they collapse.

In our earthquake shattered city the loss of the precious projected forms is a source of grief and loss - approaching three years on, this grief seems to have deepened. For the parish I serve the loss of the church building is an incalculable loss. Though massive - indeed partly because of its mass - it was no match for the immense energies of Mother Earth.

Such seems to be the very nature of encounter with the divine mystery. Temples will be thrown down - to make way for the temple not made with hands. The necessary spiritual evolutionary development - the movement from merely 'believing in' Christ to undergoing what Christ undergoes, growing into Christ consciousness - requires the gradual (or sometimes shockingly sudden!) withdrawal of all projections. In this time and place the process is unusually widespread across a population, and greatly accelerated.

# Baptism into Christ Consciousness

To those now well-tuned to the thorough-going sentimentalisation and commercialisation of the birth of Jesus, the first few days after Christmas day in the church's calendar probably come as quite a shock.<sup>242</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> is the feast of Stephen, first deacon and martyr, stoned to death – by 'good religious people'! The 27<sup>th</sup> gives a breather with the feast of St John the evangelist, who, so far as we know, died peacefully. But then the 28<sup>th</sup> is the feast of the Holy Innocents, calling to mind the wholesale slaughter of Bethlehem's baby boys by Herod – the gospel account of which is set for today if one is celebrating that feast instead of Stephen<sup>243</sup> – And things don't improve on the 29<sup>th</sup> with the feast of Thomas Becket, 40<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in Canterbury cathedral in 1170.

How odd it must seem to the mind which has become accustomed to the idea that Christian religion is about thinking correct thoughts, or being good boys and girls, or being politely pious, or being compliant citizens. Or if the Christian faith has become firmly associated with imperialism, crusading, scalp-hunting, and like any other corporate entity. Or if it is regarded as mere sentimental fairy tale or stubborn and perverse anti-scientific superstition. Baby Jesus, cutesy animals, and angelic choirs are apparently easy enough to accept. Though the latter case is particularly revealing of the naivety of our age, since the presumption that angelic visitations can be so domesticated smacks of delusion.

Nevertheless, here we are on the feast of Stephen – when good king Wenceslas is alleged to have looked out on the deep and crisp and even snow – celebrating of all things a martyrdom! In fact, consistent with today's theme, King Wenceslas, Duke of Bohemia, was also martyred, on the 28<sup>th</sup> December in the year 935. The well-known nineteenth century carol has been all but dis-embowelled, sadly, like most carols, its jolly schmaltzy tinsel renditions almost totally obscuring its deadly serious lyrics - about a faithful Christian king who goes out to give alms to a poor

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<sup>242</sup> Preached on the Feast of Saint Stephen, on 26 December 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel.  
Lectons: 2 Chronicles 24:20-22, Acts 7:51-60, Matthew 23:34-39

<sup>243</sup> Matthew 2:16-18

peasant on the Feast of Stephen. During the journey, his page is tempted to give up the struggle against the elements, but is inspired to persevere because of the heat miraculously emanating from the king's footprints in the snow. The King's advice to his page remains relevant and so needed in post-modern western capitalist times:

Therefore, Christian men [*sic*], be sure  
 Wealth or rank possessing  
 Ye who now will bless the poor  
 Shall yourselves find blessing.<sup>244</sup>

Such a dose of sobering on the day after the feast of the nativity is undoubtedly too much for most people – not the kind of sobering-up after Christmas excess most are looking for! And we can hardly fail to be appalled by the fact that the killing which makes martyrs is so often done by ‘good religious men’. Just as it has long been: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”<sup>245</sup>

Such is the nature of this baptism into Christ, into which Livia is initiated this day,<sup>246</sup> in the company of Stephen and Wenceslas – and which we all reaffirm and celebrate, and commit ourselves once again to live. The first century Ancient Near Eastern religious intuition which recast rather more ancient religious rites into the Christian symbol of baptism may have been attempting to give expression to a deep truth about human consciousness. ‘Walking in the King’s miraculously-lifegiving footprints’ through perishing cold, being submerged in the transformational vessel of the font, perceiving the ‘heavens opened and the Son of Humanity at the right hand of God’<sup>247</sup> are all symbols expressing the same strange gospel – God found in lowest form, found in an animal feeding trough,<sup>248</sup> embracing human flesh, the Divine coming to birth in the ordinary human soul, ‘God with us’.<sup>249</sup>

The person who would accept this astonishing *evangellion*, gospel – and who would endeavour to shape their

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<sup>244</sup> John Mason Neale, ‘Good King Wenceslas’, in *With One Voice*.

<sup>245</sup> Matthew 23:37

<sup>246</sup> Having already lost access to the 1909 Halswell stone church building, the parish had made its temporary home at the Rose Historic Chapel. At the Sunday parish Eucharist on this day after Christmas Day Livia’s parents had presented her for the sacrament of Baptism.

<sup>247</sup> Acts 8:56

<sup>248</sup> Luke 2:12

<sup>249</sup> Matthew 1:23

lives according to its puzzling truth – is bound to create a problem for the status quo, to give offence, to scandalise, to galvanise negative energies, possibly even lethal. For not all are motivated to bless the poor, to see heaven on earth<sup>250</sup> – not even some ‘religious’ people, as today’s gospel reminds us.

Yet Stephen, and Wenceslas, and the rest, embodied this vocation because it is the vocation of the One whose steps they followed, the Bethlehem babe – the blesser of barren womb and breaker empty tomb. And a person who would accept this gospel, even one such as Livia, (and you and me), is likewise called to bless the poor, to see heaven on earth – that is, to unite the Spirit and flesh, the Divine and the human.<sup>251</sup> Christ’s-mass proclaims that possibility and hope – that there will be peace, the reconciling of all conflictual opposites, among men and women of good will.<sup>252</sup> Baptism is immersion in to this vision.

Baptism into Christ is a high calling, Livia, without doubt! Yet the Christmas gospel declares this vocation to be realisable, in spite of all evidence to the contrary – because of the babe of Bethlehem and man of Calvary. Each human life is given the potential to be blesser of barren womb and breaker of empty tomb. Every human is called to embody the Christ consciousness. Of course this is a life’s work.

In the eucharistic symbol – which nourishes those who would walk in Stephen’s and Wenceslas’ footprints, into which Livia is now welcomed – the sacramental traces of that Christ consciousness are taking flesh in us: ‘Christ becoming as we are, that we might become what he is.’<sup>253</sup>

*Postscript:* Not long after this sermon was preached and Livia had been (thankfully) baptised, during the Communion, at 10.30am the city was severely shaken by a sharp and surprisingly violent 4.9 magnitude event with an epicentre a little over 2 kilometres away from the Rose Chapel, causing significant new damage in the city. The Communion was completed outside after an orderly but hasty evacuation of the building!

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<sup>250</sup> Acts 7:56

<sup>251</sup> John 1:14

<sup>252</sup> Luke 2:14

<sup>253</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, cited in Alan Richardson (ed), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1969, p175.

# New Humanity, New Creation

The feast of All Saints poses an awkward paradox, a contradiction even.<sup>254</sup> For the church proclaims an all-inclusive vision which envisages nothing less than the whole of humanity gathered up in a great banquet. In the words of the ancient prayer at the 'fraction', sadly omitted from the eucharistic rite in our Province's prayer book:

"As this broken bread was once many grains  
which have been gathered together and made one bread,  
so may your Church be gathered  
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom."<sup>255</sup>

Nothing short of cosmic proportions indeed! But the all-too-obvious reality is that only a very small proportion of the world's peoples will be gathered around the Lord's Table today. The church, especially in the West, is a minority, a diminishing one at that. Even congregations which make extravagant claims about their size are in fact still only very small proportions of the population. As for us, well the matter is even more acute – forty or fifty people normally gathered in a structure built to house about ten times the number. Not an equation favoured by economic rationalists. In short, we do not look like the complete gathering of humanity. The World Cup, the Olympics, The Big Day Out, the Santa Parade, such events seem more like the complete gathering of humanity nowadays – sadly, even to many dispirited members of churches.

So it's reasonable to ask, is the Church no longer capable of gathering the human family together? Has the task of gathering humankind together now passed over to the Olympics, the World Cup, the internet, the United Nations?

Confronted in this way, and feeling perhaps less than adequate, it's crucial to ask the question: What *is* the Church? And, therefore, what is the nature of the human gathering envisaged? St Paul and the gospels, especially, offers us much guidance on this matter.

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<sup>254</sup> Preached on All Saints Sunday, 31 October 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel. Lections: Daniel 7:1-3,15-18, Psalm 149, Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-31

<sup>255</sup> 'The Didache', chapter 9, para 4, in Jasper R C D & Cuming G J, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early & Reformed*, London: Collins, 1975, p15. This translation from *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p141.

The Church is the new humanity, the new creation in which there is no division - neither slave nor free, male nor female,<sup>256</sup> neither black nor white, gay nor straight, nor any other infernal division we have created. The Church is that which manifests the new humanity, in which is reconciled those who were near with those who were far off.<sup>257</sup> The Church is detached from possessions, blessed for being poor, hungry and weeping.<sup>258</sup> The Church is the new humanity which scandalises our dependence on possessions, class, status, our modern addiction to the cult of personality.<sup>259</sup> The Church is that humanity which is liberated from competitiveness, rivalry, ambition.<sup>260</sup> The truly new humanity which is witnessed in the Church is love and blessing towards enemies.<sup>261</sup> In this new humanity, the Church, the last will be first<sup>262</sup> – as we heard last week, the exalted humbled, and the humbled exalted.<sup>263</sup>

The quintessential symbol for this Christ consciousness new humanity, the symbol which sums all this up, is the eucharistic gathering. The new humanity is Eucharist-shaped – lives offered, blessed, broken, and given, for the life of the world, as a living sacrifice. This Eucharist-shaped new humanity is conformed to the pattern of its Lord, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.<sup>264</sup> The ‘saints’ are that company of the new humanity which embodies this Eucharist-shaped life. For this reason the Church has been described as “the true universal human community in embryo”.<sup>265</sup>

Now it should be perfectly clear that this Eucharist-shaped new humanity, the Church, is not at all like the Olympics, the World Cup, nor even the United Nations – and certainly nothing like the ‘marketplace’. This is because this Eucharist-shaped life, the life of all the saints, interrogates all the assumptions upon which all such pseudo-humanity is based –

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<sup>256</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>257</sup> Ephesians 1:13-16

<sup>258</sup> Luke 6:20-21

<sup>259</sup> Luke 6:20-22

<sup>260</sup> Luke 6:22

<sup>261</sup> Luke 6:27-29

<sup>262</sup> Luke 13:30, Mark 10:31, Matthew 19:30

<sup>263</sup> Luke 18:14

<sup>264</sup> Philippians 2:6-7a

<sup>265</sup> Henri de Lubac, cited in Andrew Davison, Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions*, London: SCM, 2010, p63.

values such as strength and truth as measured by statistics; unity as generated by good feeling and sentiment and crowd euphoria; success and freedom as measured by the principles of 'free market' capitalism; human worth determined by 'productivity' and 'personality' cult.

Well it should be clear from even this very brief sketch of the gathering of all the saints, the Church, that there is bound to be a gulf between what is envisaged and what is realised. The Church is both the sign that the kingdom *has come*, and the stumbling, groping fleshy embodiment of the kingdom which *is coming*. And as our Lord repeatedly warned, the gathering of the saints, the Church, does not necessarily consist of those expected.<sup>266</sup> We need to be constantly recalled to our Lord's warning: "Woe to you when all speak well of you".<sup>267</sup> Because the saints, the Church, are those who have died – died to competition and rivalry; died to fear and insecurity and the desire to control; died to mass-mindedness and crowd euphoria and superficiality of every kind; died to the lure of 'personality' cult and populism and success as measured by free-market capitalist ideology.

This is what it means to be the Church, the saints. When we return from this gathering of the new humanity at the eucharistic table we are no longer at liberty to return to our homes and work as though we do not know what the new humanity is. It is no longer possible to pursue our own plans and devices, creating our own separate lives. After the World Cup, the Olympics and the Santa Parade we may return to business-as-usual – for such pseudo-humanity does not call upon participants to renounce their addiction to the ways of competition, rivalry, consumption, self-centredness, populism, and unchecked individualism. Indeed, such gatherings frequently promote such ideologies.

But those baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ, those becoming the new humanity at the eucharistic table, are no longer autonomous individuals in the pursuit of the capitalist-individualist-materialist dream. 'Choice' as defined by our culture is not the guiding principle of the Church, the saints. Choice is crucial to the baptismal vocation, of course, but it is different kind of choice – the freely offered choice to relinquish, to

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<sup>266</sup> e.g. Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>267</sup> Luke 6:26

take up the cross. The Church can only be the 'true universal humanity in embryo' in the degree to which it interrogates, challenges, and transcends the pseudo-humanity addicted to choice, competition, populism and individualism.

This is obviously a high calling. But of course! We should expect that the universal humanity for which we long is both a present reality in embryo, as well as the completion, the fulfilment which is yet to be fully realised. We need not be surprised, nor disturbed, by the fact that the new humanity is like yeast and mustard seed, and salt and lost sheep and lost coins<sup>268</sup> – truly a 'little flock'<sup>269</sup> in a mass-minded, populist-capitalist-individualist culture. But the saints, the Church, are given a spirit of wisdom and revelation... so that with the eyes of the heart enlightened we may know what is the hope to which we have been called.'<sup>270</sup> This hope itself is a gift, the "fullness of the One who fills all in all".<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Luke 13:18-21, 14:34-35, 15:1-10

<sup>269</sup> Luke 12:32

<sup>270</sup> Ephesians 2:17-18

<sup>271</sup> Ephesians 2:23

# A Uniting Symbol

“A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Judeans... came to Jesus by night...”<sup>272</sup>

On this New Year’s Eve, at the turning of the secular calendar year, as we mark time in the middle of the night, we are offered a model for our spiritual predicament – caught as we are in the throes of tremendous evolutionary upheaval.<sup>273</sup> Nicodemus is a model for the honest seeker after truth in the midst of such a circumstance. He is a Pharisee. This means that he stands squarely within the faith tradition. He is a believer, an adherent of the faith, which he takes very seriously.

But he comes to Jesus ‘by night’. While some have interpreted this in terms of Nicodemus’ ignorance, his state of spiritual darkness, in fact this is the necessary path. The Christian problem of over-emphasising the light is surely at the root of a great deal of evil – presuming to be sole possessors of the light, repressing our own darkness, we Christians have appalling blood on our hands. All the spiritual masters have taught, by contrast, that truth must be sought in the darkness – in the desert, in the Abyss, in the Cloud of Unknowing, in the dark night of the soul, in the darkness of earth,<sup>274</sup> in the total darkness of crucifixion.

Nicodemus acknowledges that in Jesus he has discerned a ‘teacher from God’.<sup>275</sup> He recognises that Jesus stands firmly in the tradition with which he is intimately familiar as Pharisee. This is a courageous stance, since others of his fraternity, as John later tells the reader, frightened by Jesus, refuse to accept what is obvious to Nicodemus.<sup>276</sup> The spiritual search requires such courage. Even risky devotion such as we find in the third and last mention of Nicodemus by the evangelist – in the end the loving provider of expensive myrrh and aloes for the burial of Jesus’ body.<sup>277</sup>

But the surprising contribution of the Nicodemus symbol to the Christian believer is his willingness to expose himself to that which he cannot grasp - what is coming to birth in human

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<sup>272</sup> John 3:1-2a

<sup>273</sup> Preached at the Watchnight Mass, 31 December 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel. Lections: Deuteronomy 30:11-20, John 3:1-12

<sup>274</sup> John 12:24

<sup>275</sup> John 3:2b

<sup>276</sup> John 7:50-52

<sup>277</sup> John 19:39

consciousness, though not yet comprehended. Not only does Nicodemus recognise Jesus' credentials as a faithful Jewish teacher – he opens himself to the light who is coming into the world, the light which penetrates the darkness. Paradoxically, too much light renders vision in the darkness impossible. Nicodemus' night-time visit to Jesus points to the necessary way for spiritual enlightenment and for salvation. In the darkness Jesus is able to reveal to Nicodemus the deeper light: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit."<sup>278</sup>

This is the great illumination in the darkness, to which Nicodemus willingly exposes himself. Here is the great uniting symbol which has eluded the Pharisaic mind thus far. The paradox here is that the search for spiritual truth fails in its trajectory when it over-emphasises spirit, rationality. This is the state of affairs which besets all pharisaic manifestations – not only the Jewish party known by that name, but just as much Christians over-emphasising the rational aspects of doctrine and scripture. Such an excess of spirit needs to be plunged down, into water – perhaps precisely what the Baptiser had intuited.

The descent into water is an immersion in the instinctual, in the great and unfathomable Abyss, in the non-rational, in a deep and dazzling darkness which is primal. Being born the first time is an awakening to potency of the flesh. Flesh is good, Genesis assures us,<sup>279</sup> nevertheless what is born of flesh remains merely that.<sup>280</sup> And flesh under the influence of an excess of spirit is still merely flesh, but now inflated, dangerous, potentially lethal – as religious history amply illustrates. Whereas 'being born again' is an immersion of the excess of spirit into the dark chaos of instinct and matter. Perhaps it was this intuition, even if unconsciously, which guided the church in shaping its graphic Easter Vigil rite – the newly-lit Paschal Candle plunged three times into the freshly-filled waters of the font; a rite undertaken in the darkness of night heralding the first day of the new creation.

Thus Nicodemus models for us the quest for the deeper significance of the initiation foreshadowed by the Baptiser. He is an image of the spiritual path – remaining firmly within the faith tradition, while submitting to the wisdom of watery darkness

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<sup>278</sup> John 3:5

<sup>279</sup> Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

<sup>280</sup> John 3:6

which seems to challenge and threaten his tradition. Willingness to submit to this deeper initiation is the path, Jesus assures him, to the unification of water and spirit which is entry into the Kingdom of God.

“How can these things be?”<sup>281</sup> Nicodemus’ question is an honest one – it is, of course, our question also. Nicodemus’ two later appearances in John’s gospel amply demonstrate his willingness to live with this honest question until such time as the great uniting symbol revealed itself. In this way, also, as one who lives through honest questions Nicodemus models for us a way through our own night which we experience in the passage of the years.

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<sup>281</sup> John 3:9

# Dismantled Projections

The Temple, beautiful though it may be, dedicated to God though it may be, will be thrown down – not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down.<sup>282</sup> And so it must be, according to Jesus.<sup>283</sup> What the Jerusalem Temple stood for had to give way to what was coming. From now on, Jesus seems to be saying, men and women will no longer need the Jerusalem Temple because they will have him instead. The Temple which is mother, the Ark of the Covenant contained within her holy of holies, is replaced by Jesus our Mother – in the rich term of Blessed Julian of Norwich.<sup>284</sup> Faith previously held in the womb of the Temple now held in the womb of the Christ. Jesus at the Table, gathering his church as a mother gathers her chicks.<sup>285</sup>

However, the difficulty in our religion is that when this idea becomes externalised - projected outwards, backwards, upwards – we actually have the same state of affairs which Jesus says has to be thrown down. When spiritual truth becomes solidified in an external object, whether Temple or historicised, externalised Jesus, it loses its vitality, its capacity to regenerate life. For the spiritual quest is by definition an interior undertaking. What is projected must be taken back, taken within, interiorised – we must eat a communion with our selves. Yes, this interior undertaking, when authentically lived, is bound to have ethical consequences. The point is, authentic, organic, non-manipulative, ethical action naturally flows out of the inner undertaking.

So when Jesus is projected, made into an externalised and historicised figure, the problem of the Jerusalem Temple is repeated all over again. Thus, his warning about not being led astray remains valid in the era of the Church: Beware that you are not led astray; for many will say ‘This is Jesus’, and ‘You must accept him into your life, now before it’s too late!’ Do not go after them.<sup>286</sup> Such a Jesus is a projection, an externalised figure, just as the Temple was an attempt to concretise and externalise the

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<sup>282</sup> Luke 21:6

<sup>283</sup> Preached on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, 14 November 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel.  
Lectons: Malachi 4:1-2a, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

<sup>284</sup> Edmund Colledge, James Walsh (trans.), *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, chapter 57 ff, p292ff

<sup>285</sup> Luke 13:34

<sup>286</sup> Luke 21:8

Divine presence. This projection typically relies upon a reduction of spiritual truth to a set of propositions to be believed in, a collection of externalised facts, dogmas, historical details and pious formulae to be adhered to unquestioningly.

The real problem with projection, from the spiritual point of view, is that it is in fact a way of avoiding the actual divine encounter itself. This was Jesus essential criticism of the keepers of religion in his day: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you do not go in [to the kingdom of heaven] yourselves, and when others are going in you stop them.”<sup>287</sup>

Whereas the true spiritual task is something that *each person must undergo*. This requires the dismantling of every way in which we have come to externalise the Divine presence – no Temple, no Jesus, not even Church, all must be thrown down! The task is not to ‘believe in’ someone called Jesus, which is a reality external to us – but to become the living body of Christ ourselves, to do it, to undergo it. In the memorable term of St Augustine, to become what we eat.<sup>288</sup>

Of course we resist such a call – naturally! We resist not merely because of some institutional sanction. Rather, because we do not want to undergo ourselves what the Christ undergoes. We are devoted to and dependent upon our projections – which spare us from entering into the inner temple where we might have to really face our selves. A man may leave his mother and father and join to his wife. But what is likely is that the projection formerly upon his mother now falls upon his wife – making for no end of confusion and trouble, as everyone can readily observe. We may even think in our heads, and in the public story we construct about ourselves, that we have left our mother – and we are all the more deluded and dangerous for that lack of consciousness. And what is true about men and their mothers applies in the case of many other powerful projections also. And so we are as highly resistant to the thought of the Temple being thrown down as those who first heard Jesus utter those words.

But in spite of our resistance we find ourselves in a world which is undergoing evolutionary development, whether we like it or not, and which has a habit of creating great and shocking

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<sup>287</sup> Matthew 23:13

<sup>288</sup> St Augustine, Sermon 272: “Your mystery is laid on the table of the Lord, your mystery you receive. To that which you are you answer “Amen”. Quoted in Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London: A & C Black, 1993, p247.

disturbances. You will hear of wars and insurrections, nation rising against nation, there will be great earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven, you will be handed over to those who have become the appointed keepers of externalised claims to truth, betrayed by parents and brothers, relatives and friends, possibly even put to death.<sup>289</sup> In the face of such disturbances our projections seem to offer us some security. So we are resistant, yes.

Yet our resistance to the inner work to which we are called is ultimately no match for the overwhelming divine grace which wills our completeness, our development, our salvation. One way or another, our projections must be entirely thrown down, not one stone left on another. Even an outer *seismos* may play its part!

Now if all this is true, then we may be feeling quite anxious about our capacity to withstand the necessary dismantling of our projections – of course! Nevertheless the gospel’s promise is that we will be given what we need in order to undergo it – we will be given words, symbols, meaning-making structures, wisdom.<sup>290</sup> That is, all that we need in order to undergo the dismantling of our projections will be given by the same Divine impulse that wills us to undergo it unto wholeness. And not a hair of our heads will be harmed!<sup>291</sup> All that is required is a faithfulness to what calls to us from within.<sup>292</sup> “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Luke 21:10-16

<sup>290</sup> Luke 21:15

<sup>291</sup> Luke 21:18

<sup>292</sup> Luke 21:14

<sup>293</sup> Luke 21:19

## Spiritual ‘Method’

All spiritual paths require the practice of a method of some sort. No matter what spiritual tradition we might consider, East or West, it is only possible to attain its riches by practicing its method.<sup>294</sup> Westerners in search of truth head East, but most give up, discovering that there is a rigorous and demanding method without which there can be no Enlightenment. The crowds who were at first titillated by the spectacle of Jesus the teacher and prophet arousing attention in first century Palestine gave up, turned back, discovering that Jesus demanded a rigorous and exacting method of total self-sacrifice.<sup>295</sup>

‘Method’ can include teachings, doctrines, liturgies, sacred texts. Israel could only be the chosen people by practicing a strict adherence to the method which came to be known as ‘the Law’. Adherence to this method transformed a group of disparate individuals and warring tribes into a holy nation - one people of a Covenant with God forged out of faithfulness to the Law. Likewise, the Christian ‘method’. For that is one of the principal purposes of the method, that a corrective is offered for our disparate and warring tribalism - the ego-centric individual becomes a member of a body, of the Body of Christ: as we hear every Eastertime, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”<sup>296</sup>

This sense of spiritual method is passed on from teacher to disciple, from apostles to the church, from generation to generation. The necessity for faithfulness and accuracy in this transmission of the spiritual method can be heard in Paul’s letter to Timothy: “For the time is coming when people will not put up with healthy teaching, but according to their lusts will accumulate teachers tickling the ear, and their ears will be turned away from the truth towards myths.”<sup>297</sup> Without faithful teaching the spiritual method becomes dangerous and misleading, captive to lusts and ticklish ears - fair game, in other words, to the ubiquitous success ideologies which beset every age.

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<sup>294</sup> Preached on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, 24 October 2010, at The Rose Historic Chapel.  
 Lessons: Sirach 35:12-17, 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18, Luke 18:9-14

<sup>295</sup> John 6:66

<sup>296</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>297</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-4 This translation follows the Greek more literally.

Because this fact is recognised in all spiritual traditions we must conclude that those who are identified as ‘Pharisees’ in the gospels are to be regarded in the first instance as faithful. The fact of being a Pharisee is not in itself a problem. Indeed, it is only in Christian hands that the gospels have come to be employed in the service of an anti-Semitic projection. Everything that the Pharisee declared in his speech in the temple was in fact required by the teaching of the tradition. The spiritual disciplines he names – observing the commandments, fasting, tithing - are all valid and indeed necessary. So what’s the problem?

The nub of the problem is named in the opening verse: “He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”<sup>298</sup> The problem is the universal problem for spirituality of every tradition, probably. The teaching, the method, is vital, but this very same method can become the seed-bed of self-righteousness. And a person is not incorporated into the people of God, is not saved, simply by adhering to the spiritual method of their tradition – no matter how fine and important that spiritual method may be.

For when I come to depend upon my adherence to the method in fact I come to depend upon myself – I come to put my trust in my capacity to practice the appointed method – as the loud, verbose and ostentatious prayer in the temple reveals. And loud, or verbose, or ostentatious prayer is a perennial spiritual problem. This problem of my trusting in my capacity to practice the appointed method can be observed regardless which aspect of received spiritual method I may be inclined to emphasise – whether it be my pre-occupation with the Bible, or the liturgy, or some doctrine, or even my works of social justice and care. In every case the grave danger is that I come to trust in my capacity to practice the method – nothing other than self-righteousness, as Martin Luther realised.

So the spiritual danger for the Pharisee in the story is his self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is a form of self-exaltation which is the seed-bed of contempt towards others.<sup>299</sup> And the reason that the tax collector went home ‘justified’, made righteous, is that he knows his lack of capacity to practice the appointed spiritual method. Indeed, it is his capacity to accept his

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<sup>298</sup> Luke 18:9

<sup>299</sup> Luke 18:14

failure with regard to the spiritual method which is the basis for a true encounter with the Divine graciousness who is the source of righteousness. He is exalted because of his true humility.

Once again, we are in the gospel's upside-down world. We are called to be faithful to the received spiritual teaching, to practice the spiritual method of the tradition. And yet we are also called to relinquish even this! We present ourselves at the Altar of Christ not as those who are righteous because we heroically practice the designated spiritual method – but as those who are being justified in spite of our lack of righteousness which we humbly and honestly offer as our only true gift.

'Behold the Lamb of God  
who takes away the sin of the world;  
blessed are we who are called to the banquet of the Lamb!  
Lord, I am not worthy to receive you,  
but only say the word and I shall be healed.'

# Relinquishing Treasures

“And having opened their treasures, they offered gifts to [the child], gold and frankincense and myrrh.”<sup>300</sup>

On this feast of the Epiphany attention is rightly drawn to great spiritual themes contained in the well-known Matthean story:<sup>301</sup> the joyful reward for the searching heart;<sup>302</sup> the mystery of the inclusion of outsiders and foreigners into the salvation previously regarded as Israel’s exclusive domain;<sup>303</sup> the arduousness and the faithfulness required for the spiritual journey;<sup>304</sup> the necessity to employ whatever gifts and intelligences God has given for the sake of the spiritual quest;<sup>305</sup> the very great dangers which threaten to extinguish the new thing which God accomplishes by Incarnation.<sup>306</sup> All these spiritual themes are present in today’s story, and we do well to meditate upon them in our own lives.

Yet there is a perhaps still greater theme – if you like, a summation of all these spiritual themes. The *Magoi* opened their treasures. These treasures represent their very selves – symbols of that which is of the greatest value to them. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>307</sup> It has been said that the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh speak of the vocation of the person the Bethlehem infant is to become – and indeed that is so. Treasures fit for a king indeed – a King and a true Son of Humanity. Gold symbolising virtue. Incense for prayer. Myrrh for suffering. So we rightly think of the gifts in relation to the character of the One to whom they are given. But what do these signs say about those who are the givers? Having opened these treasures – they depart from the company of Mary’s child now empty-handed. They have opened their treasures – and left their treasures behind!

This, then, sums up the spiritual undertaking to which this feast day’s story gestures – that which matters most to them

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<sup>300</sup> Matthew 2:11b

<sup>301</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Epiphany, 8 January 2012, at The Mary Potter Community Centre.  
Lectons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>302</sup> Matthew 3:10

<sup>303</sup> Matthew 2:1, Isaiah 60:5

<sup>304</sup> Matthew 2:2,7-9

<sup>305</sup> Matthew 2:2,9,12

<sup>306</sup> Matthew 2:3,16-18

<sup>307</sup> Luke 13:34, Matthew 6:21

is to be surrendered, relinquished. Or to turn to one of the key words by which the Christian tradition has employed to express this spiritual task – detachment. The Magi count as disciples of Christ, “fellow heirs, members of the same body”<sup>308</sup> – albeit in prototype form – because they willingly detach themselves from their treasure. Their treasure defines them, expresses that which they want and who they would be in the world. “Whoever wants to be this or that wants to be something,” says Meister Eckhart, “but detachment wants to be nothing at all. So it is that detachment makes no claim upon anything.”<sup>309</sup> In detaching themselves from their treasure the Magi make no claim upon the Bethlehem infant – or indeed upon anything at all!

By this act of will and consciousness they become detached from that which wants something – and they themselves become as nothing at all. For even to want to be virtuous is to want some thing, and thus be not truly free. Likewise, to want to pray, and even to want to suffer, is to want for something, and thus not to be truly free. Of course, where there are no such virtues we are less than human, little more than gnats and worms. Yet, detachment – even from virtue, from prayer, and from suffering – is the way of true relinquishment and complete openness to the Divine inflowing. They arrive with the grand and tantalising appellation *Magoi* – they leave, without their treasure, as nobodies. Thus, they leave for their own country by another road<sup>310</sup> – that road which is detachment, without claim upon anything, that way of knowing and being no-thing.

In this undertaking the Magi, these fellow heirs, prefigure St Paul’s great spiritual intuition: “I live, and yet I do not; Christ lives in me.”<sup>311</sup> Though we are given energies, passions, gifts and possessions which are to be put to good use – talents that must not be merely buried in the ground<sup>312</sup> – yet the spiritual enterprise requires that we become detached even from these good things and all the best of the virtues. To put on Christ is to be detached from all that I would have, or grasp, or reckon to be my treasure.

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<sup>308</sup> Ephesians 3:6

<sup>309</sup> Meister Eckhart, from ‘On Detachment’, in Edmund Colledge, Bernard McGinn (trans & eds), *op cit*, 1981, p287.

<sup>310</sup> Matthew 12:12b

<sup>311</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>312</sup> Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 19:11-27

Of course, we should expect a great paradox – for how else can ultimate truth be expressed!

Here is the two-fold movement of the Divine life – the breathing-in and the breathing-out of the Spirit; the Divine creating and the Divine self-emptying; by Incarnation, that *kenōsis* (Phil 2:7) which makes no claim on anything; that way of no-thing. The gold, the frankincense and the myrrh are all good in themselves. And for each of us there is gold and frankincense and myrrh which we are to employ to creative effect in our relationships with each other – this is the ethical, positive, breathing-in. Yet our grasping onto them, our refusal to be detached from them, is the path to spiritual death – the path away from God and freedom and life. We live, yes, yet it is not we who live; Christ lives in us. This is the detached, negating, breathing out by which all humankind may become heirs, true sons and daughters – which is the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God... now revealed [in Christ].”<sup>313</sup>

The eucharistic action is the Christian expression *par excellence* of this paradoxical and life-giving way. Each of us invited to offer at the Altar of Christ the gold of our love, the incense of our prayer, and the myrrh of our willingness to bear the cross. Yet even as we offer these our best gifts, we are to relinquish them – to leave them behind; to become completely detached from that which is our treasure; to return to our country via another way; becoming heirs of Christ, members of the same Body;<sup>314</sup> no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

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<sup>313</sup> Ephesians 3:9b,5b

<sup>314</sup> Ephesians 3:6a

## Discernment & Consciousness

“If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.  
For those who want to save their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.  
For what will it profit [a person]  
if they gain the whole world  
but forfeit their life?” (Mt 16:24-26)

We would be hard pressed to find a clearer exposition of the core of the Christian gospel.<sup>315</sup> Believe it or not, this is the Christian evangel – that the way to life is relinquishment. Of course we know this – it is nothing other than the Paschal Mystery, which we celebrate at every Eucharist. But our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is not an exercise in knowing about these things – as though it were information to impart to others. Rather, by baptism we are *to do this, to undergo this*. The Christian dispensation has the potential to change the world – but not as information to be guarded, doctrines to be argued; only as a work to undergo, a way, a praxis, a life.

Thus, at every turn in life we are confronted with the agonising, testing question: what is it that needs to be relinquished, that I must die to – in order to live?

But how will I know whether I am to relinquish this, or not? And how can I know what is necessary to hold onto, and what is necessary to die to? To relinquish everything and anything is actually an unconscious position – since all things, regardless, are treated as of equal value. Life itself, in fact, is not fully valued.

Also, in matters religious the distortions are all too plain – well-known scriptural metaphors such as ‘turning the other cheek’, ‘handing over two coats when someone asks for one’, can so readily be misused in ways that foster injustice and abuse; giving up everything would be a travesty, a failure to live fully, to employ those gifts we have been given for the good of all. No, we must suffer the discerning of the difference between that which is

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<sup>315</sup> Preached on the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, 28 August 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

to be held onto, and that which is to be relinquished. This work of discernment is exquisitely subtle and difficult.

The life of Jesus offers many insights into precisely this matter of discernment. When they wanted to make him king – he resisted them and relinquished his undoubted secret desire to be so. (Jn 6:15) When Peter, James and John wanted him to remain in glory with them on a mountaintop – he led them instead back down to the valley. (Mk 9:2-10) When in their rage they were going to throw him off the cliff – he held onto his life and evaded the mob’s murderous possession, living to teach and heal another day. (Lk 4:28-30) It was not yet his time. But later, at Jerusalem, he did allow himself to be given over into the mob’s murderous possession. (Mk 14:49) *Now, his time had come!*

No two circumstances and situations required identical responses. In his life we see repeatedly the work of discernment – to hold onto this, to relinquish that. If he holds onto that which must be relinquished he loses his divinity. If he relinquishes that to which he must hold he loses his humanity. It is essential to “hold fast to what is good”.<sup>316</sup> This work of discernment is exquisitely subtle and difficult.

Even now, at this precise moment in the life of this parish and city we must discern between what is to be held onto, and what must be relinquished. There are no easy answers, no quick formulae for deciding unequivocally between the one and the other. If we hold on that which are called to relinquish, we will lose the very life we want. We may well have gained the whole world, but lost our soul! Yet if we relinquish that which we are in fact called to hold onto then we are insufficiently conscious – which is simply another form of death in fact.

How can we know? One thing only seems certain. We must know fully, or as fully as is possible, what it is that we are relinquishing – what precisely is the death we must die. That is, we must become as fully conscious as is possible of ourselves and of the time. An unconscious death is not a life-giving death. So in every circumstance, at every turn we must struggle to as full a consciousness as is possible – of the astonishing mystery of our humanity and our divinity.

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<sup>316</sup> Romans 12:9

## Fiery Serpent

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up,  
that everyone believing in him may have eternal life.”  
For thus God loved the world,  
that God gave the Son, the unique one,  
that everyone believing in him may not perish  
but have eternal life.”<sup>317</sup>

What an astonishing thread John weaves between the Son of Humanity, the serpent, ‘belief’, the love of God, eternal life, and salvation!<sup>318</sup> Such a surprise to find that the serpent thus associated - so accustomed are we Christians in associating the symbol of the serpent with evil, temptation, deceit, and the devil. The Christian re-framing of Garden of Eden and the doctrine of ‘the Fall’ are so pervasive that serpents, snakes are for us wholly negative. Many people are viscerally repelled by snakes. Some people even imagine Australia to be a dangerous place because of snakes – which hardly makes sense in the light of the terrible destruction we have experienced in this city in the last year!

But today’s gospel emphatically associates the symbol of the serpent with healing, belief, Love, eternal life, salvation – even the ‘Son of Humanity’! It was because the people complained against Moses and God – “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”<sup>319</sup> - that the LORD sent poisonous snakes to kill them. But the same phenomenon which killed them, also became their means of life:

“Make a poisonous/fiery serpent,  
and set it on a pole;  
and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”<sup>320</sup>

To look at the serpent on the pole was somehow to look upon the *Mysterium Tremendum* of the all-encompassing divine reality – and thus, to live! The serpent both takes life, and gives it!

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<sup>317</sup> John 3:14-16

<sup>318</sup> Preached on the Feast of the Holy Cross, 11 September 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Numbers 21:4b-9, 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17

<sup>319</sup> Numbers 21:5b

<sup>320</sup> Numbers 21:8

Truly the *pharmakos* – that which is simultaneously poison and curative, giving us the English word pharmaceutical.<sup>321</sup>

Thus, in Christian symbolism, Christ is the trans-signification of the serpent on the pole. Indeed Christ is the one who dies on the tree<sup>322</sup> – the same tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is the tree of life in the garden of empty tomb, the garden of new creation.<sup>323</sup> Christ, like the serpent, both takes and gives life, in the sense that knowledge of good and evil strips us of a life of unconsciousness, of innocent pre-humanity. This same knowledge bestows life, the life of consciousness, of full humanity. On the tree of Calvary Christ takes away the life of sin. On this same tree, Christ gives the life of eternity. Christ is the great and universal the *pharmakos*, the fiery healing serpent - “I baptise you with water,” declared the Baptist, “but [the One who is coming] will baptise you with Spirit and fire”<sup>324</sup>; “I came,” declared to Jesus, “to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.”<sup>325</sup>

And so it is that those who look upon the fiery serpent on the pole – the Christ who is lifted up on the tree – will live, through ‘believing in’ this astonishing and un-believable sign. Indeed, the whole world is thus saved by Love and in Love!

‘Belief’ in this sign is not really a proposition to be organised in the mind, however – rather, a work to be undergone, a sacrifice to be lived. For just as Christ is the serpent-sign on the pole - raised up on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – so too are those who are baptised into Christ’s death and resurrection. The serpent-Christ / pole-tree sign exquisitely expresses the inner dynamic of every life – death to unconsciousness, living into consciousness, eternal life. Clearly, to undergo, to live, this sign is not a matter of mere rational ‘belief’. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks.”<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Greek: **φαρμακος** *pharmakos*

<sup>322</sup> Acts 5:30, 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>323</sup> Acts 13:29

<sup>324</sup> Luke 3:16

<sup>325</sup> Luke 12:49

<sup>326</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18,23

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

Our reverence at this particular cross before us on this Holy Cross Day would be merely historical, external, life-less – except as our willingness to bow before the eternal mystery of the fiery serpent raised on the tree that is embodied in our own dying and rising. Just as Christ must be lifted up on the tree – so too those who eat his body and drink his blood. Just as God gave the unique Son – so too God has given every one of God's unique daughters and sons as bread for the life of the world. And so we bow before that same numinous *Mysterium Tremendum* embodied in the flesh of the Living Body of Christ.

## Christ's Real Presence

“See, I am sending you out like lambs  
into the midst of wolves.  
Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...  
Do not move about from house to house...  
Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you,  
eat what is set before you;  
cure the sick who are there and say to them,  
‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’.”<sup>327</sup>

We celebrate this 152<sup>nd</sup> patronal feast knowing that we are living through exceptional and demanding times.<sup>328</sup> We hear so many stories of those who, dealing with insurance companies and the ‘free market’, feel like lambs before wolves. The security of our gracious and spacious stone church building stripped from us – tossed upon the turbulent seas of liquefaction-damaged land, insurance-driven recovery, a city reeling punch-drunk, and a diocese overwhelmed by the enormity of its losses – we may feel a bit like lambs before wolves.

But let us not forget that there is something precious here – I think we all know that. And though the gracious Cyril Mountfort building helped shape it, nevertheless its essential quality and character endures without that building – indeed cannot be taken away. Swimming somewhat against the prevailing current of performance-ism, consumerism, competition, success-ism, loudhailer-ism, and just general noise and distraction and superficiality - this parish embodies a contemplative liturgy, a gracious theology, and generous hospitality. This quality of spirituality, theology, and missiology is the fruit of the gospel of Jesus – and which emanates from the hearts of a people in this place and time. You! It matters not that there are some who neither understand nor value this spirituality. And it certainly cannot be lost simply because the building is lost.

Rather, it is you. It is your deepening spirit in the Spirit of Jesus. It is your gracious theology which is wide enough and deep

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<sup>327</sup> Luke 10:3,4a,7b, 8-9

<sup>328</sup> Preached on the 152<sup>nd</sup> Feast of St Luke, 18 October 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre.  
Lectons: Isaiah 35:3-6, 2 Timothy 4:5-17, Luke 10:1-9

enough to face up to the realities of the world – yet remain compassionate and merciful. It is your mission which is hospitable, to all-comers – regardless of distinction. You are the living stones of this gospel which embodies the expansive and all-encompassing Spirit of Christ.

Our building is gone, yes – but you are here, you endure, you are Christ’s Real Presence and Christ’s Altar. It is you – and all of us who are willing – who offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We, together, are both the sacrifice, and those who offer themselves as sacrifice. This light cannot be extinguished – because its source and ground is the living divine reality expressed in the tangible flesh of the living body of Christ, of which you are its members.

So, in this time of tremendous trial and endurance, of uncertainty and strain - now more than ever let us remain absolutely firm in our commitment to this Lucan spirituality of contemplative hospitality and healing and radical inclusion. Under the extraordinary conditions which prevail, we probably cannot expect anyone else to stand by this. Because it is in our hearts, it is we who must stand by and support this mission and ministry.

Let us with St Paul be able to say we have “fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.”<sup>329</sup> And let us continue to “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’”<sup>330</sup> And let us remember Jesus’ encouragement: “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals... Do not move about from house to house... Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’.”

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<sup>329</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7

<sup>330</sup> Isaiah 35:4

# FULLNESS

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God has made known the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him.<sup>331</sup>

*St Paul*

There are some people who change the world by their correctly motivated activity. And there are some people who change the world by achieving a certain quality of consciousness and holding to it... 'Such a person does nothing, yet everything gets done'. In our Western world, which is activistically oriented, all change is thought to come from direct actions even if those who act are themselves egocentric. But in more spiritual, mystical, or psychological traditions, effective changes are made via the unconscious, that is, the superior consciousness of one person invisibly affects and changes others even though no direct action is taken. This appears to be John [the evangelist's] way.<sup>332</sup>

*John A Sanford*

If only men could see that in each of them there is an element of the Pleroma, would not that, Lord, effect the reconciliation between God and our age?<sup>333</sup>

*Teilhard de Chardin*

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<sup>331</sup> Ephesians 1:9-10 'Fullness' is the English translation of the Greek **πληρωμα** *pleroma*.

<sup>332</sup> John A Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New York: Crossroad, 2001, p336.

<sup>333</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Priest', in *Writings in Time of War*, London: William Collins, 1968, p220.

The relationship between the Christian community and its buildings is rather more complex and subtle than the simplistic sound-bite pronouncements cheaply proffered in the aftermath of a series of events as destructive such as those in Christchurch. The loss of sacred buildings is no trivial matter.

Christian communities always construct buildings which both reflect their identity as well as mediate the divine mystery upon which that identity is staked. Foundation stones declare the building's constant witness: 'AMDG', 'To the Greater Glory of God'. There is no such thing as an empty church building. For some, the God of all creation and the good news in Jesus Christ are more likely to be encountered in a church building containing not a single other person. For some, the Christian community in its collective, organisationally-oriented mode can be the single greatest impediment to encountering God!

Even so, the *Mysterium Tremendum* which makes itself known in the mediated presence of the physical structure, may make itself even more compellingly known through the immense earth forces capable of shattering even the finest of our structures – and through all the unfolding consequences.

The structures matter, absolutely. Yet spiritual evolution, the development of human consciousness, the fullness and completion of humanity, is the goal. It is for this that all creation is groaning in travail. This fullness transcends all structures. The Christian tradition attempts, in so many modes and metaphors, to express what seems to be a universal human longing: for completion, wholeness, fullness.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> The πληρωμα *pleroma*

# Untroubled by Annihilation

“Teacher, do you not care that we are being annihilated?”<sup>335</sup>

Immediately you’ll notice that sounded a little different from what we have just heard read.<sup>336</sup> The NRSV translates “do you not care that we are perishing?” But as is frequently the case, English translations can miss the meaning of the Greek – in this case, the rather more emotive and potent word “annihilate”. This is no mere academic point. Here in this story – and concentrated to a single charged sentence – we have what is one of the central questions facing the community for whom Mark writes. Annihilation. The feeling of being annihilated – at times, the reality.

This feeling is not an alien or distant concept. Throughout the centuries there have been times and seasons during which the Christian community has felt that its very existence is being destroyed – indeed, times when it has been destroyed.

As we all know, right now we have all been instructed to meet with two of three other parishes to consider ways in which buildings can be shared. And it would not be an exaggeration to say that this directive is fuelling the fear that certain parishes are going to be annihilated. Our apparent security and strength as Anglican Christians in Christchurch would seem to have been shattered by the work of the earthquakes – with the collapse of the supposed solidity of our church buildings seems to have come the collapse of apparent solidity of our very existence in this city. We are now feeling very insecure – the protective layers of Victorian Gothic masonry stripped away from us. A great windstorm has indeed arisen – fierce gusts, as the Greek says – waves beating against the little vessel of the church. We are terrified that we are going to be swamped, imprisoned in the depths. And, typical of those who are afraid that they will be swamped, we are prone to panicking.

So Mark’s gospel is made for us! For Mark’s community knew precisely this fear of annihilation. Indeed, they even knew

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<sup>335</sup> Mark 4:38b

<sup>336</sup> Preached on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, 24 June 2012, at the Mary Potter Community Centre. Lectons: Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3,23-32, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

the horror of treachery within households and families – as personal survival instinct met Roman persecution, and family members were tempted to betray each other rather than face the lions themselves. Bad enough that Nero’s Rome was hostile – shocking beyond belief that ‘Christian family’ might betray them and hand them over! A great storm was most certainly hammering Mark’s little community – and the other faith communities known to them, the ‘other boats’.<sup>337</sup> Terrified, feeling overwhelmed, they cried out to their Lord: “Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are being annihilated?”

“But he was in the stern, sleeping, his head on the cushion”!<sup>338</sup> The Lord of Life – the One who will later ask them who they think he is<sup>339</sup> - is untroubled by this storm. The storm is inevitable – just as the passion and death will become inevitable. Thus, the disciple, like the Master, is bound to face such potentially annihilating conditions – this is the repeated message of the *evangelion* of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Mark’s gospel is written for us. We are bound to encounter storm – life’s battering waves. Unsurprisingly, terror and fear are the inevitable consequences of what we now call ‘post-traumatic stress’ – such as we are all experiencing in this broken city. The multiple wind-storms of building collapse, insurance industry abuse, geotechnical chaos, centralist bureaucracy, institutional restructuring, and ‘free market’ profiteering are bound to be felt as annihilating forces. And such experience is bound to spawn panic-motivated, knee-jerk decisions and strategies designed to ‘rescue’ the situation – in the desperate attempt to restore some sense of having control. All this is perfectly ‘understandable’, humanly speaking.

For the disciple of Jesus it’s how we respond to the annihilating experience that counts. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”<sup>340</sup> After speaking to the storm, this is all Jesus says to the terrified disciples. One suspects that such a blunt and damning remark cut them to the quick. In fact the Greek is more accurately translated as “Why are you so cowardly?” Ouch!

This episode focuses not so much on the ‘miraculous’ calming of the waters. In fact that is a cinematic preoccupation

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<sup>337</sup> Mark 4:36b

<sup>338</sup> Mark 4:38a

<sup>339</sup> Mark 8:27,29

<sup>340</sup> Mark 4:40

which leads to all sorts of literalist and infantile religious pictures – including regression to an interventionist deity – that have nothing to do with Christian discipleship. No, the real focus of this episode is the reaction of the disciples to the reality of the forces of the cosmos – planetary and human.

Mark's community is being encouraged to not live by fear – to resist knee-jerk panic in the face of any threat, or even the reality, of annihilation. They are even being chastised for being so afraid! They are to remember the meaning of the parable of the sower – which teaching immediately precedes this episode<sup>341</sup> - to be as those with ears to hear!<sup>342</sup> In spite of all appearances, the disciple's faithfulness will bear fruit a hundredfold – an unimaginably large harvest in a Semitic world! As St Paul writes, the disciple is to be one who has nothing, yet possesses everything – the consequence of which is an open wide heart.<sup>343</sup>

Mark's gospel is indeed written for us! In such a menacing time – when betrayal may even come from 'family members' – we are called to be disciples of Christ; to live not by fear and panic, but by faith; as those who have nothing but possess everything; with hearts open wide; as the apparently inconsequentially small seed that becomes the greatest tree truly free.<sup>344</sup> We make Eucharist week-by-week for precisely this reason – that we become what we eat.

Not surprisingly, we are filled with great awe, in the company of such a person as remains and creates calm in the midst of panic and fear. We could paraphrase the disciples' closing question in this way: 'Who then is this, who is neither troubled nor driven by the wind and waves of annihilating assault?'<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Mark 4:3-34

<sup>342</sup> Mark 4:23

<sup>343</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:10,13

<sup>344</sup> Mark 4:30-32

<sup>345</sup> Mark 4:41

# Meaningfulness

The excellent documentary film ‘When a City Falls’ premiered at the newly-reopened Reading Cinemas on Thursday last week.<sup>346</sup> The work of local film-makers and Kilmore Street neighbours Gerard Smyth and Alice Shannon, it’s a moving and courageous film – which seems to me to strike just the right balance between heart-breaking solemnity and heart-lifting humour and hope. You all feature in it, because it was Gerard who filmed the deconsecration and demolition of our gracious church building.

I mention the film because of its ‘last word’ – the final sequence in which one of the survivors of the CTV building offers a kind of interpretive summary of what we have all been through since September 2010. And because her voice is the ‘last word’, I suspect it may represent filmmaker’s position. That ‘last word’ is this: This event is simply random. We are, in essence, nothing other than victims of random planetary processes. As the cinema screen cut to black a nearby voice declared to his partner: “Wise woman.”

I suppose such a summary of all these happenings may well find wide acceptance. What has happened to us is merely random. All of us whose city has been crippled – who now live in varying degrees of unbearable limbo; and more particularly those who were killed – were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s all. Random planetary forces – that’s all there is to it! It’s a kind of conversation-stopping argument – since to suggest otherwise is to run very rapidly into a kind of ethical liquefaction, a veritable bog of blame and guilt. Perhaps this is why some Christian leaders have apparently taken up the randomness argument and blessed it.

But the inevitable consequence of the ideology of randomness is meaninglessness. When events are merely ‘random’, they are without meaning or purpose. There is no direction, no goal, no fulfilment, no freedom. People’s suffering and hardship and loss simply has no meaning. Indeed, the randomness argument if pushed to its logical conclusion is that

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<sup>346</sup> Preached on the Reign of Christ, 20 November 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre.  
Lectons: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

the creation itself – in its entirety – is without meaning or purpose. This relatively new philosophical ideology in the West is now a widespread malaise – little wonder we now have a ‘Generation Y’ who can’t commit to anything!

But the Christian vision – and especially the vision set before us on this Feast of the Reign of Christ – rejects the argument of randomness. The symbol of Christ reigning over all creation – which is of course a thoroughly monarchical symbol, arising in a patriarchal and monarchical first century Ancient Near East – is the very reverse of randomness. The creation, far from being merely random, is highly purposeful. There is direction, a goal, a fulfilment.

It is worth saying something about the monarchical symbol we have inherited, because of its problematic nature in our time. That this symbol of Christ the King which arose in the first century Ancient Near East now strikes an unacceptable political-social note in our time does not invalidate the meaning of the sign itself. But to be life-giving in our time does require that the symbol be attenuated in the light of evolution. Christ as the monarchical Saviour needs to be seen as Christ the sign of the consummation of human consciousness. Teilhard de Chardin’s suggestion was “Christ the Evolver” – not Christ the King and master, whose universal power over creation is primarily seen in an extrinsic and juridical manner, but a Christ who “physically and literally ... fills all things: at no instant in the world, is there any element of the world that has moved, that moves, that ever shall move, outside the directing flood he pours into them... it is [Christ] who gives its consistence to the entire edifice of matter and Spirit.”<sup>347</sup> Seen in this way, Christ is the human archetype, representing the highest development of human consciousness.

Today’s gospel parable of the last judgement explicitly places purposefulness, direction, and outcome at the centre of human existence. Those who gave the hungry food, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, healed the sick, and visited the prisoner may not have realised that they were serving Christ – but this indicates only their lack of awareness, of consciousness. Those who did not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and so on may not have realised they were failing to serve Christ – but

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<sup>347</sup> Teilhard de Chardin P, *Science and Christ*, London: William Collins, 1968, pp166, 167.

this too only indicates their lack of consciousness. In the moral-ethical domain, to behave in a manner which ignores the plight of the poor, the weak and marginalised does in fact have meaning after all. The Christian symbol of the gift of the Spirit of Christ in baptism is the means by which the vision of the completion and fulfilment of creation is being accomplished.<sup>348</sup> In the sign of baptism in Christ life has a direction, a goal, a fulfilment.

So the creation cannot in fact be random – according to the Christian vision – because of its purposefulness of creation and consummation. And in the Christian vision this purposefulness is attenuated to maximum dimensions – to nothing less than a cosmic scale! The symbols of final judgement, the eschaton, the New Jerusalem, and so on, these boldly claim that there is nothing in all creation which can be called ‘random’. The whole of creation, in that tremendous metaphor of St Paul, is groaning in its travail to its meaningful completion, fulfilment.<sup>349</sup>

We may not be able to explain phenomena. We may not at first be able to fathom the meaning in phenomena. In spite of the fact of there being so much suffering - whose purpose we cannot see, and which we can only rail against as unnecessary, meaningless, immoral even - this does not mean that meaning does not exist. Rather, it simply indicates the limitations in our perception, our consciousness, our wisdom and our understanding. Science also is beginning to express more honestly its limitations.

If meaning exists in the moral-ethical domain, then it must exist in every domain of creation. That is the symbol proclaimed by today’s feast. The argument of randomness ultimately carves up the creation into unrelated compartments – claiming that while there may be meaning in human actions, the creation itself is meaningless. That we are perplexed by planetary forces and their tumultuous and shattering consequences does not of itself prove that these phenomena are meaningless and random. Rather, according to the Christian vision there is purpose and meaning in all phenomena – since the creation is ultimately of one fabric; groaning to its fulfilment.

Our task, then, is to willingly, hopefully and joyfully undergo the heroic quest of the evolution of consciousness for

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<sup>348</sup> Ephesians 1:14,18,20,23

<sup>349</sup> Romans 8:19,22

meaning and purpose in human life, in the whole of life. Human dignity and evolution is best served when life's suffering and hardship finds purpose and meaning – meaning which is the engine room and power house for future action and decision-making – and when that individual meaning finds its place within the context of the whole of life. The Christian vision specifically rejects the dismal view of the human individual as a meaningless speck of dust in the cosmos – in favour of the eschatological vision of the unique human individual as a meaningful and vital member of a body of cosmic proportions. Fullness!

This cosmic scale of the Body of Christ is proclaimed and enacted every time we make Eucharist – every time we share in the Body of Christ – we are participating in the fullness of the One who fills all in all.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Ephesians 1:23

## As Without, So Within

Discrimination, separation, the supposed conquest of mind over matter – these are the great hallmarks of the modern mind, the legacy of centuries of ‘enlightenment’, the ‘age of reason’, the triumph of the scientific.<sup>351</sup> By radically separating mind from matter, rationality from feeling, ‘objectivity’ from ‘subjectivity’ the modern has conquered the vast reaches of space and unravelled the secrets of DNA – and also created Facebook and Twitter! From this radical separation we have come to enjoy all the tremendous benefits and advantages of the modern period – in economics, industrial development, engineering, technology. Oh, how we marvel and wonder at every novelty in the gadget marketplace!

However, the disillusionment experienced by the modern human seems to be moving towards a great crisis. Our rationalistic, technological and materialistic triumph is simultaneously our failure and our Achilles heel. We have everything we want, we can conquer the natural world with our machines and our drugs, we can rationalise our way out of a paper bag – but everywhere we are facing a profound crisis of being. The signs of this crisis are to be seen in every aspect of modern life – in ecology, psychology, economics, sociology, politics, to name but the obvious.

Surveying the destruction of so much that he and his colleagues have built in this city over the last 30 years, a structural engineer recently declared to me that he now wonders what was the point of all that work? What have they actually accomplished? Everything has apparently been gained exteriorly, without. But the price of this apparent success is the price is the interior, the within.

What strikes me as the truly hopeful development in Western civilisation in our time is the dawning – albeit painfully slow – realisation that there can be no ultimate ‘success’ of a civilisation that despises the interior, the within; that material and rational gains will be as ashes in the mouth unless they serve a non-material, non-rational inner meaning. This development can

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<sup>351</sup> Preached on the Feast of Mary, Mother of Our Lord, 14 August 2011, at The Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Revelation 11:19-12:6,10, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 1:46-55

be observed breaking out in almost every aspect of life – even though the triumphalism and profound separation of exterior and interior, of matter and spirit, still holds the numbers.

It is to be expected that the task of re-integration of matter and Spirit will be a mammoth one - so many centuries in the development and so thoroughgoing has been the split. Nevertheless, across all the old traditional divides we have begun to grasp the fundamental principle: nothing can be achieved without, if the foundations are not firmly laid within.

Mary the Mother of Our Lord sings a song pre-dating her by a millennium, the song of Samuel's mother Hannah.<sup>352</sup> The song is prophetic, eschatological. That is, it speaks of that 'end', that 'goal', towards which creation is being drawn<sup>353</sup> – overcoming the severe limitations of what has prevailed in the past and continues to thwart the present. It's the song of the Hebrew *anawim*, the poor and marginalised – it is always they who pay the price of triumphalism, wealth, power, conquest, empire, profitability, and so on. It's the song of the great reversal: the humble exalted, the proud scattered; the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up; the hungry filled with good things, the rich sent away empty. In Mary's song we hear the great reversal song which Jesus will sing repeatedly – indeed he will in fact em-body, undergo as the one who though in the form of God humbled himself in human flesh.

Yet what is declared can only be accomplished without, exteriorly, to the degree that that it is accomplished within, interiorly. As without, so within. That which we desire to accomplish 'in the world' – ushering in justice, constructing a world of order, beauty, peace, prosperity, enlightenment, and so on – must be accomplished within. We need only reflect for a moment upon the abject failure of all the world's 'isms', including capitalism, to usher in the millennium of true equality, justice and peace. Similarly, the equality between the sexes, the equal partnership between men and women – and for that matter, between slave and free, between black and white, 'straight' and 'gay', science and religion – must be accomplished as an inner reality for its outer efforts to be truly accomplished.

We now have more than enough evidence to demonstrate that a woman with a man's powers in the world can be just as

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<sup>352</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-10

<sup>353</sup> From the Greek word *εσχηματα* *escheat*, meaning 'end', 'goal', 'purpose'.

much a tyrant as the man she sought to overthrow. Likewise, there is now an over-abundance of evidence to demonstrate that a 'science' which attempts to overthrow of the 'unreasonableness' of religion can be just as much an un-reasonable tyrant as the religion which science sought to overthrow. And, sadly, we can observe in Africa especially that a black man with the white man's powers can also be an oppressor and tyrant.

In these and so many other instances we see disappointing failure in the hoped-for emancipation of this era of 'freedom'. The common factor in this failure is the attempt to accomplish the revolution solely in the exterior domain. A woman who remains possessed interiorly by her unacknowledged unconscious masculine principle cannot accomplish that for which she hopes – unless she first comes to grip with her oppressive inner masculine. Such a woman is likely to act out in her behaviour the very same patriarchal-masculine power principle which she sees in men, and which she seeks to defeat. As without, so within. A scientist-materialist who remains possessed interiorly by an unacknowledged unconscious divinity cannot win the reasonableness and rationality for which he labours – unless he first comes to grip with his unacknowledged inner divine authority. Such a 'scientist' is likely to act out in his behaviour the very same divine authority which he sees negatively in the formal religions, and which he imagines he is defeating. As within, so without.

Thus, the path to true freedom and wholeness, to fullness, is the path of the reunification of matter and Spirit, of feminine and masculine, of science and religion, and so on. The same Mary who sings the song of liberation must contain within herself the dawning revolutionary truth. She must undergo within, in her soul, the great reversal of values that will eventually be manifest without. It is the proud within her that must be scattered; the powerful within that must be dethroned, in order that the lowly be lifted up; the inner rich who must be sent away empty, that the inner hungry might be fed. Only by bearing this within is Mary able to manifest it without. Perhaps this tells us something about the sword that pierces Mary's soul.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Luke 2:35

## INSIDE the FAULTLINE

Indeed Mary is first of all disciples – for she is the one who re-unites within herself matter and Spirit. Her liberation song can be trusted because she is the one who endured the necessary undergoing. She is first of all disciples because she accomplishes that which must be undergone by all persons – female, and male!

# Transformational Vessel

At the analytical labs where I worked, Bob prepared the thousands of gold samples every week for assay in the furnaces.<sup>355</sup> Whereas the rest of us, with our fancy high-tech and sensitive equipment, were housed in an insulated air-conditioned building, Bob's furnaces were in an unlined steel shed out the back. On a 39c Perth day it could easily be in the mid 50s inside Bob's shed - a shed which housed three large gas-fired furnaces blazing away at between 1200 and 1500 degrees Celsius. I've never seen another person go through such quantities of electrolyte replacement as Bob!

It's an awesome sight, observing rocks melt, passing through a range of colour and texture transformations – until a glowing almost translucent liquid shimmers and dances in the crucible in the heart of the blazing furnace. The intensity of fire is vital – vital to the evolution of the cosmos and the human heart alike, it turns out. The consequence of this fiery encounter is the separation of different elements in the rock – enabling the precise quantity of gold to be assessed, by removing what is less precious. It's not surprising that the invention of the smelting of metals was an economic social, political and a religious turning point in human history. And hardly surprising that this development would be associated with mystery and magic and the exchange of power, for better and worse.

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon envisages human life as gold tested in a furnace.<sup>356</sup> This motif was picked up centuries later in the first letter of Peter.<sup>357</sup> But unlike what later developed in Greek-speaking Christianity, the Hebrew-speaking Biblical writers remained convinced of the original goodness of the human person; made in the image and likeness of God. Not originally sinners, as we became under the influence of a Greek philosophy that would have been alien to Jesus the Jew – but originally gold, God's good gold. Like a furnace, life reveals the pure gold which is our native state.

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<sup>355</sup> Preached on All Saints Sunday, 4 November 2012, at the Mary Potter Community Centre. Lections: Wisdom 3:1-9, Psalm 24, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

<sup>356</sup> Wisdom 3:6

<sup>357</sup> 1 Peter 1:7

Moreover, in a furnace, in the fiery crucible, there is both separation and unification of matter – the combining of two, or more, mutually incompatible elements forming an unexpected new substance; as well as the separating of a compound into elemental states. Life itself, as the alchemists also intuited, is a crucible – a vessel designed to contain us in life’s furnace; until that which is most precious is revealed; and that which needs to be united is accomplished. Both separation and unification, discrimination and synthesis.

For the early church the idealised ‘method’ for separation of the precious gold was martyrdom. The martyrs enacted the synthesis of the new creation, resurrection life. The gold being the blood of the martyrs. The unexpected but sought-after compound, the new humanity – the new heaven and new earth.<sup>358</sup> Martyrdom was considered to be the highest expression of being fully human after the pattern of the Christ. And that’s how today’s feast day began – as a celebration of all martyrs. For in such places as Rome and Antioch there were so many martyrs that an annual commemoration of them as a collective category was necessary. It’s sobering at this particular time, as a terrifying civil war is raging in Syria, to realise that in that very land, in the fifth century, there developed a feast for the so many martyrs, which was observed on Easter Friday.

However, in 835CE group commemorations that had typically been held until then around Easter were transferred to 1 November, and renamed, given the title of today’s feast. While particular martyrs and saints have always been specifically celebrated – All Saints catches the conviction that gold is the universal base metal of all those made in the image and likeness of God. In a sense the renaming of today’s feast was a kind of democratisation. Though there are still martyrs to the Christian faith, nevertheless All Saints acknowledges a more universal aspect of human witness to Christ. And for this reason it is a joyous, universal, catholic feast. Whatever we might make of the strange and confronting language of the Revelation to St John the Divine – and in spite of its somewhat neurotic persecution-complex temper, and associated ingrained dualism – nevertheless the One seated on the throne, the Alpha and the Omega, declares:

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<sup>358</sup> Revelation 21:1

“See, I am making all things new.”<sup>359</sup> Ultimately, in life’s furnace that which is precious and lasting will be revealed in all persons, in all of creation.

Yes, of course all this is metaphor. As metaphor it does not really explain anything intellectually, rationally – and there’d be no point turning to the Bible for such a scientific rational explanation anyway. But this potent metaphor does accurately express the reality of human feeling and experience. It does not ‘explain’ life, in a scientific sense – but it does sponsor life’s meaning.

Likewise, Jesus does not really ‘explain’ anything about the death and the resurrection of Lazarus – a death and resurrection foreshadowing his own. Martha’s and Mary’s gut-wrenching questions simply go unanswered: “Lord, if you had been here,” they separately declare, “my brother would not have died.”<sup>360</sup> Instead, Jesus offers them meaning: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die... Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”<sup>361</sup> The attempt to explain resurrection life and the precious gold Jesus offers is bound to lead to a rationalistic dead end. On the other hand, the separation and unification taking place in life’s fiery crucible finds its meaning and purpose as a direct consequence of ‘sharing the one bread’ - of participating in Jesus the resurrection and the life.

It’s no surprise, then, that I am unlikely to be able to explain what is taking place in my life, that we cannot explain what transformation is taking place in the crucible of our little, broken city – let alone the enormity and complexity of the crucible which is our world. I can know the experience, however, of life’s crucible – the fire, the intense heat, the dissolution, the translucent shimmering, the separation, the transformation, the unification. According to our tradition, in this fiery testing we are exposed to the *Mysterium Tremendum*, to the Ground of all Being, the God of heaven and earth. Within the crucible of our city many people know the experience of tremendous suffering – truly of

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<sup>359</sup> Revelation 21:5

<sup>360</sup> John 11:21,32

<sup>361</sup> John 11:25-26,40

being tested by fire – and, God willing, the revelation of pure gold. There are many saints here – only some attending churches!

Jesus apparently makes no attempt to prevent Lazarus from dying<sup>362</sup> – refusing to interfere with the fiery transformation in the crucible of this particular life, and those who love him. Moral objection to this seems to me to be reasonable – indeed, we would be less than human if we did not. However, Jesus does promise that it is possible to see the glory of God<sup>363</sup> shimmering miraculously within life's fiery furnace – that life's gold *will* be revealed; that transformation into the new humanity *will* be accomplished.<sup>364</sup>

There seems to be no satisfactory, morally-acceptable explanation for the world's suffering – we may feel that Job's objection has not yet been answered. Yet the Christian vision sponsors its meaning and life's fullness. Because of the intensity in our 'little shed', we probably need extra electrolytes on hand, and for some time to come!

Likewise, this one essential work of the Christian community, the Eucharist, makes no attempt to prevent us from the necessary dying - indeed quite the opposite! Rather, in this Eucharistic crucible the great company of all the saints willingly and joyfully offer themselves for transformation – that precious gold might be revealed; that we might be transformed into a new humanity. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>362</sup> John 11:5-6

<sup>363</sup> John 11:40

<sup>364</sup> John 19:30

# I Must Be On My Way

There is a way that must be travelled.<sup>365</sup> ‘Must be’? So it seems. Who says it ‘must’? Life says. “Today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.”<sup>366</sup> Even when the best explanations have been fully examined and accounted for – when all the facts have been considered - there remains an inexplicable vector in life’s direction. Yes, I can choose not to travel it – a cosmos without freedom to choose is no cosmos at all. Yet if I do not choose to travel the way I ‘must’ – then that simply only opens up another way I will have to travel.

The way that must be travelled is full of potential – and also fraught with its dark opposite, the reality of suffering and extinguishment. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”<sup>367</sup> The beating heart of our tradition – the Paschal Mystery towards which Lent is oriented, and which we are encouraged to not forget at every Eucharist (‘Do this, to remember me’) – is the crucifix of opposites, the altar of sacrificial transformation.

Naturally, such a way seems like preposterous madness. Even our ‘enemies’ may warn us against such a way of folly: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”<sup>368</sup> There are so many compelling reasons for avoiding this ‘way that must be travelled’. Certainly, the way to avoid being ‘last’ according to structures of the political order of this world<sup>369</sup> – ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ - is to avoid at all cost the way that leads to ‘Jerusalem’. Such is the world’s ‘common sense’.

Supposing we do find it within ourselves to choose thus - how can we know if it is truly the way that we must go? The answer to this question is as excruciatingly painful as it is straightforward – it won’t be about me, about us. “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow.”<sup>370</sup> No matter how uplifting, nor how excruciating – regardless whether we appear to be making ‘progress’ or not – if it is truly the way to

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<sup>365</sup> Preached on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, 24 February 2013, at *The Mary Potter Community Centre, Christchurch*, Lections: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

<sup>366</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>367</sup> Luke 14:34

<sup>368</sup> Luke 14:31

<sup>369</sup> Luke 14:30

<sup>370</sup> Luke 14:32

which we are called, then the poor are receiving good news, the captives are released, the blind are gaining sight, the oppressed are going free.<sup>371</sup>

For me, at least, one final aspect of all this is the most difficult – perhaps the source of my greatest inner turmoil. I am to regard even my enemy – ‘Jerusalem’, the city that kills the prophets – as loved and cherished! “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and see you were not willing!”<sup>372</sup> He willingly set his face towards Jerusalem, the evangelist tells us,<sup>373</sup> in spite of knowing its betrayal and murder. I confess that I find it exceedingly difficult to regard the religious-political-economic matrix of betraying-Jerusalem in the way that Jesus the broody hen regards her chicks. Moreover, I struggle even to see the point! What good can possibly come out of Jerusalem’s murderous betrayal?

And so here is the greatest leap of faith – truly hope for that which is not seen<sup>374</sup> - that even Jerusalem’s demonic betrayal can be the womb of new life! Whereas my instinct is to fight against the moral, political and economic failures of prophet-stoning Jerusalem – the transfiguring revelation of ‘glory’ is inescapably a function of Jesus’ impending Jerusalem ‘departure’, literally ‘exodus’.<sup>375</sup> Exodus, liberation from all forms of enslavement, is accomplished via this way. The unexpected work accomplished in the dark matrix of prophet-stoning Jerusalem is liberation. Little wonder our forbears called this an *evangellion*!

Moreover, in spite of all appearances to the contrary - in spite of the perplexity, the injustice, the suffering of ‘the way that must be travelled’ - exodus will be recognised. The time will come, the moment of liberating enlightenment when we can say: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”<sup>376</sup>

And every Eucharist is a preparation – a training in, a celebration of, an anticipation of and longing for such illuminating, liberating, and loving recognition: ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

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<sup>371</sup> Luke 4:18

<sup>372</sup> Luke 14:34

<sup>373</sup> Luke 9:51

<sup>374</sup> Hebrews 11:1

<sup>375</sup> Luke 9:31 “[Moses and Elijah] appeared in glory and were speaking about his *departure* which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The Greek word is **ἐξοδον** *exodon*.

<sup>376</sup> Luke 14:35

