

Be Still and Know

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Introduction

‘Be still and know that I am God.’ (Psalm 46:10) Through these words of the Psalmist, God invites us to seek quietness and to become still. He then promises that this stillness will not be an empty experience. It will be a place of encounter. In the stillness he will meet us. Prayer is the name for this encounter. In the meeting-place of prayer he says he will reveal himself to us. He promises we will come to know him. When God says we will know him in the stillness of prayer, he speaks of heart knowledge rather than head knowledge. God does not call us into prayer to offer us information about himself. Rather he wants to reveal his inner self to us as Father, Mother, friend, lover. He invites us into union with himself.

God did not create us and reveal himself to us so that we might study him. He wants us to enjoy him, to taste him and be nourished as persons by his love. The Eastern holy man asks his disciples:

“Of what use to you is it to have counted all the mangoes on your tree if you have never tasted one?” Fruit is for tasting and eating, not for counting and analysing. God wants us to experience the joy, warmth and nourishment of his personal love. St. Ignatius, in his book ‘The Spiritual Exercises’, says ‘It is not abundance of knowledge that satisfies the soul but the feeling and savouring of things internally.’ Again the Psalmist says: ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good.’ (Psalm 34:8)

The Psalmist makes a very simple demand, ‘Be still.’ This surely must be the briefest treatise on prayer! This instruction from God himself reminds us of a profound truth so easily forgotten by us, that prayer is God’s work rather than ours. God seeks us more than we seek him. He desires our company more than we want to give ourselves to him. We don’t have to work out prayer techniques, read spiritual manuals, consult gurus, practice yoga positions in order to meet God and experience his loving self-communication. It can be good to read of the experience of fellow searchers of God, but we must be careful that this study does not become a substitute for prayer. Also we must be on our guard against a subtle kind of discouragement which could come from imagining that these people have reached heights of prayer to which we are not called. We are all called into this meeting place we call prayer, into this intimate union with God.

Prayer is a love encounter between God and each person. It is not a skill, a technique, a performance. We can encourage each other but must not try to copy each other. The love encounter between each person and God is unique. Therefore I must not compare my prayer experience with your prayer experience. It is the experience of a deep personal relationship. Methods can be compared but not the heart of prayer which is personal encounter. God seeks each of us with a personal love. This is the basis of all our confidence in prayer. The meeting place of prayer is our heart. He awaits us there. He invites us to be still, to become aware of his presence and to respond. ‘Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.’ (John: 15:4)

God asks me to ‘be still.’ In prayer time I don’t have to make anything happen. Indeed I am asked to stop trying to make something happen, so I can enter into awareness of the miracle of what is happening every second of every day. What is happening? God is within me. Doing what? He is sharing his breath of life with me because he considers me very special. Right now he offers me his peace, his healing power, his love. He asks me to slow down, to become still, to enter into the awareness of this reality to let myself be touched and nourished by this loving presence.

The peace, love and healing power which God offers right now in prayer is more real than all the hassle, anxiety, fear, doubt that torment me just now. But the excitement, pace, glamour and noise of our modern world bombards our person and obscures this deeper reality which gives true meaning and value to our lives. If we are to get in touch with this reality and experience this active healing love, we must seek this God. This will not involve any journey or pilgrimage. Just become still and become aware of God who has made his home in our hearts. Is this experience meant for everybody? Yes, for everybody. Suppose I find it hard to believe in God and am angry with him or am in a state of sin and have pushed him out of my life? Then he respects your freedom. He will not force himself into your house. He will go out and sit on the doorstep of your heart ready to come in if you only glance out of the window towards him. If you pull the curtain to peep out and see if he is still there, he will knock again at the door.

The two persons involved in the love encounter we call prayer are God and myself. Meister Eckhardt writing about our search for God offers an insight which I believe could lead us into a more authentic and nourishing experience of prayer. Speaking of our quest for God he writes, ‘The me beyond me seeks the God beyond God.’ Eckhardt is saying there is more to you and me than meets the eye and certainly more to God than our picture or image of him. He draws our attention to the wonder and

mystery of our deep, true self and the wonder and mystery of the true God. I'm sure that we agree that a personal encounter can only be real and meaningful if the two persons involved come as they are and allow their real true deep selves to meet and interact. When this happens you have a meaningful encounter and you can have love. In this book I would like first to reflect on the self-revelation of God, in Jesus, in some gospel incidents and stories. I hope that a deeper understanding of God's love revealed in Jesus may increase our desire to become still in prayer and allow God to lead us into deeper heart knowledge of Himself.

Chapter One

God Beyond God

The word 'God' must be one of the most commonly used words in any language. We whisper it, say it, shout it out loud. We use it to bless and curse. We exclaim it in times of frustration and fear. We sing it reverently in hymn and prayer. What reality lies behind the word? What image, picture, idea does the word suggest to you? It might take us a while to sort out our thoughts and describe what we imagine God to be like. But we have some picture in our mind. This image will be influenced by our upbringing, education, culture and by our experience of life, good or bad. When the mystic Eckhardt speaks of the 'God beyond God', he is suggesting we should not be satisfied with our images and pictures of God. In saying this he is not blaming us but just reminding us of the greatness of God and inviting us into freedom in our search for God. He is asking us to let go all our small, narrow images of God and let God be God. He wants to lead us into celebration of the true God of wonder, beauty, love and joy. I believe the very word 'God' can become a kind of cage in which we imprison God. We say the word and immediately feel we know what God is like. It can be a beautiful prayer exercise to go to that cage, open it and set God free to be the true God of love, healing, nourishment and new life. And when we open the door of the cage, we find that God does not fly away but comes to my small heart where he longs to make his home.

When we begin to think of God as he really is we run into what seems an insurmountable problem. Saints, theologians and Scripture all warn us that this true God is not only unknown and beyond any description but is even unknowable. The mystics say we can only know what God is not. We cannot know what he is. St. Augustine puts it this way: 'If you say you know God, then what you say you know is not God.'

Here is a parable from the Annals of the Desert Fathers:

'One day, a young man recently initiated into the faith went to visit a holy hermit and asked him, 'Father, what is God?' The holy man prayed for a moment and told him the following parable: two friends were seated at table drinking milk. One of them was blind from birth. The other one who could see, commented on the whiteness of the milk. Then the blind one asked him, 'What is white?' His friend thought for a while and answered, 'White is the colour of a swan.' But the blind one asked again, 'And what is a swan?' His friend replied that a swan was a very big and beautiful bird with a large and curved neck. Again the blind man asked, 'And what is a curve?' Just then his friend took his hand and made it touch the border of the table, which was round. At the same time he said, 'A curve is the shape of the table which you

are touching.' The face of the blind man lit up and he told his friend, 'Thank you for explaining it to me. Now I know what is white.'

You and I are, as far from understanding the true God as that blind man was from knowing the meaning and reality of 'white'. Is this not discouraging for those seeking God in prayer? On the contrary! The day we believe this truth and live it out we can be liberated from all small and narrow images of God and can look forward to prayer with great wonder and joy. The awareness that God is infinite mystery beyond human understanding does not make prayer forbidding or impossible but leads us into authentic relationship with this God. Accepting that we cannot know, describe or measure God with our human intelligence is the greatest act of worship and adoration and can be the most beautiful and liberating thing we can say about God. If we say we cannot fit the waters of the mighty Kariba, say, into a teacup, we are simply acknowledging a fact and rejoicing in the greatness of the lake. When we acknowledge that the wonder, beauty and love of God surpass our teacup understanding and at the same time believe that this same God wants to reveal himself to our hearts, then we can find those hearts beating with new joy.

'Be still and know that I am God.' These words invite us into prayer with a new and exciting sense of expectation and wonder. This God beyond God says to men, 'When you seek me you shall find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me. It is Yahweh who speaks.' (Jer. 29:13-14). The author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' agrees: 'By love he can be caught, but by thinking, never.'* God is mystery. Mystery is not a mind-puzzle, but an idea too difficult for our human intelligence. Mystery is revelation to the heart of a love and beauty that can never be exhausted. In prayer we must cease to make God an object of the mind to be understood and see him as the mystery of Love to be explored, tasted, enjoyed, celebrated. We don't try to understand the rose, the sunset, the sea. We enjoy them. To let God be such a God we will have to grow out of our many early childish ideas of him.

Recently when I was on home leave from Zambia, I paid a visit with my sister to the midlands town in Ireland where we have lived all our early years. We took a memory walk through our home town and we both experienced similar emotional reactions. The chief of these was that the town seemed to have grown small. Distances which had seem great to us as children now seemed very short. The walk from the family home to school or church which to us long ago seemed a great journey was now a matter of five or six minutes. Places where we played hide-and-seek, rounder's and other games which to childish eyes and imagination had seemed so vast, now appeared to have shrunk so much that we wondered where one could have hidden or had enough space to play. When we are very young, the physical world about us seems vast. As we grow older, the physical reality seems to contract.

I then reflected on another reality around and within us, not physical but spiritual, the unseen world of God and of our inner self and our relationship with God. Here I detected some kind of opposite development. As I grew older this spiritual world which in my youth was small and narrow was now changing, growing larger, expanding into a wonderful new world full of mystery. My small idea of God and of myself was giving way to the greater reality of the true God and the true self. This has taken some time! But it was worth waiting for? This particular change was brought home to me on that memory walk in my home town. As we entered the parish churchyard my sister reminded me that one Sunday morning as she and I entered this very yard, she confided to me that she had swallowed some drops of water when washing her teeth and she asked me if she could receive Holy Communion. I asked her what I had said, and to my horror was told that I was very definite that she had broken the communion fast and could not receive. So much for the theologian of fifteen years and his small God!

It took me years to discover that my home town was not as great and vast as I had thought it was when I was a child. It has taken even more years for me to realise that my God is not as small and narrow as I had imagined him to be in those days. Some may want to put the blame on a legalistic Church which in earlier days put the emphasis on a God of law and punishment. But the Church, like its members, is also weak and often fails. However, God is always with his family, the Church, offering his Holy Spirit to heal and renew. But many of us fear change and long for security. Observance of law seems to offer security. But Jesus put life and love at the centre not observance of laws. The Holy Spirit invites us into the adventure of letting God be God. At Vatican II many Church leaders of deep spirituality and great vision criticised weaknesses in the Church. But they did so with love and a new chapter opened in the pilgrimage of God's people. Let us today thank God for Vatican II. Let us not waste time in regret over the past but look into our own hearts and see how we are responding right now in seeking the true God, the God who first seeks us in love.

Growth is always going on. We all need to be continually shocked out of our presumption that we can understand God. Many still carry within them an image of God formed in childhood. As we leave childhood behind, we grow into a more mature understanding of love, of ourselves, of relationships and the world about us. And we notice our world seems to grow smaller as our horizons of knowledge and experience are pushed back. But for many years there is little corresponding growth in our ideas about God and our relationship with him. Many still worship from a distance the small God of childhood days. Our idea of prayer always flows out of our ideas of God. Perhaps many saw prayer only as 'asking' things from God, and then judged the reality of the prayer when they got what they asked for. Only then did we say God 'heard' my prayer. I'm reminded of the prayer of a young lad which appeared in a book of children's letters to God. It ran as follows:

Dear God,

I wrote you before. Do you remember? I did all I promised but you never sent the horse yet. What about it?

Yours Lewis.

Happily there are many today who are discovering and experiencing the true God of love who hears and notices our every heartbeat, our every wish, dream, fear, hope because he is closer to us than we are to ourselves and loves us with an everlasting love. And many are finding that the closer they come in prayer to finding this God beyond God, the closer they come to finding their true self. The truer our picture of God, the truer will be our understanding of our own self. When you think about it, that should not surprise us, since we are created in his image and likeness.

Chapter Two

God Laughs and Cries

'Our God is not one of the gods.' (Tillich). There are no gods but only God. There is no family of divine beings, vastly superior to us, inhabiting the outer or inner world beyond death, who influences our lives. There is no such God. In prayer we call Abraham 'our father in faith'. Abraham was called to a totally new religious faith, to a belief in one God only. He is not one among other,

even among all he has created. He is source, ground and origin of all being. He is eternal, infinite mystery. God is not another, not even 'the other' but just simple other. And even as we speak like this, we must be careful not to fall back into the old trap of thinking – 'Ah, now we know something.' For us, the word 'other' suggests different, separation, distance, but in fact God can be none of these. He is not far away. He cannot be separate from us. If he was, we would cease to be. Precisely because he is God, he is inexpressibly near to us, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

These paradoxes and apparent contradictions we apply to God should not upset us but rather delight and liberate us and open us to wonder and true worship. We cannot even apply the word 'different' to him incautiously for revelations tell us we are made in his image and likeness. Here is deep wonder. The Bible tells us that God forbade his people to make any image of himself. He did so because he knew us well. Becoming familiar with images we might begin to think we in some way knew him and indeed they could come between us and himself – and even keep him at a safe distance – whereas he wants to reveal himself to us and wants union with us. But then we find that the God who forbade images himself broke his own law. He creates man and woman in his own likeness. (Gen. 1:27) So we share in his life and mystery and it is no wonder that we seek him. We are drawn to him as the river is pulled to the mighty ocean. Augustine's insight is ever fresh, 'O, beauty ever ancient, ever new, You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You.'

We must be continually reminded that we cannot understand God with our minds or describe him in words. There is always a danger that we identify God with the words we use in talking about him. We imprison God in words. Carlo Martini says we want to enmesh God in the nets of our minds. We say the word and instinctively feel we know what God is like. We must tear all nets and let God go free, let Him be God in our lives and in our world. As we let Him go free, we will find we become ever more, free to praise him and rejoice in his love and beauty. We must be aware of the temptation to transfer to God our own limited understanding of reality. Words like, good, true, beautiful, free and close – all have associations of limit for us. We instinctively transfer these limitations to God. We invert the divine order and make God in our image and likeness. This is inevitable, but we must constantly remind ourselves there is no limitation in God. Sometimes we try to solve this problem by saying, 'Well, his love, his forgiveness is like ours but to an infinite degree.' But this is not so. His love is not like ours. It is totally other. And what does the word infinite mean for us? We cannot imagine the reality it suggests. We think of length, space or bulk and try to imagine them going on and on with end. We have to speak of God but let us rejoice that our words don't describe him but always point past themselves. What can we say? Nothing, we can only rejoice in wonder and delight and throw ourselves into his arms and celebrate.

When the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob realised that Jesus was a very special prophet, she put this question to him: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, while you say that Jerusalem is the place where we ought to worship.'

(John 4:20) Jesus answered her thus, 'Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.' (John 4:21-23) Jesus is not criticising holy places or pilgrimages but is reminding her and us that God must not be tied to such nor indeed to any place, person or object. There is no more of God in Lourdes than in our own kitchen. God is not more present in a church than in a factory. There is not more of God in a great saint than in the most degraded sinner. In the year 63 BC the Romans conquered Palestine. The Roman commander, Pompey, led his troops into Jerusalem and captured the temple. Then to the horror of pious Jews, he fought his way to the heart of the temple and entered the Holy of Holies. To his amazement Pompey found only a small

empty room. His dreams of finding silver and gold and rich images of the Jewish gods were dashed. The Holy of Holies was empty of precious images but full of the Glory of God.

When I am in touch with the real God, the God beyond God, I will be open to the infinite variety and freshness of his Being. I can constantly be surprised and recreated by his activity and the revelation of his beauty, truth, love, healing and compassion. I will clap my hands in wonder and sing a new song as he makes all things new. Scripture constantly speaks of him as the one who always does a new thing. 'Now I am making the whole of creation new.' (Rev. 21: 5). In Isaiah he says: 'No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light, can you not see it?' (Is.43:18-19) And in Lamentations we find this beautiful reflection: 'The favours of Yahweh are not all past, his kindnesses are not exhausted; every morning they are renewed; great is his faithfulness. (Lam.3:22-23)

Do we not often recall a past blessing and hope God will do the same for us again? He will not. He is not that poor. He does not repeat favours. He is God. He does not copy or duplicate yesterday's favours. Each day is a new day, a new gift of love. Each day his gifts come to us with love like freshly picked roses with the dew still on them. God does not parcel up his gifts or leave them ready to be sent to us by some heavenly Post Office. Each new day he comes personally with a new smile and new love. This encounter, this prayer today is not a repeat of yesterday. It is fresh amazing grace. He is God, so any miracle of love can happen. The words of scripture today have new meaning, life, power for me today in my new mood and need. The prophet Isaiah refers to this new thing God is doing and associates it with joy and gladness. 'For now I create new heavens and a new earth, and the past will not be remembered and will come no more to men's minds. Be glad and rejoice forever and ever for what I am creating, Because I now create Jerusalem 'Joy' and her people 'Gladness'. I shall rejoice over Jerusalem and exult in my people.' (Is. 65:17-19)

God speaks of joy and gladness. Must this not also involve humour and laughter? I love to imagine God laughing. Surely this God who made us a people who smile and laugh and enjoy a good joke must be a God who also smiles and laughs? Brian Keenan in his book 'An Evil Cradling' tells how he and his companion, John McCarthy coped with their terrible experience of loneliness and isolation during their long captivity in a dark prison cell in Lebanon. They invented all kinds of games and activities to preserve their sanity. He writes: 'We would imitate different characters as we played, or more frequently we would create characters out of our imagination. With these characters we entertained ourselves for many hours. Through them we brought other people into the cell to be with us, to talk to us or to make us laugh. In that laughter we discovered something of what life really is. We were convinced by the conditions we were kept in and the lives that we managed to lead that if there was a God, that God was, above all else, a comedian. In humour, sometimes hysterical, sometimes calculated, often childish, life was returned to us.'

In humour life was returned to us. This is a profound reflection. Let us ask, 'Why are we able to laugh?' The answer surely must be, 'Because God laughs, and we are made in his image.' Keenan and his friend say they were saved by laughter and became convinced God must be a comedian. We are told a new baby will not smile until the mother smiles at it. The Psalmist invites us to smile at God and says we shall not be ashamed, which I presume means that God will smile back at us. (Psalm 34:5)

What makes us laugh? It is often a deep current of joy caused by looking at others playing and enjoying themselves, especially children. When God looks at his children enjoying his beautiful world, surely, he must be smiling. We often laugh at the unexpected, the incongruities of life. It's hard to keep a straight face when we hear a good joke and when some comedians deliberately play

dumb and do not laugh at the obviously funny, we laugh at their straight faces. Many jokes poke fun at our inflated sense of our own dignity. This laughter is healthy and prevents us taking our lives too seriously. Jesus had a very serious mission in life, but I find it easier to imagine Jesus laughing than to imagine the over-serious Pharisees doubling up in laughter.

We could also profitably ask ourselves, 'Why are we able to cry?' Again I believe the answer must be, 'Because God cries, and we are made in his image.' Why would God cry? Because he is a Lover and love is always vulnerable. We could say he has so much to give us and we don't seem very interested. Jesus wept over Jerusalem for that reason. Or we could say that God desires our happiness and fulfilment, but we keep hurting and wounding ourselves and others and seeking our happiness away from him. We can laugh and cry because God first laughs and cries. Above all we can love because God first loves us. Let us come to this God in prayer and just be with him. There will be days when we shall laugh together. Other days we shall have cause to weep together. But all days I will know, whether there be laughter or tears, that my God is there, sharing his love and life with me. Let me put no limit to that love. It is as great as God himself.

Chapter Three

God is Love

One of Christ's closest friends and co-workers was John who wrote the fourth Gospel. He shares his image of God with us in these words, 'God is love.' (John 4:8) If the word 'God' is one of our most commonly used words we have to say the word 'love' is even more in common use. And again we have to question ourselves as to what images and pictures come to mind when we use this word. What reality lies behind the word 'love' for each of us? There is the love of friendship, love of mother for baby, love of husband and wife, love of sport, music, nature, love of country, sexual expression of love, love which moves a person to sacrifice life itself. Again I believe it might take us some minutes to describe our image of the reality behind the word. But all of us deep down know that we desire. We want to love and be loved. We know love is happiness, love is life. Now John says, 'God is love.' He does not say God has love but God is love.

For many years I did not think God was love. Awe, anxiety & even fear, were more common emotions excited by the mention of God. I believe that God created me and put me on this earth to test me. If I passed the test I would be rewarded with 'heaven'. My ideas of this heaven were vague and childish. Even today I have to pray a lot to get anywhere near the reality behind the word heaven. If I failed the test I should be sent to hell. Sad to say, my ideas of hell were much more vivid and graphic than my ideas of heaven. To qualify for heaven I had to pass the Ten Commandments Test. Now I have been a schoolteacher for many years and have often had to prepare students for serious tests. Together we would try to spot likely questions which might appear on the paper. Knowing a question in advance is a great advantage in a test. But knowing I would be examined in the Ten Commandments was no help at all! They were too tough, and I constantly failed to observe them. I was bound to fail in the finals and so fear and not love was the dominant emotion in my religious life. Yet at the same time I was commanded to love this God with my whole heart and soul.

I now believe it is possible to love God very much, but only because I am certain that this God truly loves me in all my failure. Again we must get behind the familiar words 'love' and 'God'. When I was reflecting on these matters a family tragedy in England was receiving much publicity. A mother gave birth to a baby girl in a large maternity hospital in Nottingham. Four hours after the birth, as she cradled the baby in her arms, a nurse walked in and asked for the baby to take it for an injection. Instead of taking the baby for any treatment the 'nurse' walked out of the hospital with the child. In her desperate desire for a child she impersonated a nurse and kidnapped the baby. The kidnap story made headlines in the papers and on TV and millions were deeply touched by the grief of the parents. After fifteen days the baby was found safe and returned to the mother. The TV cameras were not allowed in to film the reunion. It was too personal, special and intimate. A senior doctor who was involved said simply, 'It was a privilege to be there.' I ask you to reflect in prayer on this scene and to imagine the mother's feelings. And then I ask you to make an act of faith that this love is only a pale reflection and image of the love God has for you. The God we are talking about, the only God is the one who gave this mother such power of love. The same God says to you and me: Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you. (Isaiah 49:15)

You and I are not made by God to be tested here on earth. Heaven is not a reward for keeping laws and rules and passing a morality test. Hell is not a place of punishment 'made' by God to punish failures. God is love and acts only out of love. God's love is unconditional. It is gift not reward. It is easy to say these things but not easy to believe them and live out of them. God's love for you or me is not offered as a reward for being good. It has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with what we do but everything to do with what we are. And what are we? We are his: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, You are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

God's love is like the feeling that tore the heart of that woman whose baby was kidnapped, like the powerful life-giving force that was hers when the nurse handed her the baby after delivery then the crucifying pain when, a few hours later, she heard the baby was kidnapped then joy beyond our words to describe it that gave her life new meaning, when fifteen days later the baby was again in her arms. Such is God's relationship to us. Such is his love. Hell is not a place. Hell is not a fire. Hell is rejected love and God suffers in it as much as we do if we reject him. Many have rejected God. Many have refused to believe and have lived without him. I cannot believe that are lost as we say. I believe they did not reject the true God, the God beyond God. And I believe God's love, the love beyond love, can find them no matter where they stray.

The unconditional love of God is at the heart and centre of our religion, our faith. Again let us go behind the common words to the reality they point to. What does 'religion', 'faith', 'church' mean for us? For many it means laws, structure, church membership, teachings. All of these have their place but not the central place. At the centre is God's love. This love brought us into existence and gave us our deepest meaning. The life God shared with us was meant to grow and blossom here on earth and to ripen to fullness in eternity. Dogmas, laws, structures are on the periphery. They have meaning only when they flow out from a centre which is love. Jesus did not come to found a new religion called Christianity. He tells us clearly why he came: I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full. (John 10:10).

Jesus came to lead us into meaning which is the experience and sharing of love. Without love we cannot grow and become what God wants us to be. Without love life has no meaning. When Jesus was asked where or how we could find this new life, he answered simply, 'I am the way and the life.' (John 14:6) The life Jesus offers is nothing less than coming to know him and having a personal relationship of love with him. This new life flowers out of knowing God. In his prayer to the Father

at the Last Supper, Jesus says. 'And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (John 17:3)

Cardinal Suenens in his book, *Memories and Hopes* writes 'Christians must rediscover Jesus Christ'. They must meet him – or better still – allow themselves to be met by him.' Through his reflections he continually stresses that this meeting involves experiencing Christ. He points out that this lived experience corresponds to one of the most typical aspirations for modern consciousness, which in this respect echoes that of biblical believers. 'For the children of Israel to know God was to experience God.' This is heart knowledge and is the fruit of prayer rather than intellectual study. For this and nothing less we are created. Mgr. George Leonard in his delightful book, 'Here and Now', writes: 'We, the redeemed, have been given life for one reason only, to be loved and to love.' God created us, to change around the words of the old Penny Catechism, so that he might know us, love us, serve us and be happy with us forever in heaven.' God wants us to know him and to grow in his love. The noise of our world can easily drown out God's voice and so he invites us, 'Be still and know that I am God.'

Chapter Four

Me beyond Me

Who is the 'me beyond me'? This is the real me, the me who comes from the mind, heart and love of God. It is the me made in the image and likeness of God, the God who is wonder, mystery, beauty, love. Since I am made in the image of God who is mystery, it is no wonder that I too am mysterious. I must not be surprised if I am at times a puzzle to myself. Also if God is infinite beauty and eternal life, it is no surprise that I, made in his image, have dreams. It is no wonder that I am never fully satisfied with anything, that I often feel frustrated and never properly fulfilled and that I have deep, deep yearnings for a joy and happiness which are beyond the threat of time and change. But as well as moments of frustration I have moments of joy, wonder, ecstasy. These moments may be infrequent and brief, but they are true, and in such moments, I know or guess who I am and at the same time have some awareness of who God is. And I feel that God and I are inseparable.

Such experiences of joy may come when I stop and stand and look upon a flower, a snowdrop in winter, a daffodil in spring, a rose in summer. They may come as I stand on the seashore or on a cliff and wonder at the sea. They are experienced by a mother and father receiving their new-born baby into their first embrace. They can arise out of a moment of awareness of beauty as I enjoy a favourite piece of music, of art, of poetry. They may be awakened by a favourite comedian and in the laughter, I just know I am made for joy. They come to many in the stillness of prayer. They are awakened when I see someone respond with total unselfishness to another person's need. In such grace moments I meet the me beyond me and the God beyond God in whose image I am made.

In these moments of awareness of beauty, love, joy, goodness I experience a deep peace, a sure sense of being at home. I do not feel a stranger in the presence of such experiences. I realise there is close intimate affinity between me and goodness, love, beauty, joy. It is not a question of wishful thinking or an impossible dream. The reason that I do not feel a stranger is that I share the very life of God who is the source of all this wonder. Let us notice further that all this beauty and joy is gift, pure gift. I have not brought it to be. I have not earned it. It is given to me. Our faith says it is given

because I am loved. My very existence is the first of all the gifts and is the promise of all to come, here and hereafter. All is given out of love and I am the object of that love. Here is the deepest meaning of faith, religion, God. Sadly we have turned it all around and made it a question of being worthy. But it has nothing to do with worthiness, absolutely nothing. We are loved because we are, and heaven is ours because we are God's children.

We are always wondering are we good enough to please God and win Heaven. But this very God made us good. In the account of creation in the book of Genesis we are told that all that exists came from God's hand and that God loved what he made. When he created the woman and the man, he was especially pleased and saw his work was 'very good'. (Gen. 1:31) The trouble is we heard so much about original sin that we have forgotten the deeper reality of our original goodness. Fr. Rohr in his book 'Simplicity' says very well, 'We have to find out who we were all along in God before we did anything right or wrong.' We do not and cannot deny that we do wrong, that we find it hard to love as Jesus asked us. We are given God's love that we may share it. We are all sadly aware how we fail many times a day to share love with each other. But we will never succeed unless we first realise how much we are loved. True love for one another will not be born out of fear of displeasing God. We will find it hard to forgive unless we realise how totally we are forgiven. That's why Jesus came. He came to restore and recreate us in love and to invite us to love as he loved. This is the great challenge facing us each day. When we fail, we must turn to Jesus for forgiveness, healing and power to keep trying, to become more like him. If I keep close to him in a relationship of personal love nourished by prayer, he will empower me.

It is nearly impossible for us to imagine God's kind of loving and even more difficult for us to believe that we are the recipients of such love. Yet this is the ultimate deep truth and meaning of life. Why is it so difficult for us to believe that we are loved for what we are, and not for what we do? Why does it seem so difficult to accept joyfully unconditional love? One reason is that God's love was mostly presented as a reward for observance of his law. Another perhaps more serious reason is that we are all very conscious of our human weakness and failure to love. There are dark areas of guilt and self-hatred in all of us. We are far more aware of our sinful state and our experience of failure and disappointment with ourselves than we are of our deeper graced condition. The me beyond me is seldom noticed by the eye. The externals of my condition are more obvious than my hidden good self. It needs little or no reflection to become aware of my human frailty, my fears, guilt, failure, anger, selfishness. I notice these all too easily and if I forget them there will always be people who will remind me! Here we must be honest. Only the truth can save us. We cannot deny reality. So we humbly admit our human weakness and sin. But there is the deeper reality still, God's presence at our very centre accepting us, healing us, and loving us. Here is a helpful word from Juliana of Norwich: 'To behold the sinful self is a matter of truth but it is not the highest truth which is to behold God. We are precious kept in one love.'

The poet Yeats says, 'The Vision is always finer than the View.' The view is on the surface and is seen with the eye. The vision is deeper and is seen with the heart. We have views of ourselves and other. Often these are very inaccurate but even when true we imprison ourselves and others in our present situation. God sees the vision and sets us free for growth. God knows what we truly are and can become. He sees the possibilities for growth. Growth involves death of course. The seed must die or it will remain alone. We must die to the false self, the surface self so that our true beauty can be revealed, our true self, the me beyond me. Jesus always saw the Vision and so we read that most extraordinary sentence in the Gospel, 'The tax collectors and the sinners, meanwhile, were all seeking his company.' (Luke 15:1). These unlikely people were attracted to Jesus because he was opening their eyes to the vision of their true selves. Jesus told them that their sins were not the

whole truth about themselves. The Pharisees were much more short-sighted. They saw only the view and condemned what they saw. They demanded perfection before someone could be accepted by them or God. So the sinner was outcast and could not celebrate. In waiting for perfection they missed celebrating what was present. Jesus drew attention not to sin but to the deep true self made in God's image. He invited them to accept love and celebrate with him. He knew the great secret that love heals and enables growth and that love is offered to us not because we achieve but because we are his children.

Because of God's understanding love even our sin and failure can be an occasion of grace and new life. God does not reject us but comes even closer when we fail because we need him more. Unfortunately society and even religion often tend to promote a destructive guilt complex when we fail. Some years back I was corresponding with a young Zambian lady studying in a university in Europe. Her first letters were full of joy and hope. Then a very long silence was followed by a very sad letter. Briefly, she had contracted A.I.D.S. and was already quite sick, had been expelled from the university and country where she was studying and was ashamed to return home. These were the early days of A.I.D.S. when there were false and exaggerated ideas about how A.I.D.S. could be picked up. Her long letter finished with this sad sentence: 'I see Father that you are something and I am just nothing.' She saw herself as 'nothing'. She had the stigma of A.I.D.S., and was very sick. She already had an ugly body rash, could not finish her studies and was estranged from her family. She saw me as 'something': I had a respected profession, was healthy, doing useful work etc. She was noticing only the view and missing the vision. After prayer I wrote back: 'What you say is true that you are nothing and I am something. But it's only half the truth. It is equally true that you are something and I am nothing. Each of us is nothing. We are created from nothing. We did not make ourselves and everything we have we have received. But it is even more true, that each of us is something incredibly precious and beautiful, made in the image of our Creator who is in love with us. We are so precious Jesus died for us and would die again for us. Turn to him, tell him you believe this and accept his healing love.'

One morning as I was leaving Kitwe Hospital a lady from the parish asked me if I would give herself and her friend a lift home. Her friend was walking behind carrying a small baby. We walked to the car together and I asked the woman with the baby what was the child's problem. She smiled and said there was no problem. She had just delivered the baby a few hours earlier! I was invited to see the little miracle and marvel at the wonder of such a tiny new life. The pride, joy, light and love on the woman's face gave me some idea of unconditional love. I wonder what that mother would have thought or said if I had asked her why she loved this baby or if I had said, "How can you offer such adoring love to a small child who can do nothing for you?" We would not dare think, much less ask the mother such a stupid question. Yet we seem to attribute less love to God who gives such love to that mother.

Chapter Five

Prayer is Encounter

In prayer I don't have to make something happen. I am invited to become still and become aware of what is happening all the time, namely that God is within me, seeking me, revealing himself to me. He reveals the meaning of my life. A reflection from Thomas Merton helps me greatly here.

'In seeking to know God we must forget the familiar subject-object relationship which characterises our ordinary acts of knowing. Instead we know him in so far as we become aware of ourselves as known through and through by him. We 'possess' him in proportion as we realise ourselves to be possessed by him in the inmost depth of our being. Meditation or prayer of the heart is the active effort we make to keep our hearts open so that we may be enlightened by him and be filled with this realisation of our true relationship to him.' (Contemplative Prayer)

We all seek meaning in life. We feel it is connected with success, image, and possessions. We must be somebody, we must achieve. We compare ourselves with others. We become over busy, worried, and anxious. Most of us feel we have not made it, cannot make it and so end up not liking ourselves. We run from stillness, afraid to meet our self. But this is to run from reality. I must return to stillness where God can talk to me and tell me my meaning and who I really am. I don't have to dress up for the meeting, just come as I am and let God embrace me as he embraced the prodigal boy, tired and dirty from his journey.

The God who is love awaits me in the place of prayer which is my own heart. In stillness I enter this holy place to meet him. St. Paul reminds us we are the temple of God (1 Cor.3:16). It's hard for us to accept we are holy. But so we are. I don't say we are always good or devout or churchgoers, but we are holy because we are part of God. In the holy places of my heart I meet God and he meets me. Prayer is a word for this meeting, this being together. It is a meeting of friends, of lovers. It is encounter, not a religious duty. God wants this meeting and looks forward to it. Can I make time with him, just that, to be with him? The saintly Curé of Ars, St. John Vianney tells how each evening, as he prayed in the village church, a farm labourer on his way back from work would enter and spend a long time before the Blessed Sacrament. One evening the Saint waited for the man to come out from the church and asked him, 'What do you do in your prayer time in the church?' The man answered simply, 'I just look at him and he looks at me.' Prayer is simply being with God.

In the stories from the Fathers of the Desert this short dialogue is recorded and leads us to wonder at the mystery of God present to us:

Disciple: Is the path to God easy or difficult?

Master: It is neither.

Disciple: How can that be?

Master: Because it isn't there.

Disciple: Then how does one travel to God?

Master: One does not travel. This is a journey without distance. Stop travelling and you arrive.

I ask, how do you imagine this presence of God in and to you? Don't answer quickly. We have already said that God is wonder and mystery and will always be infinitely more wonderful than we can imagine. This is true of all his activities and applies to the way He is present in us. We speak of people being present with and to each other. They offer advice, consolation and help or just listen to each other. Many of us are not good at listening to others with our hearts. Our attention is often fragmented, and we find it hard to give total attention. But God is totally present to each of us, listening deeply, understanding and consoling. Maybe we think of God present as an object in its container, say a necklace in its box. But if the necklace were removed, the box remains. But if God

left me, I would cease to be. God does not watch me from a distance. He is intimately close in a way we cannot imagine. I remember Fr. de Mello in a retreat telling us, 'God and I are not one. That would be heresy. But God and I are not two. This would be another heresy.' St. Paul preaching in Athens reminds his listeners, 'In God we live and move and exist.' (Acts 17:28)

Sometimes we may think of God as present in us in a kind of material way as if he were inside me, in my body as it were. But God is present not in my body but in the deepest reality of myself. He is present in those deep places in me which I seldom visit because I live so much on the surface and seldom meet my real self. He is in those deeper places where I fear to go because I don't understand those depths in myself, 'Why did I say that? What made me do that? Why did I react so angrily or foolishly?' And God is present in those even darker deeper regions of myself where I have thought of evil and dallied with evil; places where I have memory of evil I did and hate myself, places where I have suppressed memory of evil done to me which leads me to hate the one responsible and rejoice in the thought of revenge. God is present in those deep, dark and fearsome places. Do we not say in our creed that God descended into hell? I don't understand what that article of the creed means but I am certain it refers to a journey of love. Yes, God is present to all of me, the dark and bright places and it is not the presence of an observer or onlooker, much less of a judge. He is present as lover, healer, saviour. He holds me, he embraces me and whispers, 'Don't be afraid. It's alright. I understand. Let me be here with you. Accept my light, My healing, My love.'

Is this still prayer easy or hard? It is both. It is easy because no skills are needed but just the desire to be with God and the determination to set aside some time. It is hard because during the time of prayer I will, despite best intentions, constantly lose the awareness of God. After some moments of joyful recollection my mind will get distracted. The distraction may be triggered off by some noise outside or by some unbidden memory within. I will find myself talking to all kinds of people and become involved in all kinds of situations. Then I will 'return' to the Lord's presence but soon may wander again or feel sleepy or dry. No matter how often we are assured by spiritual guides we will feel this kind of prayer is useless and a waste of time and it would be better to read a good book or do some work for God. An even deeper temptation may enter and we may see this dryness and distraction as a punishment for our sins. This can lead us to conclude that this kind of prayer is not for us. I myself have been trying for many years to be faithful to this prayer and humbly wish to say my own prayer as I describe above. But I am more certain than ever that God wants me to be with him. To give it up, would for me, not be a sign of humility but rather of pride because 'I don't want to seem a failure'. I want consolation and a sense of succeeding by my own efforts. But more and more I am seeing prayer time as God's gift to me and not my gift to God. I see it as an amazing gift and privilege and believe if I keep it up despite distractions and dryness; God is keeping and will keep his promise to show himself to me. I place all my hope not on my own effort but on his promise.

Prayer is a great act of faith. It is worship and adoration of the Mystery of God. It is sacrifice in the strict sense, an offering to God. I sacrifice my time, myself. Let us understand this well. When I say 'sacrifice' I do not mean that I now choose to do something difficult and hard for my sensual nature, like giving up sweet things for Lent or like bodily fasting to atone for sin. We speak here of something deeper, more beautiful, more mysterious. The sacrifice is to 'make sacred', as the bread and wine are sacrificed at Eucharist and made Holy, made sacred. In prayer it is our time that is sacrificed, offered and made holy. I offer God this time as a sacrifice, as a pure gift joyfully given. This is in fact the highest and most perfect use of my time. Each day God breathes me into life. Each day with its span of time is God's gift to me. Each moment is gift, is a moment of love. Now I recognise the wonder of this gift of love and I take some of that time and offer it back to him with wonder, praise and thanksgiving. Even if the piece of prayer time is dry and distracting, it is now

sacred and holy and a beautiful offering in God's sight. To say I offer time is only another way of saying I offer myself. We speak of time as if it were a separate reality apart from me. In fact if I say I am giving some time to God, it is myself, I am giving at those moments. Bread and wine do not change externally when they are consecrated at Eucharist, but they become a deep new mysterious reality. So on the surface, at prayer, I am the same sleepy distracted person but in reality I am a most pleasing and holy offering to God.

Prayer then can be called sacrifice and sacrifice should be a love offering. It is sacrifice, not in the sense of going against my nature but in doing that which responds to the deepest need of nature, my human created nature, and expression of my most basic desire to give praise, thanksgiving and worship to my creator. This is my primary intention, desire and activity in prayer. As truly as in olden days ancient or pagan peoples gathered round a rough stone altar in the open air and offered back to their gods meat and fruit in sacrifice, and their worship and thanks for life and nourishment, so truly do I now become aware of my God and his daily gifts of time and love and joyfully, humbly offer back to him some of that gift in thanksgiving. As truly as any believing community today in a modern church, is united with God as they gather around the altar to offer bread and wine and in that way offer adoration and thanks, so truly do I in prayer offer the sacrifice of my time and myself and my desire to be united with God. In all ritual sacrifice the offerings and gifts were immolated, burnt, destroyed as a sign they were being handed back to the God from whom we came. So in prayer I hand over completely and totally my time and self and leave the rest to God. At times he will touch me, and I will know that I am known by name and loved. Often there will be no such experience, but I will know in faith that nothing else I do today will be more meaningful and beautiful than this prayer which will come from my heart.

Chapter Six

Love is Risk

In his first homily in Nazareth Jesus said he had come to set captives free. We could say God was one of those captives. Jesus came to set God free, to open the cage in which we imprison God. He comes to reveal the truth about God and that truth in turn will set us free, free from fear and open to love which casts out fear. The God of infinite mystery is unknowable to our minds, but this same God has chosen to reveal himself to us, to reveal himself to our hearts and seek our love. This self-revelation is made in Jesus. If we ask what God is like, how does God see himself, the answer is Jesus. We have no words to describe God, but God has one word to express himself. It is Jesus, the word made flesh. Jesus is very conscious of this mission, to reveal God the Father to us. He boldly says, 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father' (John 14:9) and 'If you know me, you know my Father too' (John 14:6). He says no one knows the Father except the Son and he rejoices to make the Father known. (Luke 10:21-22)

But then, comes the terrible twist in this story of God's self-revelation in Jesus. Instead of rejoicing in this amazing grace, the world takes God's word and throws it back in his face. Jesus is rejected. How could this happen? If Jesus is the answer to our questions about God, if he is the end of our search for meaning, if he is Light and Truth, how can he be rejected? How could this story with such

a promising theme end on the killing field of Calvary? How could God's clearest revelation be rejected and nailed up for mockery on a cross. The answer to these questions has great relevance for us who believe we can meet God in the stillness of prayer. The answer is the most frightening endorsement of our earlier observations on that sin of pride which leads us to believe that we know what God is like or should be like. If anyone reveals a different God from our image of what he should be like, we will not accept him. We enter prayer hoping to meet the true God. Are we open to let God reveal himself as he truly is? Are we ready to wait on that revelation? Do we not often have to wait on people before we come to know them? We must be ready for surprises. We must call on God's spirit to help us. Paul assures us we shall be given this 'Spirit' who reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:10-11)

The enemies of Jesus challenged him to show them a sign that he was who he claimed to be. 'The Pharisees and Sadducees came and to test him they asked him if he would show them a sign from heaven.' (Matt.16:1) This was a proud boast that they knew what God was like. They are saying, 'Show us the kind of sign we expect. We will recognise it was authentic because we know what God should be like.' This kind of arrogance is shown again on Calvary. They shout up at Christ, 'Come down and we will believe.' (Mark 15:32) They demand a display of power. They say, 'Show us your power. Rescue yourself, save yourself from pain. God should not, cannot suffer. Bad things should not happen to good people. Come down and we will believe. If you cannot, we will not believe.' But if he comes down, he cannot reveal the true God who gives his life in love for us. He cannot come down precisely because he is God. They and we have much to learn about God. What a lesson for us here. Those who reject Jesus are the leaders of organised religion. Rahner says well: 'Organised religion tends to organise God.' God will not be acceptable to many people unless he conforms to their small image of him. In prayer let us wait for God. Let us be open as he reveals himself to us and let us ask him to melt us and mould us into his image of love.

On Calvary Jesus reveals the very heart of God. Can we look and see and understand with our hearts? Here is what God is like and he will not change. He will be himself. They want him to take charge on Calvary. They want him to be master of the situation. But he has come to be servant, our servant of love because he knows that in fact bad things do happen to good people. He knows there is much injustice and pain due to the sin of human heart. He has come to face this. Also he knows that mostly sin generates sin. Evil and sin are handed down in families from parents to children. Children suffer from the sins of parents and often copy parents or seek refuge and comfort from their wounds in later sin, often not knowing why they act as they do. Children are not born with racial prejudice but learn it from adults. Sin is also passed on in nations as one generation seeks revenge for the betrayals, wars, tortures inflicted by a certain group or by another nation. What can God do? See what he does on Calvary. He absorbs the sin and evil. He will not pass it on. He will not seek revenge. 'Father forgive them for they know what they do.' He is giving us God's word that love can overcome evil and sin, that love is stronger than death. It is this God we will meet in the stillness of prayer where he wants to share this power with us so that we share it with one another and help to save the world. Thomas Merton writes on true pacifism. 'God's non-violence is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved.' This inner unity is a fruit of time spent with Jesus in prayer.

Jesus reveals God On Calvary. 'Be still and know that I am God.' This verse from the Psalm is also the first line of a well-known song. The second line of the song contains a very good insight. 'I am the Lord that healeth thee.' The God we meet in prayer reveals himself as a healer not only of sin but of all life's wounds. He is the Servant God. He kneels before you and me as he knelt before the apostles at the Last Supper. He kneels to heal our wounds with the most powerful medicine, his

love. What does this medicine cost? To you and me, nothing. But it cost him his life's blood, a price he paid joyfully as it was a love offering. If he is going to heal me, I must show him my wound. I must describe my sickness. This I can do openly and honestly in the stillness of prayer. Perhaps our pain can often be linked to worry and fear. Many suffer from anxiety and worry which they find hard to describe to a friend. They envy others who appear to have no fear and worry. This pain they say is like a knot in the chest. Jesus does not want us to suffer in this way. In prayer we can ask him to loosen and untie the ugly knot. Imagine him doing just that, untying the knot. His hands move gently and patiently. Hear him speak, 'Easy now – this is very tight.' You become aware you are totally accepted as you are. There is no reproaching or putting blame on anyone, only his great desire to bring you peace. Accept his healing touch.

Jesus is the King of Love on Calvary. If we see him in this way, we may better understand a key expression which he used in all his teaching and preaching. Jesus constantly spoke of 'the Kingdom of God'. A proper understanding of this expression will help us greatly in all our Christian life and especially in our prayer. I share with you my own faulty understanding of this expression in my early years as a priest. I imagined the kingdom of God as a place God ruled as a king and where all who lived there were obedient to all of God's laws. The kingdom could be identified by the perfect sinless lives of all its members. I personally, as a Christian, was called to enter this place of perfection and as a priest, my work was to promote and spread this kingdom, to lead more and more people to God and his law then follow it and win salvation. Notice the emphasis was on my activity making me worthy of the kingdom and its blessings. The wonderful truth is that the kingdom is not a place but activity, and it is God's activity not mine. God is present in our world, a mixture of good and bad, but he is not sitting on a throne awaiting our worship and obedience. He is a working God, a servant God, and his activity is love. The wonderful joyful thing to notice is that the Kingdom of God is not my doing, not my activity. It is God at work in me and in his world. What have I to do? Jesus says, 'Believe the good news'. It is 'news', something new is happening among us that we have not originated. It is life-giving and promotes hope and new life growth. I don't make it happen just as I cannot make a seed grow. I can remove obstacles to growth but the growth itself comes from God. Prayer must be a place of growth. We are there in touch with this active, loving, serving God and his life flows into us as surely as the life of the vine flows into the branch.

'In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are, and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.'

(Philippians 2:5-7)

Jesus comes to set God free from our poor narrow images of him. He reveals a God who is king but a very different kind of king from our traditional ideas of kingship. He does not stand on his dignity as king. He is concerned only for the peace, happiness and welfare of his people. He empties himself of all honours and prestige and becomes the servant of his people. This of course involves a terrible risk. True love can never force a love response from the other. It can only invite love and then wait. Kierkegaard, the Danish Protestant theologian, has a famous short parable in which he dramatizes the risk God took in the Incarnation. He deliberately leaves his story unfinished. Each of us has to write our own ending to the parable:

Once there was a king who loved a humble maiden. This king was so powerful and well established that he could not marry her without being forced to give up his throne. If he were to marry her, the king knew that he would make her forever grateful. It occurred to him though that something would be wanting in her happiness. She would always admire him and thank him, but she would not be

able to love him, for the inequality between them would be too great and she would never be able to forget her humble origin and her debt of gratitude.

So, he decided upon another way. Instead of making her Queen, he would renounce the kingship. He would become a commoner and then offer her his love. In doing this he realised he was taking a great risk. He was doing something that would perhaps be foolish in the eyes of most people in his kingdom, perhaps even in her eyes. He would lose the kingship and he might also be rejected by her, especially if she were disappointed at not becoming queen.

Yet he decided to take the risk. It was better, he believed, to risk everything in order to make love possible.

Chapter Seven

Looking at Jesus

'To have seen me is to have seen the Father.' (John 14:9) If Jesus is how God knows and expresses himself and we agree we cannot 'understand' God, then we should be prepared for surprises when we look at Jesus. Also we must be prepared to catch ourselves out trying to make Jesus fit our preconceived image of God rather than allowing him to reveal to us the wonder and beauty of God. We have seen how this resisting attitude when carried to the extreme ended in the rejection of Jesus by those who would not believe because he did not fit their image of Messiah. 'This man is blaspheming.' (Matt 9:3) I do not say we will always understand Jesus or never question his revelation of God. We are speaking of a faith response. Faith accepts that at times we will be very puzzled, will question, even doubt, but we will continue to trust and believe and follow because God is love and in our deepest self, we know this love is the meaning of our lives.

It is consoling to notice in the gospels how those closest to Jesus were at times very puzzled and even questioned Jesus. When Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the boy's first visit to the temple since he was a baby, Jesus stayed behind in the big city. At the end of a long search he is found, Mary complains, 'My child, why have you done this to us?' (Luke 2:48) When Jesus gave an enigmatic answer, we are told Mary just did not understand (Luke 2:50) Jesus described John the Baptist as the greatest prophet ever born. Yet when Jesus asked John to baptise him in the Jordan, John was utterly confused and wanted to refuse. With difficulty Jesus persuades him to agree. (Matt.3:14) Peter was chosen by Jesus himself to be leader of the new community. But when Jesus confides to Peter that he expects persecution, Peter lectures Jesus, 'Heaven preserve you, Lord, this must not happen to you!' (Matt.16:22) Peter's idea of God will need some refining and it will be a painful, humbling experience. Martha and Mary were among Jesus' closest friends. They inform Jesus that their brother Lazarus is very sick. Jesus comes late and finds Lazarus already dead. What do they say? 'If you'd been here, Lazarus would not have died.' (John 11:21) Is there not an echo here of our common cry? 'If you were really with me, I should not have this suffering' or 'where were you when my child was run over by a lorry?' Let us be honest: we feel sure a God who is really God would not allow bad things to happen to children. If we were God, we would not allow such things to happen. There must be a 'wisdom' deeper than ours, a stronger healing love greater than we can imagine.

The mystery of this God who allows bad things to happen deepens when we find that not only Mary or the Baptist are puzzled and wondering. The most terrible question, the most painful cry of all comes from Jesus himself. The very Son, always so strong and confident sinks so low as to cry out, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Matt.27:47) We must wonder, even admire the evangelist for recording this cry. Matthew must have been inspired. Mere human reporting of the story of Jesus would have deleted this word lest it give scandal and be used to prove Jesus could not be God. But the word is there and leads us into the heart of the mystery. There is darkness, but not cold empty darkness. Here in this dark place there is awareness of some light. The horizon is tinged with a slight gentle line of light and when the sun of faith rises, we will see beauty and wisdom we could never have expected. We will 'see' as God sees. What do I mean?

This terrible questioning cry comes from us, from one of our human race, a true full human person like us. Jesus is brought so low that it seems there is no God – or worse, that there is a God, but he does not care. But this member of our human family holds on and finds power to pray a few moments later, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' (Luke 23:46) And he is held in the Father's arms and received into glory. Jesus is not a divine actor dressed up as a man and giving the inside story on God. It is as man he is showing us what he has come to know and believe about God, his Father and our Father. He is giving his own true human experience of God lived out of his human relationship with God. What is that experience? One of being totally known, heard and loved by Abba despite the bad thing that is happening. And his message is that this is equally true for us. Abba is in love with each of us and will lead us through the bad things into glory. Jesus stakes his young life on this experience and message.

We desperately need this assurance of God's love. It provides the warmth and light we need to grow as people called to love one another. But many hearts are deprived of this light and warmth by the heavy dark cloud of sin. We feel as if God had withdrawn behind this cloud in anger to leave us in the cold and dark of our human failure and sin. Jesus comes to tell us it is not so. It is we with our small, narrow image of God who have nailed up that cloud and put God on the other side. Jesus comes to tell us that God still loves us with unchanged love. This is the message of the first great act in the drama of his public life, the baptism in the Jordan.

After thirty years in Nazareth, Jesus goes to a pilgrimage place of confessions and penance, to a river called Jordan. He goes as a human pilgrim, identifying himself with all sin and failure. He goes not to preach or baptise but to join the line of sinners wading in for baptism. We must be careful here or else we miss this crucial revelation of God. It is more important we enter the human heart of Jesus as he wades into the Jordan waters. This is no piece of play-acting or pretending. Nor is Jesus in any way programmed to do what he does. He is a totally free person. He is in love with God and has been constantly seeking him in prayer through his Nazareth years. On hearing that John is at the Jordan, he makes the free, human decision to go there and on arrival makes the further decision to join the queue for baptism. If we are puzzled, we can be consoled that John the Baptist is also mightily puzzled. Keep remembering that Jesus is one of us. He has seen life. He knows about sin and has been in touch with sinners. He knows that his name was chosen before birth and that it means that he is to save his people from sin. That saving will involve forgiveness but much more. It will bring new life, hope, joy. He is very aware of the hearts of those men and women who crowd Jordan's banks. It's a crowd like any crowd of people today who in better moments admit sin and failure and go to some holy place just hoping for a ray of light, a touch of love greater than themselves, a sense of healing and deliverance. With compassion, identification, love, he joins them in the river and bows his head for the touch of the flowing waters.

John overcomes his mystification and pours the waters. With that the heavens are torn open and Abba says, 'Well done, man, well done, Son. You have done the right thing.' Yes, Jesus the man had read God right. He comes with his sinner brothers and sisters open to be judged and received unconditional love. Thank you, Jesus. Now we know God is on our side. The dark cloud of guilt and fear is rolled away, and the warm sunshine of love comes through. Jesus is right. Abba loves him and all the motley crowd in the Jordan. 'This is my child in whom I am well pleased.' (Matt. 3:17) This word is not for Jesus alone but for every son and daughter of God at the Jordan, for every person anywhere searching for something better, searching for God.

This decision to join the crowd in the Jordan and accept God's approval, not only for himself but for all those pilgrims, will lead Jesus to befriend those sinners on every occasion. This will lead to confrontation with religious authority which in turn will lead to rejection and crucifixion. In this sense Jesus will die for our sins. Surely this is the greatest miracle of the gospel, a miracle of good news that we could never have imagined if it were not revealed. In younger days when I thought of God's greatness and power as revealed by Jesus I thought of the miracles of power over nature and disease and death. In early teaching these did receive all the focus and were offered as proof that Jesus was divine. I see it differently now. Let us notice what we are saying and doing when we speak of miracles. First of all, 'miracle' is our word. It is not from God's vocabulary. We use the word 'miracle' to describe something out of the ordinary which we, as it were, 'allow' God to do. We examine an event and decide God has gone over a certain line here to do something extraordinary. It's the old presumption we have spoken about. We have God in a cage. We let him out to do a miracle and then put him back in the cage. We devise a pattern of appropriate behaviour for our God in daily life. Then something unusual happens. We set up a commission to adjudicate on the happening and we define it as 'miracle'. We seem to be saying, 'there is more of God here than in the other events of the day or week'. In a sense God does not work miracles. We do, by declaring this or that a miracle. Perhaps the more wonderful truth is that God is working miracles twenty-four hours a day, but we are too blind to see.

When Jesus worked miracles, he was not pressing a miracle button in his make-up to show that he was God. His miracles were essentially related to his humanity and his understanding of God as the Father of love. Jesus accepted totally our human situation. He experienced human vulnerability and weakness but believed in the love of God and the presence of that power to heal hearts and bodies. He let his love of the Father flow through him. He was the person of immense compassion. This strong current of human and divine love was the source of the power that flowed out and touched people. This compassion was the source of his healing and caused miracles to happen. It is this same Jesus, this God we meet in prayer. He has not changed. One day when he was accused of healing on the Sabbath, he answered, 'My Father goes on working and so do I.' (John 5:17). God never rests from healing, blessing and renewing. Surely we must be drawn to be with such a God in prayer. And if our eyes are not closed must we not say our very prayer, our being with him intimately is a great miracle – as we would say, a first-class miracle!

Chapter Eight

A Puzzling Teacher

While we accept that our minds cannot comprehend God, we are also aware that the mind will never cease to search for meaning. We can say God's revelation to us is a love communication made to the heart, but our mind is also his gift and seeks understanding of its creator. In this seeking, the mind often will just have to give way to wonder. It will have to be humble. But this will not be humiliation because the heart will move the mind and invite it to its highest activity, to accept love. I wonder if this is what faith is? We have seen how some of Jesus' closest friends failed to understand him at the time, but they were deeply in love with him. Let us now look at another gospel character who was greatly puzzled by Jesus. He is full of questions and comes to Jesus for answers.

'There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leading Jew, who came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God, for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him.' (John 3:1-2)

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a teacher and a leading Jew. He is a reminder that not all the Pharisees were enemies of Jesus. He is clearly a sincere man. He does not ally himself with the group that was plotting against Jesus. But he is a very puzzled man. He comes to Jesus by night. Perhaps he fears the others. Maybe he just wants time and privacy. Jesus has upset him and his ideas about God. He speaks with respect, 'Rabbi, you are a teacher from God.' But Nicodemus has problems and questions. Jesus is so controversial. Jesus is clearly a good man, compassionate to the suffering with a compassion so powerful it conveys healing. But Jesus is also so independent. He questions long-respected customs and traditions and breaks important laws. He works on the Sabbath, God's day of rest. He does not fast or observe ritual washings. He touches the unclean, the lepers and the dead. He mixes with Samaritans and even has table fellowship with sinners. How can one who behaves thus be from God, and yet Nicodemus believes he must be from God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a teacher. He comes looking for answers to serious theological questions. He approaches Jesus through the mind. This is all right in itself, but Jesus has much more to give. He is teacher but also has come to nourish the heart of Nicodemus and all of us. Jesus seems to like the man and quickly takes him into a totally new area. He invites Nicodemus away from academic questions, from intellectual debate. He reminds Nicodemus that God and his ways are not subject to our questioning. God is not accountable to us and cannot be forced to conform to our narrow presumptions. He cannot be tied to any custom or tradition no matter how sacred. And so Jesus bypasses intellectual debate and answers, 'I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' (John 3:3) Jesus moves into the area of life. This is what he has come to bring, a new life, a new sense of meaning. He has not come to bring a creed, a philosophy, a teaching, a set of laws. 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10:10) He offers a transformation of our existence. It is so new, so radical, he uses the startling image of birth. He offers new life, 'And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (John 17:3) Be still and know that I am God.

Nicodemus is out of his depth. Let us not blame him. Are we any further on in faith? Do we believe that this is what Jesus means to us? Do we see God offering us life and love or rules and commands? 'How can a grown man be born? How can he go back into his mother's womb and be born again?' (John 3:4) We may smile at such a question from such an intelligent man. Later on Jesus will offer living water to a woman at a wayside well. She too will be startled and interpret him literally and ask for this water, so she won't have to come any more to draw water from the well. Jesus uses startling images to surround his listeners, but he has not come to offer words or images. He has come to give life itself. He seeks to put us in touch with reality, the ultimate basic reality of God's creative love at work every single moment in every person. He has come to make us aware of this love and invite us to accept it. It is a great gift. It is not something we can earn by keeping laws or becoming worthy of

it by living a good life. Jesus is not a moral reformer urging us to do better. He comes as Saviour offering healing and life and it is as gratuitous as the first life quickening in the womb. It is for every person. It is for Pharisee, Samaritan woman, Roman soldier, leper, prostitute, demonian, thief on a cross and it is for now, right now for me as I read. What must I do? Surrender; say 'yes', accept. Jesus is deadly serious. He dies hoping, trusting even, you and I will accept.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born again, to receive new life. What is this life? It is God's love for us, the love which is visible in Jesus. In Jesus, God is revealing himself as never before, breaking many of our old respectable images of him. Nicodemus cannot imagine how a true messenger of God would eat and drink with sinners. He is teaching us that God sees past the sins of each person made in his image and likeness. God in Jesus reveals himself as Saviour more than teacher. He saves us from self-hatred, from feeling unloved and unlovable. Thus he saves individuals and communities. We cannot truly and unselfishly love one another till we are certain God loves each of us with total unconditional love.

'Rabbi, you are a teacher.' Yes, Nicodemus is right. Jesus is a teacher, the greatest teacher ever. Jesus the teacher is not just handing on what he learned from another teacher, no passing on the doctrines of another Rabbi. He is not passing on second-hand book knowledge. He shares truth itself, 'I am the Truth.' (John 14:6) He speaks deep, arresting, puzzling words, 'The first will be last', 'If you want to live, you must die'. He tells stories with outlandish exaggeration about a prodigal father, an extravagant employer who forgives huge debts, a foolish shepherd who leaves a whole flock of sheep to search for a stray. They say he spoke with authority, not like one imposing a teaching but as its very author. He claims to speak out of experience, of what he says he has seen God doing. Other prophets put 'Amen' at the end of their prophecy to indicate it was from God. Jesus introduces his statements, 'Amen, amen'. All this knowledge he shares not so much as intellectual food for the mind but rather as nourishment for the heart, the spirit, the whole person. If he is listened to, believed and accepted, then the listeners become not more knowledgeable but more alive. Well might they say: 'There has never been anybody who has spoken like him.' (John 7:46) His words touch their very deepest self and there is an echo from that deep place which says, 'This is Truth, we are made for this.'

Nicodemus calls Jesus a teacher and he is right. But his is much more. Jesus is a saviour. We people need a teacher to give us the truth about God and the meaning of life. But even more we need a Saviour. Our real problem is not ignorance but weakness, hurt, sin, pain, guilt, fear. If ignorance and lack of knowledge were our problem, a teacher would do. But our problem is more profound. We want happiness and love, but they elude us. We have desires which are mostly frustrated. People disappoint and betray us and often we betray our own deeper, better self. We make resolutions. We want to be better, to try harder but again and again we fall back into old ways. We know we should be better and want to be better, but we fail. As one person recently said to me, 'I feel full of rottenness and also feel powerless to do anything about it.' Yes, we do need a saviour: we need healing. We need new life and hope. Above all we need love. Jesus comes as that saviour. He offers unconditional love. He has so much more to offer than Nicodemus realises. Are we any more desiring and trusting than Nicodemus? Do we want to understand God? Are we ready joyfully to surrender and accept the gift of new life of unconditional love that Jesus offers?

As Jesus speaks with Nicodemus, he describes the gift he has for him as 'eternal life' (John 3:16) This beautiful expression is unfortunately easily misunderstood. It is often seen as something in the future, a reward that will be given after death when we have lived a good life. But the eternal life Jesus speaks of is gift not reward and it is offered right now in this very moment of awareness. It is we who are in a time sequence. God is not. Let us not drag him into it. God is Being, Reality, Life,

Love and he is Now. In one moment he gives the grace of years. In one flash he can totally renew, recreate, give amazing grace, bring deepest life to birth. I will be physically the same but in the same moment be totally renewed, be born again. This new life has nothing to do with time or measurement. It is not something that is given after death and goes on forever. It has to do with the quality of our life. It is the kind of life God has, the kind of life Jesus has. It is offered to us now before death if we accept Jesus and his love. It cannot be killed by gun, spear or sickness. And so Jesus can say, 'I tell you solemnly whoever keeps my word will never see death.' (John 8:51)

'Rabbi, you are a teacher.' Yes, but the greatest sermons he preached were deeds of healing love rather than fine words. We could say his first great sermon was in the Jordan river where he identified with broken, sinful humanity while his last great sermon was given from the pulpit on the cross where he suffered cruel torment as a result of this choice at the Jordan. His Calvary sermon said simply, 'See how much you mean to me.' We seem to be deaf to his fine words but how can we be so blind to such love? If only we could surrender and accept, we could experience a new life, what Jesus calls new birth. This surrender, this acceptance is what we call grace, gift, the amazing grace we sing of. It is a sense of being found. It is not so much that I find but a realisation of being found. It does not mean that there is any sudden and dramatic change in lifestyle or that old compulsions and temptations disappear, or that I will have all the answers. But things are not the same anymore. There is a new vision of life, a new sense of meaning. I am aware that I am known by name and am accepted as I am.

Chapter Nine

An Unlikely Couple

In prayer I meet the God beyond God, the true God and not some small idol that I have made. How can I be sure what the trust God is like? I must continually look at Jesus who is God's own revelation of himself. I must look at Jesus especially in the way he related to individual persons. We reflected on his meeting with Nicodemus and saw Jesus offering nothing less than new life. Let us now consider another person who like Nicodemus had the privilege of a long chat with Jesus. Nicodemus came by night seeking Jesus. This person meets Jesus in the middle of the day by a wayside well. She is a Samaritan woman. For Nicodemus it would have been impossible to sit near this woman and converse with her. In his eyes she is a heretic. But God's ways are not the ways of Nicodemus or of you and me. And so God in Jesus sits with her and they have a long chat and end up best of friends.

As we look at Jesus and this woman chatting by the well, we have to admit they are a most unlikely pair to be together. Indeed normally they should never meet at all. They are from different tribes. They have a different religion and are even traditional enemies. Jesus is a foreigner here. Samaria is not home ground for the Jews. Many pious Jews would cross and re-cross the Jordan to avoid walking on foreign Samaritan soil. The woman comes out from the nearby town to draw water. Then to her surprise the man speaks to her and even asks a favour. It is midday. He has been on the road and is thirsty. He asks for a drink and she expresses her surprise, 'What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?' (John 4:9) Jews and Samaritans, we are told, would not even use the same cups and bowls.

When we start to take God seriously and as a consequence begin to take prayer seriously, we may experience moments when suddenly it will all seem most unlikely, most ludicrous. Can it really be true that I in all my poverty, weakness, sin, luke-warmness can sit in family conversation with God, the infinite Mystery and experience him conversing with me, listening, touching, loving me? I might reply by saying that this very thought reveals once again our deep-seated misconceptions about God. The 'god' I am imagining when I voice this doubt is the false god we must smash. The God who sits with me in prayer is the only God, the God who is in love with me who hears, touches, heals in mysterious ways no words can describe. I say that could be an answer to the doubt we have just expressed. Another answer, infinitely better, is God's own answer, Jesus. We are looking at him now with this woman at the well. I believe he was waiting for her at the well. We speak of our search for God. The more amazing truth is that God seeks us. But we are shy of him and so he waits. But there is always a day, a night, a moment in time when we meet. It may be a moment of pain, a moment of disgust with ourselves; even a moment when we shout at him and say, 'Could you not have prevented this? You don't care!' Or it may be a moment of deep joy when something our heart has hoped for happens and we realise he rejoices with us. Often it will be something quiet, ordinary and commonplace but we will be aware that we are not alone, that in fact we are in the presence of God and are known to him by name. We notice in this encounter at the well that Jesus is the first to speak. He breaks the silence and speaks to the woman. He does so because he knows she will not dare to speak to him. If he does not speak to her, she will not speak to him. She sees him not only as a stranger but even as an enemy. How many fear to speak to God? They see him not only as a stranger but as a judge, a spy watching to catch them out when they break the law. They see him as a judge with all kinds of punishments prepared for life's failures. The only words some can manage to address to God are a curse blaming him for their suffering and fear.

The God that is feared, blamed and cursed by many is not the true God. There is no such God. There is only the God of Jesus revealed in this scene. This God says to each of us what he says to this woman. 'If you only knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water. (John 4:10)

Why not give God a chance to reveal his true identity in Jesus? Why not come as we are and express our surprise that he should want to sit and chat with us and indeed that he should seem to need some help from us?

The woman at the well is herself. She does not immediately give the stranger a drink. She expresses surprise he should ask. We are not told that she gave him a drink. I believe she did. The fact that the conversation continued or so long and so amicably and that at the end the woman runs back to call out other Samaritans to meet Jesus suggest an openness and goodness in this woman. We could say she is a good Samaritan. Later in his preaching Jesus will tell a story to illustrate the basic goodness and concerned of the human person. He will choose a Samaritan as model of the caring person who befriends a Jew who got into difficulties with thieves on the road. Could it be he got the inspiration for that character from this woman helping this Jew in difficulties with thirst by the roadside? In one of his miracles Jesus cures ten lepers and we are told the only one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. It seems Samaritans were not as bad as they were painted. Fortunately the true God looks beyond the paintwork and sees the deeper goodness of the human heart. When we are in the presence of the true God, we will become aware that we are known as we are underneath all the labels put on us by others and underneath all the masks and disguises we wear. He sees past all our fancy dress to the hidden self he created and loves. I have no doubt that this woman gave Jesus a drink and would have shared a bun or a scone if she had had any refreshment with her.

When the woman expressed surprise that Jesus should speak to her, he said 'If only you knew who you are talking to, and the gift he has for you.' When Jesus said, 'If only you knew who you are talking to,' I imagine the woman saying to herself, 'And if you only knew who you are talking to! I am not your respectable housewife. Did you not see I came out alone to the well? The better women of the town won't be seen with the likes of me. I and my latest affair are current gossip in town. If you knew my story and the mess my life is in, I doubt if you would want to continue chatting with me. It would not help your reputation! There are some in the town who would think me bad enough even to pick up a Jew. No offence, Sir, but you know what I mean.'

Recall another gospel scene when Jesus is at a meal in the house of Simon the Pharisee. There is a moment of high drama when a woman of sinful repute gate-crashes. We can imagine horrified Pharisees gathering their cloaks lest she touch the hem of their garments. Maybe some who were less scrupulous about what woman they accepted favours from had a different terror in their hearts! But this woman has eyes for one man only, the man we now call God. She moves to Jesus, kneels, weeps tears of joy over his feet, dries the tears with the long tresses of her hair and covers his feet with kisses. And she anoints his feet with a precious ointment. Let us notice the reaction of Simon the host, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is that is touching him and what a bad name she has.' (Luke 7:39) Simon betrays his idea of God and if we are honest, our idea too. We feel God would not associate with such a woman, much less accept signs of affection. We feel God could not be at ease with the woman at the well or with me as we sit in prayer. Jesus is saying, 'You have got God all wrong. Please let me reveal him to you.' The wonderful truth is that Jesus knows what kind of woman this is and what kind of person I am and still he really wants to be with us. He believes in us more than we believe in ourselves; He will never give up on us. Why not give him a chance?

Jesus has come to break down all barriers and division among us and restore the unity of the human family. He is at home with Pharisee and Samaritan, with Jew and Roman, with sinner and saint. He sees the Vision not the view. Each person is a unique child of God. He comes to reveal our identity and tell us all are welcome in our Father's house. There are no outcasts or rejects. Jesus did not come to screen humanity and choose those for heaven. God's heaven is not a reward for being good. It is home and God wants us all there at the great final homecoming celebrations. Jesus comes to help us all find our way home.

Shortly after my ordination to priesthood in Dublin I had an experience which suggested this truth to me in a rather homely situation. I was sent to celebrate Sunday Mass in a tiny rural church in the mountains south of Dublin. Newly ordained I was still a bit nervous about Sunday Mass in a new parish. I vested in the small sacristy and watched the large old-fashioned clock waiting for 8 o'clock to strike. I soon realised that the clock was largely irrelevant and the sacristan, an amply country matron, would decide when Mass would begin. She kept looking into the little church building which would hold forty to sixty people. I realised she must know every family in the parish and would know who should be at Mass. Finally she had one last look and seemed satisfied that all were in. I was able to move when she motioned me to wait. She walked over, put the hand of the clock at 8 o'clock and with an angelic smile, nodded, and I moved out to celebrate. There was no danger about being unpunctual in that church! I have since thought about that experience and feel now that the final end of all will be something like that. Jesus knows us all and keeps an eye on the heavenly threshold. Only when we are all safely in will he nod to Abba and God will then say, 'Time's up. Let the celebration begin!'

Chapter Ten

The Seventh Man

Because of sad and bad experiences in life many people feel that they are failures. Some have suffered in human relationships that have not worked out and have broken down with much pain. They will admit at least to themselves that they are part of the reason for the failure. Their personal human weakness contributed its own share. As a result they lose faith in their own self and feel unlovable. They also feel they are stuck with their past. Oscar Wilde puts it succinctly, 'No man is rich enough to buy back his past.' I think of this Samaritan woman who came to the well. I think of her at her home that morning before she went out to draw water. She gathers her rope and water jar and sets out alone for the well. If she were in a reflective mood she would surely resonate with such thoughts. She must have felt a failure. She must have thought no one could really care for her and that there was little hope for the future. She did not know that someone was waiting for her. He could be the seventh man in her life, but with one mighty difference: he was also God.

We continue our observations of Jesus and this woman chatting at the well. Jesus speaks of the gift of living water and she asks for some. Then comes a beautiful and gentle exchange in the conversation. Jesus wants to show this new friend that in fact he knows her story with all its pain, weakness and failure and that he still enjoys being with her and still wants to give her the gift he had spoken of earlier. So, rather suddenly, he changes the conversation and says, 'Go and call your husband and come back here.' (John 4:16). What does the woman say? Does she say, 'My husband is dead'? No. Does she say, 'My husband has gone to Lusaka.'? No. She says simply, 'I have no husband.' (John 4:17) Is this true? Yes and no. She has had five husbands but is presently with a man who is not her husband. How does Jesus respond? Does he lecture her or embarrass her? Does he accuse her of being a loose, sinful woman? No. He praises her for telling the truth! It was only a small bit of truth but it's enough for Jesus. 'He said to her, "You are right to say, "I have no husband", for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband. You spoke the truth there.' (John 4:18) I wonder was he smiling when he said that?

Notice how gently Jesus related to her. She is not overcome with shame and guilt when this holy man speaks of her failure. There is no trace of such. She answers simply, 'I see you are a prophet, Sir.' (v.20) Love can tell us of our sin and failure and we are not crushed or ashamed. It is never God's way to embarrass us, to make us feel mean, ugly, evil, unlovable. He heals. God comes in Jesus to reveal our inner beauty, our own true deepest self. God is not blind to our sin but he always sees more. He can hold our hand, look into our eyes, tell us our sin and at the same moment we know we are accepted, forgiven, healed and loved. In that moment our sin has no more reality. 'Love keeps no records of wrong.' (1 Cor.13:5) There are no files in heaven.

Past forgiven sin is not an objective reality. It vanishes as the snow of years ago and in its place is new life. Our reaction to this truth could be tears, but they will be tears of joy and love. This is the new life promised to Nicodemus, the living water promised to the Samaritan woman. Yes, we must admit our sin and failure down to their mysterious roots, otherwise there can be no healing. But then with the help of Jesus we admit our goodness and beauty down to their deeper even more mysterious roots and experience healing.

Here I wish to record a story taken from the book, 'Storytelling' by Rev. William Bausch. It illustrates the redemptive healing power of a story and hopefully can lead us into a deeper understanding of this gospel scene and its redemptive power, not only for the Samaritan woman but for ourselves.

Long ago in Europe there was a Jewish Rabbi celebrated for his wisdom and story-telling. His name was Baal Shem Tov and he had gathered a school of disciples around him. On the day Baal Shem Tov was dying, he assigned to each of his disciples a task to carry out in his name. To the last disciple he gave this task: to go all over Europe and retell the stories he remembered from the Master. The disciple was disappointed, feeling it was not an important job. The Master told him he would not have to do it forever. He would receive a sign and then he could rest. So off he went, and days and months turned into years and years of story-telling. Then he heard of a nobleman in Italy who would pay a gold ducat for every new story. The disciple went to the nobleman's castle but to his horror discovered he had forgotten all the Baal Shem Tov's stories. He could not remember any story and wanted to leave. But the nobleman urged him to stay, hoping he would remember something. But two days passed, and he remembered nothing and said he must go. Then suddenly he did remember one story, and this would prove he did know the great Baal Shem Tov, for he was the only one there when the Master told this story.

This is the story he remembered:

Once the Baal Shem Tov told him to get ready for a trip to Turkey. The disciple was upset for it was the time of the Christians' Easter celebration and Jews were always in danger from the Christians who blamed them for Christ's death. But they went and got hospitality in the Jewish quarter of the city. The Jews would not go out into the streets till Easter was over. Suddenly all the house was startled when Baal Shem Tov opened the window to look out at the Christian procession. A Bishop was leading the procession, dressed in gold vestments and wearing a silver mitre. Then the Baal Shem Tov told his disciple, 'Go and tell that Bishop I want to see him!' The disciple thought his Master had lost his reason. He gave the message to the Bishop who was agitated but still came to the Master. They sat together for three hours. The Bishop then returned to the procession and without saying anything more the Master told the disciple he was ready to go home.

As the disciple finished the story, the nobleman looked at him and then broke down in tears. Finally, when he could speak, he said, 'Oh, disciple, your story has just saved my soul. You see, I was there that day. I was the Bishop! I am descended from a long line of Rabbis but one day during persecution I abandoned our faith and changed to Christianity. The Christians were so pleased they made me a Bishop and I even co-operated in the persecution of the Jews. The night before Easter I had a terrible dream of the Day of Judgement and the danger to my soul. So on that Easter day in Turkey when you came with the message from the Baal Shem Tov I knew I had to go with you. For three hours we talked. He told me there was still hope for my soul. He told me to sell my goods, retire and do deeds of holiness. There was still hope. His last words to me were there: 'When a man comes to you, and tells you your own story, you will know that your sins are forgiven.'

The Baal Shem Tov was a Rabbi and a storyteller. Jesus too was a Rabbi and a great storyteller. 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who comes from God' So spoke Nicodemus in respect. Others said, 'There has never been anybody who has spoken like him.' (John 7:46) Much of the teaching of Jesus was offered in stories which illustrated life's deepest truths and meaning. They touched, enlightened and nourished different people according to their different needs. They have as much relevance and healing power for us today as they did at their first telling by Jesus. But now suppose in prayer Jesus asks you for a story! I have no doubt the story he would most want to hear would be

your own personal story. He would sit and listen as he did with the Samaritan woman. He would introduce you to the wonderful truth that your story and his own story are intimately related. You will discover in his company that your story, which is your very self, is redeemed, saved and given all its deep meaning beauty by his story which is himself and his love for you.

‘When a man comes to you and tells you your own story, you will know that your sins are forgiven.’ The woman at the well, after her chat with Jesus hurries back to the town to call out the people. ‘Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did.’ (John 4:29) She too knows from the way he told her that her sins are forgiven and that she is healed. She has tasted the spring of living water and can never be the same again. He waits for us at the well of prayer. If I protest my unworthiness, he will say, ‘If you only knew who you are talking to and gift I have for you.’ Sit with him. Ask him to tell you your own story – the whole story. Ask him to leave nothing out. Listen carefully. Let him gently uncover the chapters you have buried. You will know from the way he tells it that all is well, you are accepted and loved. You will experience healing power, freshness and love. You will know that a new and life-giving friendship is possible between you. And this friendship can be forever, here and hereafter.

Chapter Eleven

The Right Man

We continue to look at the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. We notice that the Samaritan woman, like many of us, lives on the surface of life. She is preoccupied with life’s externals even when she speaks of religion. Again, as with many of us, the daily routine and distractions of life don’t offer opportunity for any serious reflection on life’s deeper questions and meaning. This woman is lucky to meet Jesus who cares for her deeper self and leads her quickly into such reflection, just as he did with Nicodemus who was preoccupied with intellectual questions relating to his position as Pharisee. Jesus invites both of them to deeper reflection and provokes them with strong images. To the Samaritan woman he speaks of ‘living water’ to suggest our deepest human yearning for meaning, happiness, love. The woman thinks only of bodily thirst and being set free from the daily trek to the well. Again she is only on the surface when she describes Jesus and herself: ‘You are a Jew, I am a Samaritan.’ Jesus wants to lead her past these external labels to his or her own deeper identity. When she speaks of religion she will speak in terms of places of worship while Jesus will speak of union with God who is spirit.

Early on in the conversation Jesus says he has a gift for this woman. He describes it as ‘living water’. To Nicodemus he has described the same gift as ‘new life’. When he sits with you and me in prayer, he has no less a gift for us. How do we understand it? Poor Nicodemus can only ask, ‘How can a person go back to his mother’s womb?’ The Samaritan woman is equally at sea. ‘You have no bucket, Sir, and the well is deep: how could you get this living water?’ (John 4:11). True the well is deep, but not as deep as the human heart. He has no bucket, but he can reach deepest well of the heart because he has eyes of love. The image of water was very meaningful in this land where people could die of thirst. Jesus speaks here of another thirst not confined to desert lands. It is a thirst common to all whether we are Jews, Zambians, Irish, Muslim, Catholic, Samaritan. It is our thirst for meaning, identity, happiness and love.

Why am I here? What meaning has my life? Can it be truly meaningful when there is so much frustration, failure, so many questions? And is it all to end after a few years in this world? Jesus says it has deeper meaning. We are loved into existence which will never end. 'Living water' is only an image of this reality. It suggests something clean, fresh, healthy, life-giving. But words do not save us. The words 'living water' and 'new life' cannot satisfy our need for love and true life that comes with love. Jesus offers himself. He offers us his personal friendship. This is life, to know God and Jesus and it is compatible with all kinds of problems, questions, human weakness, failure. This personal love of Jesus will give power to recover, heal, grow. 'As soon as we brought you God's message you accepted it for what it really is, God's message and not some human thinking, and it is still a living power among you who believe it.' (1 Thess.2:13)

Jesus knows the woman has been searching for happiness like all of us. He shows her she has been searching in the wrong place. When he reveals his knowledge of her story, she realises he is a prophet, and this leads her to raise a religious problem. Her people, the Samaritans, believe they must go to the holy mountain to find God, but the Jews say he is found in the Temple in Jerusalem. She is worried. Could her church be wrong? This holy man could hardly follow a false religion. She voices her problem and receives a new revelation about God: 'Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem; true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is Spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.' (John 4:21-24)

As we have said, Jesus comes to set God free from all the cages where we have imprisoned him, from holy mountains, shrines, temples and churches. Jesus is not despising holy places and buildings. He is full of love and respect for the Temple and showed a rare burst of anger when he found buyers and sellers profaning it. (John 2:13-17). But now he gives the woman the good news that God is spirit and free. And God's favourite dwelling place is the human heart. The human person is now holy ground. 'Didn't you realise that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God is living among you? The temple of God is sacred, and you are that temple.' (1 Cor.3:16-17) Later Jesus will say to his disciples that if they accept his word, then 'My Father and I shall come and make our home with you.' (John 14:23)

'Happiness is an Inside Job' John Powell SJ has this attractive title for one of his latest books. He says happiness is within reach of us all, but we must reach in the right direction. That direction is in, not out. If we reach outside for happiness and place our well-being and fulfilment in anything outside ourselves, we shall be frustrated. If we seek our happiness in people, relationships, money and what it can buy, in success and acclaim we shall never be satisfied. These are all wells which quickly run dry and leave us still thirsty. We are not talking about sin, not saying these things are sinful or bad, but just that they cannot ultimately satisfy the human heart. All these things will say to us what creation said to Augustine in his search for happiness. 'We are not the God you seek. God is he who made us. You must seek beyond us.' (Confessions BK.10:6) We recall his other word, 'You were within me and I was in the world outside myself.' Dag Hammarskjöld says, 'We are good at exploring outer space but poor at exploring inner space.' One reason why we are slow to look inside ourselves is that we don't like what we see there. Now Jesus says, 'That's because you don't look deep enough.' He is already within, waiting for us at the deep well of our heart as he waited for the Samaritan woman. Let us make that journey of prayer and meet him there and receive the gift of living water he has for us.

'What? You are a Jew and ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?' (John 4:9) Yes, Jesus is a Jew, but much more, so much more. And she is a Samaritan, but so much more. Each of us may be weak, sinful and confused but we are more, so much more. Jesus sees this more, this deeper beauty and

goodness. When the Samaritan later says to the townsfolk, 'Come and see a man who told me all about myself', she is not referring to the fact that Jesus could tell her about the men in her life. It was the deeper wonder of herself she speaks about. By his gentleness, courtesy, respect and acceptance of her as she is, he has led her to a new discovery of her true self. He has trusted her even to the extent of revealing his own inner self to her. She said the Messiah was expected and he answers, 'That is who I am, I who speak to you.' (v. 26). This extraordinary self-revelation was not offered to Nicodemus, a church theologian. But the greatest gift Jesus gives to her is the gift of her own self. Rahner says, 'Grace is not an invasion from outside but the revealing of what is already there.' This woman finds herself and now can begin to love again. She is free. She can go back to the town and knock on doors with no inhibitions and call out the townsfolk. They respond because they can see something new and beautiful in her. She is like a woman in love. Jesus believes in her and in us. Paul says, 'We are God's work of art created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he meant us to live it.' (Ephes. 2:10) I'm sure many of us feel more like God's mistake than his work of art! But the truth is, as Paul says, each of us is God's precious unique masterpiece. Maybe the masterpiece has become obscured by the dirt of life. Works of art have to be cleaned and restored. No one can do this better than the artist. Jesus comes to do this, to help us become aware of our true beauty and value. And he does it with all the care and gentleness we see in the way he relates to the woman at the well.

When the disciples return from their shopping in the nearby town, they find Jesus sitting chatting with the woman. They are shocked but discreetly say nothing. 'At this point the disciples returned and were surprised to find him speaking to a woman, though none of them asked 'What do you want from her?' or 'Why are you talking to her?' (John 4:27) Jesus is not concerned with social niceties. He is concerned about individual people. He loves this woman as he loves each one of us. He sits with her in the broad daylight by the side of the road. Later, after refusing to condemn the woman taken in adultery, he will say, 'I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark.' (John 8:12). When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he came by night. He chose darkness maybe out of fear of fellow Pharisees. Jesus comes as light for the world but not everyone welcomes the light. Jesus spoke about this in his chat with Nicodemus, 'Men have shown that they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds are evil.' (John 3:19) It is interesting to note that many of us when we were young feared the dark. We feared this objective 'thing', darkness, outside of us. Then we grow up and we fear the light! We fear the light that might reveal the darkness we now experience inside us. This darkness is in all of us, fear, anger, jealousy, hypocrisy, selfishness. We fear we might be shown up by too much light. But Jesus is not that kind of light. He comes to help us see the way. He wants to help us see past the interior darkness to the deeper goodness within us. If we allow his light to shine on us it can reflect our own deeper good self. We can become bright with his brightness. The townsfolk of Sychar must have noticed some of this brightness in the woman who came from the well.

We are told at the end of the story, 'The woman put down her water jar and hurried back to the town to tell the people' (John 4:28). By now she is very excited about Jesus. Earlier her big concern was water and the possibility of being spared the drudgery of the daily trip to the well. Now she has found something so much more precious, a new and wonderful friend. She has been with six men and has at last met the right man. We are told she leaves the water and runs to call people. She does not just drop in on a friend on her way home to say she has met an interesting traveller at the well. Her excitement and joy must have been very evident to move a whole crowd of Samaritan folk to come out to the well at siesta time to meet a Jew. But they do come and meet Jesus and they also taste some of the living water. We are told, 'They begged him to come and stay with them' (v.40) Jesus stayed with them for two days Then somewhat ungraciously they say to the woman,

'Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.' (v.42)

In prayer we have the privilege of being with him not just for two days but every day. He says he wants to make his home in our hearts. In prayer we are not getting any second-hand report about him from someone else. We can hear him ourselves, as these people said, and we can know him as our own Saviour. Be still and know that I am God.

Chapter Twelve

My Son Has Gone Away

I think that most of us believe, at least with our minds, that God loves us, but with what kind of love? I feel many think of distant cold love. God being God has to love us, as if it were one of more unpleasant 'duties' but it's not being in love with us. If only we could believe that his love has all the best qualities of our human loving, the warmth, intimacy, celebration. If we could believe that the most beautiful human loving is only a faint image of his love that he is in fact in love with us and truly enjoys our company, we would come more joyfully and expectantly to prayer. If we could believe this love is offered right now to us as we are with no conditions and that we don't have to make any changes, but just come as we are and be accepted. We have said that many people feel sure their work is more pleasing to God than their prayer, that what they do is more pleasing than who they are. So they spend themselves in activity for God when he wants them to spend some time with him. One reason for this mentality is their sense of being unlovable because of their sins, either serious moral lapses or repeated small failures. We are not what we would like to be. We judge ourselves and feel it better to do something to make up for our failure than to spend time in prayer and feel a hypocrite.

We feel this way because of our stubborn belief that we know what God is like and how he feels about sin and sinners. We know God hates sin and we are right because real sin makes us turn our back on love and loving. And God is love. So we feel that God must hate the sinner and cannot love the sinner till he or she repents and changes. Here we are so terribly wrong about God. God cares so much about having our love that he comes in Jesus and this Jesus, who is God made visible, sits with the Samaritan woman and offers her his love, a fresh spring of living water, a new experience of love with no conditions attached, except to accept the gift. He chats with her and clearly enjoys the chat. We are talking of prayer as sitting in chat with God. The same gift is offered to us. Jesus knows our anxiety about sin and goes out of his way to dispel our false ideas of God and to lead us into deep union of love with him.

One of the most amazing sentences in the Gospels must be verse 1 of Chapter 15 of St. Luke. 'The tax collectors and the sinners, meanwhile, were all seeking his company.' (Luke 15:1) We are so used to this sentence that we could move on quickly and miss the dynamite stacked in these words, a dynamite which blows to pieces many of our fixed ideas about God. It is not normal experience that sinners should seek the company of the preacher. Usually the preacher has to hunt the sinner who

in turn dodges and hides from expected judgement and scolding. Here the sinners flock to Jesus. These men and women, moral outcasts, scorned by self-righteous society are attracted to Jesus and like his company. They discover he does not judge, threaten or condemn them. At the end of a party we cannot imagine Jesus reminding them of the time of synagogue meetings on Saturday. He would know this would be a waste of time, not because the sinner friends would not go but because he knew they would not be let into the synagogue! In the society of that day, to eat and drink with someone was not just a question of satisfying hunger at the same table, it was a statement of solidarity and fellowship with that person. In choosing this lifestyle Jesus was putting his life at stake. 'The Scribes and Pharisees complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:2) Then, as this man claims to be sent by God and to be doing God's will, the religious authorities will have to condemn and kill him for this 'blasphemy'.

Jesus answers the complaints of the Scribes and Pharisees with one of his best-known stories, the story of the Prodigal Son. He tells the story because he himself is not understood, because his revelation of God as loving Father seeking intimate relationship with weak, sinful people is not understood or accepted. The story is told to reveal the true nature of God the Father, the Father of Jesus and our Father too.

The central figure is the father not the son. The title given by unknown editors, 'The Prodigal Son' is misleading. It is the father who is prodigal, pouring out love, forgiveness, healing without counting or measuring. The story comes from the heart of Jesus, the Son who 'is nearest the Father's heart'. (John 1:18) He delights to reveal this God of love to simple people. (Luke 10:21) He not only reveals God but invites us all to seek and hope for intimate friendship with God. This is life, he says. It is this new life he constantly speaks about. And so when the religious authorities complain about his familiarity with sinners he answers with this story. The story will harden the hearts of his enemies and make them more determined to kill him. He will die for this story. It must be worth our attention.

Read the story slowly and ask the Holy Spirit to open its treasures for you. The father dearly loves the son but respects his freedom and allows him to leave home. The boy doesn't do well. He wastes his patrimony in riotous living and is reduced to poverty and hunger. This brings him to his senses and he passes judgement on himself 'I will leave this place and go to my father and say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants."' (Luke 15:18)

How well Jesus reads our hearts when we fail. Jesus was close to his Father's heart but also is close to our broken hearts. He knows the guilt and self-hatred we can experience after sin and failure. He knows how we feel our relationship with God must be broken. The boy in the story and we feel alike. We feel our place in God's heart must be forfeited by our sin and all we can hope for is a kind of servant relationship. Jesus says we have it all wrong. He tells us God misses us when we move away from him in sin. He describes God watching hopefully every day for any indication that we would like to come home and when he sees even a glance towards him, he is running to meet us. Why is this so? Jesus would answer, 'It's very simple. He never stopped loving you.' It's not that a new love comes into existence when we return. It's simply the old love which never faded. The boy had left the house but had remained in the father's heart.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit to lead us into the depths of this kind of loving. (1 Cor.2:10-11). It is so difficult for us to imagine unconditional love and forgiveness. We are so conditioned by life's experience that maybe we are not to be blamed but we must be on our guard. From the time of childhood we are conditioned and programmed. As young children we quickly discovered that

parents' love and favours were withdrawn when we misbehaved. When we moved on to school the same pattern was repeated. Teachers praised and rewarded us when we succeeded and frowned and blamed us when we failed. Exams were a regular feature of school life where high marks and good performance brought congratulations, praise and rewards. The poor performer felt he or she was less important, even less loveable. When we left school the same standard prevailed in places of higher learning and at work. The world turned out to be a big school and life a big exam. Those who were gifted and succeeded, received attention, approval and reward: All this conditioning inevitably led us to link our value and worth to success. Inevitably I felt accepted, admired, loved only if I met the conditions. But we cannot live or grow without recognition, approbation, love and so we became experts at hiding our weaknesses and failures. That I should be forgiven before I say sorry is beyond our comprehension. Then Jesus comes and reveals a God who loves and forgives in that way. Paul says we shall not grow unless our lives are planted in that love 'which is beyond all knowledge' (Ephes. 3:19) The story of the Prodigal Son leads us into the mystery of God's way of loving and forgiving. If we pass lightly over it, we have not heard it properly. His enemies heard it and were so scandalised that they crucified him for it. We need the help of the Holy Spirit and time in prayer to enter this Mystery and be nourished by it.

The father of the prodigal boy never stopped seeing his son as a beloved son. God does not switch off love when we sin and switch it on when we repent. This beautiful insight into God's heart given by Jesus who is so close to God's heart is captured in the words of a very lovely song composed by the St. Louis Jesuits. These are the words:

My son has gone away,
Left me, gone astray.
But I have seen the way he went
And I will bring him back.

Perhaps my son is weary and cold,
Perhaps he's tired and sad.
Tonight I'll go and watch again
And wait for his return.

'Tonight I'll go and watch again!' This father has only one concern, the well-being of his son whom he has never stopped loving and the anxiety that he might be suffering. Then one day as he watches and looks down the road, the boy returns. The father sees him 'a long way off' and runs to meet him. This father has no concern for himself, for his own dignity. This is not a wounded parent seeking to restore his offended honour. He is totally preoccupied with restoring the son's hurt sense of self. He is 'moved to pity' by the boy's condition. There is no hint of self-pity, no trace of a sense of the boy's ingratitude. There is no inner satisfaction that the boy deserved to suffer, none of our thought, 'Serves you right!', 'That should teach you!', 'If you had listened to me!' We know the dreary litany only too well. True love does not speak like that. God does not think in our categories. 'My ways are not your ways, my thoughts not your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55). The father's great pity for the boy flows out into an overwhelming joy at his safe return. This is love. This is God. This God runs to meet us in prayer and to celebrate our being together with him in the home of his heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Tonight My Eyes Were Opened

One of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of letting God be God. Suddenly in a flash of grace I am full of excitement, joy, wonder, praise because God is God. I cannot know him or describe him or measure him and these thoughts instead of depressing me fill me with joy, wonder and celebration. God is Love, Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Dance, Joy and he is Free. He can pour out all his wonder over us whom he loves. I should clap, dance and sing because God is God. We should celebrate God being set free from our cages, nets, prisons of words, definitions and images. He can bless without limit or measure. Of course God can run down the road to meet a guilty son or daughter and embrace them and dance with them. He can pour out this love when and where he likes on whom he likes. He is not tied to our conditions or structures. He is Free. I wish to share a beautiful prayer with you. When I tell you it was composed by a young Russian atheist, you may wonder. This is what I am talking about and our wonder should be a deeply joyful sense of wonder. Here are the circumstances in which the prayer was composed:

It was the time of the Second World War, the Russian front, the invasion of Stalingrad by the Germans. A young Russian soldier is defending his country. It is night time and he is out in a field in full battle outfit, crouching in a shell hole waiting orders to attack. As he lies in the shell hole he gazes up at the sky full of stars and in a moment finds faith. He believes there must be a God. He is excited and wants to communicate with this God. He has never said a prayer in his life. He decides to write. He pulls out a pencil stub and piece of paper and writes his message to God. Then the signal goes. He shoves the paper into his pocket, stands up, moves forward and is cut down by enemy fire. Next day his comrades find the body and take his personal effects. They do not hand in the unusual letter. It gets smuggled out of Russia, is translated and published in a religious magazine. Here is the prayer:

Hear me O God, never in the whole of my lifetime have I spoken to you. But just now I feel like sending you my greetings.

You know, from childhood on, they always told me you did not exist. I, like a fool, believed them. I've never contemplated your creation. And yet tonight, gazing up out of my shell hole I marvelled at the shimmering stars above me and suddenly knew the cruelty of the lie.

Will you, my God, reach out your hand to me, I wonder? But I will tell you, and you will understand. Is it not strange that light should come upon me and I should see you?

amid this night of hell? And there is something else I have to say. This – I am glad I have learned to know you. At midnight we are scheduled to attack. But you are looking on and I am not afraid. The signal...well, I guess I must be going. I have been happy with you.

This more I want to say. As you well know, the fighting will be cruel and even tonight I may come knocking on your door although I have not been a friend to you before. Still, will you let me enter now when I do come?

Why, I am crying, O God, my Lord! You see what happens to me. Tonight my eyes were opened. Farewell my God, I'm going and not likely to come back. Strange, is it not? But death I fear no longer.

The young soldier says he is glad to know God. He meets him in the stillness of the night, a stillness which is a short prelude to a terrible battle in which the young man will be shot down. 'Be still and know that I am God.' It is interesting to note that this invitation of the Psalmist comes in the context of the God of hosts bringing all wars to an end. We rejoice that our young Russian friend has found the true God.

Twice he says he is no longer afraid of the fighting or even the dying. This boy did not know Jesus. He did not hear Jesus describing God the Father running down the road to welcome his son on his way home. Is the same God not running to meet this son of his? Is he not saying, 'This night you will be with me in heaven'? The boy is crying with joy. Let us go back to Jesus's story.

When the Father reaches the boy on the road, he 'clasped him in his arms and kissed him' (Luke 15:20). The boy confesses, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son, treat me as one of your paid servants.' (v.18) He had already rehearsed this confession before setting out for home, but the Father is so full of joy he does not give the boy a chance to complete the confession. It is important to remember that this confession was composed by Jesus, the storyteller. In this way Jesus tells us he knows what goes on in our hearts when we sin and fail. This boy expresses our sentiments, our ideas about God. We make God like ourselves. We cannot comprehend the incredible beauty, depth and wonder of God's forgiveness. Our minds and hearts are clouded by guilt and measured love. We are unable to imagine the nature of true pure love. Jesus shows us what God's forgiveness is like.

The father does not listen to the confession but calls for the total restoration of the boy's status. He embraces him in his rags smelling of the pigsty. He says no words to his son because his heart is too full. But he says plenty to the servants who ran down the road with him. He tells them to fetch the best robe in the house for the boy. In the Old Testament the appropriate dress for repentant sinners was sackcloth which was worn even by repentant kings. For this prodigal it is the best robe and ring. An SOS goes to the kitchen to build up a fire big enough to roast the best calf on the farm. The best calf for this boy who would have eaten the pig's food in his hunger! And of course, music makers are called for the celebration. Is this not a grossly exaggerated picture? Yes, it is; if we measure love and forgiveness by our standards. But Jesus wants to lead us away from these human limitations, from our presumption that we can know God and measure his love. This is the whole point of the story. This is a response to the complaint, 'This man eats and drinks with sinners.'

I ask you to go to that farmhouse on the night of celebration. Look in the window at the party going on inside. See the son and the Father out in the centre of the floor stamping the ground and clapping their hands in traditional dance. Notice the joy and celebration on the Father's face and believe that he would dance like that for you and me. The prophet Zephaniah had such a vision:

Yahweh your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult with you over you, he will renew you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy over you as on a day of festival. (Zeph. 3:17-18)

Surely this story is good news for us. It is told by Jesus, another son who went far away from his Father's home and scattered abroad his Father's riches among his sinner friends. But why do all not receive it? Why kill him for this good news? Perhaps because he says to them, 'Be like your Father.' He asks them and us to forgive each other as God forgives. But one who believes he is good by his own efforts and deserves reward cannot think or love or forgive in that way. It would undermine his personal security. He would have to rely on another, on God.

I suggest a final fantasy experience for your prayer. Go to that home later that night when the party is over. Slip into the house and make your way to the prodigal's room. Knock at his door. Don't worry that you will waken him. He won't be asleep. His heart and mind are too full of images and experiences of love and joy. Admire the robe across the chair and the ring on the table. They are beautiful but not the real source of the boy's joy. Tell him you've come for a chat. Ask him to tell you his story, the whole story. Why did he leave home? What were his adventures and why did he decide to come home? How did he feel when he saw his Father running down the road to meet him and was embraced? What were his thoughts when he heard the orders being given to bring out the best robe and ring. You admire the robe and ring and sandals, but he will want to tell what went on in his heart. He has had a fine change of clothes, but a more wonderful change of heart. As he tells his story, remember it is our Father he is describing. Every time we turn to pray in stillness, we are saying, 'I will leave what I am doing just now and turn to my Father.' Jesus says he is already hurrying to meet you and embrace you.

Chapter Fourteen

To Drain Away the Bitterness

Angello Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice was elected pope in 1958. As Pope John XXIII he summoned a universal Church Council, Vatican Council 2, which has had such a profound influence on the Church's pilgrimage in the modern world. His spirit-filled insight touched not only the universal church, but also many individuals. His personal secretary during his years as Patriarch of Venice and Pope in Rome was Loris Capovilla. In his memoirs Loris tells this story.

As Patriarch of Venice Roncalli heard that one of his older priests had become disillusioned and given up the practice of his priesthood. He told his secretary he intended to visit the old man. Loris said it would be a waste of time as the old priest was bitter and angry with authority and would only start shouting about the Curia.

Still Roncalli went and true enough heard loud denunciations of the Curia and hierarchy. Then he spoke, 'You and I are both old now. We shall soon go before the Lord. Why dwell on these things? Go back to your breviary and say Mass again.' 'They won't allow me to,' growled the old priest. 'I allow you,' said Roncalli and promised to send a breviary. He gave the priest some money. Next day the old man used the money to buy a good wine to celebrate. The Curia laughed.

Loris reported to Roncalli who replied, 'It wasn't to change his life I went to him but to begin to take away some of the bitterness. If you don't take away the bitterness, nothing else you do is of any worth.' Loris objected: 'But others won't understand! They will say you are weak and should discipline this priest.' Roncalli then took up a glass from the table and asked, 'Whose glass is this?' 'It belongs to the house, Loris replied. 'And who is the master of this house?' 'You are,' said Loris. 'Alright, so whose glass is this?' 'It's yours!' 'And if I let it drop on the floor, the broken fragments – whose are they?' 'Yours!' 'And I must bend down and gather them up. Well, this priest is mine.'

Through Isaiah God says to each of us, 'Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name. You are mine.' (Is. 43:1) God comes to us in Jesus to pick up the broken pieces and recreate and renew us with his love. He comes not to scold but to take away some of the bitterness.

He is Saviour, Healer. He visits us in our anger which may be directed against others who have treated us badly or against ourselves for being failures or maybe against God who, we feel, could have given us a better break. Jesus comes to help us overcome this anger and to forgive others, to forgive ourselves – even to forgive God if it seems necessary and to open our eyes to see that God is not as bad as many paint him! Only love can drain away the bitterness. So Jesus comes and lives among us as one of us and tells us God understands and cares and wants to heal and forgive and forget the sin. So, he tells the story of the prodigal son. We see his awareness of how this story will provoke his enemies in the second part where he describes the response of the elder brother.

Loris, the secretary, said to Roncalli, 'People will not understand this softness. They will say you are weak, that you should discipline this priest.' We hear this voice in the second part of this great parable. The elder brother returning from a day's work in the fields, hears the sound of celebration in the family home and asks what's going on. He is told about his brother's return and Jesus tells us 'he was angry and refused to go in.' (Luke 15:28) Jesus here describes the reaction of the Scribes and Pharisees to his preaching and life-style. They kept the law and were furious at Jesus' softness towards sinners. They want to see sinners disciplined and punished. They will not join the celebration. Let us forget about Scribes and Pharisees and look into our own hearts. If I am honest, I may have to admit that I feel some sympathy for the elder boy. Here is a young man who never left home, worked hard on the farm, kept the rules, never wasted money. Now his wild young brother who left home and work, who wasted the family money, gave up his religion and disgraced the family name is now welcomed with an extravagant party. I believe many of Jesus's listeners then and today feel quite sorry for this boy. Jesus is a superb storyteller. His stories search the human heart and reveal hidden thoughts. He holds up a mirror to our ways and thoughts so that he can lead us to another way – God's way.

Those who feel sorry for the elder boy see the Father as unfair. He should be fair! He should have been more strict with the young boy. This kind of softness will only lead to more sin in the future. It's good to forgive, but he should be more strict. There has to be some limit! Maybe seven times? In other words, the Father should be more like us. And here is the heart of the story. We want God to be like us. He should measure out reward and punishment. The Scribes and Pharisees wanted God to be like them. Indeed, they felt sure God was like them, and when Jesus revealed a different kind of God, they could not accept him. They reject Jesus and will not join the celebration. Jesus comes to reveal the true God, God as he is, rich in compassion and endless mercy. The great challenge for us comes in this second part of the parable where we are asked to be like that in our relationships with each other. If individuals and nations could live out this teaching, there would be an end to anger, hatred and war.

When Jesus tells a parable he expects us to enter the story. We are not to stand outside and judge the characters. We are supposed to be in the story and the story in God's wisdom judges us. In the first part we identify with the prodigal and experience God's incredible mercy and healing love. But suppose I don't think I am as bad as the prodigal? If I can say I don't have a long list of serious moral lapses, then this does not apply to me? If I think this way then I have missed the whole wonder of the God Jesus is revealing, a God whose main concern is not his own offended dignity but my happiness. And if I think I am not guilty of serious moral failure, am I not in some subtle way thinking I have been good by my own efforts and will remain good and won't need any forgiveness – indeed won't need God? I will make my own way to the reward in heaven. There is no such heaven. In the second part of the story Jesus guesses many will identify with the elder boy wanting punishment meted out for failure. But love goes deeper, and it is love Jesus talks about and reveals and invites us to live by. If I am judged by true love in life, how will I measure up? Jesus wants to

drain away some of the bitterness of those who feel they are failures and the bitterness of those who feel they have pleased God but have not been fairly treated.

Jesus comes to reveal God as Love. He does so by his person and his teaching. Love is the ultimate reality. It is the supreme value. It is everlasting and as indestructible as God. You cannot kill it. He who loves is God-like. In another story Jesus tells us that those who will be admitted into heaven will be those who showed love even if they had no knowledge at all about God. (Matt.25:44-46) The elder boy had stayed at home and worked hard. But we see no evidence of personal love or warmth in his person. Notice the dialogue with his father on the day of his brother's return, a brother he does not even want to meet. In his conversation with his father he does not even use the word 'father' or 'dad'. He calls him 'you'. He refers to his brother as 'that son of yours'. Remember Jesus composed the story and reveals his understanding of our heart with such revealing details of language. The boy has measured and counted all his work output which he does not seem to have in any way enjoyed. It is more like slavery. He speaks of 'all the years' that 'I slaved for you'. He complains he was not given 'even a kid' as a present. Then 'this son of yours' returns after living it up, 'he and his women'. This lad misses nothing. (Luke 15:29-30)

The elder boy is the typically self-righteous 'religious' person. He boasts of his obedience and hard work. He feels they give him a claim against his Father. They don't seem to be an expression of love. This person robs God of freedom. He tells God what he should do, that he must reward him for being so good. His self-worth is determined by achievement, not by his being loved by God as his child. This basis for self-esteem relies on externals, on constant good behaviour. But externals can change and so he is never secure. There is constant pathological need for reassurance. This leads to comparing self with others and rejoicing even in the failure of others. Notice it is he and not the father who has recorded the sexual lapse of the younger boy. In his code of life there is no room for weakness or failure, only duty and success. The sin and failure of others enables him to feel superior by contrast. In another story Jesus puts these words into the mouth of this kind of person, 'I thank you, God, that I am not like this tax collector here.' (Luke 18:11) When I read this story, the prodigal son, I thank Jesus for this revelation and thank God that it is the Father and not the elder boy who will judge me when my time comes.

And what has all this to do with prayer? Perhaps it's a superfluous question. But it's good to be constantly reminded that the only God we meet in prayer is God as he is and not God as some people or myself imagine him to be. If prayer is to be authentic and to touch and heal me, I must meet the true God as he is, the God beyond God. Only one person can introduce us to this God and that is Jesus. In this story Jesus leads us deep inside God's heart.

Chapter Fifteen

It is Right to Celebrate?

Through the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus reveals the inner self of God, the God beyond God. He shows us a person motivated entirely by love and forgiveness in his dealing with the two sons. When the prodigal returned, the father left the house and ran to meet him. Now when he hears the elder boy is out sulking in the yard, the father leaves the party to come out and be with him. He does so because he loves this boy too and wants him to join the celebration. He addresses the boy

tenderly as 'my son' in contrast to the coldness of the boy who addresses his father as 'you'. 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.' (Luke 15:31) Here Jesus brings us to the deepest meaning of our lives. We are created not to work for God, not to be tested by laws, not to earn God's rewards. We are created out of love to be with God both here and for eternity. We are created because it is God's nature to share. To each of us God says, 'All I have is yours.' And a modern mystic adds an extraordinary insight. Thomas Merton imagines God as saying, '..and if it could not be yours, I would not want it for myself.' The elder boy complained because he had not been rewarded with a kid goat and missed the incredible reality that the father wanted to give him his whole property.

The message is so simple, so lucidly clear and yet we are so strongly conditioned by society and culture we don't see it. Jesus is speaking of love and telling us simply that God's love is gift and not reward. All is gift from God, not reward for hard work, not payment for slaving, not approval keeping laws. All is pure gift of love. The father is overjoyed the young son is home and well. 'It was only right that we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life.' (Luke 15:32) Your brother nearly missed the party, but now it's alright. He is here. He's back safe and that's all that matters. 'Your brother was dead but now he's alive.' But the elder boy has really killed off his brother. He wants the father to do the same. Merit must be rewarded. Failure must be punished. The father pleads with the boy to come in and celebrate. 'Your brother is back and that's all that matters. He is more important than the money that was wasted, more important than what the neighbours say. He is home and safe. I do not take from you what I give to him.' This is the wonder of love. The father's love for the elder is not diminished by his love for the prodigal.

In one of his stories Frank O'Connor touches humorously on this common human failure of begrudging God's mercy and favour to our sinner brothers and sisters. He suggests there is something of the Pharisee in all of us. His elder sister Nora goes with him to the church for support. When the boy comes out from the confessional, he is sucking a sweet. Nora asks the boy, 'What are you sucking?' 'Bulls' eyes,' he answers. 'Was it the priest who gave them to you?' she asked. 'Twas,' he said.

And Nora then said, 'Almighty God, some people have all the luck. I might as well be a sinner like you. There's no use in being good.'

The case of the elder brother in the parable is far more serious than that of Nora the elder sister in this little story. But both of them invite us to reflect on the very big question, 'Why be good?' Jesus would answer 'Because your heavenly Father is good, you are his child. You have his nature. Share out of love what you have freely received in love.'

Our proper relationship with one another is intimately related to our proper understanding of God. A false image of God can lead – and in history has led – to hatred among people and nations. Terrible atrocities in history have been committed in the name of the Christian God. It is only when the elder son realises that his father's love is total and free and cannot be earned and is not measured out according to behaviour, it is only when he realises this and accepts that love joyfully, humbly, freely – only then will he give it freely and joyfully to his brother. As long as we think we have earned God's love then we will begrudge it to one another. We will not joyfully share this love with life's failures until we realise that we received it as pure gift. This conviction will not only bring joy but will help us truly love others. It is only when I see myself as my own saviour that I judge others. That's why we must be rightly suspicious of anyone claiming to have a religious experience of Jesus which leads them to pass judgement on others who have not shared their experience. It's when I am certain that only Jesus saves you and me that I will stop judging anyone and rejoice in

their receiving mercy. Both sons in the parable are precious because they are sons. People could lose God not so much by breaking the ten commandments but by seeing themselves as their own saviour and then judging others and refusing forgiveness and love, thus cutting themselves off from the celebration where God is rejoicing with the repentant sinner.

This great story composed by Jesus is not just a moral tale inviting us to lead more moral lives. It is rather an exploration of the mystery of Love, the mystery of God especially where that mystery touches us in our human weakness and failure. And since our common experience is often that of failure and sin, this story should have immense interest for us. Both of these boys in the story are found within me and both boys had got their father wrong. The young boy who failed badly in life felt sure he had forfeited his place as son and is ready to move into the servants' quarters. But he finds he has never lost his place in his father's heart and is welcomed with lavish expression of love. The elder boy who felt sure he was a big success through his own efforts finds himself outside alone and cold in the yard while a joyful party is celebrated inside. He thought the father too mean to give him even a kid to celebrate while in fact the whole farm was his. Jesus asks us to believe that God's love will always be more wonderful and beautiful than any idea we may have of it. Also it will always be more challenging. Love is not just a matter of keeping commandments and being, as it were, on the safe side of God. There is only one side when it comes to relating to God and that is to stand with him in loving service and to forgive fully and always those who fail to appreciate his or our love. This seems an almost impossible challenge. It will be, if we forget that God stands beside us in total love offering us his power.

Let us note something very important. Jesus tells this story as Jesus the man, the human person, one of us. He speaks here out of his own personal human love experience of God his Father. 'My son, you are always with me and all I have is yours.' Jesus as one of us has heard the father speak this to him in prayer. He is certain of this. It is his human experience, not a memory from some prior heavenly existence. This is the deep meaning of the Incarnation. Jesus has total confidence that this word is spoken to all of us. He says he makes known to us all he had heard from his Father. (John 15:15) And revealing these precious communications fills him with joy. (Luke 10:21) God is his father and our father. So with the total confidence of love he places these words on the father's lips as addressed to you and me. Jesus says the father wants to share all with us, not just the creation, things, gifts but all, which includes God's very own being, life, joy. At the last supper Jesus said, 'I have told you all this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.' (John 15:11) The deep personal joy experienced by Jesus had its source in his love relationship with his father. If we are to have this same experience of joy we must have the proper vision of our father. Jesus was seeking always to implant this new vision, this new imagination, new experience of God. If only we could glimpse it, catch it, be touched by it, we could become a new creation, a new person. Jesus is certain we can. He will lay down his life for this certainty, this vision, this understanding of God, his God and our God, his Father and our Father. (John 20:17)

Be still and know that I am God. We hear this word addressed to ourselves. And so did Jesus the man. Jesus prayed the Psalms as we do. We know from the Gospels that Jesus would seek this stillness in lonely places so that God could reveal himself to the human heart. 'In the morning long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.' (Mark 1:35) We too are invited to this kind of prayer. God asks us to come just as we are. Me as I am. This is the only me that exists, the only me he can touch, heal, bless and love. Me as I am with no pretending, no masks, no hiding. And maybe God in his turn is saying something similar. 'My friend, take me as I am. I can come to you no other way.' With the help of Jesus, hopefully we are moving

away from the tiny idols of our own or another's construction and are entering into the wonder, joy and excitement of the God of Jesus.

Chapter Sixteen

Ugly Duckling?

I have heard good Christians complain of the exaggerated behaviour of the father in the story of the prodigal son. He seems to act out of sentimentality. We know parents who can be sentimentally fond of a child. In their eyes the child can do no wrong. They excuse the child on every occasional This is not true love. It is favouritism and can cause much pain. We are not talking about this kind of softness. Love is not soft. It is as strong as death. Forgiveness is not weakness. It has the strength of love. The story-teller who composed the parable will later die on Calvary for this story. 'God is love.' (1 John 4:8) To love is to forgive. As the love of God is mystery beyond our understanding so also the forgiveness of God is deep mystery inviting us to prayer and wonder. We must be on our guard against arguing from our understanding and practice of forgiveness to God's kind of forgiving. The word 'forgiveness' cannot do justice to the reality of God forgiving us. It suggests cancelling a punishment that should follow a transgression and often implies condescension 'I forgive you' suggests 'I will overlook your mistake, your sin.' 'Overlook' does not always mean 'forget'. I will forgive you but won't forget. But true forgiveness is a form of loving. It is not a matter of cancelling a punishment. It is not merely repairing or patching. It heals, give new life, recreates.

We have reflected on the two great Gospel stories, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well and the story Jesus told of the return of the prodigal. Let us pay more attention to the nature of God's forgiveness revealed in these stories. In each story a person is totally transformed. The Samaritan woman with her bad reputation comes out to the well, a lonely rejected figure. At the end of the story she is a person full of joyful excitement running from house to house to call out the townsfolk to meet this wonderful man Jesus. The prodigal son leaves the pigsty, hunger, disgrace and guilt and returns home to be embraced by a loving father and be fêted with an extravagant celebration.

Notice that in neither of these stories does God say to either of these two people. 'I forgive you.' Forgiving is just not mentioned. To the woman at the well Jesus said at the start of their chat, 'If you knew who you were talking to, and the gift he has for you, you would ask, and he would give.' And he knows her story. But he does not ask her to confess or fulfil any conditions after which he can forgive her. He suggests if she can accept him as love she will experience in the same moment that all is forgiven. When the prodigal returns, he starts to say out the confession he had rehearsed but the father is so overwhelmed with joy that he is not listening. There is no hint or trace of self-pity in the father's conduct. And at the well we can imagine that Jesus was just thrilled to give this woman the living water of love and to rejoice with her. Our forgiving so often tends to make the one forgiven feel bad, even humiliated. God's forgiving makes the sinner not only 'feel' good, but, wonderful to say, makes the sinner to be good. It is a new life. The person is transformed. A spring of water bursts open within, life is restored. The person has an experience of being found and reunited with love.

We have said earlier that it is hard for us to imagine unconditional love. Yet we know true love must be unconditional. We are loved not because we do something, succeed, achieve, behave, but because we are, because we belong to God. As it is hard to imagine and accept this, so equally it is difficult to imagine unconditional forgiveness which is inseparable from love. We think forgiveness can only be given if we promise to stop sinning and do penance for sin committed. But God's forgiveness is identical with his loving. As he loves so he forgives. He wants only to heal us, renew and recreate us. And so his forgiveness is also unconditional. He just loves and in the loving is saying 'all is forgiven'. It is this kind of forgiving that scandalised the Pharisees. They could accept the idea of a sinner being forgiven but only after clear signs of repentance and atonement. But this new kind of forgiveness practised by Jesus was intolerable and scandalous. To share table fellowship with known sinners, to eat and drink with them before they showed sign of change, that was totally unacceptable. God could not be like that. This was blasphemy.

It can help us to understand in some way God's kind of forgiving if we try to see sin and failure as God sees them and compare with how we see them. We can know God's mind only by looking at Jesus and noticing how he speaks of sin. Jesus described sin as 'sickness'. (Mark 2:17) He spoke of sin as 'getting lost'. (Luke 15:16) He saw sin as death, 'My son was dead and has come to life.' (Luke 15:24. We on the other hand, see sin mostly as malice. We believe the other person intends evil. Jesus does not seem to see it this way. He has a far better opinion of human nature than we have. He does not seem to attribute intended malice. When he asks his father to forgive those who crucify him, he says, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34) But we so easily and quickly attribute evil intention and malice. And we continue to do this even when we discover that often we misjudged a person's intention. And so we demand repentance and penance for hurt maliciously done and guarantees for the future. This is not the language of Jesus who is Love and Forgiveness, who sees us so differently and conveys forgiveness through unconditional loving.

'Love keeps no record of wrong.' (1 Cor. 13:5) This is the great quality of genuine love, God's kind of loving. When God forgives, he forgets. We, sad to say, are not like that. We remember. 'I hope we won't have a repeat of last year!' 'Remember what happened at the last party...' And so the sins of last year are remembered and kept alive and generate revenge and evil in this generation. Our forgiving, even when offered, can be so condescending. We are aware we are being merciful in deciding to forgive this person. We agree to overlook but don't forget. This kind of forgiving can generate guilt and fear. God hardly seems aware he is forgiving, and that kind of mercy can generate tears of joy and love. We are concerned about restoring our offended dignity and hurt feelings by condescending to forgive. God is more concerned with our hurts and wounds, even when we bring them on ourselves. He just embraces us and heals our wounds.

This is grace, amazing grace, pure gift. I am accepted by perfect love as I am. I am known through and through by Jesus and he says he accepts me, heals me, loves me. All is forgiven. All includes everything, big and small, long past or recent, remembered or forgotten. All is forgiven and forgotten and has no more reality. The only reality is Jesus looking at me, holding out his hands to me. Will I accept? If I do, this is what we call grace. When this happens, I am still the same person and yet totally different. At the moment of grace I am not instantly morally better than I was earlier, but I am different. I am forgiven and loved. I am not any more, nor can be again, alone. To describe this transformation St. Paul says we become 'a new creation'. He links it with reconciliation, accepting this unconditional love and forgiveness. We are restored to true love, and, he says, it is all God's work. (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

When we receive and accept this amazing grace, does this mean instant holiness? Yes and no. Yes, I am holy this instant in a very deep and real way because I am created by God, loved, healed, embraced by him right now. I am aware in a flash of the wonder of my being, of my real identity, that I am in fact in the image and likeness of my Creator who is all Holy. No, I am not instantly holy in the other sense that I have reached full spiritual growth and all trials and temptations are over. On this side of heaven we are invited to grow, to become more and more holy, which means to become more and more Christ-like, to love as Christ loves and forgive as Christ forgives. This is a great challenge and is a life-time's work. Grace is not a sign that we have arrived but that we have started a journey into mystery, wonder and joy. Christ is with us each moment of the journey reminding us of our true identity that we are children of the Father and can with his help be like our Father.

Some years ago I wanted to buy a copy of Hans Andersen's 'Fairy Tales' in a Dublin book store. When I asked for a book of fairy stories, the lady asked: 'For what age group?' I said, 'Sixty-seven years!' She replied, 'Six or seven years? Yes we have something suitable.' I said with a smile, 'No, sixty-seven years. I want them for myself.' She gave me a long look but was very obliging. I decided not to upset her further by trying to explain that I wanted the book for prayer! Here is an abbreviated version of one of the old favourites. I hope it brings back happy memories and I suggest it can also serve as a kind of parable to conclude our present reflection.

On a certain farm a duck had hatched out a new family of ducklings. One of the new family was larger than the others. It did not have soft golden feathers but was dirty and grey in colour. It was clumsy and quite ugly. The mother tried to be kind to her ugly child. Not so the rest of the farm. The ugly duckling was barked at by the dogs, was mocked and bitten by the hens and even other ducks. Life became so unbearable the ugly duckling ran away. He reached the lake in the forest but there even the wild ducks laughed at him. Months passed, and he grew larger and more ashamed of himself. Winter came and one day he saw three large, beautiful white birds flying over the lake and trees. He admired their beauty and power of flight and for a moment entertained an impossible dream: 'If only I could be like them!' Spring came. The ice on the lake melted. Then one day again he saw the same three birds fly high over the forest, but this time they landed on the lake. He quickly moved closer to see them but tried to conceal himself, afraid of the mockery of such majestic creatures. But he was seen, and the three birds swam swiftly and smoothly towards him. He hung his head awaiting the expected mockery. But to his wonder the birds called out in a most friendly way, 'Hi, come and join us!' He replied, 'I can't. I'm only an ugly duckling. Kill me and put me out of my pain.' Then he heard amazing words. 'Ugly? You're not ugly. You're beautiful! You are one of us. Look in the lake and see.' He came closer and looked in the mirror of the water and saw himself for the first time. 'Is this really me? What am I?' They answered, 'You are a swan and you can fly high with us.' With heart bursting with joy he swam out and joined his true family. When in prayer I look into the eyes of God, I can find my true identity. With the light of the Holy Spirit I can look into the eyes of Jesus. In that mirror I will see myself as I am.

Then God will say, 'You're not ugly. You are beautiful. You are one of us. Come and join us.'

You share our power to fly above the gravity of sin and to love and forgive as we do.'

Chapter Seventeen

Union with God

'The Kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a programme but is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God. (Redemptoris Missio 18 – John Paul II). This person Jesus spoke a new, challenging and mysterious language, different from any other prophet before or after. He did not say, 'I speak the truth'. He said: 'I am the Truth' (John 14:16) He did not say, 'If you accept my teaching you will discover a new life.' He said, 'I am the life.' When followers asked him the way to heaven, he did not offer a set of directions. He said simply, 'I am the way'. (John 14:6). He invited people to believe in him rather than his message, to seek union with him rather than learn his teachings. Christianity is not a philosophy, nor an ideology. It is a person offering love and life through loving union with himself. Its heart is a personal relationship of love and union with Jesus Christ and with God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. 'Eternal life is this: to know you, the true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (John 17:3). Eternal life is not the life that follows the death of the body and is associated with heaven. It is rather God's own kind of life which is independent of death and is offered now. It is love. It is union with God. If I accept it, nothing, not even death, can take it from me. (Rom. 8:35-37). Prayer is an invitation to know God. In scripture 'to know' is to love, to be one in love. Prayer invites us to this union of love which satisfies the deepest hunger of our hearts.

Please do not say this invitation to union with God is meant for certain chosen souls, saints and mystics and not meant for the likes of you and me who find it hard to be still in prayer even for a short time. We come from God. We return to God. We are chosen of God, and are created for union with God and nothing less. The evangelist John in his Gospel records the words and prayers spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper. There Jesus prays for his companions at table with him and also prays explicitly for us: I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me. (John 17:20) Read that prayer which Jesus prayed for you and me. See the tender, strong, intimate love expressed in the last conversation with his friends just before his death. If we accept that Jesus is really serious, we can never again say we are not called into deep union in prayer with God:

Father, may they be one in us,
as you are in me and I am in you – v.21
I have made your name known to them
and will continue to make it known,
so that the love with which you loved me may be in them,
and so that I may be in them – v.26

Jesus shares out loud his prayer to the Father. He gives us a privileged glimpse into the depths of his heart in these most solemn moments before his death. We see how he thinks of his Father, of his friends at table and of ourselves. It is important we keep in touch with reality here and remind ourselves what kind of people are with Jesus at this meal. As he looks around the table, he does not see twelve saints with haloes. He sees Thomas, Peter, John, Judas, Matthew and the others. Surely

an unlikely group to sit so close to God and to be the recipients of such tender love! Before the meal he had washed their feet causing poor Peter to protest. Jesus had replied, 'If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.' (John 13:8). Maybe there is a message here for us when we feel we are not worthy to be invited into the intimacy of prayer.

These men at table with Jesus were weak, fearful men. They mostly did not understand what was happening. Judas would betray him. Peter would deny him and all, but one will desert him in his hour of greatest need. Despite all this, there was a friendship there which would grow in time. These men will realise with the help of the Holy Spirit that it was no one less than God who was loving them with this warm human love and accepting them just as they were. They will realise Jesus went through brutal torture and cruel death for them despite their poor response. We are no better than these friends. All that was true for them is true for us. We too are known as we are and are accepted and he suffers and gives his life for each of us. We are invited into the same close friendship. If friendship is to grow, friends must spend time together. Prayer is being with our Friend. (John 17:24)

Be still and know. In this stillness we hear Jesus praying to the Father for us, 'Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.' (John 17:21). We wonder at those words. Can it be true I am called to intimate union with the divine? St. Augustine says yes, and until you let yourself be drawn into God, you will never know real peace. But if I surrender to this call will I not lose my very self, my separate identity? Jesus has a strange word about that. He said if you want to discover and know your true self you must begin by losing yourself. 'Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.' (Matt. 16:25) Don't restrict this word to mean dying for Christ but see it rather as an invitation to live for Christ, to accept our true meaning as revealed by Jesus and to live out of this meaning a life of love. This involves accepting the love poured into our hearts by God and allowing it to flow freely to our brothers and sisters. Here we are getting in touch with our true identity. We are more wonderful than any work, job, role, function. Our friends may identify us by the work we do, the role we play in society. But we are more mysterious and wonderful than any work we do. We are in the image of God and asked to be like our Father and to be like Jesus who came to reveal the truth about God. We are asked to become a new person, another Christ.

What was this Christ like? Jesus himself is the best answer to that question, 'Will seeking union with God not obscure my unique human identity?' Who was closer to God than Jesus? His loving friendship with Abba was the very heart of his life and gave it all meaning. Yet there was never a more authentic outgoing human person in the world than Jesus. Close union with God will not obscure my human identity, but in fact enable me to find my deepest meaning and be who I am meant to be, an even more truly authentic human person.

The more I grow in God, the more I will go out to people. God's very nature is outgoing. Is this not the meaning of the mystery of creation? God wants to share his being. Since he is Love he pours himself out in the act of creation, sharing his beauty, his very life with us. We can see the mystery of the Incarnation in the same light, God revealing himself to us in Jesus, 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father.' (John 14:9) If then prayer brings me into closer union with God, it will simultaneously send me out in love to people. Union with God will not mean distance from people. The very opposite dynamic is at work. Not only will I find my own true self in God but God will introduce me to my brothers and sisters in their own deeper reality beneath many deceptive appearances. Surely this was the secret of Jesus and of the special personal love he had for each person. He knew who people really were. At the last supper he kept stressing the unity and love among us that would be the fruit of coming closer to God; indeed this unity and love would be the best sign that we were in union with the true God. Union with God in prayer would not only send

me back to people but would send me with the great healing power of love that Jesus exercised which was the fruit of his union with the Father. When the woman at the well met Jesus, she had to run to others and invite them to come and meet him as well.

Our union of love with God and one another in this life must be very imperfect. Fulfilment awaits us in heaven. Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror, but then we shall be seeing face to face.' (1 Cor. 13:12) Our death will be the high point of union with God and will lead us on into fullness of life, to the experience of love, beauty, joy which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart imagined. Then we shall know and see God, our own selves and each other face to face. Teilhard de Chardin has a beautiful reflection on death in which he prays for the grace to see the moment of death as a moment of Holy Communion. He speaks of the wish of good and fervent people who would love to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion on their death bed. Then for himself he asks the grace that he would see and experience his very death moment as Holy Communion. In 'The Divine Milieu' he writes:

'When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind), when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me, when that painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away with yourself...The more the future opens before me like some dizzy abyss or dark tunnel, the more confident I may be...if I venture forward on the strength of your word, of losing myself and surrendering myself to you, of being assimilated by your body, Jesus. You are the irresistible and vivifying force, O Lord, and because yours is the energy, because – of the two of us – you are infinitely the stronger, it is on you that falls the part of consuming me in the union that should weld us together. Vouchsafe, therefore, something more precious still than the grace for which all the faithful pray. It is not enough that I should die while communicating. Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.'

This brilliant scientist, philosopher and mystic speaks here with great devotion. But he is not naïve. He speaks of 'those dark moments'. He hopes his faith will be 'strong enough'. He imagines a 'dizzy abyss or dark tunnel'. But all his hope is in Jesus; 'you are stronger.' And he prays with humility that his death will mean communion with Jesus.

Surely, we can all make this prayer, no matter what the actual circumstances of our death may be. This deepest and most mysterious moment of life may come in the peaceful surroundings of home or hospital, or in a sudden tragic accident, or in a moment of violence inflicted by evil forces or even in a very sad moment when the end is self-inflicted because of inner pain and hurt beyond our knowing. We just humbly pray that in that moment, no matter where, when or how it comes in God's providence, we will find holy communion for all of us. If our faith is weak and our fear great, let us confess again the God we have been speaking about in these pages, the God beyond our comprehension, whose love and forgiveness cannot be described or measured. As de Chardin says, he is 'infinitely the stronger'. He is the God revealed by Jesus, the God who ran down the road to meet a prodigal son and lead him into a celebration. This is the God who will meet us at the moment of passage to our eternal home. He knows we could be thinking of 'dark tunnels' and be afraid so he will make sure to be there in the brightness of his love. Meanwhile before the day comes let us seek him often in the holy communion of prayer.

Chapter Eighteen

God of Astonishment

The prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper touches each of us deeply. We feel we are involved in a great mystery, that God in Jesus should invite us into such intimacy. It is hard for us to believe that we are the subject matter of this prayer and that in our poverty and smallness we are invited to such a relationship. The mystery deepens as the story moves on, for this young man Jesus who spoke of such love now shows how serious he is by enduring cruel suffering and a horrific death because of this love. If we wondered at his words of love must we not be overwhelmed by the suffering he now endures because of this love? 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.' (John 15:13) Why are we not swept off our feet by all of this? Do we think it is too good to be true? We seem to find it much easier to believe that God is angry and cross with us when we sin than to believe that he is suffering for us in Christ to tell us he loves us. We need the stillness of prayer to give God a chance to convince us that he truly did suffer and die for us. And when we do reflect on his suffering and death for us, the fruit of this prayer should not be sadness, guilt or fear but a sense of wonder, joy, celebration and love.

In the upper room Jesus and his friends had shared the Paschal Meal to celebrate the greatest event in the history of their race, the delivery of the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt under the leadership of Moses with great power and many miracles. But much more was happening this night than these simple men could realise. They were celebrating a past event of history. But God in Jesus was looking to the present and future and a drama was unfolding which would involve not one race but all people of all time. It would be the greatest escape story of all time. God is setting free all people not from any external political tyrant but from the more terrible inner tyranny that can deprive us of authentic freedom, joy, peace and happiness. God through his liberator Jesus will make it possible for all people of all time to overcome those inner tyrants, which hold us in slavery: fear, anger, addiction, pride, anxiety. And this rescue will be achieved not by any great display of miraculous power compelling us to follow our Saviour out into freedom. There will be one miracle which will split the atom of evil and release the most powerful life-giving force in existence, namely love. This miracle will be the freely accepted suffering and death of Jesus.

The men at that supper listening to Jesus praying for them had no idea of the reality in which they were involved. As events unfold, we find from their words and behaviour that they are totally confused. All their thoughts and value categories are shattered. All their dreams and expectations are smashed. In their eyes their friend Jesus proved just another vulnerable prophet. One of the group betrays him. Peter, the chosen leader, denies him. The others run off and hide. These men have no idea of what is really happening. Let us ask, 'Did Jesus know? Did he know how things would go?' Here we must speak with great care.

Jesus believed he was the specially chosen one called by God to save his people. He believes God is his Father and this Father is love. Therefore he will walk the path of love and save by loving. He will not return evil for evil, will not answer hate with hate. He will forgive and love. This will involve a tremendous struggle, but he will rely on his Father. This does not mean that he knew the end as we know it from the Gospel. If we thought like that, we would rob Jesus of his true humanity and would

rob this story of its power to save us. This would cast Jesus in the role of a stage actor, one who is not really touched by the torture, pain, loneliness and need to trust another, one who knows when the curtain rings down he can remove the make-up and costume and go back to 'real' living. Jesus is saviour because he suffers terrible torture and abandonment but still believes in love. This part of his story is utter reality and indeed is Glory. The marks of the wounds on his body are not pencil marks that will be wiped off with a cloth. They are marks of love and glory and will be preserved in his risen body. As we reflect on the sufferings of Jesus, we are not spectators watching a passion play. We are being drawn into a real flesh and blood story of hatred, temptation, courage and love in which each of us is intimately involved.

After the supper Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He has a sense of foreboding that some terrible evil is near. He is aware of the build-up of hatred among his enemies. He had openly challenged them many times. They are men of power who control men and machinery that could destroy Jesus. He has some knowledge that Judas has been in touch with them. Jesus needs his father's help. Also he feels the need of human friendship and support, 'He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him. And sadness came over him and great distress. Then he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and keep awake with me.' (Matt. 26:37-38). He moves away to be with his father in prayer. We are not told he kneels to pray. Matthew says he 'fell on his face' and Mark says 'he threw himself on the ground'. Suddenly all his determination, self-composure and bravery are gone and in prayer he asks his father that he might be spared what is coming. How deep his fear and distress that he would make this prayer! But he is true Son of his father, the man of love and prays 'Let it be as you, not I, would have it.' (Matt. 26:39)

In the earlier part of Matthew's gospel we read of another incident that took place on a night of fear and danger. It happened out on a lake. Jesus and his friends are crossing the lake when a sudden storm blows up and threatens the boat and passengers. Jesus is asleep in the boat. In terror the disciples wake him, 'Save us Lord! We are going down!' (Matt 8:25) Now in the garden, all is reversed. An evil storm blows up suddenly, sweeps over Jesus and threatens his very person producing a sweat of blood. Now he needs help and the disciples are asleep. But he does not wake them. He goes back to his father in prayer. When he, the strong one, had calmed the storm on the lake, the disciples wondered and said, 'Whatever kind of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him.' Now this strong man is beaten so low in his humanity we too must wonder, 'What kind of man is this?' We remember the words of Br. Emile of Taizé, 'The God of the Gospels can be met only in astonishment.' And our astonishment here must be provoked not by his failure to calm the storm in the garden, but by his love which enables him to keep going and not to give up.

In the Lenten liturgy near to Good Friday a number of Scripture readings describe certain escape stories. In each story some who believe and put all their trust in God are in danger of death because of their fidelity to God. In each story there is a last minute rescue from certain death. Isaac is about to be sacrificed by Abraham from when an angel of God intervenes and the boy is spared. In the book of Daniel we find Susannah the God-fearing woman is falsely condemned to die for adultery. God inspires Daniel to defend her and expose her false accusers and she is rescued. In the third story three young Jews are thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship an idol. God sends his angel to protect them from the flames and they are released and honoured. We enjoy these stories. We rejoice when evil is thwarted and good triumphs. We like a story with a happy ending. In the present story a young man of thirty-three years of age, God's special beloved who has done no wrong, is in mortal danger because he has followed the path of love. As the net closes round him in the next few hours it seemed as if God might use Pilate to rescue him. Pilate knows there is no case

against him and proposes an amnesty in honour for the Jewish festival. But we know from the story there will be no rescue. It is good to ask why.

We can say Jesus has presented a picture of God which is unacceptable and so is guilty of blasphemy. But I believe we must look deeper. There is a much deeper reason which touches all of our lives and again reveals the wonder of God's love. This reason is that for most of us who believe in Jesus and call ourselves his followers there will be no rescue from life's sorrows and tragedies. This Saviour is truly one of us. He will not try to escape. He is love. He will identify with us and so we will know when we cry out to God, 'Where are you? Please let this chalice pass', we will remember that he too cried out this way and his Father brought him through the worst. We will realise our God is not out there looking on. He is within, intimately with us in bearing pain and offering power. And no matter what happens there will be no suffering or tragedy stronger than his sustaining love. John MacMurray, a Scottish philosopher, writes 'The maxim of illusory religion runs: Fear not, trust in God and he will see that none of things you fear will happen to you; that of real religion runs: 'Fear not; the things you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of. 'Jesus does not say, 'Follow me and you will have no suffering.' He says, 'When you do meet suffering, even the worst, I am with you.' These words, 'I am with you', (Isaiah 43:2) assume deep and powerful meaning when we see Jesus humbly endure the torture, mockery and death of his passion.

Will we accept God as he comes to us in Jesus, a God who suffers? We prefer our own version of God, a small God we carry in our pocket like a charm to protect us from suffering. If we are honest, we will have to admit our feelings about God and Jesus can be ambiguous. We don't want a distant God who creates us and withdraws into cloudy heights to look down on us, untouched by our pain. But at the same time we want him to be most like the God we imagine him to be, the God of power and miracle who will save us from pain and make us happy and secure. In contrast the true God is foolish and weak.

'While the Jews demand miracles and Greeks look for wisdom, here we are preaching a crucified Christ, to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, a Christ who is the power and wisdom of God.' (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

We want the last-minute rescue, the dramatic answer to prayer. We want that exam, that job. We want the cancer cured, the depression lifted. We know our asking cannot be wrong. We ask only good things. The one we ask loves us. He suffered and died for us. Yes, it is right to ask and keep asking. We must also ask the power to trust this God no matter what happens. I believe as time goes on that life will teach us much and will lead us to know more intimately the God who is Jesus and to love him despite our pain and wounds. I believe we will find through experience the truth of Paul's words, 'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Cor. 1:25). We will be able to pray with St. Peter, 'Lord you know all things, you know that I love you.' (John 21:17) We will be able to say, 'Lord, you know all things. You know our poor confused hearts, how often we complain, blame and doubt you and even walk away. You know how we want you to be the problem solver, the miracle worker, the one who give us a better deal in life. You know all this but you know that deep down we love you for sharing our suffering by all that you freely and lovingly endured on Calvary for us. Help us hang on as you did and never to lose trust in you just as you did not lose trust in our Father.'

Chapter Nineteen

Himself He Cannot Save

One Sabbath day Jesus went into the Synagogue and found a man there with a withered hand. The scribes and Pharisees were watching him to see if he would cure on the Sabbath. Jesus called the man out front and asked the Scribes and Pharisees, 'Is it against the law on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil?' They refused to answer. Jesus cured the man. The story ends with these words, 'But they were furious and began to discuss the best way of dealing with Jesus'. (Luke 6:11) The enemies of Jesus discuss what is, the best way to deal with him: There are many ways of dealing with a troublesome opponent. They could slander him and have him imprisoned. They could arrange an accident or hire an assassin. Eventually one night at a secret meeting they decide the only sure way is death. He will have to die. Here is an extraordinary irony, for in fact they choose the 'best way'. It will reveal the highest point of love. 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.' (John 15:13).

Let us understand what we are saying here. In the garden Jesus had prayed 'My Father, if this cup cannot pass by without my drinking it, your will be done.' (Matt. 25:42). What is God's will? Is it that his son should suffer? No, God does not 'will' suffering for Jesus or for anyone. We would condemn a human father who planned pain for his child. Why should we ascribe to God what we find so repulsive among ourselves? God's will is that Jesus should save his people by love, and the way things are developing, love was leading Jesus the man into the dangerous hands of ruthless enemies who would not stop at murder. Further, we are not saying Jesus had a death wish and provoked his own death. We are saying God is love and Jesus is love. God wants to reveal the true face and power of love in a world where there is so much evil and terrible suffering because of this evil. The divine plan is to reveal that there is a God who cares and who is on the side of those who challenge evil with love. Jesus makes this love visible. He takes the side of broken people, sinners, and failures, all of us. In choosing this life he runs into criticism and opposition from the power group in his land. They will not scruple to destroy him if he persists. He will not go back on love. He will not answer evil with evil nor hate with hate. He will love to the point of death trusting love will prove stronger than death. So he will speak to our dull hearts and hope to convince us that we are precious, and he loves us, and also hope that inspired by his love, we might walk the same path in our world and try to love at all costs.

We read in the life of Abraham Lincoln that one day before the slave trade was abolished he was present at a slave market watching the proceedings. A young Negro woman was put on the stand to be auctioned. As the bidding progressed Lincoln joined in to the surprise of some who knew his hatred for slavery. Finally Lincoln was declared owner of the slave after outbidding others. He paid the money and received the papers of ownership. Then the unexpected happened. He went over to the woman and pressed the ownership papers into her hands and said, 'Take these. Now you are free.' At first the woman was confused having no idea of Lincoln's intentions in bidding for her. Lincoln explained he had paid the price, so she could be a free person. As she took the papers guaranteeing her freedom it dawned on her what this stranger had done. She looked at him and asked: 'Does this mean I can go where I like and do what I want?' Lincoln said yes, she was now free to choose her own way in life. She answered, 'If I am free to go where I want and do what I choose, then Sir, I would like to go with you and serve you for the rest of my life.' We can understand this girl's feelings, a man she had never met had paid a large sum of money that she might be set free

from slavery and be able to live a dignified human life. St. Peter writes to the first Christians, 'Remember the ransom that was paid to free you was not paid in silver and gold but in the precious blood of the lamb without spot, namely Christ.' (Peter 1:20). If we could believe this with our hearts, we might say to Christ what that girl said to Lincoln, 'Lord we would like to go with you and serve you always.'

The Passion is a love story. Jesus sacrifices his life to deliver us from the slavery of evil. God the Father loves us and Jesus for making this sacrifice. Each moment of the story is in God's strong hands and under God's loving providence. We must not think God lost control for a while on Calvary then regained control in the resurrection. We must not see Calvary as a terrible failure recovered by the success story of the resurrection. The mystery is much deeper. The passion, death and resurrection are providential. We have said God did not plan the suffering and death of Jesus, but it is equally true they did not fall outside of his Providence. So often we reduce providence to something as trivial as good luck. But it is richer, deeper, more wonderful and mysterious. It is the heart of the mystery of God. We could say it is the Kingdom of God we spoke of earlier. It is God in the thick of our world, especially in the ugly reality of sin, evil and suffering. God is present there bringing good out of evil. He is there recreating beauty and love in places we considered to be unrelieved darkness. The first act of creation was an act of love where God created beauty and life out of nothing. Now in redemption, the new creation, we have an act of incredible love, this time creating life and love out of much worse than nothing, out of evil, hatred and death.

Sometime before his arrest Jesus has raised his friend Lazarus from the death. So he said his friend's sickness would be for his glory. This seemed to suggest that the miracle of raising Lazarus would lead people to believe. In fact it hardened the hearts of his enemies and hastened his death, 'From that day they were determined to kill him.' (John 11:53) The real place of glory was to be Calvary. Here would be the deepest revelation of God and his love. It would not been seen clearly on the day of execution. On that dark day there would be some small ray of light, the presence of the women, the onlookers who strike their breasts, the pagan Roman soldier who sees deeper than the enemies of Jesus. But Calvary still remains a place of dark mystery and apparent victory of evil. We must not minimise this because we know of the resurrection and how the story ends. We must not minimise the agony of Jesus and the power of evil. Jesus gives a terrible cry of abandonment and dies an ignominious death. But in that terrible inner struggle he places himself in his father's hands and holds on. We must not falsify the Christian message. Evil is terribly real. We cannot explain it away. God does not explain it away or excuse it. Our response is not mere human optimism, neither can it be glib pious words that God will bring good out of it. Our only response is that of Jesus. In dark faith he hangs on and trusts God. Jesus suffers the evil, absorbs it, even forgives, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:24) And he trusts, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' (v.46) This is the answer of love and with his help which will never be refused, it must be our answer. Thus we must console and strengthen one another when evil assails us. We must never make light of it or suggest it can be acceptable because God will bring good out of it. We must resist evil in the world, but when it seems to have victory, we must trust God's love will overcome.

'He saved others, he cannot save himself'. (Matt 27:42) Those who mock Jesus on Calvary say much more than they realise. When they say 'he saved others' they are thinking of the sick and possessed whom he healed and even his friend Lazarus whom he raised to life. They do not realise that they themselves are among the 'others' and are being saved now in a way they cannot understand, by that which they mock and despise. 'Himself he cannot save.' Here they think only of surface reality, physical pain and death on the cross. But there is greater pain than physical pain of body, the pain

of love. And since his is Love he cannot save himself from the pain. True love does not think of itself but only of others. If he came down from the cross, he would deny himself. He would contradict his own hidden true self. And so he cannot come down from the cross because he is God.

The Book of Wisdom expresses the thoughts of those who mock Christ because they do not know the thoughts of God: If the virtuous man is God's son, God will take his part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies. Let us condemn him to a shameful death since he will be looked after – we have his word for it. (Wis.2:18)

'If you are God's son come down from the cross.' (Matt. 27:40) 'Let him come down from the cross now and we will believe in him.' (v.42) Earlier we spoke of our temptation to make God conform to our ideas of him. Our main idea of God is power. He is 'God Almighty' For us 'almighty' means unlimited power, force, domination over any other force of power. God constantly reminds us that his ways are not ours. Nowhere is the difference between God's ways and ours more obvious than on the hill of Calvary. We understand that crowd when they shout, 'Come down and we will believe!' They speak our language. We too find it impossible to recognise God in suffering. When things go very wrong and evil appears to triumph, we conclude God cannot be present. We prefer a God who does away with suffering rather than a God who suffers with us. If God is God, he should do away with suffering. If he is not, then he is not our kind of God. Here is the wonder of the Incarnation. God knows we cannot know him unless he reveals himself. He wants us to know him and shows himself in Jesus as love, a love which becomes visible on Cavalry. We will never be nourished by the passion and death of Jesus till we are certain it is a love story. It has nothing to do with judgement or punishment. It is God in Jesus saying: 'this is how much I love you.' When we begin to accept this love, we can experience the new life Jesus offered Nicodemus and the spring of living water promised to the woman at the well.

Juliana of Norwich in her tenth revelation writes about the passion of the Lord. 'The love that made him suffer exceeds his sufferings, as far as heaven is high above the earth.' She then starts her reflection in this revelation with this beautiful dialogue: Then our Lord Jesus Christ asked, 'Are you pleased because I suffered for you?' I said, 'Yes I am Lord, thank you. Yes, dear Lord, I praise you.' Then our Lord Jesus, our kind Lord, said, 'If you are glad, then so am I. It gives me great joy and happiness, it is a perpetual delight to have suffered for you. If I could suffer more I would.' (Revelations of Divine Love)

Chapter Twenty

My Father and Your Father

The fullness of God's self-revelation in Jesus is found in the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord, what we call the Paschal Mystery. In our Creed this follows immediately after the incarnation. There is no mention of anything between Bethlehem and Calvary, 'He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again.' In a way we are saying Jesus was born so that he might suffer, die and rise for us. In this mystery he opens for us the treasure house containing all the riches of God's love. For the purpose of prayer and liturgy we break up the paschal mystery and reflect separately on the passion, the death and resurrection of the Lord. But that we

may experience the fullness of life and power which the mystery offers us right now, we must continually remind ourselves that it is a unified whole. He who is risen was crucified and he who was crucified is risen and is with us now, offering us power to know, love and follow him.

What I wish to say may become clearer if I recall my own earlier understanding of the paschal mystery. For many years the story of Jesus for me ended on Calvary, Jesus saved me by dying on the cross for me. That ended the saving work he came to do. It was up to me now to avail myself of the grace of that saving power by atoning for sin, self-denial and avoidance of further sin. All this put an unhappy emphasis on sin and punishment rather than on love. In this context the resurrection was presented as a kind of epilogue, a happy ending for Jesus. It was something that happened to Jesus, his reward for his great work of salvation, and for me the resurrection would eventually be my reward after death if I tried to be a faithful follower of my Saviour. This weak and impoverished understanding of the resurrection robbed it of its tremendous power to lead me into an experience of the fullness which Jesus came to bring me here and now. I believed Jesus died for me. I did not realise he also rose for me. I always thought that while he died for me, he rose for himself. Let us reflect on the resurrection and see how we can in prayer enter into the joy, wonder and enthusiasm of his first followers as we begin to experience the life-giving power of this mystery in our lives right now.

One of the first graces we must seek in prayer is a new awareness that we are saved by the whole paschal mystery as a unity. The story of our salvation does not end on Calvary. We are saved by the passion, the death and resurrection. Jesus did not only die for us, says St. Paul, he also rose for us. (Rom 8:34) This risen Lord returned to his first followers and returns to us in a special way in prayer. We must think of the resurrection in the present tense. If we think of it as past history, something that happened to Jesus long ago, or as future mystery, what will happen to us when we die, then we lose all its power for the present moment. Our God is the God of the present moment. God comes to me now, at this moment, just where I am in life as he came to the first followers in their darkness and despair. He comes to me in my own personal death-like situation, my fear, guilt, frustration, depression, anger, mood, addiction. He comes with understanding and compassion, not judging, blaming, criticising, but saying, 'Do not be afraid, I am with you, I've been through it. Together we will manage and overcome.' He comes with light and love offering power, hope, joy. He wants to share the power of that love that operated in his own Calvary experience and called him out of death. He wants to call me forth out of death right now and to join him in life, love and joy.

This reflection introduces us to a much richer understanding of our salvation and our Saviour. It invites us to see salvation not merely in terms of having our sins forgiven. To be saved means so much more. Jesus stresses not what we are saved from but what we are saved for. Salvation is something more wonderful than having the debt of sin cancelled and being spared from some punishment. Our Saviour offers more than forgiveness. He does not merely open the prison doors. He calls us out into fullness of life. He is saving us from meaninglessness, from self-hatred, from feeling unlovable.

He wants us to experience this salvation now. It is a living, growing reality. It is not a ticket to heaven, to be cashed in when we die. It is a present reality and nothing less than love. He invites us into a relationship of love and wants that love to grow and deepen through the years. He wants us to share this light and love with others. But we will not be able to share till we have accepted it and experienced it ourselves. He wants us to have the experience of the woman at the well, the experience of Magdalen in the garden. He searched for these two women. He searches for us also. We can meet him in prayer.

To understand what this can mean for us now, we must try to enter into the experience of his first followers. We must try to appreciate their thoughts and feelings that Friday evening and Saturday. Meet them in prayer in your imagination. You may have a job finding them! They are hidden all over the place. They are full of guilt, fear, shame but even more of a terrible darkness. All their dreams are broken. Their friend and leader was not what they thought he was. He was just another dreamer. He could not save himself and now he's dead and all that's left is a funeral. Try to get inside their minds and share their darkness. Just share it. Don't judge them or blame them. We make suitable companions for them, for we are no better. We all have our own mixed-up ideas about Jesus and God. Enter this darkness so that you may in some way be able to share their exuberant joy when he appears to them.

Let us not take for granted that Jesus appears to his friends after he rose. He could have returned to the Father. But he loves these friends and, as always, he takes the initiative. He moves first because he is first moved by love. In his usual gracious understanding manner he now comes to his friends in their different places and situations and they begin to absorb the incredible wonder and joy. He is not dead. He is alive. He has overcome death and all fear. He is who he said he was and still cares for them and loves them. And though something incredible has happened, he is still the same, gentle, loving, human and patient Jesus they had come to know to love. He is the same but is now Lord. They experience an ecstasy of joy. They are transformed and become a new creation. They are ready to challenge the world. This is what it means to believe Jesus is risen and with us. These first followers did not start saying, 'Good! So we too shall rise.' They have a new life now. This is what the risen Lord offers us now in prayer.

The risen Jesus comes to his friends in a variety of situations. He comes to them where they were at the moment. He appeared to Magdalen searching for his body in the garden. He came to the disciples hiding behind locked doors in the upper room. He came to the two other disciples running away from Jerusalem. He appeared to Thomas questioning and doubting. And he shows himself to Saul actively denying him and trying hard to efface all memory of him. Where am I at this moment? I may be searching round a tomb of dead and disappointed hopes in life. I may be hiding in fear of threatening forces I cannot properly describe. Maybe I am questioning God and doubting his love for me. Perhaps I have pushed him out of my life. It does not matter. He remains God, the one who is in love with me. He will come to me just as I am with my pain, anger, fear, sin, doubts, with all my small ideas of him, and my certainty that he is dead for me. Can I become still in prayer, offer my grain of mustard seed faith, pray the words, 'I believe, help my unbelief?' If so, we too will have our revelation and will know our Saviour lives.

In prayer we can confidently expect to share Magdalene's experience in the garden on the morning of the resurrection. (John 20:11-18) She is in the garden near the tomb because it was the last place she had seen him whom she loved so much. The tomb is the last link. Jesus is alive now only in her memory. Otherwise he is dead, and she is inconsolable. Then he appears. She, who is so close to him in love does not recognise him. It can happen in life. We fail to see a person because we are certain they are somewhere else. Often our prayer is more like remembering than encountering, remembering a dead Jesus rather than meeting the Risen Lord. Sometimes the reason may again be our poor expectations. We can't believe he would come to us. But the wonder and beauty is that Jesus who seeks Magdalene also seeks us. He asks her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?' (John 20:15)

Surely, he smiled as he asked these questions. 'Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him.' Jesus said, 'Mary!' (John 20:15-16)

When Mary recognises him, she throws herself at him as if to be sure she will never lose him again. Jesus says, 'Do not cling to me.' He is not refusing the intimacy but just reminding her he is not going away. He gives her the joyful mission of informing the others of the good news that he has risen and will be ascending 'to my Father and your Father'. In those words he once again emphasised that he and we have the identical Father and that all he has shared and revealed about that father was true. His home is our home. This is the father who says to all of us, 'all I have is yours.' If Jesus was smiling and laughing during this conversation was not Magdalene smiling forever? Now a new relationship begins which no one can take from her and which time or death cannot end. It was Magdalene's heart that brought her to the garden searching for him whom she thought was dead. Let us come to prayer searching for him with our hearts. He will not be outdone in love. He says to us through the prophet, 'When you seek me you shall find me, when you see me with all your heart, I will let you find me – it is Yahweh who speaks.' (Jer.29:13-14)

Chapter Twenty-one

No Rest in Peace

On the mortuary cards and tombstones of our beloved we write the short prayer, RIP. We pray that our loved ones may rest in peace. We could say the enemies of Jesus were also making this prayer, but for very different reasons! Indeed, in order to make sure that he did rest in peace, they placed soldiers in the garden to guard the tomb. (Matt.27:66) But for Jesus death is not a resting place. Indeed it is not a place at all. It is a passage-way to glory and now as always, he wants to share all he has with his friends. 'All I have is yours.' And so he is busy again, busy in love, coming to his friends to console and heal them. He comes to share the glory of his risen human body and lead them into an even deeper wonder at the mystery of each person destined for this glory.

Let us ask why did Jesus appear to his friends after he rose? Did he come to compel them to faith? This was never his way. He invited but never forced. He worked miracles out of compassion for human suffering but never to force people to believe in him. That was why he would not appear to Caiaphas or Pilate. Their hearts were hardened. They would not be able to see him. From the Gospels we know that the faith of his followers was, to say the least, not very wonderful. But there was enough there for him to work on. He himself said if it was only the size of a grain of mustard seed, he could do wonders with it. He came to them because he dearly loved them, as he dearly loves us. It's as simple as that. He came to console them, to lift up their hearts, to help them overcome their guilt and fear. And he does it in God's way, not ours. There is no scolding, blaming or reminding them of their failure. He meets them with the greeting of peace and gently, patiently allays their fear and agitation. (Luke 24:38) He has work for them to do but he will not bully them into activity. The work is very important but just now he is more concerned for these men and women than he is for the work. His priority now is to lead them to peace and awareness of the great mystery in which they are involved.

In all his meetings with them Jesus repeatedly says, 'Fear not'. Often he had spoken these words when he was with them in his earthly life. Now they have new deep significance and power. Their faith blazes up again in his new real presence. They will have no fear even of the ancient enemy, death. Martin Luther King was once asked was he not afraid when he received death threats. He

answered, 'Fear knocked on the door. Faith answered. There was no one there.' Death was still there but fear was gone. Many of those followers will gladly die for the Lord. Death is no longer a reality in the sense of a final state of nothingness. It is real only as a doorway, a gateway, a passage-way. You pass through it. Now there is no fear of what is on the other side. They now know who is on the other side. If you travel to a foreign country for the first time and don't know the language, you will not worry during the flight if you know your best friend is waiting to meet you. The gentle compassionate Lord is the one who will welcome them and us with open arms when we pass through the doorway of death.

'Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free.' (Luke 24:21). With these words the two Emmaus disciples described their disappointment at the death of Jesus. Their words express the feelings of the whole group and reveal their poor, narrow expectation and their small dream. They are more concerned with their plans for him than God's plans for them and the world. Jesus wants to lead them from their narrow nationalistic dream into God's vision for all people, the glory he has prepared for every tribe and nation. Let us not be naïve here. There is only one way to glory, the way Jesus himself had taken as he explains to these same two disciples on the road to Emmaus, 'Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?' (Luke 24:26) If we follow his way out of slavery into true freedom we will have to pass through suffering and death. We are not talking of choosing suffering and death for their own sake. We choose, like Jesus, only love. We speak of the death involved in becoming more Christ-like, more loving.

To live this new life with Christ will involve death to an old life of fear and selfishness, a death to doubting the nearness and love of God. Our old, false, selfish self must die so that our true loving self may be born. We fear this death and resist it. Our blessed Lord feared it and cried out in Gethsemane. But he trusted his Father to the end. Earlier he had said: 'I tell you, solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. (John 10:24)

Imagine a grain of wheat in the palm of your hand. It is so small. Ask what is it for? It is to give food, life. How can so small a thing do this? It must die. When it does, it generates more grains, new life, and food. Life comes through death. Jesus dies and bring fullness of life to all of us. This is not a negative, pessimistic doctrine; it is the way of love and leads to joy.

St. Luke who personally knew the first followers of Jesus tells us what they had shared with him, 'Their joy was so great that they still could not believe it.' (Luke 24:41) Joy is one of the precious fruits of the resurrection. For a long time in the Christian life there was a strange suspicion of joy. This is related in some way to separating the resurrection from the passion and seeing the resurrection as a future event to happen after death. So joy was, as it were, postponed. Religion then becomes associated with severity, gravity, penance and indeed dullness. Sanctity it seemed was achievable only the hard way, by penance and self-denial. The love of a friend was not considered conducive to spiritual growth, only the love of an enemy. But the good news in the gospel pages gives rich testimony to joy. The incarnation is announced as 'tidings of great joy'. John the Baptist may have been a severe figure at the Jordan, but he leaps with joy in his mother's womb when Jesus is near. Jesus is filled with joy as he announced the God of love to simple people. (Luke 10:21) At the last supper he says, 'I tell you these things so that my own joy may be in you.' (John 15:11) Also at this supper he refers to the celebration that will follow his victory over all his enemies: 'So it is with you now; you are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one will take from you.' (John 16:22)

The Jesus we meet in prayer is this Risen Lord who wants to take away our sadness and share his joy with us. St. Peter writes about us when he says, 'You did not see him, yet you love him, and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described.' (1 Peter 1:8)

If sometimes we feel discouraged because our faith is weak, we could turn to Thomas and ask him to pray for us. I feel we do not do justice to Thomas. I think we should look more at his heart than at his head. He had a strong personal love for Jesus. Some days before the Passover, Jesus said he wanted to go and console Martha and Mary because Lazarus their brother had died. The disciples remind him that Judea, where they lived, was dangerous territory. Only a short time earlier the people there wanted to stone him. When Jesus insisted on going, Thomas said, 'Let us go too and die with him'. (John 11:16) This could indicate a pessimistic personality but could also come from a heart very attached to Jesus. Anyway, when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room, Thomas is not present. Then, when his friends tell him the good news about Jesus, he does not believe them. I think this refusal to believe is not a problem of his mind but of his heart. The strong language in which he expresses his disbelief reveals a deep emotion. Poor Thomas really wants to believe but the news is so incredibly good, he almost fears to believe. Then suddenly Jesus is present. He looks at Thomas, his disciple and friend. Jesus always looks with love. In this very room he had broken bread with Thomas. In this room he who was Master had knelt before Thomas and washed his feet. Now once again the Risen Lord Jesus becomes servant and heals Thomas's aching heart and Thomas makes his great confession of faith. We too want to believe. It's hard to believe we are so loved by God. Let us ask Thomas to pray for us.

Finally let us notice how Jesus related to Peter in these resurrection stories. Peter must have carried a heavier weight of guilt than the other disciples. He had been appointed head of the new community but had three times denied Jesus. On Thursday night, having bravely followed Jesus to the courtyard of the High Priest, his nerve fails him, and he denies knowing Jesus. Now after the resurrection we are told Jesus appeared specially to Peter. The meeting is not described, only noted. When the Emmaus disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their experience, their friends in the upper room say, 'Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' (Luke 24:35) On the night of denial Peter had wept bitterly. Surely in this meeting he must again have wept but with an extraordinary new joy. Finally at the lake of Tiberias Jesus confirms Peter in his office as shepherd of the new community. After breakfast on the lake shore there is a little ceremony of installation. Peter has a final qualifying exam. There are no questions about management skills or psychological fitness. There is only one question repeated three times, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' (John 21:16) There is no reference to the threefold denial and Peter already knows all is well. But in this very gentle way we could say Jesus is reinstating Peter before his brethren. He is also emphasising the most important qualification of leadership in the new community, namely Love.

I am always thankful for these pages in the gospel that record the apparitions of the Risen Lord. They help me in reflecting on that great mystery, the land beyond death. We cannot even begin to imagine a Reality not located in time or space. It is awesome – even frightening. We have said often in this book that we cannot know God with the mind. He is infinite beauty, goodness, love beyond describing, measuring, imagining. Yet we are created in his image, made to love him and one day be with him. In life we get glimpses of God in the wonder and beauty of creation and in experiences of true love, but this is only 'a dim reflection in a mirror' (1 Cor. 13:12) I sometimes wonder how I will cope with the vision of infinite beauty and feel I might be more at ease with something more homely, so to speak. It is here I find the revelation of the Risen Lord so helpful and consoling. Jesus is Risen, he is in Glory; He is already in Heaven. Yet he is so understanding, considerate, close to us

in apparitions. He is completely in touch with all the human emotions and reactions of his very human friends, people so like ourselves. We have been trying to let Jesus teach us what it means to be God and have seen him turn our small ideas upside down. Maybe we could say in these apparitions he is also teaching us about life beyond death, telling us we need to revise some of our ideas, suggesting it will be less 'strange' than we imagine. Magdalene, Peter, Thomas, the Emmaus disciples in a true sense had a foretaste of heaven when meeting the Risen Jesus. They were overwhelmed with joy and their hearts burned within them. We too will experience joy and the hearts God gave us will burn within us. In heaven 'we shall see face to face and know as we are known'. (1 Cor.13:12) We will discover our beauty. The ugly duckling never realised it was so beautiful or could fly so high! Heaven will be full of surprises. Astronauts go through all kinds of exercises to prepare themselves to live in the new and strange environment of outer space. Maybe prayer could be a similar kind of exercise to prepare us for the surprises of heaven. 'Be still and know that I am God.' In the quiet of prayer we give Jesus and our Father and the Spirit a chance to teach us that God is love and heaven is love and we have nothing to fear from love.

Chapter Twenty-two

The Depths of God

When Jesus returned to his friends after the resurrection, he acts as consoler and healer. He comforts them and heals their wounds of guilt, shame and fear. He builds them up individually and as a community. After this we might expect him to call a meeting, give them directions and send them out to spread the good news. But this does not happen. Jesus does not say to his friends, 'I have done my part, now you go and do yours. My work is over, your work now begins.' He says quite different things. 'When he had been at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. It is, he said 'what you have heard me speak about; John baptised with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' (Acts 1:4-5). In the upper room when he appeared after rising, he said 'And now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city then, until you are clothed with the power from on high.' (Luke 24:49) And at the Ascension scene, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8). So Jesus is clearly saying, 'My work is not complete till the Spirit comes and your work does not begin till you receive the Spirit.' God has yet another wonderful gift for us, another incredible dimension of self-revelation. He desires to pour over us his own Holy Spirit.

God reveals himself to us in Jesus, but we cannot know God just by reading about Jesus in the Gospels. We need a helper in our search and prayer. This is the work of the Spirit and if we ask how the Spirit can help us, Jesus answers, 'He will be my witness.' (John 15:26). The Spirit will witness to Jesus, just as Jesus witnessed to the Father. The Spirit does not come to take the place of an absent Jesus now returned to heaven. Rather he makes Jesus present in a new way as Risen Lord and helps us to know Jesus as a real person and experience the present power of his resurrection in our daily lives. For many Christians, Jesus is tied to history and the past. For some he may be only a kind of literary figure, more like a character in one of his own parables. But Jesus is risen, is with us as truly as he was with Magdalene in the garden or with Thomas in the upper room. He calls our name and heals our doubts. The Spirit opens our hearts to this living, present, loving Jesus. Surely it is this

experience of knowing the Lord and being known by him that we need today. The problem of religion in our modern world is not intellectual. Belief is not primarily knowledge but conversion. The answer to the modern fall-away from religion is not so much clearer explanations of the content of faith, but actual experience and celebration of Christ who is the heart of that faith. 'Of what use to have counted all the mangoes, on your tree, if you have not tasted one.' The Spirit is given to lead us to that tasting, that experience.

Another word of Jesus concerning the work of the Holy Spirit has great relevance for our prayer life. 'He will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.' (John 14:26). Here Jesus is not talking merely about recalling or remembering his words. We can read the Gospels and remember his words without the Spirit. But the words of Jesus are not ordinary words. They are living, active words of power. Through Isaiah God describes his word as something alive and actively at work in us. (Isaiah 55:10-11) The word of Jesus is spoken to our hearts. It comes to us now, where we are, bringing light, healing, nourishment. We then can share the experience of the Emmaus disciples whose hearts were burning within them as Jesus spoke and opened the Scriptures to them. It is this blessing the Spirit brings us when he 'reminds' us of all that Jesus said. We have heard Peter telling us how those early Christians who had not met Jesus in the flesh still came to 'know' him. (1 Peter 1:8) Paul also writing to those first Christians rejoices that they were experiencing the good news of the Lord, not only as words, 'but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction.' (1 Thess. 1:4-5)

The Holy Spirit will open the treasures of all that Jesus taught and shared about his Father God and in this way will continue the mission so dear to the heart of Jesus: to reveal the secrets of God to 'mere children' (Luke 10:21) Paul has a beautiful word on this work of the Holy Spirit: 'Everyone moved by the Spirit is a child of God. The Spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of children, and it makes us cry out, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, we are heirs as well; heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory.' (Rom. 8:14-17)

The Holy Spirit is not the spirit of slaves but of God's children. The Holy Spirit touches our own spirit, that deepest inner self, 'the me beyond me', and, 'wonderful to relate', there is an echo. The Holy Spirit and my deepest human spirit are in harmony. They bear 'united witness': To what do they bear witness? To my true identity, my deepest reality, that I am born of God: And in that moment of harmony, the moment of light and delight, I 'cry out' Abba. Notice how Paul puts it. He does not write, 'I say' Abba, but 'I cry out' Abba. It is like a sudden moment of intense awareness. It is really true! I am born of God. I am God's child. The riches of God are my inheritance.

When I read this passage, a certain picture always comes to my mind. I imagine a crowd of young boys playing in a street in a city suburb. It is evening time. Workers are returning home. A young man gets off the bus and enters the street. His son is among the boys playing in the street. Suddenly, the boy looks up from play and sees his father approaching. He stops playing, shouts out, 'Dad!' and runs and throws himself into his father's arms. Jesus was the first human to address God as Abba, the familiar affectionate term, the equivalent of the young boy's 'Dad'. Now this Jesus is with me in prayer, sharing the Holy Spirit with me so that I may know who I am, telling me what he told Magdalene, that his Father is also our Father.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul contrasts the wisdom of God and human wisdom of philosophy. He rejoices that Christians have been introduced to the hidden wisdom of God in their sacred mysteries. He then continues, 'These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the

Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God, and the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:10-11) When we read these words, how can we ever doubt God's desire to reveal himself to us? He gives us his own Holy Spirit to lead us into his depths. Notice when Jesus speaks of the Father sending the Spirit how he emphasises that this was the Father's own special wish, his 'promise' which he was so eager to fulfil.

Left to ourselves we could only create idols. We transfer our human thinking and ways to God even though he warned us that his ways and thoughts are as high above ours as the heavens are above the earth. (Is.55:8-9) But we remain stubborn in our certainty that we know what God is like. We persist in limiting and measuring God. Like potters we make our own small clay God. So God sends Jesus to open our eyes. And now the Father and Jesus send us the Holy Spirit to lead us into the depths of this Mystery we call God. And the breath-taking good news is that this Reality, this Mystery is Love and seeks our love. Is it any wonder that we search for meaning, truth, happiness, fulfilment, love? And is it any wonder that nothing in this world can satisfy us? Surely, we are deep, mysterious people. This Spirit of God speaks to my own depths and makes me cry out, not just with my lips but with my whole person, 'Abba!' to God in recognition of my true Father.

When we seek meaning, love, happiness, fulfilment it is God we seek, even if we say we do not believe in him, and it is Jesus we seek, even if we say he is just another figure of past history, and we are moved by the Holy Spirit even if we are professed materialists. As the river makes its way back to the deep ocean, so all of us are making our way not to death but back to fullness of life, to the depths of God, the source of all life, joy, love. Now and then on that journey home we can touch and taste in the prayer the reality of this God. 'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps.46:10)

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