

In Love with God

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When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they got together, and to disconcert him one of them put a question: "Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" Jesus said: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment." (Mt.22:34-38)

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Introduction

We are all dreamers, all searchers. For many of us, life is routine and often we may have a sense of boredom. We wish something exciting, something new, something different might happen, even in small ways. Maybe today a letter will come with some kind of good news – that I have won a prize in a lottery or that an old friend remembers me with love. Or perhaps there is an announcement in my workplace that salaries are to be raised. Maybe someone will phone to say I have been offered a Scholarship, or the boss calls me into his office to say I am being promoted. Or perhaps I become aware of someone's love. So we dream and hope. Maybe today something new will happen, something exciting.

This dreaming, searching, hoping is part of our humanity. It is a part that becomes very important, even exciting when we interpret it properly. It should be seen as a sign pointing to a deep reality. It should invite us to ask questions: why are we like this? What kind of creature are we? Are these dreams and longings there only to be frustrated? No, they are not doomed to frustration. They have deep rich meaning. They remind us of the mystery of ourselves, that we are not merely human. We are so much more than intelligent and loving animals. We are human, yes. But we are also divine. Our ultimate origin is not our parents' love, but God's love. We are because we are loved by God.

We live and breathe at this moment because we are loved at this moment by God. We are not talking about an action that finished at our conception of birth. We are saying God creates us now and loves us into life at this moment. If that were not true we would not be alive now. What does this mean in practical terms? It means each moment is special, precious, beautiful. It means God lives within us as we read these lines. God is present and active and his activity is love. God is in love with us. This is our deepest meaning. God wants to open the eyes of our heart to see the wonderful beauty of being alive. He wants us to stop, reflect, speak to him, rejoice in his presence and accept his love. If we do, then we will begin to experience a new energy which is part of us all the time though so often lies dormant. This energy is greater than all the negative experiences of fear, depression, loneliness, anger, jealousy, selfishness, etc. We can begin right now to experience a sunshine though it be a cold, cloudy, wet day. A divine power and energy is released within us. Hopefully, we will become aware of the triviality of so many situations, anxieties which we experience.

We will begin to discover that the larger dream of a meaningful life will begin to come true. Despite daily routine and the 'nothing-ever-happens' experience, we will know deep within us that we are made for a meaningful life, the heart of which will be a love relationship. Jesus who came to save us from boredom and meaninglessness promised to give us fullness of life (Jn. 10:10) Jesus encourages us to dream and search and assured us we are made for the fulfilment of these dreams of joy, wonder, beauty and meaning. These dreams are not doomed to frustration. The beginning of fulfilment is to make the great act of faith that my life comes to me from God and that this God is within me, is in love with me and asks my love. So you see you have had a great Lover all the time. This is dream come true. It is Reality. If it were not true we would not be here. I breathe at this moment because I am wanted, I am loved by God. Today I want something new and exciting to break the routine. Here is excitement beyond all dreams, something new and beautiful each day, each moment. In one of our songs we sing:

The dream I have today O Lord, is only a shadow of your dream for me.

When I accept this will everything change? Yes and no, but mostly yes. I say no because my humanity will still be present. I will be bitten by mosquitoes, I will get headaches, I will be annoyed with the children. I will have to pay the bills, etc. I remain human but now am sure of the amazing truth that I am part of God who is present within me, in love with me each moment. This reality can be a source of wonder, joy, of warm love and the new power this love brings. I will be enabled to accept the weakness of my humanity with greater patience, even joy. Yes, everything will change because I will change and see life with eyes of love and experience my God close and holding me each moment in his arms. All my security will now rest in his ever-present loving care. A growth process will go on once I joyfully surrender to his love.

I stress growth which takes time. I can read these words and perhaps feel good and be touched. But for this message to truly nourish me, I will have to stop activity, become still and give some quiet time to prayer. I have to give God, my Lover, a chance to talk to me. When I cease the activity of the body so that I can pray, I will then in prayer time have to cease the activity of the mind and relate to my God within me with my heart. All great lovers of God tell us we can know this God, not with our mind but with our heart. The object of prayer is not to call God to me but to enter awareness of his presence within me, to look at him, to surrender, to let him love me, embrace me, bless me and simply to accept his love. Growth will then happen. I will be drawn into deeper union of love with God. I will know that this is the deepest and most exciting thing in my life. I will realise all this is gift, grace, pure gift. It is not reward. I cannot earn it, only accept it. I am loved by God with his whole heart because I belong to him. He will always remind me: "You are mine."

Now we have gone beyond daydreaming and wishful thinking. We are in touch with reality. We are being led by the Spirit of our God, source of all life, beauty, power, compassion, healing, love. I can begin to think it might be possible to say, "I am falling in love with God." I am afraid to say this out loud. It seems so presumptuous given my poor opinion of myself. But God can cope with all of that and smiles as I try to surrender myself into his arms of love. I hope this book may lead us into a clearer understanding of our relationship with God and to a desire for prayer leading to a more meaningful life and to an experience of the dream for which our God creates us.

Chapter One:

A Man in Love

Jesus was a man in love. He was in love with God his Father. And he was in love with all the people created by his Father, with you and me. He proved this love for us in the most dramatic way. He gave his life for us and reflected, "Greater love than this no man has that that a man will give his life for his friend." (Jn.15:17). Elsewhere he says, "I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father." (Jn.15:15).

We see his love for his Father in his desire for prayer. He wants to be near his Father, to be in communion with his God. Many times in the gospel story he leaves the crowds to seek out a lonely place where he can be united with his Father in prayer. 'His reputation continued to grow and large crowds would gather to hear him and have their sickness cured, but he would always go off to some place where he could be alone and pray.' (Lk.5:15-16). 'After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray.' (Mt.14:23). 'Now it was about this time that he went out into the

hills to pray; and he spent the whole night in prayer to God.' (Lk.6:12). What was happening during those hours of prayer?

Before we try to answer this question, we must remind ourselves of the central truth of the Incarnation – that this Jesus is a true fully human person like us in all things but sin. The love relationship between Jesus and God the Father which we are looking at is a love relationship between Jesus, the true human person like us, and God his Father. This love relationship grows and is powerfully nourished in prayer. If we can accept this deep meaning of the incarnation surely it can move our hearts and attract us to Jesus and to God, his father and our father.

So what was going on in those long hours of prayer between Jesus the man and God his Father. The Father was speaking to Jesus about his love for the world and his desire to lead all people to happiness and fullness of their human life. The father invites Jesus to help in his plan for the salvation of this world. He absorbs the father's love for all people and later refers to them as 'those you have given me' (Jn.17:4). Jesus grows in total conviction that God is love and in the certainty of the father's love for himself and for all people. He will spend his life sharing that love with all. The father's plan to save the world by love becomes the guiding rule of his whole life. "I have come from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of the one who sent me." (Jn.6:38). In the terrible agony in the garden of Gethsemane he is overcome by sadness and darkness and is strongly tempted to draw back from the supreme love offering his life but three times he prays in his agony, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless let it be as you, not I, would have it." (Mt.26:39). Jesus the man grows in love with God and with all of us entrusted to him by God.

And so in the gospels we find this loving man making God's love visible. He is the man of total compassion. He is moved deeply by the sufferings of people: the woman bent double for thirty-three years, the mother weeping for her dead daughter, the blind man, the ten lepers, the Samaritans despised over differences of religion and above all the sinners judged by self-righteous religious leaders and cast out from society. His compassion leads him again and again to criticise the Pharisees and Scribes for their lack of love and their hypocrisy. In the spirit of true religion they should be lifting burdens from peoples' shoulders but instead they impose new and heavy burdens measuring religious life by a multitude of laws and inspiring fear by threatening people with God's everlasting punishment. Meanwhile they parade themselves as true followers of God. By condemning their lack of love and their hypocrisy Jesus puts his life in danger. He is ready to do this that he may reveal the true nature of his Father.

These men grow to hate Jesus and to fear him. He is very popular with the crowd and even some wiser Scribes are saying he should be listened to. The leaders fear Jesus could provoke a popular uprising against the colonial power of Rome which could lead to violent suppressions and possible loss of their own position of authority and power, and with that, their loss of opportunity to use their position for financial gain.

Jesus sees this clearly and knows the great risk he is taking in continuing to speak and live out of compassion and love. But he is in love with his father and his people. That love will be his strength. He continues to warn the Jewish leaders of the gravity of their behaviour. He tells many parables to enforce this warning; the parable of the guests who refused the king's invitation to the banquet (Mt.22:1-14); the parable of the workers in the vineyard who refuse to give the harvest to the master of the vineyard (Mt. 21:33); the parable of the son who said he would work in the vineyard but in fact did not go (Mt.21:28). Jesus was deeply pained to see his father's love rejected. He has so much to give but hearts are hardened, and evil was at work. In one of his prayers he expresses this

pain in language of tenderness and intimacy: "Jerusalem, how often have I longed to father your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, and you refused." (Mt. 23:37).

We are not meant to be judges of these people. Our response always must be to ask ourselves what God's message of love means to me. What does Jesus' offer of love mean to me? We can feel sorry or sad when we see people appearing blind and deaf to the true God and his love and to the amazing love story of Jesus. But as time goes on, we must ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into deeper understanding and appreciation of the wonder and beauty of Jesus and the beauty and wonder of the true God he has revealed and wonderful, beautiful meaning this gives to our lives.

We are people of great mystery. We too, like Jesus, have come from heaven, from God's creative love. Jesus considered us worth dying for. The Father and Jesus give us their own Holy Spirit of love. Yet we often fail to love as we should. When the title of this book suggested itself to me, I hesitated. I want to love God but fear it is too bold to say: "I am in love with God." In recent years I have never doubted about God being in love with me but to say "I am in love with God" seems presumptuous. Anyway I decided on the title and shortly afterwards in England a very holy and loveable man, Cardinal Hume died of cancer. Magazines were full of quotations from his works. Here is one of those quotations which attracted me and made me feel easier in using the title I had chosen:

"Always think of God as your Lover. Therefore he wants to be with you, just as a lover always wants to be with the beloved. He wants your attention, as every lover wants the attention of the beloved. He wants to listen to you, as every lover wants to hear the voice of the beloved. If you turn to me and ask, "Are you in love with God?" I would pause, hesitate and say, "I am not certain. But of one thing I am certain: that he is in love with me."

(‘The Mystery of God’ by Cardinal Hume)

I was further pleased to see such a holy man hesitating about saying he was in love with God. But his strong word about God being in love with him is very encouraging. This word I believe is true for all of us. Being convinced that God is in love with us is a very good starting point on our journey deeper into the heart of God's love.

Chapter Two

The Great Risk

In our liturgies and prayer and gospel readings each year we recall and follow the story of Jesus Christ from Bethlehem to Calvary to Resurrection. We gaze upon our Lord and Saviour with unveiled faces. We look upon him with love. Hopefully each year we enter more deeply into the mystery of his being and his love for us. This most wonderful and amazing man was making himself making a journey into Mystery. Guided by the Holy Spirit he was exploring the mystery of God his Father and being enriched with the Father's love. His greatest desire was to share that Father's love with us. As time goes by and years slip round, we in turn enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus. The same Holy Spirit given to Jesus to guide him to the Father is given to us to lead us into Jesus. (Jn.15:26) Hopefully, we grow in understanding and appreciating the wonder and beauty of our Saviour, the man of love. We become more aware of the immense privilege of knowing him and begin to realise that he gives all meaning to our lives.

This does not happen in a smooth upward graph curve. There will be episodes of doubt, of personal failure, of guilt, or darkness in our efforts to understand and follow him. But grace will be at work as well all the time. And this grace will not be measured out to us in proportion to our prayers and good works. No. It will be poured out by the Holy Spirit into our hearts. There will be moments of brightness and vision, of awareness of love. We will grow in the certainty of his humanity, that this Jesus our Lord and Saviour was truly one of us and that he too went through temptations and challenges of darkness, discouragement, fear and disappointment. He held on through the torture and pain of the cross, certain of his Father's love. This was his rock, his power, his joy. This love gave deep rich meaning to his human person. This certainty energised him with power that came from love and enabled him to hold on through every storm. He was also motivated by another equal certainty, and that was the certainty that the Father loved us and he himself was loved. It was this amazing love of the Father for Jesus and for each of us that gave all meaning to the story of Jesus.

To help us enter more deeply into the wonder of this love story of Jesus and ourselves I ask you to listen to a parable. I have used this parable in another book but wish to reflect further on it in this context.

Once upon a time there was a young king who fell in love with a humble maiden. He loved her very much and desired to marry her, but he hesitated to ask her to become his wife. He feared she would immediately accept him, but he would not be sure if she really loved him. Perhaps she would pretend love so as to become queen. He did not want to take this risk. He wanted to be sure of true love. He decided on another way. Instead of asking her to be queen he would renounce his kingship and become a commoner and then ask her to marry him. He knew this would be seen as foolishness by most people. Also he realised he was taking another great risk. Perhaps the maiden would reject him when she could not be queen. But he decided he would take the risk. He was prepared to risk everything to make true love possible.

When I tell this story sometimes in a homily and that is the end of the story, people say, "But what happened? Did the maiden accept him?" But this is more than a story, it is a parable. Most parables are invitations to the audience to reflect. Jesus used parables all the time in his teaching. Parables really concern the audience. We are the characters in the story. We have to find ourselves in the parable and then we must finish the story.

In this story the king is Jesus. We are the humble maiden. The king is in love with us and desires our love, our real love. If he came to us with divine power, working miracles, abolishing suffering, destroying our enemies and ask our love, surely, we would say we love him and follow him? But he will not be sure if this is real love or just our selfishness. So he chooses a different way. He gives us his divinity. Paul puts it strongly: 'He emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and become as men are, even to accepting death, death on a cross'. (Ph. 2:6-8)

He becomes one of us. We must keep reminding ourselves why he has come and in such a hidden, humble way. He is trying to prove his love and ask our love. We welcome him every Christmas and ponder the mystery like his mother, 'Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lk.2:20) We look at this infant in the crib, so vulnerable. Soon he will be a baby refugee being carried by parents to a foreign land to escape the murderous intentions of Herod. I often thank God he did not ask us to prepare the reception for his son. We know the fuss that attends the visit of a head of state to any country. We see the waving crowds and wonder about their sincerity. We see the bodyguards and heavily armed soldiers. We see the electric security fence surrounding the royal residence. There is not much chance of getting close to such kings. Yes, we thank God his ways are not ours. This child is so easy to approach. And when he grows up and moves among people, no

one will fear him. And those who are afraid and shy because they are rejected sinners will quickly discover this king gives them special favour and because he befriends them, he will put his life in danger.

Jesus risked everything to make true love possible. The big question for us is, "Was the risk worthwhile?" It seems it may not have been worthwhile for many of his own Jewish people. His love was rejected because he was not the kind of Lover they wanted. They did not want him to renounce the kingship. Even on the cross they shout at him to come down, so they can believe. "He is King of Israel, let him come down and we will believe in him." (Mt.27:42) If he is really king, he should not be on the cross. They do not understand the love that is being revealed. They are saying 'you are not the kind of Messiah we waited for. We don't want a God who suffers. We want a God who will take away all our suffering here and now, who will make us great and superior to all nations. We don't want a god who accepts Gentiles and unbelievers into the kingdom meant for us who have the law and the prophets. We don't want a god who eats and drinks with sinners.

But we are not meant to judge anyone but ourselves. We must look into our own hearts and have our answer ready for this divine Love who emptied himself of his divinity to come seeking our love. What kind of God do we want? What kind of religion do we believe in? Our God asks us to accept his love and to work with him to share it with others, all others. He does not ask for heroics from most of us. He asks us not to return evil for evil, but to answer evil with love.

Sometimes I experience a kind of fear when I see pictures on TV of the horrible sufferings people inflict on each other, especially on the poor and vulnerable. For example, the use of that demonic weapon of war, the landmine. When you see poor simple villagers crossing a field or walking a jungle path. Then suddenly there is an explosion, flame, smoke and those people are blown to pieces or maimed for life. Again when I see the faces of starving children literally dying of hunger because of war, war prompted by pride and greed for money and power which eats up the resources which could give all the children of the world joyful, meaningful life. When I see these things, I become angry but also for a moment fear God because I know this anger and desire to punish are not from true love. I quickly thank God I am not God! My response if I were God would be to destroy all who make landmines or help to initiate wars for motives of pride and greed. God's way, so high above ours, is to save everyone and by love.

There is only one God, the God revealed by Jesus. How lucky we are to know this God who does not answer evil with evil, hate with hate, violence with more violence. This God could have received no greater provocation from humanity than the rejection, torture and murder of his Son. But he was not provoked. He sustained the Son in his suffering and raised him to new life, a new life which he shares with us and asks us to share with each other. Love was the origin of life and only love can heal and renew life when it is damaged in each of us and in our world. Our divine Saviour and Lover comes to each of us and asks us to give him our hearts, to love him and prove the love by joining him in helping others, by promoting his values and spreading his kingdom of love.

Recently a fellow Jesuit in England celebrated fifty years as a Jesuit. He was a man who had held many posts of responsibility in different places over the years. Ending his reflection on those years he writes: 'Ultimately all that really matters is whether in our various doings, we have been able to increase by ever so little the amount of love that exists in the world. All the rest are trappings, the icing on the cake, accidentals to be carefully distinguished from the substance.' The inspiration to live a life of love for others must somehow flow from within us, from our heart. It has a much better chance of doing so if we are in love with God, with Jesus.

Chapter Three

My God and Your God

The word 'God' is a small word. We could compare it to a key. A key is small but can open a door leading into a treasure house. This little word 'God' is like a key. If properly used it will open a door into a kingdom of mystery, wonder, beauty, joy, happiness. But it is also a problem word. It is so commonly used in prayer, speech, writing, that many if not most people are sure they know the reality it stands for. Therefore many do not pause to consider its deep meaning and where it is leading. I believe it will help us early on in this book to remind ourselves of the mystery that surrounds God so that we treat the word with great reverence. Then hopefully the word will have a better chance of leading us to the true God. We all have our images of God which become alive when we hear the word. Sadly, many of these images are false gods of our own making. These must first be broken if we are to discover and worship the true God. If I believe what I am saying in this book, that God loves us with his whole heart and that he desires a relationship of love with us, then the more true and real our image of God, the more fulfilling and life-giving will that relationship be.

Here is a parable from China which can help our reflection in this area.

Once upon a time, the Emperor of China called his court painter to talk about his work. He asked the artist what subjects were the most difficult to paint. The painter replied, "Dogs, cats, horses and similar models." The Emperor was very surprised and then asked: "And what are the easiest things to paint?" The artist replied quickly, "Ghosts, monsters and dragons." The Emperor was even more surprised and asked for an explanation. The artist explained as follows: "We all see cats, dogs, horses every day and we know exactly how they look. If we painters make a mistake in painting them, everyone can spot it immediately. This makes them difficult to paint. But no one has ever seen a ghost, a monster or a dragon and they have no definite shape. So the painter uses his imagination. This makes them easy to paint. People cannot say we have got it wrong."

This little parable can serve as a kind of warning when we come to speak of God. We must approach the subject with great humility and openness of mind. Faith and reason tell us that God is unknowable to the human mind. Scripture warns us that we cannot transfer our ideas and ways of thinking or acting to God. The prophet puts it well:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, My ways are not your ways – it is Yahweh who speaks – Yes, the heavens are as high above earth. As my ways are above your ways, My thoughts above your thoughts. (Is.55:8-9)

Despite this warning, many religious people speak with great ease and assurance about God, telling us that this is how God thinks, reasons and acts.

We must constantly resist this temptation. We must approach God with deep humility, with great awe, wonder and above all with great joy at the amazing truth that this God who is beyond our understanding has revealed himself to our hearts and tells us he loves us. I suggest an imaginative exercise for prayer: think of the word 'God' and this time imagine it as a cage where we have locked God in. And it is no imagination that we have made God small by our thinking. Perhaps it is because we want to control him or maybe we have received very imperfect teaching about him when young. Anyway, there is God in our cage. We offer him crumbs of prayer and adoration. Now, in your

prayer go to the cage, open the door and let God go free. Where will he go? And now you will receive the first of many surprises. He will not fly away to a heaven in the clouds. He will fly straight into your heart where he always wants to be.

There is only one model for God, one image only, one source of certain knowledge. That is Jesus. "No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him." (Lk.10:22). Jesus has revealed a God who is in love with us and desires a relationship of love with us. God did not reveal himself as a distant God, and Almighty Being before whom we prostrate ourselves in adoration. God revealed himself in Jesus as close and loving and inviting us to grow in love with him. For any love to grow, time is needed, and we must be patient in waiting to enter the mystery even of another person. A young couple getting married feel they know each other well. But they will also realise there will be much to learn as they live intimately together and share life's joys and sorrows. That sharing will bring deeper knowing and hopefully deeper loving. How much more true this has to be when we speak of our relationship with God. In prayer and in our efforts to be more truly loving we shall hopefully enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love. A modern theologian asks "Is God less than a human person? We always have to wait for a human being. Even in the most intimate communion among human beings there is an element of not having, of not knowing and of waiting. But since God is infinitely free and hidden, we must wait for him in the most radical way". ('The Shaking of the Foundations' – Tillich).

Of course this is the joy and wonder of our relationship with God. There will always be depth after depth, new joy and wonder. No matter what we think we know, God will be infinitely more loving and compassionate. We cannot possess God as we might possess a particular truth. But we can accept God with the heart and over the years the love will grow and deepen. And because Jesus is the revelation of the true God in the flesh, we read the gospels with completely open minds so as to allow God to reveal himself. We must be ready to let God surprise us and discover his ways are not our ways, that they are as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth.

What do most of us do when we try to imagine what God is like and how he acts? I think we work on the principle of transference. We first think of the best and most beautiful characteristics we see in humans. Then we transfer these to God and add something in our thoughts like, 'This is how God is only to an infinite degree'. We transfer the goodness and beauty of people to God and then add 'God has these without limit of measure'. But the mystery of God is much deeper and more wonderful than that. God is not 'another', only infinitely greater. God is totally 'other'. God is God. God is unknowable to our human intellect. Augustine said, "If you say you understand God, then what you understand is not God'. It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question about God, but to make us progressively more aware of the mystery. The most we can say with our reason is what God is not.

To say God is unknowable and cannot be understood or known by the human mind, instead of upsetting us, should fill us with joy, because this same God has revealed himself to our hearts. The mystics spoke of meeting God in a cloud. They called it the 'cloud of unknowing'. They say our journey is to a place where only love can go. It is love, not knowledge, that scatters the darkness of the cloud and shortens the distance of the journey. Even the simplest person can find his or her way into union with God in perfect love. Surely it must be so.

The heart can know God. This is how God made us. These same mystics say, 'By love he is caught not by reason.' That God is infinitely different from us might seem to push him far away from us. But the opposite is true. Because he is God, he can be close and intimate in a way that baffles our mind but delights our heart. Our first response to God and his revealing himself to me must be to

rejoice that God is God. I must repeatedly tell myself that I must let God be God. I must put away all measuring, all comparing, all calculating. I must rejoice that my small mind cannot understand, describe, picture God. I must simply worship, praise, rejoice, invite angels and saints to help me to adore to celebrate and rejoice. I must open my heart and accept his love.

We can know and love God with our hearts. This is the good news Jesus brought. And Jesus hopes when we accept this good news we will fall in love with God, his Father and our Father. Jesus seems quite confident that we can love God with our whole heart, mind and soul. To love in this way seems to me very like being in love with God. And God then goes further to draw us even closer to him. God gives us his own Holy Spirit of wisdom and love. The Holy Spirit speaks to my spirit and tells me, 'Your God loves you each moment as he breathes his very own life in to you. He knows your name and every detail of your life and loves you as you are just now.' I do wonder can this be true. How can this God who is beyond all my understanding and imagining be concerned about me, small poor un-loveable me? The answer to this objection is Jesus. All that we know about God and his love for us has been revealed by Jesus. This message was the good news he brought. He was crucified for preaching this very message.

Someone has said, 'Religions tend to make God small'. Certainly they can obscure the vision we have been reflecting on. In the story of God's chosen people the vision did become greatly obscured. Through human failure, through pride, through fear, through false teaching about the mystery of God, a darkness came over the people's hearts. But God never gives up and asks his son to come and open our eyes to the true nature of God and the wonder of his love. Jesus came willingly and joyfully to open our eyes to the truth and tell us about his Father and our Father. Paul says he came and made God's love visible.

After his resurrection Jesus speaks with Mary Magdalen and gives her a message for the community. He says: "Tell them: I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God." (Jn. 20:17) These words of Jesus bring me a great peace of mind and heart when I find myself questioning and wondering about the mystery of God and his love for us. At one time we are saying God is God and so cannot be understood by our human reason. Then at the same time we speak with great confidence of our relationship with this God and his personal love for us. At times many of us might wonder, 'Is this true? Could it be wishful thinking? Are we in touch with Reality?'

And now come these wonderful words from Jesus, "I go to my God and your God." Think of the deep meaning of these words. Jesus of the incarnation, a fully human person like us, believed what we believe. "My God and your God." Indeed we believe it only because he first believed it and built his life on this faith in this very God. This God gave all meaning to his life. His greatest, deepest joy was to reveal this God to us. Filled with the Holy Spirit he shouted out with joy at having the privilege of revealing this very God to simple people. (Lk.10:21-22). There is only one God. We have the same God as Jesus. "My God and your God." The God you believe in and wish to surrender you life to is my God also. I trusted our God with my life and he raised me from the dead. I go back to my God who is your God and you and me and our Father are bound together in love by the Holy Spirit whom the Father and I send you.

Chapter Four

Why Do I Sing?

Here is a story from the history of 17th Century Burkina Faso. It is a historical account from the years when the Mossi ethnic people were a strong political force. They had conquered and assimilated many neighbours around them. One of these neighbours was the Kasena people. Moro Nava, the Mossi Emperor, regularly collected tribute from the Kasenas. One year at collecting time the Emperor made the mistake of sending his son Prince Nabiiga to make the collection. When the Kasena saw the heir with only a few guards they overpowered the guards and took the son hostage. All his kingly robes were stripped from him. He was forced to walk round with only a loin cloth. He was given one meal a day and forced to work in the fields with a hoe. The people mocked him. The women would come and belittle his manhood, accusing him of not being a virile male. The children came when he was working and threw pebbles at him – this was a significant act of derision!

The reaction of the Prince to all this treatment caused great surprise. He sang cheerfully as he worked and even while he was being mocked. His hands became badly blistered and he lost weight, but he never stopped singing. The elders of the Kasena were troubled by his singing and cheerful manner. They would meet and ask, “How can he sing? We make him sleep on the ground, give him little food, make him work hard with a rough hoe and our women and children mock him. Yet he keeps singing!”

After some time they called him before their council. He stood clothed only in his loin cloth, tall and proud. An elder spokesman then asked, “Why do you sing|?”

He answered them with a kind of joy. “It is true you have taken my fine clothes and made me work hard. You make me sleep on the ground in a common hut. You have tried to shame me and take away my pride. And now you ask me why I sing in spite of everything. I sing because you cannot take away my title. I am Moro Naba’s first-born son and do not need to react to your shameful behaviour. I am the son of the Emperor and you cannot take that from me. And so I sing.”

This African prince was proud of his father. He was proud to be the son of the Emperor. His identity as son of the emperor meant more to him than his fine clothes and all the other external signs of respect and deference he had been enjoying before his captivity. The hardship and the humiliation he was enduring were very painful but they could not take away the deeper satisfaction and joy he experienced from his identity as son of the Emperor.

What about ourselves? Who is our Father? Are we aware of our deepest identity? We have been told our true identity by another Son, not of any emperor, but of the living God. This Sonship for him was more precious and valuable than any wealth in this world. And when he was stripped of everything, even of the loin cloth that covered his nakedness on the cross, he remained sure of his identity. He always knew he was never alone. (Jn 16:32). And so, in his last breath, he handed himself over to his Father’s embrace (Lk. 23:46). This Son Jesus told us that his Father was also our Father. This was the good news he brought us and after the Resurrection when he was saying goodbye to his followers and us, he said; “I ascend to my Father and to your Father” (Jn.20:17). Are we proud of our Father? Do we rejoice in the wonder, beauty, love of the living God who is our true Father? Do I really believe in this incredible truth? Is it precious to me? Is it the treasure of my life? Could I lose all goods and possessions, could I be insulted and humiliated and still sing like the young prince for joy in my Father? Our identity is the deepest source of life and joy within us. Nobody can

take this from us. We come from God. To each of us he says, "I have called you by name. You are mine." (Is. 43:1)

Here I believe is the deep meaning of the Incarnation. Jesus, Son of God, becomes one of us. He accepts our humanity and shows us what it means to be a true human son or daughter of God. He does this by revealing what our Father is truly like. He reveals the true God as God of compassion and love. He invites us to be like this Father which is to be a people of compassion. We cannot see God our Father, but we can see Jesus. He is God's love made visible. (Rom. 8:39) When Jesus tells us to be like our Father we might ask, "How on earth can I be like God?" Jesus will answer simply, "Love one another. Be compassionate. Help one another. Forgive one another. We are called by God, by Jesus, not to long prayers or many devotional practices. We are called to be people of compassion and love.

And Jesus insists this is possible. Despite all our selfishness and jealousy and anger and fear, we can love one another. Jesus does not ask the impossible. When he says, "Be like your Father", he is really reminding us of who we are, of who is our real Father. Because of who we are, we have power to love and overcome sin and selfishness. We have power to be patient, brave and trusting in the face of suffering. This is another fruit of our identity and another way we can bring glory to God our Father and reveal our true selves as children of God. We can be like the young prince in the story who could sing in time of suffering and humiliation because of the wonder and joy of being the Emperor's son.

The deep well of my true identity is very deep but Jesus wants to lead us there. We seldom go there. We need a guide. That's why Jesus came. He is the way. He will lead us to this truth and this truth will set us free. When Paul speaks of our 'hidden self', I believe this is what he is speaking about and I suppose this is what is meant by 'our soul'. We can agree with Paul that this self is 'hidden'. It is buried under the many trivialities of life. It is hidden by our failures and sins. It is hidden by our constant pretending, the masks we wear, the lies we tell others and even ourselves. Paul prays for us that we will journey past all the sins and trivialities to that sacred place where we are indestructible and where God dwells. Prayer is one name we give to the journey we make into our deepest self to meet God at our centre. There is a power there says Paul, which will enable us to do more than we can imagine. He prays not only that we become more like Christ but that we may enter into the very fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-20). If we can share this faith of Paul we should be able to sing no matter what happens in our lives.

Sometimes I find myself saying to God, "Lord, I am the happiest person in the world." And the reason is that God is saying, "I am God. I call you by name and you are mine." This God loves me with unconditional love. This is the deepest part of my being, of my reality. Nothing can change this, nothing can lessen it or deprive me of it. When I say I am the happiest person in the world this does not suggest comparison with other because each person in the world has exactly the same reason as I have for this joy. It has nothing to do with me but everything to do with God. It has nothing to do with my observance of God's law or my achievements. My good works don't make it increase. My sins do not make it decrease. It has nothing to do with this religion or that faith. It is based on one thing only. God's being, God's unconditional love for me at this moment. The reality of this love is deeper and greater than my sins and failures. It is deeper and more powerful than my pride, my anger, my selfishness, my lust. I cannot earn it. I can only accept it. When I joyfully, humbly and honestly accept this love I can say with total truth "I am the happiest person in this world." I can sing like the young prince. I even feel close to being able to say even for a moment, "I am in love with you who are so wonderfully, so strangely in love with me."

And you, dear Reader, can say the same as I am saying. I don't care what reasons you might give to prove that this does not apply to you. I don't care what you might say about yourself and what is going on right now in your life. I am saying that this truth of God's personal and unconditional love for you right now is more powerful, more healing and creative than anything you can say about yourself or your present situation. You can say that you are now the happiest person in the world because God is in love with you. Please don't say I must be crazy to suggest God is in love with you who feel so unloveable and so much a failure etc. Listen to some words from a modern saint. This is a very wonderful young woman who was familiar with deep suffering but was also totally certain of God's love. She prays to God, her Lover: "You are the Divine Eagle whom I love. You came into this land of exile willing to suffer and die to carry every single soul into the very heart of the Trinity, Love's eternal home. Forgive me if I tell you that your love reaches even to madness." (St. Thérèse of Lisieux)

Chapter Five

Friend of Sinners (Mt.11:19)

We have heard the young African prince telling us why he can sing in spite of the suffering and hardship. He sings because he knows who he is and this gives him joy. I suggested we also have good reason to sing for joy, even greater reason that the Prince for we are sons and daughters of the Eternal God. Our Father is Lord and God of all. We say we believe this and yet there does not seem to be much joyful song in our religious life. Why, I wonder? I think it is because of the awareness of sin in our lives. We have all experienced failure to be what we would like to be. We have all sinned, maybe often, maybe grievously. The awareness of this failure can inhibit true joy. Even if we have confessed and been forgiven, we still cannot 'feel' good or joyful. We believe we are forgiven but guilt seems to hang on. Why is this so?

Here again I believe we fall into the trap I mentioned earlier when speaking of God being unknowable to our human reason. This is the trap of transferring our way of thinking to God. We think we know how God feels when we sin and what God means when he says: "I forgive you". Let us please humbly again confess we do not know. Let us, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit who knows the depths of God, ask the grace to understand with our heart what it means to say, "God forgives". Let us ask Jesus our Saviour and teacher to lead us into the joy of a new understanding of God's response to our sins. May this joy become a true song in our hearts as we let go of our guilt and shame and let God be truly God and let him touch and heal and love us into fullness of life right here and now on our pilgrim journey of life.

A first point which might help us in this matter is to reflect on our own experience of loving and forgiving. In our different relationships we experience love – giving and receiving. Then one party fails, and the other person hopefully agrees to forgive. Notice the stages we go through. There is love, then the wounding of love, then the act of forgiving and restoration of love. We can say the loving and forgiving are distinct operations with us. Now as we have said, we cannot and must not transfer this to God. In God the forgiving is not a separate activity which comes into existence after we have sinned. God is love and God only loves, and the forgiving is part of the loving. We don't see it this way. We believe that God loves us but when we sin something happens to that love. We feel it must weaken and become a bit more distant. We feel sure that God must have changed towards us. His love surely must have lessened. But it is not so. God is love and loves us each moment and

his love is not affected by our sin in the sense that he withdraws from us, then forgives and comes back to us. God does not withdraw and does not stop loving.

But does this mean God has no concern about sin and evil and the breaking of his law? It does not mean this, and we know it. He gave his son to us to show us how much he cares, not so much about law, as about love and forgiving and healing and happiness. So is God affected by our sin and evil? God is affected because we are his children and he wants us to be a family of love, he wants our happiness. Well, is God angry with us for our sins? No, God is not angry, but he is sad. Jesus, who knows God best, tells us this in the story of the prodigal son. Remember, Jesus composed and told the story. When you see the father running to the boy in his dirt and rags and kissing him tenderly you do not hear the Father say: "I forgive you." The boy confesses alright, but the father's only concern is the boy's shame and his need. The father is saying: I missed you terribly. Let us dress you properly as befits my son and let us celebrate. Food is ordered, musicians are called and there is a great celebration. We must never imagine that we can understand or measure the love of God.

Notice what happens among ourselves and our relationships. When one person offends and damages the relationship, hopefully like God we don't stop loving. But we change. There is some coldness. We change and we expect the other person to express sorrow and regret, to apologise and then hopefully we accept. We forgive but we want to teach a lesson! We, for some time, may feel less secure in the relationship. Notice our loving and forgiving are quite separate states involving change of behaviour, at least for a while. In God the forgiving is simply part of the one act of loving. It is the form God's loving takes in response to our sin. I suppose here we are talking about unconditional love which is a great mystery because it is God himself. And it is also the foundation of all our happiness, joy, celebration and hope.

As a young priest I easily believed God forgave sinners and I saw the joyful fruit of that faith in the confessional over the years. But I always thought that God only loved converted repentant sinners. That God loved the sinner even before the sinner repented never was part of my thinking. And yet that was the great truth revealed by Jesus in the gospel. It was the wonderful mystery of the Incarnation. God came to us in Jesus before we repented. Why? Because he loved us that much. Do you mean he loved us while still in sin? Yes, certainly. This was St. Paul's strongest argument to prove God's love for us sinners. 'What proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.' (Rom. 5:8) If we can accept this love we can be transformed.

I love fairy stories, so forgive me for repeating one shared in another book. It is very appropriate here as it is a kind of parable on God's forgiveness.

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful Princess who was given a precious necklace by her father the King. She took a walk in the forest and stopped to look into a deep well hoping to see the reflection of the necklace. Alas, the necklace slipped from her neck and fell into the well, followed by her tears. What could she do? Then she heard a deep voice say, "Can I help you?" She turned quickly but saw no one. She turned back to the well but then heard the voice again. "Can I help you?" She looked round again and there on the wall of the well sat a big frog. "Oh, yes! Please help me!" she cried. The frog hopped over and said he could recover the necklace on one condition. Frogs don't know about unconditional love! The Princess said she could give the frog anything as her Daddy was King. The frog asked, "All I want is one kiss." The frog was not pretty but she wanted the necklace and agreed. The frog dived in and retrieved the necklace but sad to say the Princess forgot her promise and ran off home. It was now the frog's turn to cry!

That night at supper the Princess told her father the story. The King was cross she had broken her promise. Just then a servant came and said there was a frog outside looking for the Princess. The King told him to bring in the frog and told his daughter to keep her promise. The girl closed her eyes and kissed the frog. And what happened? There was a great flash of light and the frog vanished and there stood handsome smiling prince. He then told his story how a wicked old witch had wanted him to marry her. When he refused, she put a spell on him and changed him into a frog. She cackled as she told him the only thing that could break the spell would be a kiss from a beautiful woman. She laughed wickedly as she said, "And what beautiful woman would ever want to kiss a frog!"

I believe that in some strange way Satan has put a spell on us, God's children. Maybe he did so out of jealousy because we refused to worship him. By this spell he wants to convince us that we are ugly and unloveable and that no one could really love us. Who would want to kiss an ugly frog? So many of us seem convinced that we are unloveable. Many of us wear masks of happiness but inside we are not deeply happy because we are so conscious of our sins and failures. We feel no one could love us if they knew what we are really like inside, under our masks and pretending. Under these masks many of us experience evil thoughts and desires which we would be ashamed to share with anyone. Often what stops us from actually sinning is not our goodness, but our fear of what people would say about us. This increases our self-hatred as we now feel we are hypocrites. Maybe this is why we are quick to notice the failure of others and even to take an ugly joy in their failure. It can also explain our envy and jealousy when others succeed. This only convinces us that we are right about the poor opinion we have of ourselves.

But now the good news is greater than the bad news. The good news is that God our Lover knows all this and still loves us. God comes to us in Jesus and embraces us as we are. God's beautiful son came to us and kissed us in our ugliness and broke the spell that bound us. His kiss of love can transform us if we accept it and it can enable us to be sure of our true identity. Think again of Paul's words: 'What proves that God really loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.' That death was the price he paid to break the spell.

Chapter Six

Jesus Eats with Sinners

The tax collectors and the sinners, meanwhile, were all seeking his company to hear what he had to say, and Pharisees and the Scribes complained. "This man", they said, "welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Lk.15:1-3) This text should cause us great surprise. If it does not, then we are not really hearing the good news, we are not understanding God's self-revelation in Jesus. Perhaps our familiarity with these words has dulled the wonder they should stir in our hearts when we hear that the all-holy God enjoyed the company of those whom society labelled as sinners.

There are two very important truths hiding in this text. The first truth is that when God is properly presented to people, no matter how perverse they may be, they will be attracted to the true God. The second truth is even more wonderful, that the true God feels at home and at ease with sinners and failures and enjoys their company.

We might ask what went on at these parties, what did Jesus and his sinner friends speak of? We can be sure that Jesus told them many stories to reveal his Father and his Father's mercy. Also Jesus

must have taken delight in revealing to these men and women their true identity, that they are the true and beloved sons and daughters of the heavenly Father. We can easily image Jesus telling the story of the Prodigal Son and their rapt attention. I'm sure tears were shed when Jesus described their heavenly Father running down the road to meet his Prodigal Son, embracing him and kissing him tenderly and organising a feast to celebrate his return. Their hearts must have been deeply moved. This was not the kind of God they were hearing about from the Scribes and Pharisees.

Many times these rejected ones experienced Jesus defending them openly before their accusers, the Scribes and Pharisees. Recall the story of the sinful woman who gate-crashed the party in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk. 7:36-50). She was a woman of bad reputation, a sinner. Simon must have had a near heart attack when she came in uninvited, but with Jesus present he had to be careful. The woman is not interested in Simon nor in the meal. She has come to see Jesus and offer a sign of love in repentance for her many sins. She cries openly and washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair and anoints them with oil. Notice the contrasting attitude and reaction of Simon and of Jesus to the woman. These are the starkly different attitudes of man and God towards human failure. For Simon the woman is a sinner. That is enough. That label is her identity. She will always be a sinner. Simon sees no possibility of change and he will always avoid her and separate himself from her lest he become contaminated by her sin.

Jesus sees the same person, the same woman but with completely different eyes. He sees past her sins, her many sins to the deeper reality of the woman, to her hidden self which can be seen only with eyes of love. Jesus sees the image of God in which she is created. Jesus has a vision of the woman as a saint. It is love that makes saints: his love for her and her love for him. She now expresses that love as she becomes aware that her sins are forgiven, and her past is healed. Jesus then defends her before Simon and speaks words that will put his own life in danger: 'Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."' (v.49)

This forgiveness of sin which Jesus offered those new friends of his was only part of a much greater and more wonderful blessing. When we hear of forgiveness of sins, we can have an image of sins being wiped off a slate or a written record of sins being torn up. But much more is happening. Jesus is doing what we often say is impossible. He changes the past of the sinners. Nothing had to be wiped off a slate because God keeps no record of sin. But we know sin leaves hidden wounds of shame, guilt, self-hatred. All of these are healed by Jesus. He himself said the sinner was a sick person in need of healing. The forgiveness of Jesus alters the past. He heals it. It is no longer cause for shame, regret or guilt. The healing medicine is love. This is the amazing powerful healing that happens when Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." The past is over with. It has no power to poison the present. When it is recalled, all that comes to mind is the love that healed it and is now truly present. Notice his final word to the woman in Simon's house, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." With these words the woman is now gifted with the very peace of Jesus, which no Pharisee nor any person can take from her.

I have often wondered how that woman in Simon's house was so courageous and so sure her many sins were forgiven her. Her tears and the anointing seem to have been expressions of love and thanksgiving rather than begging for forgiveness. I feel it was connected with those meals which Jesus shared with his sinner friends. I used to think of those gatherings as 'men only' parties. But surely Magdalen was not the only prostitute in her day. Sinful women were not afraid of Jesus and became his friends and later followed him to Calvary. So I now think of a very mixed gathering at these meals with plenty of loud talk and chat. I easily imagine Jesus dipping his hand for food in the common dish and letting a friend pour the wine for him. I believe Jesus was genuinely happy with these sinner friends. He loved then with a genuine authentic human love. There was nothing

pretended about it. These meals were not a pastoral strategy to win these people back to the synagogue. Indeed, even if they had wanted to go back, they would not have been allowed to enter the synagogue. Jesus wants to lead them into the mystery and beauty of God and the wonder of their own selves. At one of these meals I can imagine that woman who gate-crashed Simon's party sitting next to Jesus. I can imagine Jesus handing her the dish of food or pouring her a glass of wine and their eyes meeting and from that look she knows she is loved, and all is forgiven.

Jesus preached God's mercy and healing love for the outcasts of society. But before he put words on the message, he lives it out in the first great act of his public life. He did not begin with preaching but with practice. He joins pilgrims who are going to the Jordan river to confess their sins and to be baptised by John the Baptist. We might have thought he was going there to preach to the great crowd that would surely come to hear John and be baptised. But no. God's ways are not our ways. When he arrives, he joins the line of sinners wading out into the Jordan river to John. So, Jesus chooses the company of sinners before they seek his company. He makes the first move towards them as God always makes the first move in his relationship with us. Jesus is the most authentic of human persons. He lives out of his own deepest human self. In his deepest person he is convinced God is love and the God is in love with him and with every single person in that Jordan crowd. He is so sure of this he now joins them in the river. Later he will give his life to show how serious he is about this belief and this choice. If we really believe this, must we not fall in love with this Jesus? It is hard to believe, hard to understand. Even the great John the Baptist failed to understand. But let us now stop trying to believe and accept what Jesus is here revealing about the deep meaning of God and of ourselves.

Even before we can understand Jesus and his compassion with our mind, we can let our hearts be attracted to him. This is what we mean by faith, accepting God as love with our hearts. We may still have some reservations and fears because of our human weakness and failure to be what we would like to be. Also we can have some doubts and questions of the mind about Jesus and how he can be the Son of God. But deep within us all there is an attraction to human goodness and love. Let us now stifle this movement of the heart when we feel attracted to Jesus and maybe have a deep-down desire to meet him. It might help us here to recall another gospel sinner who seemed to be in a somewhat ambiguous frame of mind about Jesus. (Lk.19:1-10)

This man is Zaccheus. He was wealthy and a senior tax collector. This would make him a senior sinner in people's eyes. Despite his bad name we are told he was anxious to see Jesus. But something seemed to hold him back. He did not wish to join with meals with the other sinner friends. He was a man of small stature, so he even had a problem seeing Jesus in the street. But he is so anxious to see Jesus that he climbs a tree. When Jesus reaches the spot he looks up and calls him by name. "Zaccheus, come down. Hurry because I must stay at your house today." How sweet those words must have sounded to the ears of Zaccheus and how they must have swept away any doubting or misgiving that may have been in his heart. We are not surprised to read 'Zaccheus hurried down and welcomed him joyfully.' Maybe we are surprised at the public confession he made and his promise of restitution to give half his property to the poor and compensate fourfold anyone he had cheated. He makes this dramatic confession even before he has any chat with Jesus. Clearly this man must have been reflecting much on the meaning of his life. And now, even before he receives Jesus into his house, he has already accepted in his heart the spirit of compassion and love that motivated the life of Jesus. Money is no longer king of his heart.

Zaccheus welcomes Jesus joyfully. Let us notice that blessing of Joy. Zaccheus experiences the joy before he hears any word from Jesus about sins being forgiven. He is joyful because Jesus wants to visit his home. He sees this desire of Jesus as an act of love and knows like the woman in Simon's

house that his sins are forgiven, and the past is healed. One of the fruits of the forgiving healing love of Jesus is joy. Jesus mentions this explicitly at another meal. This time it is his farewell meal with his disciples before his death. These disciples were becoming special friends, but they were still far from being saints. He encourages them about their future work and reminds them he will always be with them. He reminds them of his love for them, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” (Jn. 15:9) and then he continues:

“I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete”

(Jn.15:11)

Jesus brings gifts for the heart. The joy he speaks of is not the surface noisy joy which often leaves us empty and tired. He brings the deep-down joy of knowing who we are which makes life meaningful and worthwhile and above all the joy of knowing God and being loved by God. Notice he calls it “my own joy”. We in our day are invited to the meal of the Blessed Eucharist. To us also he says, “I want to stay at your house today.” He comes to renew his love and the healing of any wounds caused by our sins. He comes to share his very own joy with us. When we humbly accept we will discover true joy.

Chapter Seven

The Mystery of Faith

So far in this book we have been reflecting on matters of great wonder and deep mystery. We have considered thoughts about a God who cannot be known or understood by our human reason. We have boldly said this God is in love with us and through his Son, Jesus Christ, has taken away our sins. This Jesus in turn loved us so much that he gave his life for us. We say confidently we can build our lives on these great truths. But how can we be sure they are in fact truths and not some kind of wishful thinking? To answer this we must consider the gift of faith. The letter to the Hebrews describes faith in these words: ‘Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen.’ (Heb.1:1)

Faith is linked with trust. We say of someone, “I have great faith in John – or Mary.” We mean we believe in them as good and trustworthy, capable of some responsible job or difficult task. When we come to consider our relationship with God or Jesus, we are saying we trust in the revelation we have received through the Scripture and in the long history of the millions who before us also trusted and built their lives on this faith, lives which have been inspirational to us as lives of love and compassion. St. Peter, writing to the early Christians, tells them ‘Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.’ (1 Peter 3:15) He also suggests that their answer will concern their relationship with Jesus. ‘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, because you believe.’ (1 Peter 1:8)

The deepest realities of life and the depths of the heart are not seen on the surface of our lives. We have not seen Jesus with our eyes, but we come to know him with our hearts. When preaching at weddings I often say the cameras and videos cannot photograph the reason for our celebration on that occasion. They can photograph the decorations, the people, the style, all the externals but they

cannot photograph the love of the couple which brought us all together and which we believe in enough to come and praise God with them and ask his blessing upon them.

On Sundays we gather as a faith community. At a certain moment in our service we are invited to stand and profess our faith. Together we recite the creed stating all the great truths taught by our church. For many believers this list of doctrines and truths make up their faith. Shortly after this profession of faith the Eucharistic action moves on to the offering of bread and wine which in turn are followed by the sacred words of consecration. Immediately after the consecration, the Minister of the Eucharist gives another invitation to the congregation concerning their faith. He announces, "Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith". One response to this is brief but deeply significant. The people answer, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Here we associate the word 'mystery' with our faith. Let us have a look at this word.

'Mystery' is a rich word. It has nothing to do with a puzzle. Puzzle baffles the mind. Mystery speaks to the heart and has to do with wonderful and beautiful reality. It can fill the mind with amazement but touches more deeply the heart bringing wonder, happiness, excitement, joy. As Peter would say, 'A joy so glorious it cannot be described.' What causes the wonder and warmth of the heart is not a doctrine as such but a person, the person of Jesus our Saviour and our God. We are proclaiming that the deepest meaning of our faith is a relationship of love with Jesus, Son of God. It is he who fills us with joy and wonder because of his love, a love which moved him to give up his life for us. But death was not the end. Our Saviour is risen and among us having overcome evil, sin and death. He is present sharing with us his victory over anything that might cause us fear and anxiety. And he is with us every single moment of every day. I think that for most Christians today the heart of their faith will not be a list of doctrines to which they give intellectual assent but will be the person of Jesus revealing the true God. It will be the mystery of Christ crucified who is risen from the dead and rejoicing to be among us. This must be the heart of our faith. If this heart is there then the doctrines, which are very important, will become more meaningful and nourishing.

If we have this attitude to faith, hopefully we will grow closer to Jesus in love and may then be better disciples in working with Jesus to help others find faith or recover faith that seems lost. We will not be credible witnesses to Jesus if we ourselves have not experienced his love. If we have experienced his love, we will want to share it. True witnessing must come from inside us. It cannot be mere conformity to a list of teachings or certain religious practices. St. Augustine says, "Knowledge will not save us." Knowledge is good and necessary but not enough. I must meet the person Jesus and experience his joy, peace and love. A lecture on food will not nourish me. I must taste and eat the food. Jesus and the Father have sent us their own Holy Spirit to lead us into the mystery of God's love. The Holy Spirit will speak to our spirit and reveal to us the wonder of our own identity. It will move us to cry out 'Abba!' to God our Father. (Rom.8:14-17). God seeks our love. Hopefully we will respond. From sad experience we often fail and prove unfaithful. But God, our Lover, is always faithful. Paul tells us his love and fidelity are greater than all our failure and sin. (Rom.5:21)

Faith in this kind of God we have been speaking about should widen our religious horizons and bring more joy to our lives. The practice and power of faith should not be restricted to times of prayer or strictly religious activities. It should lead us to discover God in all things, all situations and in all people. God should be found and worshipped in the sorrows and tragedies of life as well as in the joys and celebrations. We have a tendency to restrict God to 'holy places' and activities, to churches, shrines, pilgrimages, prayer meetings, sacraments. Or at least we feel he is 'more present' there than in the 'profane' world about us. We should be able to move from the sacred liturgy of the Mass to the sacred liturgy of daily life. When God created the world he rejoiced in his work and

declared it was 'Very good.' (Ex.1:31) Through the mystery of the incarnation God tells us our humanity is good and holy. This must be part of our faith, finding God and his goodness and beauty in his creation, in ourselves and in our fellow humans.

Sad to say we do not do this easily and joyfully. There can be an unhealthy focus in much religious preaching on the sinfulness of the world. Our human nature and our bodies are seen as less good, as source of temptation – even as places of sin – although they are God's creation. We talk too easily of evil and sin. We seem to notice more easily the real presence of sin than the more real presence of God. We do not wish to make little of the terrible reality of evil and sin in the world, but our faith tells us its power has been broken by Jesus who shares his victory with us. We should be more conscious of this and have more hope and rejoice and live out of this faith. There is great goodness among us, great examples of poor, simple ordinary people who despite poverty and heavy suffering still praise God, show love to their neighbours and live holy lives. There are many saints among us.

When Jesus came amongst us, a man like us in all but sin, he lived by faith. He admired the beauty of creation which he attributed to God. He praised the beauty of the flowers and paid them and their creator a lovely tribute:

"Think of the flowers growing in the fields. I assure you that not even Solomon in all his glory was robed like one of these." (Mt.6:28)

But more wonderful still was the way he was aware of human beauty so often obscured by the ugliness of sin. Jesus always saw past this surface reality of sin to the hidden self, made in God's image. It was no wonder the sinners were attracted to him. When he looked at them, they felt loved and loveable. Jesus also rejected the false dualism whereby we designate only certain places as 'holy' and the rest as profane.

When the Samaritan woman at the well discovered Jesus was a prophet, she brought him a big theological problem. Her people worshipped God as present on the holy mountain while the Jews adored him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Who was right? Jesus answers "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on the mountain nor in Jerusalem. The hour is here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. This is the kind of worshipper the Father wants." (Jn.4:20-24). Jesus is saying, "Don't make God small and tie him to one place. He is everywhere, and all places are holy."

In the past, ministers of religion were often looked upon as if they were bearers of God's presence to peoples and places. It could seem they were bringing God to the person or home they were visiting as if God were not there before they came. I am not speaking here of Bringing Holy Communion to the sick. I refer to the mystery of God's creative presence in every person, place and situation every moment of time. We cannot bring God to any place as if he had not been there already. Someone suggests an image which I as a priest find helpful. The image brings us closer to the truth of what happens when the minister of religion or any fellow believer visits some house or person in need. The image suggests that ministers should be more like midwives called to help bring God to birth in lives where he is already present. I have met many priests who have shared my own experience of growing wonder at the faith and goodness of God's people. As a young priest after many years of study I felt I was supposed to have clear answers to difficult questions about God and be able to 'explain' God's ways! It took me a long time to discover that God's ways are as high above ours as the sky is above the earth. More and more I now see my work as the immense privilege of sharing the mystery of God's love.

I am encouraged by the faith story of Mary and Joseph. They are chosen by God to play a key role in his plan for the salvation of the world. They are a young couple in love, planning marriage. They must have been people of great faith. Yahweh must have been very real and near to them both. Now God invites them into intimate cooperation with him in revealing his love to the world. Mary is told she has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah for whom her people had waited for centuries. So here are two people with God very much in their lives. Now God enters more deeply into those lives and calls the couple to work more closely with him. What happens? What would you expect? In our human way we expect they will be privileged. It is God's plan so all will go well. Nothing can go wrong, and the young couple will grow in understanding God and his ways. What in fact happens? Everything seems to go wrong. There is great upset, pain, gossip and even a possible breakdown of the love relationship between Mary and Joseph. But then Joseph received a heavenly visitor, and all is well. I'm sure many of us feel it could have been better arranged!

Twelve years later the young parents are still discovering God's ways are not their ways. The family goes to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. Jesus stays behind when the parents go home. When they discover he is not with them, they return to the city and search for him there for three days. Can we imagine their fear as to what may have happened to the young boy in the big city? Think of their anxiety considering the identity of their child and their responsibility. When they find the boy in the temple, they voice their upset strongly. "My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been!" Many parents have to speak some time like this to a child. When Jesus answers we are told 'but they did not understand what he meant.' (Lk.2:50) We can imagine Mary telling this and other stories to Luke many years later after the Resurrection. Before that she had to go through the ordeal of Calvary. I'm sure she will be very understanding if we ask her to help us grow into a deep strong faith.

It is helpful and very important to realise that our faith is meant to grow. It is not a static gift like a book or list of doctrines. It is a relationship with God. Relationships must grow, or they will perish. As we ourselves grow in knowledge and pass through different life experiences we change. The world around us is also ever changing, affected by growth in knowledge and ideas leading to new developments in many areas of life and new ways of understanding the meaning of life. All these developments affect us personally and clearly must affect our relationships with one another. They will make new demands on our faith life and affect our relationship with God. Hopefully they will invite us into a deeper and richer appreciation of the wonder and richness of our faith and into a deeper love relationship with God who is creator of all life and knowledge and growth. Because of a lively growing faith life we should be growing into a closer life-giving union with our God. We should be having an experience similar to that of Jesus when he returned to Nazareth after the Jerusalem incident. We are told, 'Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and men.' (Lk.2:52)

I think of two images for faith. It is like a tree, a fresh growing tree which must keep growing to stay alive and bear fruit. It may change appearances with fresh growth, but it is the same tree. Then faith is like a rock which is solid and unchanging and is a safe foundation on which to build our life. I feel St. Paul was expressing these two strong but contrasting images when he spoke of our faith lives being 'planted in love' and 'built on love'. He uses this language when he makes that beautiful prayer for his Christian friends in Ephesus. And let us notice what he is asking from God for his friends. He is praying that they will grow in understanding the love of Jesus which is beyond all understanding. He is talking of the wonder and mystery of God, of life, of love, of faith. He prays 'that Christ may live in your hearts through faith and then planted in love and built on love you will know the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge.' (Eph.3:18-19)

Chapter Eight

I will be with You

‘Should you pass through the sea, I will be with you; or through rivers, they will not swallow you up. Should you walk through fire, you will not be scorched, and the flames will not burn you.’ (Isaiah 43:2)

These strange words make a great promise. They are spoken by God to his chosen people to whom he has revealed himself the one true and only living God. These words are a promise and an invitation. They promise God’s loving and protecting care for his people when suffering befalls them. They invite the people to trust that God is always with them, no matter how great that suffering may be. God does not promise that there will be no suffering but does promise that, no matter how great it may be, he will be with his people and the suffering will not overcome them. We are God’s chosen people today and these words are spoken afresh to us today. I use these words as an introduction to a reflection on the difficult problem of suffering in our lives.

Sometimes on a TV chat show, when the topic of religion of God comes up, a person may say, “Myself, I am an atheist.” When asked why, the person replies, “There is too much suffering in this world. I could not believe in a God that allows suffering.” This reply of course does not offer us any light about the existence or nature of God. It just tells us that this person claims to know what God should be like. When God does not conform to his image, he rejects God. In a way he is repeating a certain cry made long ago to someone who claimed to be God but was rejected. “Come down and we will believe.” (Mk.14:32) It was some of God’s own people who made this cry. They were saying, “If there is a God, he or she should abolish suffering. If suffering is allowed, we cannot accept such a God.”

I have met many people who carry heavy burdens of suffering. Sometimes it is physical agony from some painful sickness. Sometimes it is perhaps worse pain that comes from emotional wounds caused by failed relationships, by betrayal, by personal failure, by the loss of a loved one through tragic accident or suicide. I see these people bear their suffering with tremendous courage and faith and trust in God. We do not say there is good in suffering, but the way people face it and cope with it is testimony to a God who has revealed to them a meaning in life deeper than any suffering. This God has inspired a trust and love that brings power beyond any human effort. I have also seen other believers collapse for a time under suffering and turn elsewhere for answers to their questions. For a while they may give up their faith but afterwards these people return to their faith and their God. Often this happens through the love and prayers of friends. This does not surprise me. I feel sure of the personal love of God for each person and that he wants all people saved.

Sometimes a particular family or person will experience repeated suffering. One tragedy follows another. There may be repeated bereavements, a husband may lose his job, a child may turn to drugs, a wife may be maimed in a car accident. Such heavy repeated suffering can provoke dark and troublesome questions in the heart. Is God angry with our family? What wrong did we do?

Is there a curse on our family? Is all this a punishment for our sins? The only one who can answer these questions is our God. And this God has given a clear answer in Jesus. Jesus is God’s final word on the matter, a word so clear it became flesh. By his teaching and his life and especially by his death Jesus rejects totally the idea of a God who would curse his children or send punishment on them for their sins. In his teaching Jesus explicitly rejects the idea that evil could be sent by God to

people either for their own sins or for the sins of others. Jesus reveals a God who loves his children. He makes it clear that no evil person or evil spirit has power greater than God. We must build our faith house on this rock. We have one Saviour, our dear Lord who died for us. In our suffering let us turn to this crucified Saviour believing his love is greater than any danger or evil that might threaten us.

I have said that God does not send suffering on someone as punishment for their sins. But you may say the Bible contradicts me: God clearly says in Exodus, 'I, Yahweh, your God, am a jealous God and I punish the father's fault in the sons, the grandsons and great-grandsons of those who hate me.' (Ex.20:5) Because of this revelation, the Jews in the time of Jesus believed that sickness, accidents, failures of crops and other misfortunes were all punishment on people for their sins. Jesus knew this belief of his people and quite clearly contradicted it. He has come to bring the fullness of truth about God, to purify the earlier revelation which came through Moses. He reveals a God who is God of all people and not just Jews. He reveals a Father who is compassion and love, who is gentle and merciful. This God calls the whole human family to be a family of love, to do away with anger, hatred, revenge, injustice. It was because of such false ideas that Jesus showed special favour to sinners to reassure them that God still loved them. It was also because of such teaching that his enemies were determined to get rid of him.

We find Jesus's explicit rejection of the false God of punishment in the story of the blind man. When the disciples see the blind man, they ask "Rabbi, who sinned? This man? Or his parents, for him to be born blind?" (Jn.9:3) Jesus answers "Neither he nor his parents sinned." And to emphasize this he goes on to remove the blindness which all considered to be God's punishment. It was a Sabbath day when he healed the blind man and when the Pharisees heard the story their comment is, "This man cannot be from God. He does not observe the Sabbath." Notice their focus is on the Law and not on love. By breaking the Sabbath Jesus put himself in further danger but he will risk all to reveal the true nature of his Father.

On another occasion the Scribes and Pharisees try to trap Jesus into contradicting himself. They present him with a situation where they feel sure he will have to uphold Jewish law which imposed punishment for sin, in this case the death penalty for adultery. Jesus is teaching in the temple. The Scribes and Pharisees drag before him an unfortunate woman caught in the act of adultery. They remind Jesus the Mosaic law says she must be stoned to death. (Jn.8:5) Jesus responds first with silence, then writes something on the ground with his finger. The accusers demand an answer. Jesus speaks, "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone". We can imagine the silence, the dramatic silence, the delight of the crowd, the terrible anger of the Scribes and Pharisees. Then Jesus writes again on the temple floor and the accusers leave one by one 'beginning with the eldest' (Jn.8:9) We could presume the eldest in years was probably the eldest in sin. Jesus asks the woman, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Surely he must have been smiling as he spoke to her. She says no one and Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and don't sin any more." (v.11). He has saved the woman's life but has made his own death more certain.

Jesus is leading us here into the deeper reality of God and life and ourselves. God's activity is always creative, saving, healing. Sin is a form of human suffering, even a kind of sickness. Jesus comes not to condemn but to heal that sickness. He comes to lead us into happiness and the fulfilment of our true human potential for joy and happiness. So in no way does Jesus present a God who punishes even when we accept in our human way that we or others deserve punishment. Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." (Jn.10:10) These words are addressed to all. They are not only for the healthy and physically fit. They are addressed to all of us who are suffering

– to those addicted to alcohol and drugs, to those in darkness of fear, depression, despair. They are spoken to dying people, people dying from incurable cancer or wasting away with AIDS. The weakening, wasting, dying come to all of us sooner or later. Jesus is creator, lover, healer. His medicine is love. His love can bring hope, peace, comfort, healing. It is stronger than any evil, hurt or suffering that threatens fullness of life.

We must be careful how we speak of suffering. We say good can come out of evil through God's love and healing and transforming power. This must not lead us to think of God 'sending' suffering to test our faith. With Jesus we have rejected this idea of God sending punishment. We must also reject the idea that God sends suffering to test our faith. What is wrong about these ideas is that they suggest a God outside us, outside our pain and suffering. They suggest a God who observes our suffering from a distance. They miss the wonder and mystery of God's intimate presence in us and union with us. We believe in a God who is intimately involved in our lives to the full. God is present to us not simply in the neutral zone of our existence but in all our human experience, both of joy and suffering.

God is close because he is in love with his people and as with a true lover, the suffering of the beloved becomes his suffering. Calvary is Christ's ultimate final revelation of God as love. He endures the worst we can suffer: rejection, mockery, physical torture, apparent abandonment by God and then death. He is a crucified God and Paul says our human language cannot express the wonder of this mystery which in the eyes of the world can only be seen as foolishness and weakness. This is our God. The terrible suffering of Calvary is not something incidental to the story of Jesus. It reveals the very core and heart of what God is. Maybe we judge the Jewish leaders and disciples for failing to read the story properly. But I wonder about ourselves and ask myself, do I really believe that it all happened, and that God considered me worth suffering and dying for? If I really believe the story of Jesus will I not experience a new hope and courage and even a sense of joyful love that when I suffer, I am sharing the suffering of my Saviour?

We began this chapter with the words from Isaiah where God promised he would be with his people especially in their time of suffering. Let us go back in the Bible to a much earlier word also reflecting on the closeness of God to his people. This word comes through Moses. He is giving God's law to the people and is full of praise and wonder that God should share his own wisdom with his people. 'Indeed what great nation is there that has its gods so near as Yahweh our God is to us whenever we call to him?' (Deut.4:7) For Moses the closeness of God lay in his sharing his wisdom with his people. For Isaiah God's closeness is revealed in his saving presence to them in time of suffering.

As we look at our Saviour on the cross we think again of Isaiah's words, 'I will be with you'. Could we have dared to imagine that Jesus would give such deep new meaning to these words? He is with us in our suffering, not just standing nearby with encouraging words but letting the worst possible suffering fall on himself. Indeed he is brought so low that he even needs one of us to help him survive. 'They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the city, to carry his cross.' (Mt.16:32)

We know the disciples were slow to believe in the deep meaning of Calvary and the Cross. For them it was failure, foolishness, weakness. But after the Resurrection they see it as victory, wisdom, power. With the help of the Holy Spirit they will be transformed and will begin transforming the world. This process has gone on up to our time. The good news of our God of love who shares our suffering has inspired millions with hope, courage, power and love in time of suffering. It has also inspired people in all ages to see God in suffering people and to go to their help. In our day it is providing great motivation in the fight against all forms of the injustice in society that bring suffering

to the poor, the weak and to underprivileged people. By our compassion and help and love we can help them experience that they are God's people and that their God is with them.

Chapter Nine

Reflection on Calvary

Despite all the wonderful 'progress' in our modern world there is one painful reality we have not been able to remove from our midst, the reality of human suffering. Our news media remind us daily of the pain and suffering we inflict on each other through selfishness, injustice, discrimination, war. Then very few escape deep personal tragedies involving themselves and their families. All this suffering provokes troublesome questioning:

"Why, Lord?"

"You love your people yet you allow suffering!"

"Are you powerless to prevent it? If not, why do you allow it?"

We have said how the reality of suffering leads us into the mystery of God and have seen God's answer to our question. "I am with you." God is love and allows freedom – true love cannot be forced. When the freedom is abused God does not destroy the sinner. He lives by love and wants all to be saved. He asks us to be a people of love, to forgive, to heal, to love. We ask where we can get this wisdom of God and the power to be what he wants us to be. We get it by drawing closer and closer to the suffering crucified God on Calvary. Again and again we must return in spirit to Calvary and gaze on God's self-revelation on the cross. As we look, we must ask for the Holy Spirit to lead us into the depths of God. Such reflection made in reverent humble faith and trust will enlighten us, anoint us, empower us and save us from many angry, wasteful questions.

REFLECTION

I ask you to go to Calvary and look around the hill till you see some of the friends of Jesus. You will quickly see Mary his mother and John, his close friend and Magdalen who loves him so much. They will be standing near his cross, as close as the soldiers will allow. Go over to them and ask if you may stand beside them. They nod and accept, and you join them in gazing on Jesus hanging there, just stand there and look. Say nothing. Just look. Let the agony, the wonder, the mystery sink in. I join you. We are looking at love made visible. We are looking at the saving of the whole world, of all creation, of each person of our own salvation and re-creation.

Look at this man who is son of woman, one of us, and notice his suffering. Observe the thorns sticking through his hair into his head, the cuts of the lash on his shoulders and back, the jagged holes of the nails, the dry lips parting to say: "I thirst". He was first scourged and then made to carry the heavy cross from the place of judgement to this place of execution. It's hard to imagine how great is his total tiredness and pain.

Continue to look. Ask yourself, who is he? Why is he hanging there in agony? What terrible crimes did he commit to deserve this punishment? He is one of us as he cries for a drink of water. And yet he is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Saviour. This is the Messiah the Jews had waited for all through their history. They do not know, and they cannot realise that they are witnessing the

salvation of their own people but also the salvation of all people, of all time. This death is a love offering being made by Jesus to God for all of us. He has truly emptied himself of his divinity to come and seek our love and to invite us to receive the power to love one another from the certainty of this love for us. We look at him. How close he is to us now! 'What great nation has its gods so close as our God is to us.' Could we ever fear such a God? We look, and our hearts speak silently to him, telling him we would like to pull out the nails and thorns and wash and clean his body and give him comfort.

Continue to look and contemplate. Do not hurry to speak or make promises. Maybe just ask the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our hearts that we may experience this love and allow it to pierce our hearts. The Holy Spirit can do this. We are told the Holy Spirit can understand the depths of everything even the depths of God. (1 Cor.2:11) We might like to hold Mary's hand or to let John or Magdalen hold our hand. They all knew him so well, so personally. They are men and women like us and were in love with him. Holding their hands can be good prayer. We stand together. We watch with love. We worship. Better just to watch and love. Our human words would be too weak to express our thoughts, our feelings.

What about Jesus's thoughts? We see his cruel physical suffering with our eyes. What is going on in his heart? We watch and then we hear him cry out, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me!" Have we heard him properly? Mark says he 'cries out in a loud voice' which suggests very powerful emotion. Is he in a delirium? Has God abandoned him? Here now Jesus reaches the deepest level of pain and agony, a suffering more terrible than anything physical because it wounds the heart. Notice that he who so loved the word 'Father' and used it so often now uses the more impersonal word 'God'. All we can say here for some consolation and by way of a ray of light in the darkness is that Jesus is praying one of the Psalms which he knows by heart. It is Psalm 22 and it opens with the very cry of desolation Jesus gives expressing pain at feeling abandoned by God. But the same Psalm ends with praise of God who delivers suffering people who trust in him. So Jesus has not lost faith in God at the end, but undoubtedly must have touched deep, dark sensations in his spirit. How well then will this dear Saviour understand us when at times we cry out questioning God in our suffering.

On the hill of Calvary there is a great paradox. We can say evil abounds on this hill in all its savagery, brutality and ugliness. God seems absent as if maybe he had been overcome and chased away or as if he was so disgusted with humanity that he abandoned us all to our wickedness. But no. God is most amazingly present on this hill with all his beauty. God is in control here and is bringing good for all humanity out of the evil of those who organised the crucifixion. If we had learned anything about God from Jesus before we came to Calvary this day, we would not fear that evil has overcome. We will trust and encourage each other. Later all people will call this day 'Good Friday'. As you and I stand beside Mary and John and Magdalen and continue to watch our Lord and Saviour we can only hope to learn slowly the wonder and the beauty of the love in which we are involved.

As I watch my Saviour suffering and think how poorly I have responded to his love, I cry. Magdalen is holding my hand. She knows what is going on. She too cried at his feet one day in Simon the Pharisee's house. She knows all about forgiveness. That is why she is here now because she has been forgiven everything. We can say she is an authority on forgiveness of sin. She must remember that day now as she looks at his sacred feet. These feet she had washed with her tears are now torn by the great heavy nail which transfixes them and impales them on the cross. Shortly now she will be able to wash, clean and kiss them again before burial.

The end is now very near. His last words show Jesus trusting fully in his Father's love and also reveal to us the deep real meaning of death. He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." With

these words he breathed his last.' (Lk.23:46) Jesus hands himself over to his Father. For him death means meeting his Father, and this father, as he always reminded us is our Father also. Death therefore for us will mean meeting our Father face to face. Earlier when Jesus cried out the name Eloi, the onlookers who were mocking him said, "Let us watch and see if Elijah will come to take him down." (Mk.15:36) Now as we hear him saying, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit", we might reverently say, "Let us wait and see if his Father will come to take him down."

I ask you to remember the description Jesus gave us of his father in the story of the prodigal son. Recall that old man who had such love for his sinner son and day after day watched and worried and waited. Then on the day the boy returned the father rose up and ran to welcome and embrace the son. Let us wait in our imagination to see will the father come. As we wait, we hear someone behind us say, "Yes, look, here is the father from the village." The old man is hurrying up the hill. He goes past the Roman soldiers who do not stop him. They heard people say, "It's his father!" and they have respect. They even go over to help the old man pull out the nails. They wonder at the strength of the father who receives his son's broken body into his arms. He sits on the ground cradling the body in his arms and tenderly kisses the wounded face, just as he had embraced and tenderly kissed the prodigal son in all his rags and brokenness. He removes the hair from his son's eyes and begins to clean the face. He then looks over at the mother.

Mary crosses quickly to him, kneels beside him and receives the body. She, like Jesus, was in love with God the Father. It was he who had fashioned this body as an infant in her womb. Mary now looks over at you and calls you by name to come and help. Do not be surprised at this. You and I and all of us are always intimately included in the love that passes between our Father and Mary and Jesus. It is all for us. It may be hard to believe but this is the deep meaning and reality of our lives. You move over to Mary and kneel beside her and with respect and love too great for words you help her and to wipe and clean the Lord's face and to kiss him tenderly. Magdalen and John have now joined you and others are offering help. We could spend the rest of this prayer in this small community of human and divine love. We must have much we want to say to the Lord.

Chapter Ten

I am the Resurrection

We spoke of Calvary as a place of great paradox. It was a little patch of ground where evil was so clearly present. But also most palpably present were goodness and love. Evil and love were there locked in deadly combat. They were struggling, we could say, for the soul of humanity, the soul of the world. We look at the cross. Two beams of wood crossing each other. Again there is paradox. This is innocent wood being used as an instrument of torture. From this day forward the word 'cross' will have special meaning for millions of people who will come to know the story of Jesus and come to fall in love with him.

The tree which supplied the wood for this cross was an innocent creature of God. That tree could never have imagined the fruit that would one day hang on its branches. There is a tortured figure hanging in pain, but it is a figure of love. The tree is bearing a flower, a blossom of unimaginable beauty and this flower will become a fruit that will nourish people of every tribe, tongue and nation, of every age and condition of live. The flower borne by this tree is love. The fruit coming from the tree is the Risen living Lord who has overcome evil, sin and death.

We have stood with the mother of Jesus and his friends and watched him surrender himself in death into his Father's embrace. Our scriptures tell us Jesus died for us. One understanding of this truth is that in his dying he showed us how to die. He taught us the meaning of death. To die is to hand myself over to God my father. Death is a meeting with my heavenly father. This is the father Jesus described in the story of the prodigal son. This is the father he told us is in love with us. Death therefore should hold no fear for us.

So Jesus dies. On the surface it would appear that evil had the victory. And yet we do not find his enemies celebrating. We could expect the Scribes and Pharisees to throw a big party to celebrate the success of what they had been planning for so long – to get rid of Jesus. Instead of celebrating we find them gathering in a worried and anxious state and then going again to the Roman authorities for help.

'Next day the chief priests and the Pharisees went in a body to Pilate and said to him, "Your Excellency, we recall that this impostor said, while he was still alive. 'After three days I shall rise again'; therefore give the order to have the sepulchre kept secure until the third day, for fear his disciples come and steal him away and tell the people 'He has risen from the dead'. This last piece of fraud would be worse than what went before" (Mt.27:62-64).

The friends of Jesus are also busy. They quickly clean and wrap the body of the Lord and place it in the tomb. They have to wait for the Sabbath to end before they can complete the proper reverential burial. No one is expecting a resurrection. Earlier in a farewell discourse Jesus had spoken some strange words which they could not be expected to understand at the time. But soon they will taste the reality of these words:

"I tell you most solemnly, you will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy. A woman in childbirth suffers, because her time has come, but when she has given birth to the child, she forgets the suffering in her joy that a man has been born. So it is with you; 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." (Jn.16:20-22)

Sunday morning comes. Sabbath is over. The sun rises on a new week and Jesus, the Son of God, rises to a new world. God the Father sends the Holy Spirit of life, brightness, love and beauty upon Jesus and exclaims "This is my Son the Beloved, my favour rests on him." This was the word spoken from heaven after Jesus was baptised in the Jordan. (Mt. 3:17). It was the Father approving of Jesus for his action in the Jordan, his act of identifying himself with the sinful, broken humans who gathered there for blessing and healing. Now Jesus has identified himself with all humanity in the ultimate human experience of goodbye, separation, death and the Father expresses his great love and approval by raising his beloved son into new and everlasting life. In the Jordan the Father was saying, "I do forgive the sins of all those you, my son, love." In the garden near Calvary he is saying, "I do raise to new life all those you love, all who believe in you." Like the friends of Jesus it will take you and me time to enter into the depths of this mystery of the Resurrection. It has to be an ongoing experience of growth in awareness, just as in the case of the incarnation. And we cannot enter these deep places alone. We must ask the Holy Spirit to accompany us.

If we go to the tomb that Saturday evening, we will see Roman soldiers guarding it. I guess these would likely be superstitious men. But this night they do not fear the dead. It is the living they must watch for. They have been told that the friends of Jesus might try to steal the body, and then pretend that Jesus had risen. From what we know, the friends of Jesus did not seem to be in any mood to plan this kind of treachery. All were in shock. Most were still in hiding. Those who are

nearby, Mary, John, Magdalen and others are crushed in spirit and are mourning. At first sign of dawn the women came with spices to the tomb. There is no body! Angels tell them Jesus is risen. They run and tell the others. The menfolk dismiss their story as 'pure nonsense'. (Lk.24:1-11)

It must have been a morning of amazing excitement. Jesus was their Lord and Master. They were his disciples. They were also his friends. They were in love with him. And despite their many human failings, Jesus was in love with them. He had given his life for them. When the men said 'pure nonsense' to the women's story they are really expressing their deep, deep desire that the story could be true. It seems too good to be true. And of course it is true. Through the day and following days and weeks Jesus appears to individuals and groups and gently leads them into the total certainty that he is risen from the dead. The slow and compassionate way in which he reveals himself is but another proof of his great personal love for each of them. There is no scolding, no lecturing, no blaming them for running away. He is even playful at times as when he asks Magdalen, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (Jn.20:15). Or again when he asks the two disciples on the Emmaus road, "What are you talking about on the way?" (Lk.24:17)

One feature common to many of the apparitions was the failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus. We know of Magdalen's great love for him but for some moments she is with him, even talking to him, but does not recognise him. Not until he says her name, does she know him and throw herself at his feet. At first this may surprise us but in fact it should invite us to stop and reflect on the mystery of the Resurrection. What does Resurrection mean, for Jesus, for you and me? Jesus the man has risen into new life, the life beyond the grave. Resurrection is not mere continuation of an old life like rising after a night's sleep. It is transformation into the totally new life that follows death. St. Paul puts it well. 'Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now.' (2 Cor.5:16) Magdalen and the others were focussed on Jesus as they knew him in the flesh. They are fixed on that image of him and cannot see the new reality. This is very understandable when we think of their first relationship with Jesus the man and now the deep wonder of the Risen Lord. Now they move more deeply into the mystery of God in Jesus. Slowly they will learn to celebrate Jesus their Lord and God as well as their friend. When they begin to realise their 'friend' is God and what that means, they will be transformed.

As the wonderful amazing truth of the Resurrection sinks in, the friends and followers of Jesus are transformed. They lose all fear and joyfully proclaim the good news of the Jesus story. Peter is an amazing example of this change. When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and taken to the house of Caiphas, Peter followed fearfully at a distance. Waiting in the courtyard he was accosted by a servant girl who identified him as a follower of Jesus. In terror, Peter denied vehemently, even calling curses on himself, swearing, "I do not know the man". (Mt.26:74). Now after the Resurrection he himself is arrested and stands for trial where Jesus has stood. Peter has just cured a lame man. When asked in whose name he had done this he answered, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the one you crucified and whom God has raised from the dead." (Acts 4:10). We can hardly believe this is the same Peter. This incident alone would be proof enough for me that there must have been a Resurrection. The Sanhedrim 'were astonished at the assurance shown by Peter and John considering they were uneducated laymen.' (Acts 4:11) When they are warned never to preach in this name again, Peter and John answer, "You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God. We cannot promise to stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20).

As stories spread about the resurrection of Jesus, the religious rulers are in panic. Another meeting of the full senate of Israel (the Sanhedrin) is called. Peter is again brought and accused of disobeying the warning not to preach in Jesus' name. This time he answers so definitively they want to execute

him. But a highly respected member of the Sanhedrin called Gamaliel cautioned them: "Men of Israel, be careful how you deal with these people." (Acts 5:36). He reminds the Sanhedrin of two earlier public troublemakers. They had claimed to be important and had gathered followers and opposed authority, but they were killed, and their followers scattered. He suggests they release the prisoners and adds, "If this movement of theirs is of human origin it will break up of its own accord, but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourself fighting against God." (Acts 5:38-39)

Today we know this little group did not break up. It grew and spread from a small nucleus of very simple ordinary people to spread over the whole world and to win the hearts of millions of believers. The resurrection was not the invention of a group of fanatics who would not accept the death of their leader and pretended he was alive. If there was no resurrection, if death had the last word then Jesus would be a footnote in history, a fanatic who died for a lost cause like the men mentioned by Gamaliel.

But death did not have the last word. God had the last word, as he had the first word, the creative word that brought all life and love into being. And for God life and love are eternal, forever. As humans we accept, the reality of death which for believers means the death of our bodies which we bury with reverence and mourning. We know our loved one as a person who is not dead. The life of the inner hidden self, the soul, lives on. I am sure there must be a great number of variety of beliefs as to 'where' our dead friends are and their manner of knowing etc. These are part of the mystery of our being created as children of God destined to share his life after death. I suggest we can place all our thoughts and musings in God's loving hands. We can use the words of Jesus on the cross as we pray for our departed loved ones. 'Lord, we commit their spirits into your hands.'

We will hear preachers at funeral services speak of their resurrection 'on the last day'. Again we all wonder about the 'when' and the 'how' of such resurrection. This is not revealed to us and again we are invited to leave such matters in God's hands with loving trust. After funerals and a decent time of mourning we all get back to daily routine of work and earning enough to pay the bills, care for the family, cope with life's problems and hopefully to some joy in our work and relationships and recreation. But while we do this, I believe the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus is meant to have powerful influence on our present lives. I believe we are not asked to live in the hope of something that will happen in a dim and hazy future out there called 'the Last Day'.

The present day is our concern and it is the concern of God our Father 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). It is the concern of Jesus our Saviour who died for us and rose and is with us now offering us fullness of life now. And it is the concern of the Holy Spirit who is the bond of love between the Father and Jesus and wants to be a living bond binding us now to one another and to Jesus and the Father. Believers should live in the present tense. The resurrection as a future reality is already present in the life of those who follow Jesus. Jesus is risen and is sharing his victory over evil and death. Eternal life does not yield to physical death. Talking to his Father in prayer Jesus says: "Eternal life is this, to know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (Jn. 17:3)

Recall the dialogue between Martha and Jesus when Martha's brother Lazarus had died. Martha says, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus answers, "Your brother will rise again" Martha answers by repeating the faith we have been talking about, "I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day." Jesus gives a strange answer. You get the impression he is not too happy with the 'Last Day' bit. He answers:

I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he die, he will live and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

We notice the present tense. I am the resurrection. To know and love Jesus and God our Father through the help of the Holy Spirit is to experience new life even now. When we reflect on the resurrection as we have been doing, we are not studying history, we are experiencing present reality, touching deeply our personal life right now. We are not just remembering events in the life of Jesus, but we are celebrating the present, celebrating the Risen Lord, our friend, our lover, our God among us and within us accompanying us on life's journey, blessing us and teaching us about the meaning of our lives. We should have the experience of the two disciples whom the Risen Lord met on the road to Emmaus.

'Then they said to each other "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" (Lk.24:32)

Chapter Eleven

The Richness of Grace

'Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence, to make us praise the glory of his face, his free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom through his blood we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight'.

(Ep. 1:3-7)

These words of Paul written to the Christians in Ephesus speak to our hearts today. Paul expresses briefly here what we have been reflecting on in this book, the wonderful story of God and Jesus and ourselves. We can say in a sense it had no beginning just as God has no beginning, We are people of mystery. We share in God's divinity, in God's eternity. Before the world was made, says Paul, we were chosen in Christ. We are holy because we are chosen and are invited to live a life love. This must lead us to praise the wonder of this free gift, this grace given to us through Jesus. Paul marvels at the richness of this grace by which God reveals his intentions and his plan which had been hidden until revealed by Jesus.

When writing of God and God's activity in our lives, Paul is very fond of the word 'grace'. When we consider his own story we will when understand why. We ourselves are familiar with the word which occurs often in our prayers and hymns. There must be very few who do not know the word from the popular hymn 'Amazing Grace'. But, as often happens, we can become so familiar with a word that we can miss the deep rich meaning it has for us. It helps to pause and reflect on the meaning of words commonly used in prayer. Hopefully this can bring a blessing and nourish our love relationship with God. In the opening words to the Ephesians which we have quoted, Paul draws our attention to two aspects of the experience of grace. One is that grace means 'free gift' and secondly, he describes it as a rich experience and a very lavish gift. Paul says the gift is 'showered upon us'. God showers his gifts. He does not measure, count or calculate. He is a lavish giver. Grace stresses God's activity not ours. God is the first mover and acts out of love. When we get our ideas

about God straight and realise his love is gift, is grace and not reward for anything we have done there is a chance we might fall in love with God.

Perhaps the most eloquent saint and spiritual writer on the experience of grace is St. Paul. We know his story told dramatically in Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles. He appears there as Saul, a man on fire with zeal for the traditional Jewish faith handed down from God through Moses. As a Pharisee his vocation is to explain, protect and spread this faith. But now comes a terrible threat to that faith: a man called Jesus appears among the people. He calls himself a teacher but has no academic training from seminary or university. But he speaks with great confidence and challenges many sacred traditions. He addresses himself to everybody, but his message is specially welcomed by the poor, sinners, pagans, Samaritans. He tells them their sins are forgiven and they are loved by God. He claims he has been sent by God to bring this message. When this Jesus refuses to submit to the religious authorities he is eventually arrested and crucified.

That should have been the end of the story. But instead of the end it turned out to be only the beginning of a new chapter of danger. A few days after the burial of this Jesus the troublemaker, incredible rumours are going around that this same Jesus has risen from the dead and is appearing to his followers, encouraging them to spread the teaching he claimed to have brought from God. Saul now dedicates himself to wiping out this dangerous new movement. When Stephen, one of the followers of Jesus is stoned to death for blasphemy, Saul is present, approving and supporting the action (Acts 7:59). Later Saul heads for Damascus with letters from the religious authorities in Jerusalem authorising him to arrest any followers of Jesus he may find and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. On this memorable journey, Jesus appears to Saul who is converted and becomes the apostle Paul.

In religious history and in the lives of the saints there are many stories of conversion, stories of men and women giving up a life of sin or a life empty of meaning and finding God and surrendering all to God's love. Paul's story must surely be one of the most dramatic. A modern writer has some words which fit Paul's case. He says, "The ultimate conversion is to fall in love." Whatever happened in the meeting on the road, it led to Paul becoming a great lover of the Lord Jesus. We can understand how Paul was struck so deeply by the extreme gratuity of the gift of faith he had received. Surely, he had dramatic first-hand personal experience of grace, of free gift. He had no good works to offer. He was actively persecuting the followers of Jesus when Jesus appeared to him and called him by name. From now on in all his preaching and writing he will speak eloquently of grace and love and encourage all of us to learn from his experience and to depend more and more on the infinite love of God than on our own good works. He invites us to throw ourselves into the loving arms of Jesus. If we fear our sins, he will remind us 'However great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater and so just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life to us.' (Rom. 5:21).

None of us can now say "God would not call someone like me." Paul writes, 'Both Jew and pagan sinned and forfeited God's glory and both are justified through the free gift of his grace by being redeemed in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3:23) When Paul is near to his own death, he says goodbye to the elders of Ephesus. This is how he summarises his own work: "I have carried out the mission the Lord Jesus gave me and that was to bear witness to the good news of God's grace.' (Acts 20:24) Paul follows his master Jesus in describing his message as 'good news' and states that good news is grace, it is the free gift of God's unconditional love. We cannot earn it but we must desire and accept it. Have I done so?

Notice again the word Paul uses to describe the manner in which God gives us his grace. "Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us." (Eph. 1:7). God showers grace on us. He pours out his free gift, his love with no measuring or counting. Such is the nature of God. His ways are not ours. We count, we check, we measure. We check out the background and worthiness of the receiver of a gift or reward. We don't want to risk investment in something that may not be appreciated. God does not seem to think of risk. He is extravagant, blind. He delights in giving.

In all his parables, Jesus describes an extravagant God. The sower went out to sow and scatters the seed everywhere, even in most unlikely places on good soil and on dry land. This sower is the God who sends the rain on good and bad. In the parable of the wedding feast we emphasize the guest who comes badly dressed rather than on the great full banquet tables. In the story of the prodigal son he describes a most unusual father who offers ring, robe, sandals and a banquet to his wayward son. The emphasis is always on the fact that what God gives is gift and not reward. The prodigal son had not earned any of these lavish gifts. The elder boy who grumbles represents those who have not yet understood that God's love is gift, is grace and has nothing to do with reward for our good works but everything to do with the nature of God's love.

God's ways are not our ways. Will we ever learn! God is God. His way is Love, is Grace, is Gift. God is not restricted or restrained by our narrow ideas of who is worthy or deserving. Jesus is friend of sinners. He chose Peter, a self-confessed sinner. He chose Saul whom we would have labelled a lost cause. God is not restricted to what we call 'holy places', to the holy mountain of the Samaritans or the holy temple of the Jews. Jesus reveals the true nature of the one living God and asks us to break our homemade idols. Jesus wanted to lead the sinners of his day and ourselves today into the wonder of our deep hidden self. Each of us is holy by being chosen in Christ.

Paul expresses well the transformation in himself as a result of his conversion. He writes to the Christians of Philippi warning them not to base the hope of their salvation on a return to the scrupulous observance of the old Law. All their hope must be placed on Jesus whose love and salvation are free gift. Salvation comes from Jesus. Our human cooperation is important and necessary but is tiny compared to God's final gift of salvation. It is the love of God who first created us and then redeemed us in Christ that ultimately saves. Paul writes to the Philippians:

'As far as the Law can make you perfect, I was faultless. But because of Christ, I have to consider all those advantages that I had as disadvantages. Not only that, but I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ and is from God and is based on faith.' (Philip.3:6-9)

Chapter Twelve

More Than We Can Imagine

'This then is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name. Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and

the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.

‘Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.’

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

In this beautiful prayer for us Paul expresses the hope that we will come to know the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge. Paul says when we surrender to that love, it will bring God’s power into our lives and that power will do more in us than we can imagine. I get the impression that many of us do not experience the sense of wonder, joy and power that Paul speaks of and which Jesus surely intended us to have. In my own experience I believe that Christ’s love is beyond all my understanding. But when I fail to be what I would like to be I judge myself and then transfer all this self-judgement to God and Jesus. I imagine them to be disappointed – even angry with me. In this way I limit God. I limit Christ’s love and make it small. I make Jesus act towards me as I deserve, and I lose the healing, love and joy he wants me to have. When we accept his love as it is and not as I imagine it, then we can be filled with the fullness of God. This brings power, a power which enables us to do more than might ask or dare to imagine.

What kind of power is Paul speaking of? It is the power that comes from love. It is the power we see daily in the lives of good parents, mother and father who really give themselves for their children, who bear patiently even joyfully great suffering for their children or spouses. This power of God which we are meant to have will be operative in our personal lives as we deal with the inevitable temptations, we all meet. It will be light and strength in times of darkness, doubt, fear. Again it will be operative in our relationships, in family, in friendships. It will enable us to witness in community and society to the deep and beautiful meaning of each person and to the beauty of Christ’s values. All people, no matter what tribe, race or religion share in the wonder of this love. We have the privilege of witnessing in our day to the wonderful mystery of God’s unconditional love.

I have wondered why do we not believe more easily, and more joyfully accept this love which is grace, gift which God wants to shower on us. Some might say, “It sounds too good to be true!” How could the eternal infinite God love the likes of me unconditionally? You think you know yourself. By ‘yourself’ you mean your sins and failures. But God is not looking at your sins. He is looking at the real you, the you he created in his image and whom he loves. Paul calls this deeper you which lies below the surface ‘your hidden self’. This real you can grow but only if it is certain of God’s love for you as you are. This deeper self must be planted in love if it is to grow into the beautiful person Jesus wants you to be.

We are all people of deep wonder and mystery. It must be so if we are created in God’s image. We share in God’s very being. We share in God’s divinity and eternity. God never began to love us! He always loved us. ‘Before the world was made, he chose us in Christ.’ (Ep.1:4). Through the prophet Isaiah God says, ‘Before you were formed in the womb, I knew you.’ Most of us touch only the surface of ourselves and of one another. We see appearances and stop there and miss the wonder of our ‘hidden self’. Many people in our busy world have no time for serious reflection on their deeper reality. Others are afraid to go past appearances and visit their deeper self. Down there are bad memories which we buried and want to forget. Down there are wounds and hurts of many years ago, wounds of childhood which were never properly healed. But all this can be changed. The light and warmth of God’s love can reach, touch and heal all the hurts of life, of long ago. In the

transformation that can follow we can be filled with the utter fullness of God and be empowered to do more than we can imagine.

Here is an image from nature which invites us to reflect on the wonder of our true self which is hidden under the appearances of our daily lives. When you see a great iceberg in the cold northern oceans your eye will see only a small floating block of ice on the surface. It may be shaped like a mountain peak and seem quite small. But hidden underneath in the water is a massive mountain of ice powerful enough to destroy the greatest ship or structure man can fashion. This is a very small image of the amazing reality which is true of each person. On the surface we see a tiny fraction of our real self. But underneath is a power and force greater than all our imagining, the very Presence of God, what Paul calls 'the fullness of God', breathing his life and love into us.

Paul prays with great confidence to God for us. He knows who he is praying to, the true God who is love. He knows the nature of true love. 'Love does not come to an end.' (1 Cor.13:8) Love is forever. It is everlasting like God himself. And of course it is grace, free gift. We are eternally loved by God not for our own good works, not for resisting temptation but because God is God and we are his. Again Paul said, 'The temple of God is sacred, and you are that temple.' (1 Cor.3:17) When we hear these words we feel Paul must be mistaken or exaggerating. You could apply such words to someone like Mother Teresa but not to me. But now you are comparing yourself with others. God does not do this. Each person is unique and is uniquely loved by God. We should not compare ourselves with others. We should not say, "I am better than x", nor should we say "I am worse than x". When we speak like that, we are again missing the deep mystery of our hidden self which is in the image of God and is a unique creation.

Let us recall for a moment two basic truths about ourselves. The first truth we have just mentioned which we find so hard to believe, is that we are holy, good, sacred. We are holy because God created us in his image and shares with us his holiness and this holiness is gift. His prayers and good works are not the cause of our holiness. They can be the fruits of the holiness we share from God. The second truth about ourselves is that we are sinners. I doubt if any of us will deny this reality. We know from sad experience that we are weak and selfish in many ways and often fail to be what we should like to be. The problem is that we dwell on this truth so much that it obscures the first and original truth we must insist on, namely our holiness, our goodness.

Now I ask an important question. Which of these two truths is the greater? Don't answer quickly. We all easily agree that God is greater than we are! Therefore God's activity is greater than our activity. This means God's loving us is infinitely greater than our sinning. I hope therefore you will agree that God's loving activity is greater than our sinful activity. If so, then I wonder why we spend so much time thinking and talking about our sins and so little time in thinking and talking about God's love for us. Some might answer and say, "My sins are so obvious. Many are external and frequent and their evil effects on myself and lives of other are also easy to see and very disturbing." This is a true observation but even more true is the salvation from sin which Jesus brought us. This salvation is at the heart of the love of Jesus which Paul says is beyond our understanding! The love of God revealed on Calvary has broken the power of sin in our lives. We have been saved. This salvation is God's work and free gift, amazing grace. The Risen Lord comes to each of us with this gift sharing with us his victory over sin.

Again Paul helps us and shows how understanding he is of our human nature. He humbly confesses his sin and weakness. In words which we can all appreciate he describes his experience of the struggle between good and evil that goes on within himself. "What a wretched man I am! Every single time I want to do good, it is something evil that comes to hand. In my inmost self I dearly love

God's law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. Instead of doing the good thing I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom.7:14-25) Paul recognises his need of salvation and believes it cannot come from himself. He rejoices that Jesus has rescued him and in his lovely prayer for us which we have reflected on, he prays for us that we too will accept the salvation Jesus has brought and allow Jesus to live in our hearts. Hopefully then we will experience God's power working in us which will do infinitely more than we can imagine in our struggle against sin.

What might happen if I, in a moment of truth, were to admit that I am holy good, sacred, under all the triviality, sin and failure in my life? What might happen? I might make an act of surrender to this great Lover. I might give up asserting that I am not worthy. I might accept that love. I might begin to cry for joy. I might say goodbye to the burden of guilt, shame and fear. It might be a grey day outside. I might be in the middle of some mess in my personal or work situation. I might be a sick person health-wise. But now I will be different. There will be a lightness, a brightness, a joy I never experienced before. Now my feet have touched the foundation of life. I have touched reality. I experience love. I will notice a power which will make me strong and bring courage and new hope and joy. I might go back and read Paul's prayer for me and see it full of new meaning, life-giving meaning.

When I humbly and joyfully accept the free gift of God's love, I can say I am in touch with reality. This reality is a strong and firm foundation on which I can safely build my whole life. Indeed surely it must be true that it's only on reality I can build my life. I cannot build on illusion, on lies, on wishful thinking, on deception. God's love is the ultimate reality, it is the rock on which I can safely build. I know I am still weak and sinful like Paul, but I am certain, as he was, of God's love.

In conclusion let us listen to another very humble, honest, joyful word from Paul:

"I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and is based on faith . . . Not that I have become perfect yet; I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me. I can assure you, my brethren, I am far from thinking that I have already won. All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come. I am racing for the finish for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus." (Ph.3:9-15)

Chapter Twelve

Salt of the Earth

St. Paul tells us he was a Pharisee and he sought perfection by careful observance of the Law. This involved scrupulous obedience to hundreds of minutiae of the Jewish law. We can imagine the self-control this must have demanded, and we can see how easily this could lead to pride and to the conviction he was his own saviour. By this tremendous self-mastery he 'earned' his salvation and God had to give it to him. Then came his meeting with Jesus and his dramatic conversion. His religious thinking is turned upside down. God is now at the centre of his life not himself and his own achievements. God through Jesus is his saviour, his salvation. He is invited to accept this salvation as gift. His pride is totally undermined. The worse sinner who had shown no respect for the Law is

equally the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love as the scrupulous Pharisee who strove to observe all the law. So Paul can no longer compare himself with others. He can no longer separate himself from those considered sinners as if he were better than they. All are loved with total unconditional love by God.

"I believe nothing can happen which will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Ph.3:8). I hope that most of us will be able to say a fervent 'Amen' to this statement. From now on Paul has one desire only, to share with as many as possible this good news. He is fully in love with Jesus and can talk of nothing else. You and I may not have had such a dramatic conversion experience as Paul, but God's love and the salvation brought to us by Jesus are equally true and real for each of us.

For Jesus comes right now to tell us we are loved by God our Father just as he is loved. And this will never change, no matter how dark it becomes, no matter how deep we fall into sin, no matter how strong our enemies may seem, no matter how heavy our cross. Jesus died and is risen for us and is as close in love to us as he was to Paul. Jesus has the victory over evil, sin, darkness, fear and his life consists in sharing that victory with us. These are not mere words. This is Reality. This victory has broken the power over anything that can hurt us, guilt, shame, fear, spirits, depression. These things fear the name of Jesus. No matter how dark it has become, no matter how low we sink in human weakness, we can whisper the saving name of Jesus and experience salvation.

If we really begin to experience the reality of the love of God and the salvation brought by Jesus, we will want, like Paul, to tell others about it. Like the first followers of Jesus we will become his disciples and want to share his love with others. Those first disciples were very ordinary people and we might have considered some of them to be very unlikely disciples. But a real friendship grew up between them and Jesus and after the Resurrection they wanted to tell everyone about their friend, their Lord and Saviour. I'm sure like Paul they would also say: "Nothing can happen to us that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord." But before they started to move about and share the good news, Jesus asked them to wait in Jerusalem. He said that he and the Father had another gift for them which would give them new power for this work. The gift was God's own Holy Spirit.

I think many of us have difficulty with our imagination when we want to reflect on the reality of the Holy Spirit. I offer a thought which might help us here. I ask you to imagine some very wonderful person, man or woman. Think of a lovely wonderful, beautiful person who is noted for compassion, generosity, goodness of every kind, a person greatly admired by all, one who is making our world a better, safer and happier place. Two very great and much-loved people now gone to God come to my mind: Julius Nyerere and Mother Teresa. Now imagine this person calling you to their home and telling you confidentially they are soon to die. They tell you they want you to inherit, not their wealth but their spirit. They want you to have their gifts of love, so you can continue their work of goodness and compassion. This is a lovely imagination. However, it is only a fantasy, but it might help a little in thinking of 'spirit'. We may not have words to describe the reality, but we may have some understanding of what we mean when we speak of the 'spirit' of Nyerere or Mother Teresa.

Now let us move from imagination and fantasy to reality. We move to reality when we hear Jesus saying, "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." (Lk. 24:49) And again, "John baptised with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptised by the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5) And again, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Jesus and the

Father offer us their very own Spirit, that which makes God to be God, that very Spirit of love by which they saved the world. They pour that Spirit over us and in the power of that Spirit ask us to go to one another and share God's love.

When Jesus sends out his disciples to share his love, joy and peace he used a familiar image to express what he hoped for from them. He said, "You are the salt of the earth." (Mt.5:13) We could ask in what way could people be described as salt. Think of two great qualities of salt. It is a preservative; it can save food from going rotten. Then it is commonly used to give taste to food and make it more appetising. I think we can see easily enough how the loving message of Jesus can bless society in both these ways.

Salt preserves but also stings. We know the message of Jesus can save our world from corruption but at the same time it challenges individuals and groups. The values of Jesus can save the world but also offer it a very serious challenge. Jesus has a vision of a very new kind of world. He proposes values which animate and give fullness of life to all people. These values challenge the false teachings and values of the world. They challenge selfishness and pride. They challenge the hidden propaganda that underlies much of modern advertising concerning the meaning of life. Christ's values of concern for others, work for justice, love for the poor and underprivileged are seen in the eyes of many as foolish and weak. But there are also many who realise there must be more to life than money and the pleasures it buys. Many are searching for deeper meaning to life. Christ is the answer to their searching. We have the privilege of sharing Christ with them.

Salt also gives taste to food. How true this image is when we really appreciate the teachings of Jesus. His love and goodness give meaning to life, give taste to life. They touch the deeper regions of our hearts. Even in small matters, in offering or receiving a word of praise or encouragement we can be touched and know that this is good. And when we see examples of courage in the face of suffering, of great Christian charity shown to people in need, of trust in God in desperate situations, we can see how apt is the image of salt used by Jesus. When our lives, even in small ways, help people to experience authentic human joy and peace and help them to cope in time of suffering and questioning, then we are true followers of Christ. We are letting his spirit work in us. We bring the taste of happiness into lives which otherwise would be dull and insipid. When we help others to find meaning in their lives, this meaning is like relish giving taste to the food of life. Then we don't just gulp down the daily food of life, but we taste and relish the deeper reality! Then we are truly nourished and helped to grow.

We live in an age of great and rapid progress in many areas of human life. This is very obvious in the world of communications. While adults are only getting used to the amazing world of computers, their children are already at home there and are not so excited. With e-mail, internet, mobile phones we can be in touch with one another in an instant. There is comparable progress in other areas: gadgets for home comfort and kitchen cooking, latest models of TV and luxury cars, sports equipment, recreation centres. Advertisements on TV and in magazines remind us of all that money can buy. They tell us, "The future is WOW!", "We have only started to live", "Life is wonderful!" These advertisements will not tell us of the tragedies of those who sought happiness and found it could not be bought in any store.

One of the greatest singing names of the Sixties was Elvis Presley. We are told Elvis owned eight cars, six motor-bikes, two planes, a vast mansion as a home in which there were sixteen TV sets, yet he died at the age of forty-two of drug abuse, a sad, lonely and pathetic figure. But despite such tragedies we also are saying in this book, 'Life is wonderful' And we say it can become even more

wonderful when we discover its deeper meaning, hiding under all the surface progress we have mentioned.

Jesus came to tell us life is wonderful beyond our imagining. He offers his followers fullness of life (Jn.10:10) When our advertisements speak of life, and how our supermarkets can lead us into a fuller life, they are speaking of the body, of surface life and not of the deeper meaning of the human person. They do not touch the big questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? What happens after my time here? Is there any deeper meaning beyond what I can see? We answer "Yes!" There is meaning of wonderful beauty. To get in touch with this meaning we have to slow down, to forget about the supermarket, to switch off the TV for a while. We will have to rediscover the idea and meaning of sabbath. Time is a beautiful gift, and like all gifts, it must be appreciated and used well. We will have to give some of our precious time to rest, to reflection and to thanksgiving. I don't speak merely of physical rest from the frantic rushing around in our busy world using up physical and emotional energy making money. Any good doctor will warn us of the danger.

We speak here of sabbath or rest to get us in touch with deeper human reality, with our true identity, our hidden self, our very meaning. This puts us in touch with the more precious energy, spiritual energy. We want to recover the true meaning of recreation and think of it as truly re-creation. We need the experience of being newly created. This will come partly from the awareness of the wonder and mystery of our first creation when we received life itself from God. We must stop and take time to reflect and pray and rejoice and give praise for the wonder of our own self and for the deep meaning of Being. We need some real recreation so we can enter awareness and experience of life itself. This is a true human response to the frantic activity of work, repetitive work, often boring work, that dulls our spirit. We need some salt to give taste to our life if we are in turn to fulfil the Lord's wish that we should be salt of life for others.

I finish with a lovely word from Pope John Paul, often quoted by Cardinal Hume. The Pope suggests that if we are going to be the salt of the earth, we must have a deep love for humanity and be people in love with God:

'We need heralds of the gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can shape the joys, the hopes, the agonies, the distress of people today, but who are, at the same time, contemplatives who have fallen in love with God.' (Pope John Paul II)

Chapter Fourteen

Another Christ

By creation God makes all things and people good and holy. This creation is not a once-off activity in the past. God lives in the present tense and is active all the time breathing the gift of life and love into all creatures. God is creating, sharing life with each of us each moment. All is good and holy because of this active presence of God. This great truth is confirmed and reinforced by the Incarnation. God comes to us as Jesus in the flesh and in this wonderful way reaffirms the goodness and holiness of the human person and the human body and the holiness of the daily life of each person.

We have noted our human tendency to decide what we consider holy and sacred and separate this from what we call ordinary or profane. This is our idea of thinking but not God's. It is a false dualism

that did not come from God. Jesus reacted strongly against this tendency. His first great public act was to identify with those who were considered unholy, who would not be allowed in the 'holy' synagogue. He identified with all of those people in the Jordan river when he asked for Baptism. Even John the Baptist was shocked. In his public life Jesus chose deliberately to eat and drink with these 'unholy' sinners and in that way to tell them God was with them and did not separate himself from them like a Pharisee.

Jesus went to the synagogue. He respected it as the place where ordinary folk gathered to express their faith in Yahweh and to listen to the Scriptures and religious teaching. Jesus was not over-impressed by the temple because it was being abused by the religious leaders as a source of power, influence and wealth. He would agree with Paul who later said: 'The temple is sacred, and you are that temple.' (1 Cor.3:16) Again we notice our human tendency to want to have fine large religious houses and places of worship. We like fine vestments and external display of religious symbols. All this can come from good intentions and can lift us up above the drab world of money and materialism. But it always carries the danger of reinforcing the idea that God is confined to such places and is less present in the daily market place of life. We do need certain moments and rituals which can put us in touch with the mystery of God and ourselves, but this sacred liturgy must not obscure what one writer called 'the sacred liturgy of daily life.'

One of the most beautiful titles we give Jesus is 'Saviour'. He is the beloved saviour of each person. Let us ask "Why is he called Saviour? Were we in danger? Was there an enemy threatening us? In what way did he save us? What do people mean when they say, 'I am saved' or I have accepted Christ as my personal Saviour'? We can all answer these questions in a general way, but different people will give different emphasis in their answer. Perhaps the most common answer would be: 'Yes, we have a great enemy, namely sin, and this is what Jesus came to save us from.' St. Paul would agree in the description he gave of his struggle with sin and finished saying only Jesus could save him in that struggle. The angelic messengers from heaven would also agree. They tell Mary she is to call her baby 'Jesus' because 'He will save his people from their sins.' (Mt.1:21).

Others will stress different enemies and say Jesus saves us from fear, from the fear of an angry God or from the fear of death or the fear of Satan. Certainly a favourite expression of Jesus is "Do not be afraid". Today many people would say Jesus came to save us from our selfishness. And they would add the positive expression of this same truth and say: 'He came to save us for service of one another, for love for one another.'

In his life Jesus put the stress on this positive attitude, the call to love and serve one another. He comes to reveal the inner being of God, to show us a God of compassion and love. He does this by himself being a man of compassion, love and service. Peter in his post-resurrection sermon summarises the life of Jesus in these words, "He went about doing good." (Acts 10:38). When Jesus was one day accused by his enemies of doing evil, he defended himself by saying "I do only what I see my father doing." (Jn. 5:10) He reveals the activity of his Father as 'doing good. And since we are created in the image of our Father, Jesus is also revealing our own deepest human self. Jesus invites us to be like our heavenly Father. We are created in his image and also empowered to be like him and to become a community of compassion, love and service. Jesus put this truth before certain sacred traditions. On the Jewish sabbath, work was forbidden, and healing was work. Jesus therefore was faced with a choice between observing the sabbath and so refraining from healing or healing and breaking the sabbath. He put compassion for the sick person above observing a sacred role. This choice will eventually bring about his death.

He answers his critics on that occasion with a powerful statement revealing God's attitude to the human person, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mk.2:27) This was a very brave and dangerous pronouncement. I wonder could we say, "Man was not made for the Ten Commandments, but the Ten Commandments were made for man." I believe this could express the same deep truth Jesus lived and died for. God did not create us so that we could keep certain commandments and earn his heaven as a reward. God created us to share his very life and love with us and to invite us to be like him and share this love with one another, to set up a community of love and service here on earth. This is the Kingdom he so often spoke about.

For a long time in Christian teaching preoccupation with sin and saving our souls from hell have obscured the central revelation brought by Jesus. This is the revelation of the deep meaning of our lives. We are created in love to come to know God our Father and to love that Father and one another. Jesus comes and tells us this is the greatest commandment. He tells us this kind of love is possible and he empowers us to live as a people of love. This empowerment comes from having a deep personal love for Jesus. He is the Vine and gives to us, the branches, his own power of loving. He is the living bread that nourishes this life.

But the richest source of all our power to love is Calvary. Jesus appeals to his death on the cross as the greatest sign of his love for us. (Jn.15:13) On that cross he has the victory over all selfishness, all darkness, all fear. He shares that victory with us and empowers us to live lives of compassion and service. He invites us to notice the suffering of the poor and the injustice in our world and to join him in caring and helping, in mending broken hearts and setting captives free. This is not easy but is the most worthwhile way to live, the way Jesus lived. It is not easy. Indeed I would say it is impossible unless we are certain that he died for us, unless we are certain of his deep personal love and his presence in our hearts. If we become certain of this, anything is possible. I believe this is the real meaning of 'conversion'. It is not primarily giving up sin to save my soul but surrendering to the amazing truth of God's personal love for us. It is falling in love with God, with Jesus, with God's people.

In preparing his disciples to continue his work for the Kingdom Jesus stresses their role as servants. They must not fall into the temptation of the Scribes and Pharisees and of so many professional religious leaders all over the world: the temptation to be seen as holier and separate from ordinary people and to seek status, privilege and wealth from their calling. He warns them against ambition and seeking titles of places of honour and privilege. When James and John ask to be promised places of honour in the kingdom, the other disciples are indignant. Jesus has to call them together and give them a teaching: "Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant and anyone who wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Even at his farewell supper the disciples are still disputing who would be the greatest among them. Jesus must have had a heavy heart to find how slow they are to learn the meaning of his life and message and their call. Again he has to repeat the teaching: "Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them. This must not happen with you - No; the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves. For who is the greater: the one at the table or the one who serves? The one at the table surely. Yet here I am among you as one who serves!" (Lk.22:25-27)

On this occasion Jesus reinforced his teaching with a great act of love and humility. At the end of the supper, 'he showed how perfect his love was. He got up from the table, removed his outer garment and taking a towel wrapped it round his waist, He then poured water into a basin and began to wash

the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing' (Jn.13:1-5). John stresses this was an authentic act of love. We are not surprised that Peter does not want to allow Jesus to wash his feet. He loved Jesus and felt totally unworthy. Jesus says Peter will understand later what is happening. What will Peter understand later? I expect it is the deep teaching involved in this gesture. Jesus puts it this way: "Do you understand what I have done? You call me Master and Lord and rightly; so I am. If I then, the Lord and Master have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you." (Jn.13:13-15)

This reflection can lead us into a new way of thinking of our identity. In many places of Scripture our creation and destiny are linked with Jesus. We have already seen Paul's strong words on this truth: 'Blessed be God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons through Jesus Christ for his own kind purposes to make us praise the glory of his grace.' (Eph.1:3-6). Our creation and identity are intimately linked with Jesus our Saviour. He is someone who understands us since he is one of us, like us in all but sin.

We have spoken about our deep hidden self where we are in the image of God and are called to be a people of love. In Paul's beautiful prayer for us we have seen how Paul associates our hidden self with the mystery of Christ. Might we not say then that our deepest identity is to become another Christ. This is possible with the help of the Holy Spirit through whom we experience the Spirit than animated Jesus. Elsewhere Paul says: "Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom.13:14) And again, "Baptised in Christ you have all clothed yourselves in Christ." (Gal.3:27) Peter puts the same idea in another way. He invites us to gaze on Christ, so we become like him on whom we gaze. We will then reflect the brightness and goodness of the Lord to one another. And Peter reminds us that this will be the work for the Holy Spirit in us.

If we are to keep close to Christ and gaze upon him, then we must be people of prayer. If we are serious about the call to be another Christ, we must be equally serious about prayer. This requires faith, humility, perseverance. My own experience in earlier years was failure to be faithful to prayer. I would try for some time, maybe after a retreat! But then I became discouraged by distractions and dryness. I could see no fruit from the prayer and felt it would be better to do some work for the Lord. This experience has only convinced me more than ever that I must keep trying and not give up. I try now to realise the privilege of being invited to God's tent. I believe prayer is God's work in me more than work. I believe it is not to be judged by ordinary criteria of visible results. It is a faith activity. I am now certain I am invited to God's tent by a God who is in love with me. The remainder of this book offers some reflections which I hope will encourage the reader to desire prayer and persevere in prayer and even to look forward to it.

Chapter Fifteen

Why Does the Bird Sing?

I wish to ask you, dear Reader, "Do you pray?" I expect most will answer and say, "Certainly I pray. I say morning and night prayers. I pray a blessing on my food before I eat. I have my favourite prayers from my prayer book, I say novena prayers, I am a member of a prayer group, I go to Mass on Sundays and I say the rosary daily." This is a blessing in your life and all this prayer is very good

and keeps you in touch with God and reminds you of the rich meaning of your life and of God's presence with you.

Now I want to ask: have you tried another kind of prayer? It is called sometimes meditation or contemplation or maybe the Prayer of Quiet. For this prayer you try to find a quiet time and a quiet place and come by yourself to God. You adopt any kind of posture you wish, sitting, standing, kneeling, prostrating. You ask God's Holy Spirit to come up on, to help you meet God and listen and talk to God. You don't have to make anything happen. You simply try to become still so you may enter into the wonder and mystery of what is happening every single moment, that God is present with you desiring your company. You don't have to invite God to come to you. God is already present and is the one inviting you to come to that Sacred place deep within where he awaits you to embrace and bless you. In the following chapters I would like to encourage you to desire this kind of prayer, to try it and persevere in it when difficulties come.

This prayer is our response to God's revelation of himself which we have been considering in this book. It is our response to the King in the parable who renounced his kingship, so he might get close to us and win our love. In this prayer we remember Cardinal Hume's advice. "Always think of God as your Lover. Therefore he wants to be with you as a Lover always wants to be with his beloved. He wants to listen to you as every lover wants to hear the voice of the beloved."

Ruth Burrows is a Carmelite nun who is one of the most gifted modern writers on this kind of prayer. This is how she describes the significance of contemplation.

'Our deepest reality as human beings is our relationship to God! It is what constitutes our identity as unique persons. What we experience of ourselves and our consciousness of who and what we are is largely illusory. God's intimate knowledge of us, the divine presence in the depth of our being, this is our truth and our Yes to it is prayer. Prayer is God bending to us, offering us love, inviting us to intimate friendship.' (Living in Mystery – p.96)

God invites us to intimate friendship. You might ask what about earlier remarks in this book that God cannot be understood by our human reasoning and is unknowable to our intellect. Are we contradicting ourselves when we refer to prayer as coming to know God intimately? No. We are now talking of prayer and the language of prayer is the language of the heart and not the intellect. The great mystic saints say we 'know' God with our hearts and not our intellect. Here is a little parable from Anthony de Mello which can enlighten and help us here.

The disciples of the Guru are asking many questions about God. The Guru listens and then says, "God is the Unknown and the Unknowable. Everything I tell you about him, every answer to your question, is a twisting of the truth. The disciples were puzzled. "Then why do you speak about him at all?" "Why does the bird sing?" said the Guru. A bird does not sing because he has a statement to make. He sings because he has a song to sing.

The words of the Scholar are to be understood. The words of the Guru are not to be understood. They are to be listened to, as one listens to the wind in the trees and the sound of the river and the song of the bird. They will awaken something in the heart that is beyond all knowledge.

We spoke earlier of the mystery of God present at every moment and in every place and in each person. God is not a spectator God observing us from a distance. He is present, speaking his love to our hearts, singing his love song to us. Paul prays we will come to 'know' this love which is 'beyond all knowledge' (Eph.3:19) Prayer is our response to this truth. We wish to become present to God, so we may listen and give our response of love.

St. Augustine, after being converted from a life of sin looked back on that life and prayed thus, “all the time you were with me, but I was not with you.” He wondered as St. Paul and so many others have wondered at the amazing grace of coming to know the one true God and discovering that this God is a Lover. Augustine expressed his feelings in beautiful and memorable words. ‘O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I known you. Late have I loved you. You have made us for yourself, O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’ I’m sure many of us will agree that these words find an echo in the deep place of our own hearts.

We could say the human heart is in a sense more restless today than in Augustine’s time. We live in a new and exciting world. Science has made immense progress and keeps promising more wonderful discoveries. Our shops and supermarkets are full of wonderful, exciting and attractive goods. They promise to make work easier and fill our leisure hours with exciting entertainment. Television fills our minds with a multitude of images from morning to night. Computers not only help our work but entertain us with games and puzzles and offer instant access to world news. Despite all this, many people are already making the discovery of St. Augustine that all the progress and pleasure and excitement do not satisfy the deepest longings of our human hearts. They desire a more meaningful and fulfilled life. Many are turning to prayer and are finding new life there. But many others are captivated by this exciting new world and we can see it offers a great challenge to anyone who wants to take prayer seriously.

Karl Rahner S.J., one of the great religious thinkers of our time is credited with saying that today one must be a mystic or a non-believer. Certainly to resist the materialism of our day it will not be enough to be baptised and go to Mass on Sunday, our faith must have interior depth. It must be a relationship, a love relationship which can touch and satisfy the human heart and bring peace, joy, power. For this a living prayer life is essential. Recall again some words from St. Paul: ‘And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is spirit.’ (2 Cor.3:18)

In prayer each of us in our own way gazes on the Lord. We look with great, deep humility and with love and joy. Psychologists say when you look deeply at something it becomes part of you. You can become what you look at. Paul says we are turned into the image we reflect. These words can also be a strong warning of one of the more sinister aspects of the incessant television. Viewers are constantly looking at empty and false images and these can fill the heart. It is always the heart, the person that is centre, which is important and can be in danger. Augustine says these hearts are restless till they rest in God the creator. I said prayer is a challenge because of the competition coming from a noisy world seeking our attention all the time. We will never meet that challenge till our hearts are totally convinced of God’s unconditional love and that God is our Lover truly seeking our love.

Chapter Sixteen

This Prayer Not for Me ...

When I speak to friends and encourage them to try contemplative prayer, some of them will say, “Father I am not yet ready for that kind of prayer. It sounds like prayer for ‘holy’ people advanced in the spiritual life. Just now I am trying to cope with sin. Maybe later.” I understand in some way what my friends are saying. But I believe their response is spoiled by misunderstanding and failure

to appreciate the deep wonder of themselves and how God sees them and desires their love. I believe the Incarnation is God's answer to people who argue like that. God did not wait for us to become holy before becoming one of us and sharing our humanity intimately. He came precisely because religious teachers were telling the people they were sinners and not fit to attend the synagogue. Jesus comes to tell us we are holy by the very fact we are children of God. He comes especially to those who were convinced they were unloveable and were rejected by God. He wants to lead them into a new life of joy and intimacy with their Father. Recall Paul's encouraging words: 'What proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.' (Rom 5:8) God does not wait for us to reach a certain stage of holiness before inviting us to intimate prayer.

When Jesus left the hidden life of Nazareth to go out in public life to begin sharing his Father's love, where did he go? Did he go to Jerusalem to the temple? Did he go and spend hours of prayer before the Holy of Holies in that temple? We know he did not go near Jerusalem. He joined a great crowd of pilgrims and sinners who were on their way to the Jordan to receive baptism from John the Baptist. Like all of us these people were seeking some reassurance that God was not angry with them for their sins and that they could be forgiven. Jesus joins them and with love in his heart for them. This choice was a powerful message, greater than any sermon, that God loves us despite our sins. In your imagination go to the Jordan. Where is Jesus? He is in that line of sinners wading out to where John is baptising. Can you spot him? No, you cannot. No one knows who he is. Just another sinner! John said earlier when foretelling Jesus that when he came, he, John, would not be fit to untie his sandals. Now when Jesus reaches John there will be no question of untying the sandals. They are tied round the neck of this carpenter. We have often seen people crossing a stream tying their sandals or shoes round their neck. Jesus is truly one of us.

What a beautiful and wonderful, God we have. Think again of the words of Moses: 'What great nation is there that has its gods so near as Yahweh our God is to us.' I expect Moses would also be shocked as John was by this behaviour of God in Jesus. How could I fear to approach such a God in prayer? Should I not be eager to accept the invitation to his tent, to come and open my heart fully to him, to pour out my whole self to him knowing that his response will be to embrace me, touch me, heal me, share his Holy Spirit with me. And we don't have to go to the Jordan. We don't have to make any journey. All we have to do is to become still, to become aware of the miracle of his presence within us and let him heal and renew us. Let us not make our sins an excuse for postponing prayer.

Yes, I am weak and sinful and have doubts, questions, problems. . . Do I think if I wait that I will clear up all this mess by myself and then come to God? Through the prophet Joel, God says to us, 'Come back to me with all your heart.' (Joel 2:12) These words 'with all your heart' can mean 'with a great love'. But also, they can mean 'with all that is in your heart right now'. In other words, 'come just as you are'. Maybe you have a cracked, broken heart, broken from disappointed love or from self-hatred. Maybe it is a heart baffled by the questions and problems of life. Maybe it's a heart completely captured by some addiction — drugs, alcohol, sex, money, jealousy. The condition of your heart is no surprise to God. You think maybe he doesn't know its depths? He knows your pain, hurt, darkness, questions, loneliness, wounds but he has not stopped loving you. Does a true father or mother stop loving their child because the child is in trouble and maybe in trouble brought on the child's stubbornness or waywardness? We have no excuse for not praying. Our brokenness and failure are reasons for coming to God and not reasons for hiding. This hiding from God seems to have been with our ancestors from the beginning.

To explain the present we have often to look to the past. Someone said, 'We live our lives forward, but we understand them backwards.' Often, we have to journey into the past to find out why things

have turned out the way they are. All great cultures and religions have turned out the way they are. All great cultures and religions have a sacred story describing how things were at the beginning. The Jews have their story recorded in Genesis. Things were good at the beginning, God created a garden for his children. Children cannot know everything. They have to be taught. So God plants a tree whose fruit must not be touched. It is a boundary not to be crossed, a kind of teaching aid. A tempter comes and tells a lie. "God fears if you eat this fruit you will be his equal." The first man and woman eat and there is a change. Fear and shame enter the story. The first parents cover part of themselves from each other and all of themselves from God. They hide. From now on the relationship with their God will be strained.

What does God do? Does he punish them? Does he want to destroy them. "Where are you?" (Gen.3:9) This is an eternal question. It is addressed to us today. We hide. God searches for us in Jesus. When we let him find us, we will experience grace, gift, amazing grace. "I once was lost but now am found." I once was blind to the amazing truth, Now I see. Jesus says to me, "I am the truth." (Jn.14:6) If we surrender to this truth, to this God, we will become free and will be led into the fullness of life Jesus came to bring us.

"I am not ready for this kind of prayer." This objection of my friends is also based on false ideas about the prayer of contemplation. They think it consists of unbroken union with God, full of uninterrupted experience of God's presence and all joy and sweetness. Later I will comment on this false idea. Just now I would like to quote a modern holy man who has written most inspiring religious books which have touched many people from very many different lands. He is Henri Nouwen. In one of his books he gives this reflection on his prayer experience. I believe his honest humble words can be a great encouragement to all of us to keep trying in prayer.

'My prayer time is not a period of serious attentiveness to the divine mysteries. I wish it were! On the contrary, it is full of distractions, inner restlessness, sleepiness, confusion and boredom. It seldom, if ever, pleases my senses. But the simple fact of being for one hour in the presence of the Lord and of showing him all that I feel, think, sense and experience without trying to hide anything, must please him. Somehow, somewhere I know that he loves me, even though I do not feel that love as I can feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile as I can see in a human face. Still God speaks to me, looks at me and embraces me there, where I am still unable to notice it.' (Gracias: A Latin American Journal)

Notice that Nouwen does not get much human satisfaction from his prayer but he does grow in awareness of God's love. It is this love which can transform us.

Here are some more humble, honest and encouraging words from another very holy person of our time. He is Joseph Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago who died of cancer in November 1996. In the final two months of his life while fighting the cancer, he wrote a personal testimony of his spiritual life called 'The Gift of Peace'. There he tells us that earlier in his life he promised God that he would give the first hour of each day to prayer. He says he managed to keep this promise for the last twenty year but that his prayer was often of very poor quality. He continues, 'But early on I also made another decision: I said, "Lord, I know that I spend a certain amount of that morning prayer day-dreaming, problem-solving and I'm not sure I can cut that out. I'll try, but the important thing is I'm not going to give that time to anyone else. So even though it may not unite me as much with you as it should, nobody else is going to get that time.'" He goes on to say that the effect of that first hour does not end when the hour is up. It keeps him connected with the Lord throughout the rest of the day.

I share an interesting human occurrence I read about recently. It has a humorous angle to it and also a teaching about prayer. It concerns a holy Archbishop in Viet Nam. Archbishop Van Thuan was head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Because he was critical of the injustices in his country he was arrested and imprisoned. He was kept thirteen years in solitary confinement in a certain house. Two policemen guarded him in this house, and here comes the humour. These two guards had to be changed every two weeks as the speech and behaviour of the prisoner was converting them to Christianity! What can this have to do with prayer? I ask you: if being close to a holy man could change these guards to want to become Christian, what can happen to us if we keep close to our God in love and prayer?

Chapter Seventeen

God Desires Our Company

Many books have been written about prayer. Guidelines are given, and methods suggested to help people to pray. I suggest we should not be overawed by all the advice and directions and warnings offered. We should be very selective. Each person is unique and the relationship of each one of us with our God is unique. God seeks us, wants to reveal his love and have our love. Prayer is one very privileged area where this relationship can grow and develop. This love relationship is central in our prayer life and so over the years it is not so much a question of improving a technique of prayer but rather of God becoming more real and of my falling more deeply in love with God.

Our prayer should flow from all we have been saying about the mystery and wonder of God in himself and in his revelation of himself in Jesus as the God of unconditional love. God desires my company, wants me to be with him, invites me to his tent and wants me to be in communion with him. If I have any doubt about this, then real life-giving prayer will be very hard, even impossible. If I am convinced of this truth, then at least I will have the desire to pray. I will be full of wonder at the amazing privilege of being invited to God's tent. This attitude and sense of privilege are for me the basic foundation stones when I think of prayer. They offer sure hope that prayer will become food and drink for my hidden self.

In prayer I am invited. Here lies the source of all my confidence, especially when prayer is dry, distracted and seemingly fruitless. I am invited to prayer as surely as if I received from heaven a gilt-edged card with the words "The Holy Trinity wishes the company of Robert etc. etc." When I enter prayer I am responding to God's initiative. I might not think so or see it that way. I might think I have made a good resolution to become a better person, to seek God's help to overcome sin to develop my spiritual life. I might think this is how it is, but the truth is more wonderful and mysterious. I am in fact responding to God's invitation to be with him. "Come apart to a lonely place and rest for a while." (Mk.6:30)

As always God is the first mover. God was and is first mover in my creation. God is first mover in sending Jesus to lead me into fullness of life. God is first mover in sending the Holy Spirit to lead me into the depths of the mystery of his love. In our love relationship God is always first mover. Here lies my hope in prayer and in every other effort I make to get past the surface appearances of trivia of life, to get in touch with the deep meaning, wonder, joy and beauty of life. God wants blessings for me and is always active in my life. 'Glory be to him whose power working in us can do more than we can ask or imagine.' (Eph.3:20)

I am speaking of our interior disposition as we approach prayer, of our inner attitude as we make an effort to take prayer seriously, but also very joyfully. I do not say this attitude of desire will make prayer easy or guarantee dramatic observable change in my religious life. I am saying it will motivate me to be very serious in my effort to pray and to persevere in that effort when prayer turns out dry and distracted, even boring. I always had a very uneasy feeling that this sounded very disrespectful to God! It seemed unthinkable to suggest that you could be in God's company and be dry or bored or sleepy. I now realise there is no disrespect. Indeed we should expect this and it in no way contradicts our earlier reflection on the beauty and love and wonder of God. If anything it reinforces those ideas.

When I believe that God is God, when I think of the Mystery of the Trinity, unknowable to my human reason and that my mind cannot compose any picture or image of God and when I think at the same time of my own smallness and weakness, how poorly I understand or live out of love, then I must not be surprised that I can feel dry or distracted. But all the time I remain convinced of the wonder of God's love for me and his desire to reveal himself more and more to me. Early in this book I quoted Cardinal Hume, how when he asked if he was in love with God, hesitate and said, "I am not certain, but on one thing I am certain, that he is in love with me." I know if we persevere in seeking God in prayer, we shall be blest beyond all our imagining.

Another essential factor in my prayer and a source of great confidence and inspiration is God's gift of his Holy Spirit. This gift is given precisely to help our prayer and promote our love relationship. 'The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words.' (Rom.8:26) Even more important, Paul reminds us that only God's own Spirit can lead us into the depths of the mystery of God. 'The Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.' (1 Cor.2:11) And again, when he says we can be turned into the image of God on whom we gaze in prayer, he reminds us 'this is the work of the Lord, who is Spirit.' (2 Cor.3:18)

We read in the Acts of the Apostles how God's Spirit comes upon the first followers and their pagan converts. Here again is the wonder of God's universal and unconditional love. God does not ask them to wait and be circumcised. God desires not to give us laws or rules but his very own self. Are we interested? Do we believe? What is our response? By now, hopefully, we should know we cannot plead our unworthiness. God does desire our love. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart." (Mt.22:38) Our prayer is one way of responding to this invitation.

One of the monks of the great monastery of Taizé in France describes prayer in simple words. He said, "For me, prayer is waiting." There is much support for this idea in the Scriptures. 'The Lord is good to those who wait for him' (Jer.14:22) 'They that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.' (Is.40:31) 'I waited patiently for the Lord and he heard my cry' from the Psalms. He asks us to wait patiently, expectantly, lovingly. This is all we can do, God must do the rest. We could see ourselves as the parched earth looking upwards waiting patiently for the rain to fall. To those who ask, "Is this really prayer?" he gives us a beautiful answer from St. Augustine: 'Your very desire is itself your prayer. If your desire is continued, so is your prayer also.' He finished with these words, 'Prayer, we might say, is a holding on to God until waiting, waiting, waiting we move into the knowledge that we are being held.'

A Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, describes this waiting in prayer with what might seem a curious image; he takes his image from a love affair. And this suits our idea of God as a Lover. He says waiting in prayer is like the gravel thrown at an unresponsive lover's window and ends with these words. "I would have refrained long since but that peering once through my locked fingers. I thought I

detected the movement of a curtain.” The lover is waiting outside the house of his beloved. She is not showing any sign of responding to him and coming out. He does not want to disturb others in the house by any noise, so he throws gravel up at her window. He gets tired and is about to leave when looking up at the window, he thinks he sees the curtain moving! There is hope, so he waits.

We must wait patiently for God our Lover to reveal himself to us. We wait for this blessing, for the falling of his gentle life-giving rain on our dry spirit. We will discover he is good to those who wait. Slowly but surely the Holy Spirit will lead us past all the trivia to the deep meaning of life. We will see that so much that preoccupies us and worries us is trivial. Jesus says, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” (Jn.10:10). In prayer Jesus brings us past surface joys and sorrows into our own deepest place, our hidden self, the place of which we are hardly aware, where we are in the image of God, where we share God’s being, where there is no sin, where we are holy, good and beautiful. Jesus came to bring this blessing to us all. No wonder people flocked to him!

Recall the day when Jesus was tired and worn out and suggested slipping away by boat with his disciples for a break. But the crowd saw the direction of the boat and they followed round the lake on foot. They forgot about lunch and supper. They have another hunger which only this strange and wonderful man can satisfy. They did not think he was God, but they knew that no man ever spoke as he did and that God was speaking through him. When Jesus landed and saw the crowd, tired as he was, he had compassion on them and began to speak. How they listened to him! They were fasting but also feasting on every word that came from his lips. We can understand this. We know that we too do not live on bread alone. How blest we are that we too can in prayer feast on God’s word!

Chapter Eighteen

Be Still and Know

God is mystery. God is infinite goodness, beauty, love and wonder. This God has created us, is creating us each moment, sharing his life and love with us and so we share in the Mystery. We are partly divine. It is no wonder that there is within us a hunger for God, a desire for prayer. Prayer is the time and place of meeting between God and myself. In imagination we approach the Tent of God where we are invited. In the early moments of prayer we ask for awareness of the wonder of what is happening. We ask God’s Holy Spirit to escort us to God’s Tent and be with us in our communion with God. This is the Holy Spirit that guided Mary in her relationship with God and Jesus. This is the Spirit which led Jesus the man in his relationship with the Father. Now the Spirit is given to us precisely for this purpose. ‘The Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God . . . the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God.’ (1 Cor.2:11)

Our early thoughts will be thanksgiving, humility, praise, joy. We give thanks for the desire to pray which God is giving us. We give thanks for the gift of this time and opportunity to pray. We rejoice in the amazing privilege of being invited by God to be with him. We recall with greater wonder why we have been invited. God has not called us to give us a catechism lesson but that he may share his life with us, that he may bless, nourish, heal us. Again we think of God as Lover and desiring to have us near, wanting to hear us and wanting us to listen to him. Prayer is communication but also something more, something deeper and richer, it is communion, union of love.

What must I do? In a sense, nothing. Be still. Become aware of God’s presence. Let awareness flow over me. Awareness of God my Father, of Jesus my Saviour, of the Holy Spirit, my comforter.

Awareness of the Holy Trinity, of the Holy Unity of God. I adore, worship, glorify, celebrate the one true living God. I enter awareness of this God surrounding me and present within me. This God is saying, "I am God, you are mine. All I have is yours." What about all my doubts, fears, anxieties, questions, failure, sin problems? God answers, "You are mine. I know all this. I know you better than you know yourself. You are with me now. Accept my love. I embrace you as I embraced the prodigal son. Accept my love."

'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps.46:10) This stillness is also gift. It will not be empty stillness. It will lead to knowledge, heart knowledge of God. This stillness is not negative, not absence of movement or speech. It should affect the whole person, the body, faculties, mind, heart. It is rich and positive. Becoming still can occupy some time and be itself prayer as I involve my whole self in adoration and worship. When we hear the words 'Be still' most of us think primarily of the quietening of the body, ceasing other activities so we can concentrate on God. This is a true but limited interpretation. My body is God's gift and God's temple and should be involved in the prayer. I think it can help to spend some early time reflecting on the gift of our body and all its limbs and members and its history. The body wants to give thanks for its story, for good health, for recovery from sickness, for protection from dangers etc. We have all involved our bodies some time in sin. We now humbly accept the healing already received and thanks for protection from worse sin. These thoughts should lead to praise and joy.

All through the history of religion there has been a negative attitude to the human body which some considered as a source of evil and sin. This is lack of understanding and reverence for God's gift which is sacred. We must thank Jesus for correcting us by becoming flesh and entering our world through the womb. In this way God tells us the body is good and holy. We rejoice in the resurrection where Jesus took a glorified body and so assured us this will also be our destiny. He did not despise and leave his body. In prayer then we can invite our body to worship and adore and give praise. Some may wish to involve the body with gestures of worship and praise.

Be Still. I move from my body to my mind, my intellect. Again I give thanks for this gift, for a healthy mind and all its activities. Now in prayer my mind worships and adores its creator. In prayer it becomes engaged in the highest possible activity, the exploration of the truth as revealed in Jesus. It reflects on God, on Jesus, on the Spirit, on God's revelation of himself in scripture, in creation in life. I am not speaking here of intellectual study of the scripture but of finding God in all the different ways he reveals himself and listening as God shows me the deepest meaning, the real Truth about everything. Sometimes it will happen that a serious personal or family crisis will occur in our life. Clearly on such occasions we will spend the time of prayer offering this matter to our Heavenly Father and asking his guidance, light and power to help us cope.

Here we will find stillness of the mind to be harder than stillness of the body. We ask the help of God's spirit to lead us away from thinking of all the business of our daily lives, serious matters and trivial matters. We stop thinking of what happened yesterday or may happen today or tomorrow. We can always expect distractions. A slight noise can trigger off many thoughts, our imagination becomes active and leads us far away from God's tent. Here we must be humble and patient with ourselves. God understands and is not offended. Gently we recall God's presence and ask for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Be Still. Next, I offer my heart with all its sensations and emotions to God. I give thanks for love I have received and for love I have shown to others no matter how small. I wish to put away all upsetting emotions coming from experiences of being hurt, cheated, betrayed, rejected. I ask for healing of those painful emotions related to my life story, experienced may recently or in the

distance past. I ask the Holy Spirit to lead me back again into deep awareness of God's present and the activity and power of his healing love.

Now I offer a word of caution and warning. This word will cause no surprise to anyone who has been using this method of prayer. The warning is that our fidelity to this kind of prayer will be constantly challenged by experiences of distraction, dryness, darkness, apparent absence of God. No matter how much we desire prayer, no matter how many years we have been praying, no matter how faithful we are to prayer time, we must always expect such experiences. There will be attacks of dryness, distraction, desolation, God will seem to be far away, and we will be tempted to conclude that the whole operation is a terrible waste of time. The most holy and experienced spiritual directors warn us that we must expect such problems and we must resist with all our might the temptation to abandon the prayer, to think we would be more pleasing to God if we were to give the time to a good spiritual book or some work of charity. They say we must persevere, must go on waiting and put all our trust in the Lord.

This perseverance in prayer despite the absence of consolation is a form of dying to ourselves so God may live in us. It is also a form of dying to our false and childish image of God so that the true God may reveal himself to our hearts. We want a God we can control, a God we can predict, a God who gives clear rewards to those who try to please him. In one way we admit that God is totally other and cannot be understood by our limited minds, but at the same time in a subtle way our thoughts and feelings are dictated by much older ideas of a God who should respond to our sincere efforts and give us more consolation. We find it almost impossible to break all our old images and idols, to empty ourselves of our kind of God, to let the true God be God. True prayer takes place in the deepest and most mysterious place within us. The more surface experiences of dryness or even of spiritual joy are not the important thing. The most important thing is that God is leading us into the deepest truth of his Being, that he is Love, and into the true meaning of Love which gives all meaning to our lives, as individuals and as community.

We all crave signs of progress in our spiritual life. We look for signs that God has recognised our efforts, that he is pleased with us. Very seldom are these desires gratified. We have no certainties about ourselves except what we have been saying, that we are unconditionally loved by God and that this love can do with us what God desires and in God's own way which is infinitely better than our way. I do not demand proof of this. I just believe it. We must simply keep trying to come closer to God and not be looking for signs. I quote a much-loved holy woman of our time, Mother Teresa. She was speaking of our spiritual life in general, but her insight applies aptly to prayer. She says "All that is asked of us is that we be faithful. We are not asked to succeed." God is a Lover. He is in love with us. This God cannot be absent from us. When we in prayer feel he is absent, it is the false God we created that is absent. This sense of love is an invitation to persevere humbly in prayer waiting, seeking the true God, our Lover.

Prayer is God's activity in us. We try to dispose ourselves. We wait. God is loving us, recreating and healing us in prayer. But above all he is the Lover who is revealing his own inner self to us. This I think we could say is the greatest gift coming from real prayer: coming to know the true God with our hearts. This God wants us to find him and will reveal himself to us. Again we listen to St. Augustine, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Chapter Nineteen

The Hidden Wisdom of God

God's unconditional love for each person is unique. Our response to that love and the personal relationship which develops as a result are equally unique. This clearly has a deep bearing on our prayer. It means the prayer of each person will be unique. Each of us will pray out of our own heart and in our own special way, delighting the God who loves each of us in his own special way. Hopefully as life goes on, we will grow in awareness of the mystery of God's love for us and the mystery of our own self as good and loved by God. This will lead to a desire for prayer. This desire is a great grace. But, as we noted earlier, this desire will not make prayer easy. We are weak humans entering the tent of the living God. We seek the face of the true God and have to be weaned from the childish images we all like to fashion. Our humanity does not change when we go to pray and so we must not be surprised to experience distractions, dryness and darkness. But we also know we are invited. Love itself calls us. Our hearts respond humbly but joyfully, and we are certain that as time goes on, we will taste the goodness of the Lord. Prayer will not be merely communicating but communion with the God who called us into life and keeps calling us into closer union with himself.

The fruit of prayer is this union of love. But prayer is also communicating. We might ask what generally, would be the subject matter of our prayer. What would we share and talk about? What might we say to God or God say to us? I expect most of us would begin by greeting and expressing praise and thanksgiving for this privilege. Maybe we could invite angels and saints to help us in worship and adoration. The early part of our prayer may be dictated by our own heart and our life situation. It may concern some good or bad news of the moment. This sharing is not a matter of informing God but revealing our own heart with its joy or sorrow and giving God a chance to speak to us. But this prayer time must not become a petition time, listing our sorrows and asking help. The central activity is becoming still and gazing on God and letting the Spirit lead us into the mystery of God. If we get close to God and his heart of love our needs will be attended to even without our explicit speaking of the same. We remember the sick woman in the gospel. She said, "If only I touch his garment I can be healed." She touched and was healed. Jesus reveals that he knew he had been touched. "Somebody touched me. I felt that power had gone out from me." (Lk.8:43)

As we go through the Church's year, the liturgical seasons will suggest fruitful matter for contemplation. The scripture readings will be attuned the spirit of the different seasons and will lead us deep into the unfolding mystery of God revealed in the humanity of Jesus. Advent invites us to believe in a God who keeps his promises. Christmas leads us into the mystery of the Incarnation which offers reflection for a lifetime. In Lent we confront sin and evil and in Holy Week we see God's response to his immense problem. At Easter we are lifted up in joy at God's revelation about death and afterlife and we are invited to be transformed as we share in Christ's victory over sin, evil and death. In Pentecost we open our hearts to welcome God's own Holy Spirit offered to us to empower us to become another Christ and work to transform and recreate the earth. This Holy Spirit will lead us into the mystery of prayer and into the depths of God. In our prayer these holy seasons will be celebrated not as something that happened long ago to Christ, but as present reality and good news happening right now in us and in the world through us. God is always doing a new thing in us and in the world.

For all of us in prayer the richest subject matter will always be the Holy Scripture. The Scripture could be called the Tent of the Lord. It is a meeting place. There we are invited, and there, God reveals himself to us. We must constantly remind ourselves that this self-revelation is God's

initiative and its motive is not to give us rules but to give us himself. God is the first mover in our love relationship. What a great wonder and joy this should bring. God wants us to know him and reveals himself as Creator, Saviour, Friend, Lover. We would never have been able to think of God in such terms were there no scripture.

The Bible is the book of God's self-revelation. In the Old Testament this revelation comes through the great events in the history of the Chosen People and through the Prophets and the Psalms, the prayer book of God's people. Today many people find the Old Testament difficult to read and are further upset by the very fundamentalist understanding of some of the material. They find only certain books suitable for prayer. This is understandable. Humanity over a very long period of history is only slowly growing into a purer and more authentic understanding of the nature of God. And I'm sure you will agree this is the work of our lifetime here on earth, to come to full fruition only after death. Some of the images of God recorded in the history of the chosen people were influenced by the culture of those early days. In places they present the picture of a vengeful and punishing God which even Jesus rejected. In our day there has been much research and study among Bible scholars who have produced very useful commentaries which provide a helpful guide to reading and understanding the Old Testament. These will help people to pray this part of Scripture in a more authentic and fruitful manner.

The climax of God's self-revelation of course comes in Jesus. How privileged we are to live in the time of the Lord. St. Paul describes Jesus as 'the love of God made visible'. (Rom.8:31) The Gospels give us the story of Jesus and the other books of the New Testament offer very rich reflection and teaching on that story and on the formation of the new communities of love which continue the presence of Jesus and his work among us. St. John, who was so close to Jesus, beings his Gospel differently from the other three Evangelists. They begin with some event related to the human life of Jesus. John leads us into the mystery:

'In the beginning was the Word:
The Word was with God
And the Word was God.
The Word was made flesh,
He lived among us,
And we saw his glory,
The glory that is his as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.' (Jn 1:1-2 and 14)

Why does John call Jesus 'the Word'? Word is linked to speech by which we communicate with one another. What we have in our minds and hearts is made known to others by our words, our speech. John is telling us the meaning of Jesus. He comes to tell us what is in the mind and heart of God. How can God the Father 'tell' us of his love? He sends his Word Jesus and this word is so expressive it becomes flesh; it is a living Word, it is our dear Lord. I think of the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah and how wonderfully it applies to Jesus:

'Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and give growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.' (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Jesus the Word sent from the Father did fall gently upon our dry world and many hearts were softened and began to produce flowers and fruits of love. And this growth continues to this very

day. Love us not easy and Jesus had to work hard up to the moment of his painful death to produce the good harvest. We rejoice that he did not return to the Father empty. He carried you and me and the whole world in his arms of love. How proud the Father must have been! The celebration that began that day is still going on. In prayer we can talk to our Lord about these things for this living word of love is with us when we become still in prayer.

When we read Scripture with faith we are in touch with reality, with creative and healing power suited to our present unique situation. Notice at our Eucharist after the reading of the gospel the reader will announce, "This is the word of the Lord." Please pause for a moment on the word 'is'. We do not say "This was the word spoken long ago by Jesus." No. We say, "This IS the word of God." God lives and speaks in the present tense. Jesus is risen. Jesus is among us and wants to speak to us right now. He invites you to listen. You may have heard this word before, many times, but today because it is a living word you can hear meaning you never heard or noticed before. You can now, through faith, experience a communication you never had before. Read again the prophecy of Isaiah above.

The book of Scriptures is unlike any other book we may read. Why? Because we never read it alone. As we read, we are accompanied by God's Holy Spirit who is breathing life into the words and is moving our hearts to be open to the meaning and power of the words for us. Paul says the Holy Spirit teaches us. 'The hidden Wisdom of God is the wisdom God predestined to be for our glory before the ages began, what Scripture calls the things no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.' (1 Cor.2:7) I used to think of this text as referring only to the beauty and glory of heaven. I now believe we can be touched by this wonder and beauty even now in prayer. Paul seems to agree as he 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.' (1 Cor.2:10-11)

Chapter Twenty

Prayer

'Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and give growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.' (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Old Testament

Numbers 6:22-27	A blessing prayer composed by God saying he wishes to uncover his face to us
Zephaniah 3:14-20	A hymn celebrating how God rejoices in us; he dances with shouts of joy for us.
Isaiah 55:1-3	Come to the water if you are thirsty, though you have no money

Isaiah 55:9	The heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.
Isaiah 55:10-11	I send my word to you and it will do in you the work I send it to do.
Psalms 46:1-	Be still and know that I am God.
Psalms 139:1-18	I praise God for the wonder of myself
Psalms 23:1-6	The Lord is my shepherd
Isaiah 43:1-7	Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine.
Isaiah 35:1-10	Let the wilderness and dry lands exult, let the wasteland rejoice and bloom.
Isaiah 46:1-7	False gods cannot carry you in time of trouble. God will always carry his people.
Jeremiah 43:1-7	Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.
Jeremiah 18:1-7	As the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine.
Deut. 1:29-33	God carries us as a man carries his child all along the road.
1 Kings 19:11-14	Jeremiah meets God in the gentle breeze.

Gospels

LUKE

Luke 2:20	As for Mary she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.
4:16-22	In the synagogue of Nazareth Jesus describes what he has come to do.
5:4-11	Peter realises how special Jesus is and confesses his own unworthiness
7:36-50	The sinful woman anoints the feet of Jesus.

10:21-24 Filled with the Spirit Jesus rejoices in his mission to reveal the true God to simple people.

15:11-32 Story of the Prodigal Son,

19:1-10 Jesus calls Zaccheus, "I must stay in your house today."

23:39-43 The story of the good thief.

24:13-35 The Risen Jesus walks with two disciples to Emmaus.

24:49 Stay in the city till you are clothed with power from on high.

JOHN

John 1:45-51 "Rabbi, where do you stay?"
"Come and see."

6:57 As I draw life from the Father, whoever eats me will draw life from me.

8:1-11 Jesus rejects the god of punishment.

10:10 I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.

13:1-17 Jesus after supper washed his disciples' feet.

14:1-3 There are many rooms in my Father's house. I go to prepare a place for you.

14:21 Anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father and I shall love him and show myself to him.

14:23 If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home with him.

14.26 The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.

14:27 Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you.

15:11 I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

- 15:14-17 I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.
- 16:13 When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth.
- 16:33 In the world you will have trouble but be brave. I have conquered the world.
- 17:20 I pray not only for these but for those also who through their words will believe in me. May they all be one.
- 17:26 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.
- 20:11-18 Jesus appears to Magdalen after the Resurrection and calls her by name.
- 21:1-19 Jesus appears to the disciples at Lake Tiberias and Peter professes his love for Jesus.

MATTHEW

- Matthew 3:13-17 Jesus identifies with sinners in the Jordan
- 22:34-40 The greatest commandment is to love your God with all your heart, soul and mind.
- 26:36-46 Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane
- 27:39-44 Jesus is mocked on the cross

New testament

- Romans 5:5 The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.
- 5:20-21 However great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater.
- 7:14-24 Instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I don't want. Who will save me? Jesus.
- 8:14-17 The Spirit given to us speaks to our spirit and makes us cry out "Abba, Father!"

8:31-39	With God on our side who can be against us? Nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible in Jesus.
1 Cor. 1:17-25	We preach a crucified Christ who is the power and wisdom of God. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness is stronger than human strength.
2:10-27	We are given the Spirit of God which leads us into the depths of God.
3:17	The temple of God is sacred, and you are that temple.
2 Cor. 3:16-18	We gaze on Jesus and should reflect his image to others and grow more like him. This is the work of the Lord who is Spirit.
Ephesians 1:3-7	Before the world was made God chose us in Christ.
3:14-20	Paul's prayer for us and all Christians.
Philippians 2:1-11	In your minds you must be the same as Jesus.
3:7-16	I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus
Colossians 3:12-17	You are God's chosen race, his saints, he loves you.
1 John 4:7-10	Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love. This is the love I mean: not our love for God but God's love for us when he sent his son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away.
4:17-21	In love there can be no fear. We are to love then because he first loved us.

The words of Isaiah should give us great joy and confidence in praying the Scriptures. The prophet reminds us that the word is sent to us by God. It is an active, living word. When I receive it into my heart in faith it blesses me, heals me, nourishes me, enlightens me. The word in a way is not separate from God the Speaker. It is God himself within me who is blessing, healing, nourishing and enlightening me.

I have indicated just a few texts which over the years I have used in retreats and people have found helpful. But the whole of the New Testament is a rich goldmine of God's revelation to us.

Many people have discovered other texts which speak to their hearts and nourish their love of God.

A number of the texts I have listed describe a gospel scene. When using these for contemplative prayer many people begin by asking the Holy Spirit to lead them into the meaning of God's revelation. Then they read the whole scene. They then read again and now stay with one word, phrase, sentence which moved them. I think we all have the experience of finding familiar words and sentences speaking to us with fresh new meaning we never saw before. This illustrates what we are saying, that Scripture is a living word. It is also very consoling for it means our relationship with God is growing and developing as we ourselves grow and change through the years. God is near and in touch and speaks the new word we need to hear in our new life situations.

Another way of praying a scripture text is to take a short phrase from any scripture passage and repeat it slowly in the heart. Repeat it again and again in your heart. Relish it and taste it. After a while you may wish to stop and be silent. This silence will not be empty. The Spirit can move you. But then distractions may come! Don't let this upset you. You return to your phrase. An added blessing here is that the phrase can rise again in your heart during the day when you are moving from one place to another or even when you are working. Here are some of the kind of short phrases which could be used in this prayer form:

Be still and know I am God Ps.46:10

He first loved us 1 Jn.4:21

I call you friends Jn.15:14

God is love. 1 Jn.4:8

My ways are not your ways. Is.55:9

I must stay in your house today Lk.19:6

These are just a few samples. Most people will already have discovered favourite words or phrases they love to repeat in the heart. And as time goes on, as we have said, the Holy Spirit will be leading us always in discovering new treasure in words, phrases and sentences of the Scripture.

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Robert Kelly SJ, RIP

AMDG