

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP

SEEKING THE CHANGELESS IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Peter Sills



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Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waters. (Psalm 42.7)

Also by Peter Sills

Deep Calls to Deep is the fourth booklet in an occasional series of meditations and addresses. The others are: *My Strength and My Song* (1991), *A Word in Season* (2001), and *Your Kingdom Come* (2006). Other publications include: *The Time Has Come: A Lenten journey with St Mark* (Columba Press: 2006), *Theonomics: Reconnecting economics with virtue & integrity* (co-edited with Andrew Lightbown, Sacristy Press: 2014), and the *Ely Cathedral Souvenir Guide* (Scala: 2008). For a full list visit: www.peter-sills.co.uk

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PREFACE

THE FIRST DECADE of the third millennium was the third decade of my ministry, for most of which I was a residentiary canon at Ely Cathedral. I was appointed to Ely at the end of 1999; the excitement of moving to a new post and the fulfilment of a personal hope, resonated with a widespread renewal of hope that the new millennium aroused. Hope and change were in the air; it was a time of looking forward: perhaps, somehow, we could transcend the problems that beset the world and usher in a new era of justice and peace. For Christians, and also for many others, the spirit of the time was expressed in the movement called *Jubilee 2000*, a broad coalition of churches, aid agencies and other organisations who, inspired by the Biblical institution of the Jubilee Year (when a new start was made possible by the cancellation of debts), campaigned for the remission of the unpayable debts of the developing nations. The campaign was largely successful, bringing about substantial levels of debt relief, but other hopes for a new start were soon dashed, and it became clear that we were living in deeply troubled times.

The two defining events of the first decade of the twenty-first century were the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 and the banking crisis of 2008; both had deep religious implications. The destruction of the World Trade Centre, and the continuing atrocities perpetrated by al-Qaida and *IS*, are the actions of those who believe that they act in the name of God. We are compelled to ask what kind of God justifies such appalling cruelty? What kind of faith is propagated by terror? Getting our picture of God right is now politically, as well as spiritually, important, and I consider this in the first part: The God Who Does not Change.

The banking crisis raised important issues about ethics and motivation, in other words about the spirit in which we act. The same moral questions are raised by the continuing shocking revelations of endemic child-abuse, the routine use of phone-tapping by the Press, the serious failures in the police service, in hospitals and in the care of the elderly, and the repeated failure of nations to agree effective action on climate

change. There is something deeply wrong with the spirit of the Age, and the second part, *A New Spirit*, addresses, this theme.

It is one thing to see what is wrong; it is another to change in response. The third part, *Becoming Rooted*, considers the challenge of making our own the values and attitudes that do not change, and how we can achieve this.

These reflections are based on the sermons I gave over the decade 2001–11, mostly in Ely Cathedral. The intervening four years have provided the opportunity for further reflection, and while some are printed as originally given (with minor revisions), others have been combined into longer pieces, and have been more extensively rewritten.

The temptation in times of change is to resist, to be clear about where stand, and to dig in. I talked about this once with Bishop Simon Phipps. He responded, 'Peter, God is not interested in where you stand but in where you are moving.' Digging-in is not an option true to God, and never has been. He is the One who is changeless, yet who is always moving ahead, calling us to follow and build heaven on earth. Those who would heed his call need to be deeply rooted in what is unchanging so that they may move closer to where God already is.

Peter Sills

St Nicholas' Day, 2015

THE GOD WHO DOES NOT CHANGE

I Deep Calls to Deep

*Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waters:
all your waves and breakers have gone over me.*

PSALM 42.9 (ASB 1980)

WATERFALLS are places of wonder. People travel miles to see them, and are spellbound at the sight. I made a special journey to see the Victoria Falls when I visited Zimbabwe in 1992. The only word to describe the the sound and sight is awesome. Every second 1088 cubic metres of water plunge 108 metres into the gorge below. Standing there, transfixed by the overwhelming power of the water, and deafened by its roar, I experienced something that has remained the same for thousands of years. It is a scene of constant movement, and at the same time it is a scene that never changes, and the fact that it draws me and absorbs me indicates that it resonates with something deep inside me. Always changing, always the same, both awesome and sustaining, its power ultimately irresistible; the waterfall is, I think, a good metaphor for God.

Everyone has these experiences. We are awed by thundering waterfalls, soaring mountains and the vastness of the ocean; we marvel at the wings of a butterfly and the beauty of a rose; we are moved by music and art, and by the love of another. These things, and more besides, touch us in our depths, but their meaning usually goes unrecognised; I believe that they are encounters with God. As with my experience at the Victoria Falls, they resonate with something deep inside us: 'He has made everything beautiful in its time; he has put eternity into the hearts of men.' (*Ecclesiastes 3.11*)

Over two thousand years ago a Levite from Jerusalem watched the waters that feed the river Jordan as they plunged from rock to rock with ferocious force down Mount Hermon. He was living in exile in northern Israel, far from the Temple where he had 'led the rejoicing crowd into

the house of God.' In his grief he is overwhelmed by the sight of the thundering water, it is as though the torrents are sweeping over him, and yet... he senses that the depths of God touch him in his own depths, and in a poem that became a psalm he recorded his experience: 'Deep calls to deep across the roar of your waters: and all your waves, all your breakers sweep over me.' Despite feeling overwhelmed, he knows that God, the unchanging reality in a world of change, is still with him, and he takes courage: 'Why are you cast down, my soul, why groan within me? Hope in God; I will praise him still, my saviour and my God.' (*Psalms 42.5-12*)

The Levite's experience is also universal. As I write, the world is coming to terms with the atrocity in Paris when 129 people died and many others were injured in a series of terrorist attacks. In tragedy deep calls to deep. Like the Levite, it is in our depths that we find the resources to deal with our grief; it is in our depths that we discover common ground with others that goes beyond the everyday. We may not recognise it, but it is in these moments also that the God who does not change touches our lives. Whether in wonder, love or grief, these are moments to learn from, moments to heed the call of God who invites us to live from our depths and not on the surface.

Living from our depths is, I think, the main theme of the wisdom tradition in the Bible. The Book of Proverbs pictures wisdom in terms that everyone can relate to: a house in which to make a home, a pillar that supports, a feast to enjoy. The call of wisdom is to 'lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.' (*Proverbs 9.1-6*)

Wisdom and insight come from our depths where God's Spirit speaks to our spirit, and they are not the same as knowledge, but come from reflecting upon what we know. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, 'It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.' Wisdom attends to voices other than our own, and to the truth that is unsaid. Wisdom leads us beyond the literal, inviting us to delve below the surface and to seek in our depths those truths that do not change. 'Scripture,' says St Paul, 'speaks of things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him; and these are what God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit explores everything, even the depths

of God's own nature.' (1 Corinthians 2.9–10a) Walking the way of insight is to let God illuminate our knowing, an understanding that St Paul also emphasised, 'be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise. ... do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.' (Ephesians 5.15) The West has largely lost touch with wisdom. We confuse it with cleverness; we prize breadth of knowledge, marvelling as the contestants on programmes like *Mastermind* or *University Challenge* display what they know. Breadth of knowledge is good, but what we should really prize is depth of understanding. As Fritz Schumacher observed, we have become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.

Wisdom is a source of hope, and our depths are where our hopes abide, but we seem to prefer dreams. As Denise Inge said, 'We think we need a dream. We are urged to "climb every mountain" till we find it..., but what we really need is hope. Humans cannot live without it. We can do without many things ... but we cannot live well for long without hope.' Hope is not the same as optimism, which she describes as passive, 'waiting for what is better to come to you.' Hope, she says is active, 'it goes out and does. It falls and fails sometimes, but it is tenacious and unafraid, and it survives long after optimism is dashed. [Hope] will not let go of the notion that the good is real, and that we can find it.' Hope calls us forward; deep calls to deep.

Denise Inge writes about ephemeral, man-made dreams that leave us living on the surface of life – the new world promised by politicians and advertisers if we will buy their products – but there are other dreams that are given, that come to us unbidden in our sleep and our waking moments, and these dreams we need to heed, for they show us what is going on in our depths; they too lead us in the way of insight.

Walking the way of insight means allowing the Spirit to speak to us in our depths. Meditative prayer (described on page 40) is the practical way we do this, exploring God's house, savouring the delights of his feast, and knowing him as a pillar of strength. But, however they come, insights need to be checked – there are too many religious madmen claiming divine inspiration! We need a standard to measure ourselves against to see if we have heard rightly and truly. Christians believe that that measure is Christ. Bishop John Robinson described him as the

human face of God; in him we encounter the God who does not change. For Christians truth is personal, not propositional; embodied, not abstract; we follow a faith not an ideology. The author of that faith is Jesus of Nazareth, whom St Paul described as the wisdom of God (*1 Cor. 1.24*), and it is the depth of our relationship with him that determines the depth of our insights. We shall know if deep is truly calling to deep if the insights we receive ring true to the character and teaching of Jesus. It all depends on the picture of God that we carry in our hearts.

II Getting the Picture Right

O Thou who changest not, abide with me
HENRY FRANCIS LYTE

WHEN MY MOTHER DIED one of the things I inherited was a box of family photos – the sort of thing that it's hard to know what to do with, and even harder to throw away! There were pictures of our family, of holidays and other special occasions; pictures of people I dimly remembered, and of distant relatives I never knew. Looking at the pictures, sometimes I could re-live the event, but sometimes I was brought up short. Did uncle so-and-so really look like that? Was the party I remember as a big event attended by only a few? Some of the images I had carried with me since childhood were challenged and shown to be wrong.

I guess we all have had a similar experience; childhood memories are not always reliable. In the same way we often have to revise the image we formed of someone on first acquaintance in the light of later impressions. But revising our early memories and impressions is not always easy; often we prefer to hold on to an old image because it's more comforting, or because it's how we should like the person to be. Often we prefer to keep our box of photos unopened because we fear having our cosy images taken away, like someone I invited to join a pilgrimage to the Holy Land who declined my invitation because she feared it would disturb her picture of Jesus.

I think one early picture that resists change is our picture of God. One picture I grew up with was of gentle Jesus. I don't think it was a particularly strong image, but it was there, colouring my picture of God. Later on I had to round out this early impression. Reading the gospels, I began to realise that this gentle Jesus who went around doing good was no soft touch! For example there is nothing gentle in the woes he pronounces on the Pharisees (*Matthew 23*). He didn't express mild disapproval in a rather English sort of way, he tore into them angrily. He called them hypocrites, blind guides, whited sepulchres, snakes, a viper's brood. He couldn't stand what they stood for and he let them know! I had to let go of my picture of gentle Jesus, and round out my picture of God.

Many years later, on a visit to Prague, I was faced with another picture of God at Mass in St Vitus cathedral. The service was, of course, in Czech, which I didn't understand, and during the sermon I found myself looking at the east window with its striking stained glass, which I guessed was made in the twentieth century. The figures are large and easy to see. At first glance it looked like a picture of the deposition: Jesus being taken down from the cross. The lifeless body of Jesus, bearing the marks of crucifixion, is held from behind by another figure, but it is only partially supported; most of the body is slumped, and the suffering it has endured is evident. As I looked I realised that the person holding Jesus was the Father; his strong arms holding his Son, compassion radiating from the divine face; and then I noticed a small figure of a dove hovering over the scene, like the Spirit of God that overshadowed the waters of creation. What I was looking at was a representation of the Holy Trinity, a wonderful and moving picture of the love of God, the deepest mystery of the divine nature. For those who could not read, or who could not follow the sermon, the story was in the glass. Here was a true picture of God: I saw Christ who died for me, and understood that this was the work of God, whom we experience as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the God who is beyond us, beside us, and within us – the God who changes not, and in whom we abide.

Getting our picture of God right is perhaps the most important thing that religious people need to do, particularly in times when there are people who believe that God requires them to murder, rape and commit

acts of brutality in his name. For Christians getting the picture right will involve the realisation that the pictures of God that we have in the Bible are not all the same, and that we have to choose between them. For example, there are many pictures of God in the Old Testament; they differ quite markedly, and to some extent show a progression in understanding. The early pictures are primitive: God is vengeful and jealous, a tribal champion, one god among many. Later pictures see him as the only God, righteous and moral, the God of all peoples. A graphic, early picture is seen in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 18 & 19*). God, we are told, hears disturbing reports of the wickedness of these two cities, and decides that he must take a look for himself. The situation is as bad as he feared, and so he resolves that the cities must be destroyed. Abraham thinks that this course of action is unjust; it will punish the good along with the bad: 'Will you really sweep away the innocent and wicked together?' he asks. He tells God that it is unworthy of him to do such a thing, and he gets God to agree that if fifty righteous persons can be found in the cities they will not be destroyed. Building on this divine concession, Abraham gradually bargains God down: first, the cities will be saved if forty-five righteous can be found, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, and finally just ten. A God who has to be reminded that what he proposes to do is not just, and who is open to persuasion, is not quite the almighty, ineffable, loving and righteous God of Christian understanding; he is rather like the gods of the Greeks, more super-human than divine.

The God pictured in the story of the Exodus (*Exodus 6.28–13.16*) is equally unedifying. After many years during which the Israelites have endured harsh treatment at the hands of the Egyptians, God decides to liberate them from slavery. He sends Moses to Pharaoh to demand that he let the people go; Pharaoh refuses, and there follows a series of plagues, or disasters, that God visits on Egypt until Pharaoh relents. It's easy to take sides as the story unfolds, and to feel that the Egyptians got what they deserved. What is easily overlooked is that God both punishes Egypt and simultaneously hardens Pharaoh's heart, so that despite the escalation of the plagues, Pharaoh becomes increasingly obdurate, thus justifying God inflicting on him even greater disaster. On the one hand God is pictured as jealous for his people and concerned for their future, but on the other hand what kind of god is it that hardens

Pharaoh's heart so that he may punish him and his people even more severely? And, indeed, what kind of god wants to inflict such punishment in the first place? Such a god is scarcely moral; in fact, he is a monster, unworthy of worship.

In both these stories God is a tribal champion, maybe the most powerful of the gods, but still one god among many. Move on many centuries to the Exile, when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians and her leading citizens were exiled to Babylon. There are echoes in this story of the God of the Exodus, as some prophets interpreted the Exile as God's punishment on Israel for her faithlessness, but in the midst of desolation another picture emerges. An unnamed prophet, known simply as Second Isaiah, or Isaiah of Babylon, sees that God is not the tribal champion of Israel, nor her scourge, but is the God of all nations; not one god among many, but the only God: 'Thus says the Lord... I am the first and I am the last, and there is no god but me.' (*Isaiah 44.6*)

Isaiah of Babylon pictures God as righteous and ethical. Israel cannot expect of him special treatment, for his concerns are wider than those of Israel; prosperity and adversity come to all; they are not willed by God, but the inevitable consequence of being human. This very different picture is focussed in four so-called Servant Songs, the last of which sees God as the One who saves his people, not by smiting their enemies, but by taking upon himself the burden of their sin, and suffering for them.

... it was our afflictions he was bearing,
our pain he endured,
... he was pierced for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
the chastisement he bore restored us to health
and by his wounds we are healed.
We had all strayed like sheep,
each of us going his own way,
but the Lord laid on him
the guilt of us all.

Isaiah 53.4–6

It is a beautiful and eloquent picture of God as Love, and represents the high-point of the Old Testament conception of God, though it never gained general acceptance within Israel. When the Exile had ended,

something of the tribal champion re-emerged in official thinking, including, under Ezra, a demand for racial purity which is shocking to modern ears (*Ezra 10*). This hard-edged image of God persists to this day, disabling many people from receiving love from God. Their image maybe is of a stern father-figure always correcting them, or of a God of wrath, demanding and punishing.

Clearly these pictures of God are not compatible; but equally clearly God does not change; it is our perception of him that changes, and we see this in these stories which reflect the diverse authorship of the Bible, and the different times in which it was written. So, if we want to get our picture of God right, we have to choose between them. For Christians the Old Testament has to be approached through the perspectives of the New Testament, and its central conviction is that in Jesus God has given us a picture that is definitive. He is the standard by which we are to judge; as Archbishop Michael Ramsay said, there is nothing in God that is un-Christlike. And it is significant that when the first Christians looked in the scriptures for a picture of God that prefigured the one that they had seen in Jesus, it was to Isaiah of Babylon that they turned. We do not have to accept all the Old Testament pictures of God, the morally repellent and the morally acceptable, and somehow hold them together. We can reject the pictures of God seen in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and in the Plagues, as well as the 'divine' command for racial purity of the post-Exilic period, because, quite simply, they are un-Christlike.

III The Human Face of God

He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being.

HEBREWS 1.3

COMPARING most of the pictures of God in the Old Testament with those in the New Testament, we are faced with a sharp contrast. For example, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep God's concern is shown to be for the lost, to the extent of searching for them until he finds them. This picture

is not of a God unrelenting in his desire to punish, but unrelenting in his desire for reconciliation, to bring his people back to him. Just as the shepherd lifts up the lost sheep, places it on his shoulders and returns home rejoicing, so God bears our sins and rejoices when we turn to him (*Luke 15.1–7*). Or again, God is like the woman who lost a coin; she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and looks in every corner until she finds it (*Luke 15.8–10*). As Jesus said, there is greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who do not need to repent – and in case this seems to favour the sinner over the righteous, we need to remind ourselves that there is no one who has no need of repentance; it is only the self-righteous who will feel aggrieved.

In Christian understanding Jesus is the human face of God. ‘He is the radiance of God’s glory, the stamp of God’s very being.’ (*Hebrews 1.3*) He reveals to us the whole of God; he is not just one member of a divine committee of three, but the almighty, ineffable God expressed in a form suitable for human understanding, and whom we experience in three ways: creator, redeemer and sustainer; the God who is ahead, beside and within. For Christians the picture of this One God that Jesus shows us is definitive: he is loving, forgiving and merciful, and he calls us to show these qualities in the ways of the world. One of the things I learned as my picture of God was rounded out was that wherever God was, it wasn’t on the fence. He had clear priorities and preferences and was not neutral regarding the great issues of the day. When the Church began to stress God’s preferential option for the poor I realised that this was true; the poor are God’s special concern; it is there time and again in the Old Testament. So, for example, at harvest time, the Israelites were commanded (in terms that are a sharp contrast to the modern desire for profit maximisation):

When you reap the harvest in your land, do not reap right up to the edges of your fields or gather the gleanings of your crop. Leave them for the poor and the alien.

Leviticus 23.22

I also realised that when you look for signs of God’s action in the world, you have to look at the anguish and the pain, and not just at the love and the pleasure, because God is present in judgement as well as in blessing. Archbishop Michael Ramsay wrote, ‘When men and nations

turn away from God's laws and prefer the courses dictated by pride and selfishness to the courses dictated by conscience, calamitous results follow. God is not absent from the contemporary scene; he is present, present in judgement through the catastrophes that follow from human wilfulness. And nowhere is the divine judgement *as* the working out of human folly put more trenchantly than in the words of the Psalmist: "So he gave them their hearts desire, and sent leanness withal into their souls." (*Psalm 106.15 BCP*) When we feel challenged, or when appalling things happen in the world, we need to look for the hand of God in the experience, and to ask 'What is God saying?' Tough times bring us face to face with our image of God. It's tempting to hang on to our childhood images and not to look at the other pictures in the box, but then it becomes difficult to receive hard truths from him.

There are many hard sayings attributed to Jesus, like the Woes he pronounced against the Pharisees (*Matthew 23.13–end*). How do they fit into the picture of a God of love? – they seem more of a piece with the wrathful God of the Exodus and the Exile. Again, it is important to look at intention. While judgement is undoubtedly part of the picture of God that Jesus painted, he made it clear that the aim of judgement was not condemnation but reconciliation. His harsh words to the Pharisees were spoken so that they could see themselves as they really were, and change. God does not want to see them punished for their hypocrisy, but to see them repent, to turn away from it and put it behind them. To the same effect are the parables of judgement at the end of St Matthew's Gospel: the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, the Three Servants, and the Sheep and the Goats (*Matthew 25*). They stand as a warning of the consequences of turning away from God. The language reflects the exaggeration and use of dramatic contrasts typical of the Levant, but their theme is salvation, not punishment. We can choose how we conduct our lives, the values and attitudes we live by; if we choose the wrong path then by that decision we have chosen to be separated from God, and that will be our fate. It is not what God desires, but respecting the free will that he has given us, he will not force us to change our path. This state of separation from God we call hell. Hell is commonly thought of as a place, especially as a place of punishment, as so much of medieval art graphically proclaims, but it is misleading to think of hell as a place, or that it is about punishment. Like heaven, hell is not a place

but a state of being, and we get into it not because God desires to punish us, but because separation from him is the inevitable end of the path we have chosen. The gates of hell, it is said, are bolted on the inside.

God is not indifferent as to which path we choose; his desire is for reconciliation, for those who have rejected him to come back to him. Indeed some passages in the Old Testament prefigure this. Isaiah of Jerusalem (or First Isaiah, after whom the Book is named and who wrote 200 years before Isaiah of Babylon) inveighed heavily against the sins of Israel, promising punishment for disobedience, but even here the divine desire for reconciliation is clear:

Now come, let us argue this out, says the Lord.
Though your sins are scarlet,
they may yet be white as snow;
though they are dyed crimson,
they may become white as wool.

Isaiah 1.18

And Hosea gives us a beautiful picture of God's love for his people. Writing at much the same time as Isaiah of Jerusalem, Hosea also denounces Israel for her faithlessness, for which she must suffer punishment, but then he pictures God saying:

But now I shall woo her,
lead her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

Hosea 2.14

God's desire for reconciliation is also, of course, central to the prophecy of Isaiah of Babylon quoted above. In the New Testament that prophecy was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, the defining picture above all of the nature of God. The Cross speaks of the God who so longs to overcome all that separates us from him that he bears in his own body the consequences of our wrong actions and desires. As Jesus said, there is no greater love than that a person should lay down his life for his friends (*John 15.13*), and on the Cross that is what he did, laying down his life for the salvation of the world. Dying for another is the ultimate endeavour and the ultimate expense of love, beautifully expressed by W H Vanstone in his hymn *Morning Glory; Starlit Sky*:

Love that gives, gives evermore,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full;
bound in setting others free;
poor in making many rich;
weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who thee reveals
hangs, O Father, on that Tree
helpless; and the nails and thorns
tell of what thy love must be.

Thou art God, no monarch thou,
throned in easy state to reign;
thou art God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

W. H. Vanstone (1923–1999)

The final verse takes me back to the window in St Vitus' Cathedral in Prague. The artist shows us Jesus' arms of love stretched out upon the cross, aching, spent, sustained by the Father. There in the stained glass we see the truth that St John expressed in words: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.' (*John 3.16, 17*) God's love, we believe, cannot be defeated; it will overcome all that separates his creation from him, and even those who have chosen the path of separation will find, in the end, that the love of God touches their hearts, and they will be reconciled to him. To believe otherwise is to accept that the sacrifice of Christ was only partially effective. The Cross is a sign in time of what God has achieved eternally. Hell is not permanent; it will be taken up into heaven.

The God of love – ahead, beside, within – is the one constant in our lives, the one constant in a world of continual flux and change. In picturing this we have to let go of anthropomorphic images. God is not some kind of super-human, but, as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, 'God is spirit.' (*John 4.24*) God is the unchanging power, the energy, the Reality that brings into existence all that exists. John Macquarrie describes God simply as *Being*. While God is beyond our comprehension, he is not beyond our experience. Through faith we experience him not as an impersonal force, like gravity, but a personal presence, like love. It is in the unchanging, loving God that we live and move and have our being (*Acts 17.28*), and getting our picture right helps us to see ourselves, our neighbours, and our world, in a new light.

IV Making All Things New

Behold, I am making all things new!

REVELATION 21.6

THE BOOK OF REVELATION, after some graphic images of the conflict between good and evil, ends with a vision of peace. The author, John the Seer, is shown the holy city, whose light is God himself, and through which flows the river of the water of life, bordered by trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. It is no less than the dwelling place of God, where the thirsty are invited to accept the water of life as a gift, and where God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes. While it is a vision, and not to be taken literally, it expresses in beautiful visual images the picture of God who makes all things new.

Newness of life is the promise that Jesus makes to all who put their trust in him. 'I have come,' he said, 'that you may have life, and may have it in all its fullness.' (*John 10.10*) As Tom Wright reminds us, the good news, the gospel that Jesus proclaimed, was about heaven coming to earth, and not about making sure we get to heaven when we die. We ask for this every time we say the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.' And it is this image of heaven coming to earth that provides the backdrop for the closing scene of St John's visions. An angel comes to him and grants him a vision of the heavenly city:

In the spirit he carried me away to a great and lofty mountain, and showed me Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God; it had the radiance of some priceless jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. *Revelation 21.10–11*

Many centuries before, the prophet Jeremiah saw the coming of heaven to earth as a thing of the heart. Speaking of the new covenant that God would make with his people, he said:

For this is the covenant I shall establish, says the Lord: I shall set my law within them, writing it on their hearts...

No longer need they teach one another, neighbour or brother, to know the Lord; all of them, high and low alike, will know me, says the Lord, for I shall forgive their wrongdoing, and their sin I shall call to mind no more.

Jeremiah 31.31–34

God makes all things new by changing our hearts, and Jesus spoke of the values of the kingdom as things of the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount he restates the law, placing the emphasis solely on intention, that is on the disposition of our hearts, rather than simply on the act. Talking about murder he says:

You have heard that our forefathers were told, “Do not commit murder; anyone who commits murder must be brought to justice.” But what I tell you is this: Anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to justice. Whoever calls his brother “good for nothing” deserves the sentence of the court; whoever calls him “fool” deserves hell-fire.’

Matthew 5.21-22

Jesus’ intention is positive, not condemnatory: what he says is not really a rule but a teaching. The old commandment is toughened, but only to emphasise the individual worth of each person. Abusing other people, treating them as fools, is to deny their uniqueness in God’s sight; it denies the fullness of life that Jesus offers. As he makes all things new God offers us a new way of seeing our neighbour, and also of seeing ourselves.

Bringing heaven to earth has often been obstructed by the temptation of Christians to teach the world a moral lesson, an attitude that derives, I think, from a mistaken picture of God. We need to hold this temptation against the reluctance of Jesus to do so. He was more concerned to warn than to prohibit. He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, but he warned her not to sin again. (*John 8.1–11*) His concern was not so much with her behaviour, which he rightly describes as a sin, as with her eternal destiny. The two are, of course, connected; the important point is where the emphasis is placed. It is notable that Jeremiah says that it is through the experience of forgiveness that we shall know that God has touched our hearts. Forgiveness does not cheapen sin – there

may be a punishment or other consequences to be suffered as a result; nor does it take away the need for repentance, that is, a willed turning away from the habits and attitudes that caused the sinful act – repentance will always be the pre-condition of forgiveness; what forgiveness does is to say that the sinner is still loved by God, and this makes a new start possible.

The Book of Acts recounts a story showing how the values of the kingdom offer a new and positive picture of those who are different, correcting the concern for religious and racial purity that characterised Israel after the Exile, and which is still widespread today. When Peter visited the house of Cornelius in Joppa, God made it plain that his good news was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews; his love is inclusive (*Acts 10*). The point was not lost on Paul, the former Pharisee. (The Pharisees were the ‘separated brethren’; they prided themselves on being different from other men.) Writing to the Galatians Paul said: ‘In Christ there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female.’ (*Galatians 3.28*) In the community of the baptised all the basic social barriers – race, status and gender – are overcome. This has much to say to a world that has largely lost the sense of social justice, where the gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater, and in which there is a strong desire to concretise differences between peoples and faiths, rather than affirm the similarities. Making all things new, God teaches us that we are all his children, and equally beloved of him whatever our gender, creed, colour or class.

Creating community is another area where the values of the kingdom are often in marked contrast to those of the world. St John records that Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: they are to love one another, just as he has loved them (*John 13.34*). Love has many meanings; Jesus is not talking about feelings or affection; he is talking about the way he has loved the disciples, and that was shown above all in the way he laid down his life for them, that they and all the world might be forgiven. Bishop Simon Phipps, a former Bishop of Lincoln, when asked what love meant in a social or business context, replied: ‘It means taking everyone’s interests seriously.’ This is the basis of true community. Alas, this falls on deaf ears in a world where the individual is the centre of concern: me and my needs; me and my values, come

first. This produces a private morality: if it feels good to you then it is right for you, whether we are talking about lifestyle, violence, drugs or sex. Taking other people's interests seriously means moderating our own desires; making all things new for our neighbour means accepting that self-restraint, rather than self-indulgence, is the way to happiness.

Above all, we see the way in which God makes all things new in dealing with pain and loss and failure, things that touch us all. The story of Jesus offers the most hopeful way of coming to terms with the painful parts of life. Some years ago I visited Schleswig, in northern Germany. In the state museum there is an exquisite pieta, carved in oak and dating from 1450. It is no more than two feet high, and there are no protective barriers, so the encounter with it is intimate. Mary holds the lifeless body of Jesus across her knees. Her hands are delicately carved: one supports Jesus' head, the other rests on his folded hands. Her head, covered by the hood of her robe, is bowed; she looks down on her son in wordless grief; the expression on her face is numb with pain. It is a simple carving, without decoration or colour, and with age the wood has split, adding poignancy to its effect.

This small statue speaks to anyone who has lost a loved one, and especially to those who have lost a child. It speaks also to all who feel the pain of the world with its needless deaths, its cheapening of human life and its exploitation of the vulnerable. But the encounter with this statue goes beyond the common sharing of experience that helps pain and grief to be borne; it interprets that experience and gives it meaning. Looking at it, absorbing its message, we realise that our experience is at one with God's experience, and we find that our story is part of the Great Story. Perhaps we sense, as Martin Luther King said, that all unmerited suffering is ultimately redemptive. Standing before this statue we go beyond the personal to the eternal, and in the midst of devastating loss and grief we know that God is indeed making all things new, that, as John the Seer says, our dwelling is with him, and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes (*Revelation 21. 3-4*).

A NEW SPIRIT

I Faith and Identity

THE OPENING DECADE of the twenty-first century saw a serious challenge to religious insights, from both a hostile media and the so-called militant atheists, like Richard Dawkins, who mounted an unrelenting attack on religion in general and Christianity in particular. For Dawkins belief in God is a harmful delusion that has materially increased the woes of the world. Man, not God, is the measure of all things; our identity is nothing more than biological, and there is no truth beyond that which science can verify. Dawkins has, of course, been answered, for example by Alastair McGrath in *The Dawkins Delusion*, but this goes largely unnoticed by the secular media, and they also pass over the fact that the idea of God that Dawkins attacks is one drawn from those who take extreme positions, and which no mainstream theologian would accept. So determined are the critics to undermine Christianity that they fail to notice that atheism is in decline, as Alastair McGrath has also demonstrated (*The Twilight of Atheism*), and they pass over the appalling and brutal record of atheistic regimes. Morally, socially and politically atheism is a spent force, which those who deny religious truth but who see themselves as spiritual beings, need to reflect on. While they take the moral dimension of life seriously, they fail to acknowledge the Christian foundation of our moral values, and indeed of many of their own moral arguments.

This is part of a larger debate about who we are, reflected on the national level in the concern to articulate and affirm British values, and which, at the ethical level, reaches into all aspects of our culture. The economic crash of 2008, and the widespread malfeasance in commerce, the press, the police and social care, are symptoms of a loss of a clear sense of identity and common values. We delude ourselves, I believe, if we think that Christianity has nothing to offer in this context. Only religious faith offers an adequate foundation for a sustainable moral

vision. Even if our innate moral sense is enough to enable us to know what is right and wrong (which I doubt), living by that knowledge, and making the personal sacrifices involved in working for peace and for a more just and inclusive society, requires a source of strength beyond ourselves. Removing God from the scene denies us that source of strength and leaves the individual as the only moral point of reference.

A moral vision whose point of reference is outside the individual offers the best hope for creating a just and sustainable society, and this is precisely what the Christian faith offers, but for this vision to become a reality, a new spirit is required: we need to see ourselves as spiritual people, and not simply as a collection of selfish genes. Spirituality is not, contrary to popular views, something that exists on its own. A spirituality implies a particular way of living and doing things. As Tom Jordan OP has said, 'Spirituality derives from the coming together of two things, a person's life and a set of beliefs and practices.' To be human is to have a spirit, it is what animates us and makes us who we are; our spirituality is the way our spirit expresses itself through our behaviour and our beliefs. To deny the spiritual aspect of our humanity is itself a delusion, but it does not follow that all spirituality is religious in character. There are many kinds of spirituality, religious and secular, and the dominant spirituality today is materialistic and utilitarian. But it leaves us unhappy and feeling unfulfilled. When all our physical characteristics have been weighed and measured, and our biology fully understood, there is still a mystery about us that we cannot quite comprehend. Like love, it can be experienced but not explained, and the failure to accept the Christian dimension of our identity is, in large measure, the cause of our unhappiness. As St Paul says, the world is indeed subjected to vanity so long as it ignores God. This unhappiness is widely felt, and despite Dawkins and the media, there is a widespread searching for a life that feeds our spirits. Without a renewed spirituality that enables us to perceive our common identity, our vision will remain obscured, and there is little hope that our resources will be adequate to our challenges, the greatest of which is climate change. When Jesus came to Jerusalem he offered Israel a renewed faith and a new identity – he offers us no less.

II Change, Continuity and the Benedictine Way

An Address given at St Benet's, Cambridge on the eve of the Feast of St Benedict, 10 July 2002

THE LIFE AND WISDOM of a monk who lived over 1500 years ago, somewhat paradoxically, has much to teach about a spirituality for today. A remark that I heard on the radio several years ago has remained with me: 'Rootlessness, not meaninglessness, is the problem of our age.' I do not know who said it, but his words resonate with the essence of what St Benedict was about, namely helping people to be rooted in changing times. Roots give identity and stability, roots anchor us; roots sustain us and also make possible new growth. Being rooted enables us to change whilst preserving continuity.

Benedict's 'little Rule for beginners' still speaks to us after fifteen centuries, and not only to those who search for God. One of the more encouraging things today is the number of people in industry and commerce who are finding in the Rule inspiration for good management and a more fulfilling experience of work. In a confused world, Benedict draws us back to roots which still contain abundant life. In particular I think he can help us with three aspects of the search for meaning today: the loss of community; the nature of work; and the dominance of economics.

The feeling of loss of community is widespread, and, although much of this feeling is romantic, the loss is real enough, a result of the uncompromising individualism of today's consumer society. Individualism produces a private, utilitarian morality: if it feels good to you then it is right for you, whether we are talking about lifestyle, violence, drugs or sex. Utilitarian ethics is one of the foundations of modern economics; materially we may never have had it so good; spiritually we have never had it so empty. Biologically our genes may be selfish, but selfishness is not a spiritual inevitability, for grace perfects nature.

We are social beings and we exist in relationship; we need community to be and to become. Benedict has much to teach, both about the nature of community and about the leadership that nurtures it. The Benedictine vow of stability roots the monk in a community, as Anthony

Marett-Crosby OSB, a monk of Ampleforth, explains: 'A monk is committed not to an institution, nor to an ideal, nor to a philosophy or even to the Rule itself. The monk is committed to a community, to a group of people with its own particular past and present and future.... The promise of stability is not made on condition that certain things change, or that certain things and customs remain in place.... It is a promise to a group of people, with all their faults and failings, that you want to seek God with them.' Community is not something that arises of its own accord around those who happen to live or work in the same place, but, as Benedict knew well, creating a community requires hard work. It requires not only obedience to God and to the Abbot, but also to one another. It was Benedict who first spoke of mutual obedience, and in this he was ahead of his time (*Rule of St Benedict 71.1*). Those who join in community make an open-ended promise to make a journey together come what may; but making the journey and forming the community are symbiotic. It is travelling together that enables the journey to be made, and it is perseverance in the journey that forms the community and helps it to change.

Recovering community is an important political as well as religious priority. As the last century closed it was becoming clear that a crucial political question for the 21st century will be the relationship between the individual and society. Neither of the dominant political creeds of the 20th century, market capitalism and communism, have provided a satisfactory model for that relationship. Both in their own ways have put purposes before persons, exalting the economic over the spiritual. Pope John Paul II made the point well: 'when the affluent society or the consumer society... seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values... it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs.' Recovering community is also the way to regain the sense of social responsibility that has been largely eroded by our rights-based culture. The Biblical social unit of the-person-in-society resolves the paradox of the modern world, acknowledging both our interdependence and our individual worth.

Helping people to become rooted in community is, perhaps, the most important function of leadership. The Church in my experience teaches little about leadership; Benedict taught much. He knew that the way the Abbot exercised his office was crucial to the health of the community, and so Benedict bids him remember above all his accountability before God: 'The Abbot must always remember that at the fearful judgement of God two things will be discussed: his own teaching and the obedience of his disciples.' (*RSB 2.6*) He must govern by deeds not words; he must not let his personal preferences determine his decisions, nor must he love one more than another or show partiality on account of social status. He must listen to the advice of the whole community, especially to the youngest, for 'It is often to a younger brother that the Lord reveals the best course.' (*RSB 3.3*) Above all, the Abbot 'ought to be of profit to his brethren rather than just to preside over them.... He should seek to be loved rather than feared, always preferring mercy to judgement, [and] he should so regulate everything that the strong may desire to carry more, and the weak are not afraid.' (*RSB 64.8-19*) Benedict knew what made for effective leadership in community; it is not surprising that businesses are taking his teaching seriously; the Church needs to recover its own treasure.

Another area where people are looking for meaning is in their work. Work tends to be seen as a means to an end, and not something that is fulfilling in itself. Part of the problem is the way we separate things that should be held together. We are used to the cry that religion must be kept out of politics, but we have been more successful in keeping it out of work. Faith is seen as part of our private life, almost a leisure activity. The Bible teaches otherwise, insisting that work is central to our being, indeed to our well-being. To have no work is to be rootless, as those who are unemployed know only too well. It is for work that the gifts of the Spirit are given, and it is through work that those gifts will grow. But many in work feel that life is out of balance, that they are making a living but they are not making a life. Benedict knew that a fulfilled life was a balanced life, and the monastic day was a combination of work, study, recreation and prayer, and the same spirit that animated prayer should animate work. Thus the Cellarer (the Steward) of the monastery was instructed to 'regard the chattels of the monastery and its whole property as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.' (*RSB 31.10*)

Christians reject the dualism of body and soul, but equally we should reject the dualism of faith and work, the sacred and the secular. Benedict was clear that the values of the holy place should also be the values of the market place, and today Benedictine communities, like Douai Abbey in Berkshire, offer regular workshops in which people can explore Spirituality in the Workplace, and the Work/Life balance.

Perhaps the basic cause of our rootlessness is the dominance of economics. As the Cambridge economist Jane Collier has pointed out, our modern culture is an 'economic' culture: economics provides the language through which the world is understood, problems are defined and by which solutions to those problems are expressed. Economic ideas express the spirit of the age. Benedict taught that a monk is engaged in spiritual warfare, and if Walter Wink is right in saying that the demonic incarnates itself in the structures of power, then the war about which we need to be deadly serious is the one of engaging the dominant culture of economics. Being rooted is not just about absorbing the tradition but also about learning how to use the tradition to challenge the gods of the age.

Economics is not so much a science as a rival religion. Its foundations are not hard empirical data but assumptions about what makes for human happiness and about the ends to which society should be directed, namely that happiness comes through increasing consumption, and that the goal of society should be increasing material prosperity. The individual is central; ethics are uncompromisingly utilitarian; and it is assumed that human behaviour is motivated solely by the rational pursuit of self-interest. This economic view is far removed from the Christian view which insists that the common good is central, and equates the love of neighbour with the love of self. It insists that the condition of the poorest rather than the general level of material prosperity is the bottom line in determining the state of the nation.

The Benedictine principle of frugality offers a fundamental alternative to today's consumer lifestyle. Benedict is not an ascetic, but he is clear that enough is enough. He prescribes a severe moderation in the allowance of food, drink and clothing, and by requiring the Abbot to inspect the beds regularly, ensured that there was no danger of the monks being ensnared by personal possessions! And the care with

which the tools and the property of the monastery are to be maintained is a sharp judgement on our disposable society. Benedict saw his monks as stewards; we view people as consumers; we demean our humanity and too often are treated as mere economic agents. But this battle is not just about preserving our humanity; it is now abundantly clear that our survival depends on dethroning the economic gods. In 2002 *The Independent* reported the chilling news that exploitation of the Earth's renewable resources had grown by 80% in the past forty years and was then 20% higher than the natural capacity of the planet to replenish itself, and since then the situation has not improved. There are signs that this message is being heard, and that others are joining in the battle, including a small but growing group of economists who are striving to work out an economic theory concerned less with life style and more with life-giving style. If I recall it aright, even George W Bush said in his Inaugural Address: 'I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort.' The challenge is to translate these sound-bites into practical action; Benedict shows the way.

III Two Paths

An Address given at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 15 February 2010

THE CREATION of Adam and Eve is a lovely story, with a caring and tender picture of God. It is one of two creation stories at the opening of Genesis, and although placed second, it is, in fact, the first in date; the opening story, commencing with the words, 'In the beginning', is a later composition, and is altogether more magisterial in tone and conception. God speaks and all things come into being in an ordered six-day process. Creation, we are to understand, arises from the command of God; and men and women are the crowning glory of the process, created to have dominion over the earth, and commanded to 'be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth.' (*Genesis 1.28*)

The older story is quite different in tone. Creation is not a divine command but an act of divine love. God is close to what he makes;

Adam is formed from the dust of the earth, and God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life, the very breath, or spirit, of God himself. God cares for Adam; he plants a garden in Eden with trees 'pleasing and good for food,' and places Adam in it. And God is concerned that he should not be lonely, and so Eve is formed to be his partner. Here, apart from the earth itself, the human creation is the first of God's works; Adam names all the other creatures, and there is no command to have dominion over them and subdue them, instead Adam's task is to care for God's handiwork, he is 'to till [the garden] and look after it.' (*Genesis 2.15*)

The stories not only have a very different tone, they also have a very different ethic. In the earlier story Adam comes from the very earth which is to sustain him and for which he must care. Here is mutuality, a sense of connectedness between humankind and the rest of creation, the working of which Charles Darwin and others have made plain. The key concept is not dominion, but humility – which, of course, comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning 'earth'. We tend to see humility as weak, doing oneself down, but actually it's a tough call. Humility is about being earthed; being connected to what is real, and having a proper appreciation of one's place in the big picture, in the overall scheme of things. This requires inner strength and wisdom. This story resonates with our ecological concerns; if only it had taken root in our collective psyche in the way that the later story has done! We have preferred dominion to humility, and wherever we look we see the influence of the first story, from the reckless exploitation of the earth's resources to the reckless trading of the banks and financial markets. The attitude is: the world is ours, we can do what we like with it. The best brains are employed in the financial houses, and we choose to use our cleverness in pursuit of personal enrichment rather than in support of the common good. We have, indeed, become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.

Wisdom is seen in the older story as God sets a framework for life for human kind. Two trees in the garden are out of bounds, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus Adam's life has ethical boundaries, and, as the story unfolds, it is when he tries to overstep these boundaries, by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of

knowledge, that he falls from grace. He, like all of us, men and women, have to learn that we are not the centre of our lives, we are not our own moral authority. To be fully human, we need to be earthed, in touch with what is real, and that means accepting a source of authority outside of the self. Not for nothing did St Benedict describe humility as the chief virtue. Not for nothing is it said that awe of God is the beginning of wisdom.

We tend to look at the two creation stories separately, but in truth they should be held together. The later story is no less true than the earlier one. We *do* have dominion over creation; and within us *is* the divine image, the capacity to relate to God and to live in communion with him. It is because of this – because we are so fearfully and wonderfully made, as the Psalmist puts it – that God commissions us as his co-creators. The earlier story shows us how that divine commission is to be discharged: with reverence and care; with concern for the common good; and within the divine moral framework. These virtues are the fruit of wisdom; they come from our inner life; they are an expression of our spirit. We all have this capacity for wisdom, the ability to access the divine framework for human life, for God has breathed his breath into us no less than he did into Adam. The mess we get into when we try to devise our own framework is only too evident, from environmental pollution to financial greed. We prefer dominion to humility and care; we have heard only one half of the story.

This tendency to latch on to half the story seems part of the human condition, and it underlies our two global crises. We prefer to see climate change as a technological issue: how to clean up the energy supply and develop more efficient uses, so that we can continue with our present life-style; we prefer not to see it as a moral problem: how to change our life-style so that demand is reduced and the resources of the earth better conserved, in other words, dominion without care. We prefer to see the recession as caused by irresponsible financial management focussed too much on maximising returns, keeping the share price high, and reducing the tax burden; we prefer not to see it as a moral problem, the consequence of defining ourselves as consumers with ever increasing demand for goods and services; again, dominion without care. We may be clever, but we're not very wise.

These crises point to a deep moral malaise. I do not mean personal morality, but the way we understand the moral basis of our human nature. To regard ourselves as consumers is to define ourselves by our appetites; we see only part of the whole of what it means to be human with the result that our moral sense has atrophied, and like the disciples in the boat on the lake, we are sinking.

To whom do we cry out in our need? Who will help us see the whole picture and renew our spirits? Calming the storm must have been awesome in itself, but the disciples seemed more awed by what it said about Jesus; in fear and astonishment they said to one another, 'Who can this be? He gives his orders and even the winds and the waves obey him.' (*Mark 4.41*) For the disciples this was a glimpse of the whole picture. Jesus was not just a holy man, he was the human face of God. His power over the wind and the waves was the same power that created the world; in him we see wisdom embodied, a human life lived to its full potential; his values and attitudes are literally life-giving, displaying the moral understanding of what it means to be human. But perversely we are turning away. Again, we choose to see only one part of the whole. In the name of equality and respecting diversity, Christianity is being marginalised. In our desire to respect different faiths and ways of life, we are losing contact with the Christian values and moral framework that for twenty centuries have shaped our civilisation. As Gavin Ashenden, the Chaplain at the University of Sussex, has said, we are experiencing the gradual asphyxiation of the religious spirit, a slow sucking of the oxygen out of our common life.

The challenge for the Church, as Archbishop Rowan Williams said in his enthronement sermon, is to find ways in which the Christian story can capture again our hearts and our imagination, and we can feel again the breath of God upon us. Rowan Williams is one who sees the whole picture. God's will is that through the Church the whole Christian story will be made plain; and we who have glimpsed it, like the disciples in the boat, need to pray hard for our vision to be enlarged. It may not seem much, but prayer is not without effect; as Jesus said, it can move mountains, and we are in the mountain moving business! For his part, God does not give up or abandon us; as he was close to Adam, breathing his spirit into him, so he is close to us, working continually to

renew his spirit in us, and as his co-creators, he calls us to work with him. He has given us dominion; we need to learn how to use it with care.

IV Unclean Spirits

An Address given at The Meeting House, University of Sussex, 1 January 2009

APOCALYPTIC IMAGES abound in the Book of Revelation. One of the images of the final conflict between good and evil is the great, fiery red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, which stands in front of a woman in labour who is about to give birth so that when her child was born he might devour it (*Revelation 12.3–4*). Some of the healing miracles of Jesus are presented as involving the same conflict. Early in his ministry, in the synagogue in Capernaum, a man ‘with an unclean spirit’ cried out to him. Jesus rebuked the spirit, and as he commanded it to come out it threw the man into convulsions. (*Mark 1.21–28*) Quite what is being described is unclear, though the fact that this one threw the man into convulsions, suggests some sort of mental illness. Being possessed of an unclean spirit could also mean that the person was ceremonially impure, or it might simply mean ‘vicious’ or ‘evil’. One way or another, an unclean spirit is one that is opposed to God, and this is clearly the case here as the man cries out, ‘What have you to do with us ... have you come to destroy us?’ As is so often the case, the evil spirits recognise what Jesus is about rather better than the people. He came to overcome the forces opposed to God, and to enable us to live a life pleasing to God.

Today we might think of an unclean spirit as something within us that subverts our nature, something that mars the image of God in us, that leads us down the wrong path. We all know what this feels like. The image of God in us is subverted by all kinds of things from evil acts and deliberate wrongdoing to the way we let ourselves down, say and do the wrong thing, or just go along with the crowd. If we are going to be happy and fulfilled in our God-given uniqueness and put behind us the things that drag us down, if we are going to grow into Christlikeness

– which is the destiny of all human creation – our unclean spirits have to be made clean. In the synagogue the man is cleansed by the command of Jesus; it is the word of God that restores order and gives new life.

The great red dragon waiting to devour the new-born child, is a picture of collective evil, the summation of all that is opposed to God. As John the Seer sees it, the forces of evil wait to devour the saviour of the world, the One alone who has the power to dethrone them. In the end, says St John, the dragon will be thrown down, but now he is active. Recent times have been good for the dragon. The financial system of the whole world has been subverted by wrong devices and desires: irresponsible risk-taking, corporate and individual greed, private gain being preferred to the common good. The whole system is unclean.

If, as I believe, collective evil is the sum of all our individual wrong devices and desires, rather than the result of a separate cosmic force opposed to God, then collective salvation and individual salvation are linked. They both require a process of personal change and growth through which our unclean spirits, our wrong devices and desires, are overcome. But as Jesus also said, the unclean spirit must be replaced with a new spirit. If the cleansing leaves a spiritual vacuum, then seven more spirits more wicked than the first will make their home there (*Luke 11.24–26*). We need to put something more substantial in its place.

For us, the overcoming of our unclean spirits will be a gradual process, rather than the dramatic deliverance performed in the synagogue. But doing things gradually, taking time, is not the way of our world today. Short-term thinking is a big part of the financial crisis; more and more we live in an instant society; the waiting has to be taken out of wanting. We have forgotten that as moral and spiritual beings we are built for the long-term; to mature and gain wisdom, takes time. We grow as people by making committed, long-term personal relationships, rather than the short-term, serial relationships of the celebrity culture, and if we are to grow into Christlikeness, we embark on a process of personal formation that lasts a lifetime. We know the truth of this from our everyday lives. If we want to acquire a skill, or absorb a body of knowledge, we have to give ourselves to it; it is not enough to get it in our heads; we have to get it in our spirits, into our bones. I used to say to my students, you don't become a lawyer just by learning the law, that

is, simply by gaining head knowledge; you become a lawyer by learning to think legally, which is a different matter; you have to get inside the tradition and allow it to form you. Right now I'm relearning the French I learnt at school: its the same process. Its not enough to get the hang of the grammar and vocabulary; to speak French with understanding you have to absorb the idiom, to think like the French do, and let their culture form you. Its the same with growing in faith.

Somehow we do not notice that the dragon has his own ways of formation. One of these is to exalt knowledge over wisdom. In today's world, information is king; outsmarting the field is what counts. We learn to adapt constantly to new situations as structures are endlessly reformed, and we become short-term, shallow people without roots. Writing in *The Guardian* (26 January 2009), Madeleine Bunting pointed to the rootlessness that underlies the current recession. It wasn't, she said, that we weren't clever, some of the best brains worked in the financial sector; nor was it that we lacked information: 'every economic indicator is meticulously tracked, information is spilling out of every analyst.' Our failure, she said, was that 'we forgot that there is a massive gap between information and understanding. The latter requires judgement, and that depends on moral attributes such as courage and wisdom. Intellect must always be married to morality if it is to be conducive to the common good. Its not enough to be clever.' Apparently the city traders who gambled with our money and lost had an average age of twenty-six – old enough to be clever, but not old enough to be wise.

Throughout the gospels we are told of the amazement of the people at the authority with which Jesus spoke and acted. Of course, his authority was an attribute of his divine nature, but even so he spent time in prayer, deepening his understanding, and at the outset of his ministry he took time to withdraw to the wilderness to wait on God, seeking to discern his will. In the same way, St Paul, after his dramatic conversion, took time, over a period of three years, to reflect on his new-found faith, and absorb the full truth of his experience. In the same way as Jesus and Paul we too have to be formed in the faith, so that our witness may be effective. A modern parallel is the way in which Barak Obama has made the American story his own. Writing about Obama's

first inaugural address, Simon Schama commented that he seemed to have internalised all of American experience, going right back to the founding fathers, to the point he had become inseparable from its history. In him the whole American story is made plain. That is God's will for us – that in us the whole Christian story will be made plain. Obama is, no doubt, an exceptionally gifted person, but as is clear from his books, he has reflected deeply on his experience, and taken to heart his faith, and it has formed him.

To gain wisdom, to be formed into the person God made us to become, we must let our spirits be cleansed. It has to be our choice; we have really to want to do it; choosing not to is what keeps the dragon in business! It may be too much to expect city traders and bankers to take time out to be with God and to let his word form them, but this is a reasonable expectation of Christians who have heard his call. What we do may seem ineffective, but those who pray put something into the world that was not there before, and it all adds up. We need to remove ourselves from centre-stage and put a deeper reality at the centre of our lives. This means spending time in prayer and allowing the word of God to take root in our hearts so that we come to see the world as he sees it, and his values become our values. It is counter-cultural; you cannot do this overnight; growing in wisdom is not a quick fix. But in the end it is the only way to personal and collective change. It is the word of God that vanquishes the dragon.

BECOMING ROOTED

I Memento Mori

In 2003, as part of a national scheme to place modern works of art in unusual locations, a sculpture by Rachel Whiteread consisting of two mortuary slabs, the one the mirror image of the other, was displayed in Ely Cathedral. This sermon, given on 6 July 2003 in the cathedral, was inspired by the sculpture.

RACHEL WHITEREAD has established a reputation as one of the leading sculptors of her generation. Her work explores spaces usually unseen, and she came to fame when she made a cast of the interior of a house in the east end of London that was about to be demolished. Patrick Elliott, Assistant Keeper of the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art, says that ‘Many of [her] works contain a direct reference to the human body. She has made casts of beds and baths, places where we are naked, relaxed and defenceless, where we make love, give birth and die.’ The pair of mortuary slabs by Whiteread on display in the north transept continue that theme.

How do we respond to having such a stark reminder of our mortality placed in the Cathedral? Judging by many of the comments in the visitors book, we find it disturbing and distasteful. There is a deep sense of affront that such a piece should be placed in such beautiful surroundings. The contrast between the medieval and the modern is, of course, part of the statement that the sculpture makes, but that doesn’t make it any more acceptable to those who do not see it as art.

I have a lot of sympathy with that view – though that may surprise those who attacked me angrily for permitting its display. But, in fact, I do have difficulty with modern art. Its not that I dislike it, although I do find some of it distasteful. Like and dislike really don’t come into it; its more that I simply can’t relate to it; much of it passes me by. It seems to be speaking a language that I don’t understand, and its hard to grasp where the artistic imagination is leading me. But this does not mean that I simply write it off, and return with relief to Michelangelo. Something

tells me that I am being addressed, spoken to, even though I don't like the medium and struggle to understand the message. I believe that art speaks to us about the spirit of the age, and if we want to understand that spirit we have to struggle with its art. And this, surely, is something that the Church has to do if it is to speak effectively to the needs of the times.

Over the last two centuries art has mirrored the decline in belief in God. This is obvious enough if you walk through any large gallery. In the medieval period art is almost wholly religious in the subjects it depicts; after the Enlightenment classical and mythological themes predominate, giving way in later times to social and every day subjects, and then to the abstract works of the modern period. This movement from the sacred to the secular to the abstract mirrors the decline of religious faith as the motivating force in human life. The ultimate questions: Why are we here? Where are we going? were eclipsed in the Age of Reason, and since then they have been kept conveniently out of the way. The individual has replaced God as the centre of concern, and consequently art has become an exploration of individual experience, personal space and relationships; the focus is the immediate rather than the ultimate. This movement in the visual arts is seen also in music and literature. But the ultimate questions won't go away, and if we do not address them they force themselves on our attention, often in ways we find violent.

Death is *the* ultimate experience and poses ultimate questions: What is the meaning of life if in the end we simply disintegrate? Is there anything beyond this life? In Advent we used to hear sermons on the four last things: death, judgement, hell and heaven, but that has passed out of fashion; we just don't want to know. Today we sanitise death and the dead are kept out of sight; much modern medicine is based on the belief that death is the worst thing that can happen to us, and modern funeral practice is often unreal, denying the reality of death and descending to the sentimental.

Death is the one certainty we all face, and yet we try not to do so. Rachel Whiteread's sculpture makes us face it; no wonder we don't like it, and don't want it in the cathedral. But surely a church is an appropriate setting for her work? The Church is very much concerned

with ultimate questions, with the life to come, and part of the ministry of a priest is to prepare people for their death. And what, after all, is at the heart of the Eucharist, the centre of Christian worship? It is the death of Jesus. It is his death that is atoning; it is his death that takes away the sin of the world, and opens the way to eternal life. Did not St Paul say, 'every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes?' (*I Corinthians 11.26*) And The death that we celebrate was not a nice, clean, sanitised death, but brutal, agonised, public and prolonged.

Jesus spoke a lot about death in his parables of judgement. He wanted his hearers to know that there will be a reckoning, and they needed to prepare themselves for it. That, he said, is what this life is about: ensuring that we are going in the right direction, so that at the end we continue along the path to God. The mystics – those who see into the divine mystery – echo Jesus when they insist that it is easier to change now in this life than in the life to come. Jesus' parables of judgement are not the flavour of the month. We don't like them, so we don't think about them – rather like the mortuary slabs! But one of the things that I believe I've learnt about modern art is that you're not meant to like it, but you are meant to think about it, and to be provoked by it. There is, I think, a widespread assumption – evident at most funerals – that we are all going to heaven, no matter what kind of life we have led on earth, although there is nothing in the Gospels to justify such optimism. There will be a reckoning, and we need to prepare for it.

Judgement goes against the spirit of the age when anything goes. We can put men on the moon, create life in a test tube, genetically modify crops, depose dictators at will, we can even change the climate, but none of this will endure. What remains is the spirit of the age, sometimes embodied in magnificent buildings like this cathedral, but more often in the values and attitudes that we leave behind. It is the spirit that survives, and that's why Jesus spoke so much about getting our spirit into line with God's Holy Spirit. He wanted us to make a good death, to die in grace and not in disgrace, and that's why he spoke so much about judgement, and that's why this sculpture is in this Cathedral.

Like Jesus, the Church is not in the business of simply saying what people want to hear, offering a pretty faith, beautifully carved and

presented; sometimes its message, like this sculpture, will be shocking. It shocks because it confronts us with our mortality, and part of the anger it has aroused is precisely because it does just that. It reminds us that whoever we are, high or low, rich or poor, clever or foolish, powerful or oppressed, it is not our achievement but our spirit that will survive. Death is the great leveller, and in a culture that invests so much in status, wealth, race and achievement, that is too hard to accept. But it's true. As one visitor was overheard to say, 'I don't like them, but they are a real test of faith.'

At first I resisted the idea that this sculpture should be shown here, but as I thought about it and tried to understand its language, my mind changed. I felt that I was being addressed. When I stand in front of these slabs I am reminded that all I have will one day be taken away. Like Jesus, I will be stripped and laid out, naked and defenceless; and I will be judged not for what I have possessed or achieved, but for the person I have become. And for that becoming I know that all my hope is on God alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked come to thee for dress;
Helpless look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Augustus Toplady

II Watching and Waiting

After the purification had been completed in accordance with the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

LUKE 2.22

JOSEPH AND MARY were just doing what parents did. The Law said that every first-born male shall be deemed to belong to the Lord, and so they went to make the customary offering in order to fulfil their religious

obligations. But of course, it wasn't just a matter of fulfilling obligations. It was a very special occasion, and they may well have had a family celebration planned, but they cannot have been expecting to be greeted by two strangers who prophesied over their infant son. And what a prophecy! Simeon praised God: he had seen the One who was to bring light to the gentiles and glory to Israel; Anna told everyone that the child was the One who would liberate Jerusalem. Heady stuff – and deeply disturbing. But as events unfolded that's how it turned out, and thirty-three years later, as Mary stood at the foot of the Cross, she knew the pain of Simeon's words that she too would be pierced to the heart.

There were of course many others in the Temple at the time; what did they make of the child – the priest who received the offering, the traders and the money-changers, the singers, the tourists, and the religious types, concerned more with tradition than truth? Their responses are not recorded; it seems unlikely that they recognised the Saviour in their midst.

So how was it that Simeon and Anna recognised him? Prophets are called by God, and given special insight – Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon – but these gifts are given only to those who are able to receive them. We need to note that Simeon and Anna had prepared themselves so that they would know God's moment when it came. Simeon, we are told, 'watched and waited for the restoration of Israel.' *Watched and waited*: 'watcher' is another word for an angel, the ones who are close to God, who see as he sees, and who do his Will. Anna 'worshipped night and day with fasting and prayer.' Her faith was not lived on the surface of her life, but went to the depths of her being, to her innermost self. She denied herself to be closer to God. So perhaps we can see why it was with Simeon and Anna that God shared his truth.

We can recognise only what we really see. These two saints had grown so close to God that they saw things as he saw them, they were, if you like, on his wavelength, and so they could recognise the Saviour. Today, we might say that they had made the journey within, travelled the way of the heart. Another way of putting it is to say that they had allowed God to form them. They knew the scriptures, not in an intellectual sense, but in their heart, so that the Biblical rhythms and

insights had become their rhythms and insights. They prayed, not simply in words, but in their hearts, with their whole being – mind, feelings and imagination – in silent attention to the wonder of God, and the truth of God, and it is no surprise that it was these two and not the others in the Temple who recognised the reality of what was happening.

What of us? And what of this temple at Ely? Where do we place ourselves? Among the priests, hurrying about their business, too busy to see what was really going on; among the workers and traders, keeping the show on the road, respectful but uninvolved; among the tourists, not sure what its all about, but enjoying the atmosphere; among the religious types, concerned more with tradition than truth; or among those who watch and wait? Would we have recognised Jesus in the infant cradled in Mary's arms? Are we on God's wavelength? Have we let him form us? Where are we on our journey within?

One of the joys of the coming of Jesus is that the gifts of God are not just for the few, but for all: saints and sinners, convinced and doubting. When we were baptised God poured out his Holy Spirit on us just as he did on Simeon, but we have to work to help that gift to grow and form us. Everyone of us has an inner life. Everyone of us knows the call of conscience, the promptings of intuition, the dreams of imagination, the demands of feeling. The Spirit is at work in everyone; perhaps we had the experience but missed the meaning.

This day, this festival of Candlemas, is a turning point in the Christian year. We end the Christmas celebration and turn towards Lent. Lent can have a rather negative feel with the emphasis on giving things up. Self-denial is important, but Lent is meant to engage us more deeply than that. Anna fasted, but she also prayed day and night. Lent is the time for putting some serious effort into our own inner journey. Think about it as becoming more rooted in God. Roots are good things, and the deeper they go, the better they are. Most of our personal and social ills are the result of rootlessness. Simeon and Anna were deeply rooted in God, and that's how we need to be.

Esther de Waal in a book about the Celtic way of prayer describes a rooted way of life which pulses with the Spirit of God. It was from the Celtic tradition that Esther de Waal learnt about commitment, and how

that meant 'simply staying still, not trying to escape, being deeply rooted in one's innermost self.' Our innermost self is where God speaks to us. The self-denial of Lent is about making space for God, making space for new roots to grow. Coming to the Temple is not just about fulfilling our religious obligations, its about learning to watch and wait like Simeon and Anna so that we can recognise the God in our midst.

III Open to God

IF BECOMING ROOTED requires an inward, spiritual journey – taking seriously our ultimate destiny, turning to God, and sorting out our priorities – it also requires some practical action. Living up to our calling as followers of Jesus, means opening ourselves to God, and the two essential steps are learning to pray, setting aside each day a time for prayer, and letting the values of the Bible shape our values and preferences, not just in our private lives, but also in our public life.

Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.

Luke 11.1

PRAYER IS A natural endowment, like our capacity for language; everyone has the capacity to pray, but like language prayer has to be learnt, practised and perfected. Learning to speak is one of the most difficult things that we have to do, but because we do it when we are very young, we have no memory of the trials that it involved. Faced with a similar task in later life, we are inclined to give up; but as with any skill we need to persist. Jesus taught the need for persistence in the parable of the friend who came at midnight to ask his neighbour for bread. His persistent knocking on the door got him not only the loaves he needed, it also showed how much store he set by getting them. (*Luke 11.1–10*) As George Caird comments, 'God does not have to be waked or cajoled into giving us what we need – but his choicest gifts are reserved for those who will value them and who show their appreciation by asking until they receive'. Those who ask will receive because God longs to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

Prayer was central to Jesus' own life, and it was after Jesus had been praying, that his disciples came and asked him to teach them how to pray. John had taught his disciples how to pray – it was one of the things that the disciples expected of their master – so Jesus' disciples looked to him to teach them. Its important to note that the disciples wanted to pray; it was not just about God or morals or heaven or hell that they wanted to learn, but about prayer, about how to grow in their spiritual life. There are two versions of Jesus' answer, one each in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Father,
may your name be hallowed;
your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread
And forgive us our sins,

for we too forgive all who have done
us wrong.
And do not put us to the test.

Luke 11.2–4

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be hallowed;
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us the wrong we have
done,

as we have forgiven those who have
wronged us.
And do not put us to the test,
but save us from the evil one.

Matthew 6.9–13

Christians take this as their model prayer; it includes three elements: *Adoration* 'Father, may your name be hallowed'; *Contrition* 'forgive us our sins...'; *Supplication* 'your kingdom come,' / 'give us each day...'. To these three elements Christian devotion has added a fourth, *Thanksgiving*. Together they make the word *ACTS*, and provide a simple guide to the elements that should be included in a time of personal prayer.

People often wonder about the appropriate language for prayer, concerned to get it right. I would say there is no 'right' language; we should pray as we are, and from the heart. In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (likely to be the more original), Jesus begins simply and directly: 'Father...', as from a child to a parent. There is an intimacy in this brief, affectionate address, and if that is the way Jesus spoke to God, then so should we. His life and ministry were grounded in his close personal intimate relationship with God, and he wants us to have that

relationship too – not just because it is wonderful, nor because through it we shall grow, but because that is the way God has chosen to be God for us, in the closeness of a personal relationship. Archbishop Michael Ramsay described Jesus' own prayer as being with God with the world on his heart. Perhaps we can think of our prayer in the same way.

Adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication find their roots in more basic form of prayer, that is meditation, the prayer of listening, where we learn to be still, silent and attentive to the presence of God – as the psalmist said, 'Be still and know that I am God.' (*Psalms 46.10*)

Silence enables us to be aware of God, to let mind and imagination dwell upon his truth, to let prayer be listening before it is talking, and to discover our own selves in a way that is not always possible when we are making or listening to noise. There comes sometimes an interior silence in which the soul discovers itself in a new dimension of energy and peace, a dimension which the restless life can miss.

Michael Ramsay

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he had been praying alone. There are many references in the Gospels to Jesus praying alone, and although we are not told what he did in these times of prayer, it is likely that he drew on an established tradition of meditative prayer that we see in the Psalms. For example, Psalm 8 is a meditation on the wonder of God and his creation:

O Lord our God,
How majestic is thy name in all the earth...
When I look up at the heavens, the work of thy fingers;
The moon and the stars which thou hast established;
What is man that thou art mindful of him...

Learning to listen prayerfully is a basic step in our spiritual growth; it is more important than academic study, reading books or joining discussion groups. So, how do we learn to listen? A tried and tested method is *Lectio Divina*, or sacred reading, a way of prayer that St Benedict taught his monks. It is a slow meditative reading of scripture, or of any holy and inspirational book, and it has four stages: reading, reflecting, responding, resting.

Reading: The chosen passage is read slowly, speaking the words quietly, but audibly, to ourselves, until a word or phrase arrests the attention, then we stop and reflect.

Reflecting: We meditate on the word or phrase, repeating the whole of it or part of it. Meditation is done with the mouth; we repeat the words quietly, but audibly, to ourselves, like striking a bell and listening to the echo. We speak thoughts or questions that it poses for us, but not at length. The aim is not to wrestle with the text, rather to savour it, or to absorb it. When we feel we have done this we respond.

Responding: Briefly we offer a prayer that arises out of our reflection; just a brief petition for ourselves perhaps, or for whatever our meditation has brought to mind. And then we rest.

Resting: Benedict called this last stage *contemplatio*, resting in the presence of God, finding depth in a shared silence, like those who love each other, whose communion has passed beyond words. When this stage reaches a conclusion, the process starts again.

To begin we need to choose what we shall read, say, the opening of St Mark's Gospel, and we need to adopt a comfortable, but alert posture, for example sitting upright in a chair, or on a prayer stool. We then begin to read the passage quietly to ourselves, as described, and then follow through the four stages. We *Read:* let us say, Mark's opening sentence arrests our attention: 'Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.' We stop immediately, put down the Bible. We *Reflect:* repeating the phrase, not continuously like a mantra, but slowly, savouring it after we have spoken the words, letting the sound linger before we repeat it again. We may just repeat a few of the words, '... Jesus Christ Son of God.' Or just 'Son of God.' When we feel we have savoured it, we *Respond:* we might pray simply, 'Lord Jesus, you are the Son of God, be with me as I pray.' Or 'Jesus, let your good news dwell in me and be heard in your world.' Then *Rest:* holding the moment in your heart.

The aim of this way of praying is not to seek to understand the text intellectually but rather to let it speak to us intuitively or imaginatively. This is not to criticise intellectual study, but to say that we need to use

other faculties in addition to the intellect if we are to appreciate scripture in all its fullness. So Benedict taught his monks first to listen and reflect rather than to think and question. We try to enter into the atmosphere, the shape, the feeling of the text in the same way that we might experience a beautiful garden or a wonderful view. It is the overall effect of the garden or the panorama that first strikes us; we simply look at it, trying to take it all in and imprint it on our memory. Then we might walk round and look at the individual shrubs and flowers. This is not speed reading!

I find it helpful to think of meditation as tuning in to God's wavelength, letting the scripture become part of me, so that it is something I carry around in my heart. It is a way of coming to see the world as God sees it, letting his outlook inform our outlook, his values become our values, and his Will strengthen our will. It is a good idea to have a pen and notebook with us, so that we can note any insights that may come to us, and also deal with distractions, for example the things that we have to remember, like calling a friend, or something we need to buy or attend to. The insights that come may not be blinding revelations (though this will be true for some), but a sense of something given. An idea or an answer will form in the mind, like an intuition or a feeling. These insights are often fleeting, no more than glimpses in a mirror, and we can struggle to articulate them, but the effort needs to be made otherwise they are lost. It is also important to check out what we have received, and many find it helpful to do this with a spiritual guide.

Why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Luke 12.56

LECTIO DIVINA is a way of letting the scripture form us, and that is the second element in staying rooted. Jesus' question about understanding the signs of the times was directed at those who were adept in the ways of the world, but who seemed blind to the ways of God. When a small cloud appeared over the Mediterranean, or the warm wind blew from the south, the weather-wise Israelites knew what it meant, but when the storm clouds were racing before high winds on the spiritual horizon, they remained unconcerned. No wonder Jesus was impatient and challenging in his words. They neglected the things of the spirit to their

own peril. There is a widespread feeling today that we too are suffering from the same neglect; like Jesus' hearers we too need to take the Bible seriously.

Taking the Bible seriously does not mean taking it literally in the way the so-called fundamentalists do. Theirs is a crude and credulous approach which lumps together poetry and prose, fact and prophecy, stories and symbols, as though they all have the same value and are to be interpreted in the same way. Taking the Bible seriously does not mean a crude literalism, but it does mean putting yourself under its authority and allowing its view of the world to shape your own view, rather than vice versa. The Bible needs to be fundamental, but that need not make us fundamentalists.

The first step, of course, is actually to read it. And to be clear what it means to affirm it as holy scripture. Designating a book as scripture is to give it authority. The Church has collectively come to affirm that in the various writings that make up the Bible the nature and character of God is disclosed. As we have seen, this disclosure has the character of an evolving, rather than a once-and-for-all revelation, as for example in the Koran. The Church's affirmation also means that in the Bible we can discover a way of living, authentically and uniquely ordained by God, that enables us to grow in our humanity, embrace our destiny, and order the world with justice. Again in contrast to the Koran, the writings that are designated scripture were not written as such, but were chosen from among extant documents because experience authenticated their truth. Something is not true because it is in the Bible; it is in the Bible because it is true. So, for example, when St Paul wrote to the Romans, he did not think of himself as writing holy scripture; he was writing a letter to introduce himself to the Christians of Rome. Subsequently, the Church decided that his letter was true to the Christian understanding and experience of God in Christ, and included it among its scriptures. One result of this process is that neither the Bible as a whole, nor individual books, present a single theological or ethical system; even in the letters of St Paul, or indeed in the teaching of Jesus himself, there are contradictions and different views. Neither Jesus nor Paul were systematic teachers; they responded to the situation before them, and like the rest of us when speaking extempore, their responses reveal a degree of

inconsistency. While this can be frustrating, especially for those who prize intellectual tidiness, and means that there will never be complete agreement among Christians, it is a salutary reminder that the truth is larger than our capacity to perceive it at any particular moment.

Maybe this untidiness is part of the reason that even for established Christians the Bible is often largely unknown. Without our realising it, secular assumptions shape our views rather than the Biblical perspectives. Writing in *The Tablet* in 2001, Kristina Cooper described how the Bible came alive for her. She was working as a volunteer teacher in Panama and was invited to attend a charismatic prayer group. It was a disturbing experience as she found herself in unfamiliar territory, a group to whom the Bible spoke directly; but the real disturbance was the frontal assault it delivered to her world view, as she said: 'I may have been brought up a Catholic but I didn't actually believe in a God who had power in our world. It was easier to believe that it was all down to us, and we just had to try harder and be better and fix it. Yet here were people with the audacity to say that they knew a God who did intervene, a God who was involved, a God who healed bad backs, who helped people with the rent and generally had the ability to transform people's lives.' Her experience made her look with new eyes at the Bible, and she realised that she had been making God in her own image all her life. 'Although I never read the Bible, never prayed, knew nothing really about God, this did not stop me arrogantly pontificating about him. A favourite turn of phrase of mine always began: "I could never believe in a God who..."', as if I, not God, was the centre.' This realisation changed her life. God became real for her in new and exciting ways; her faith was deepened, and her world view transformed from a superficial, secular perspective, to a deeper Biblical one.

Accepting the Bible as scripture means that faith precedes understanding; we need to take on trust the stamp of authority that it bears. This is not the way of the modern world; it is, nevertheless, the experience of countless Christians over the centuries and down the ages that what scripture teaches will lead us to God. It is in the doing, in the reading and wrestling with the text and in striving to live according to its insights, that we shall find that the Bible speaks to us.

That has been my own experience. For me the Bible came alive through critical study. Coming to understand how it was written, the successive layers of story and interpretation, the different points of view of the authors, the parallels with other contemporary sources, the different types of writing – poetry and prose, symbol and satire – all combined to bring it alive as inspired writing with a way of looking at the world which made sense of its hope and its heroism, its tragedy and its suffering. God became a real and living presence – beyond, beside and within – who had a clear and sublime purpose for his creation and with whom I could have a personal relationship. As I have already said, my picture of Jesus changed, but equally exciting was the discovery of the Old Testament: not the battles and the slaughter, but the law and the prophets, and their insistence that God was God of all our life. He was concerned not just with whether we went to church and said our prayers, but with how we earned our living, and conducted our public affairs. He was God of the market place as well as of the holy place, and I saw in a new way how faith embraced both the personal, the political, and the commercial, giving a wholeness and coherence to life.

However, the Bible is not an instruction book, and even if it were its rules would have little value today because solutions to contemporary problems cannot be conjured out of ancient texts which belong to a world organised in a very different way. Nor is it a complete code. Although the Law (comprising the first five books of the Bible) was intended to set out the way Israelite society was to be ordered and governed, it did not cover every situation and was supplemented over the years by other provisions. The Bible provides a moral and social framework, and like the ancients, we have to wrestle with its provisions to discern the best approach consistent with this framework, most of all in matters where modern knowledge has changed the basis of our understanding. You cannot reject modern knowledge just because it is at variance with the Biblical picture; Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth, and I believe that advances in the physical, human and psychological sciences are part of the Spirit's work. The best example is the creation of the world. The six-day creation story in Genesis cannot be taken as literally true, but that does not mean that it has no value, no relevance to modern life. It provides, among other

things, an ethical perspective, which gives value to creation and shapes the way we deal with it, as I have said above.

More controversial, is what the Bible says about personal ethical issues, for example marriage and divorce, sexuality, abortion and assisted dying. Some of these issues figure in the Bible, most do not; and when the Bible does have something to say it is often the case that the relevant texts offer different views. What does it mean to place oneself under the authority of scripture in such instances? Where there are relevant texts it is a matter of considering them closely in their original context and coming to a conclusion as to their meaning today. Divorce is one such matter, and looking carefully at the texts (which I do in *My Strength and My Song*, the first booklet in this series) it became clear to me that the Bible does not say that divorce is wrong in all circumstances. The Biblical view of marriage is clearly a life-long commitment, and husband and wife become 'one flesh', that is, a new unit of kinship, and although Jesus clearly affirmed this when he said that what God has joined together man must not separate (*Mark 10.9*), he also acknowledged that Moses permitted divorce because the people were 'hard-hearted' (*Mark 10.5*). So long as that hardheartedness exists, marriages will break down, and men and women must be protected from the greater evil of constant and bitter domestic strife by being able to divorce. As St Paul says, 'God's call is a call to live in peace.' (*1 Cor. 7.16*)

The danger in such matters is to seek texts which support our view and to overlook those that do not, and this is particularly so today when society takes a relaxed, liberal view on most moral issues. This, in its own way, is to place ourselves above scripture; wrestling with scripture means acknowledging the validity of views other than our own, and allowing the Biblical views to examine the roots of our liberalism. As John Muddiman has said, the modern world as well as the Bible is culturally conditioned, and by its capacity to affront the received wisdom of our age, the Bible creates the possibility of real dialogue. Retreating on to the safe ground of a few liberal-sounding texts and pretending that this is what the Bible says, is merely to confirm our own prejudices, and is unlikely to lead to sound solutions.

Where there are no relevant texts, placing oneself under the authority of scripture becomes a matter of determining and applying Biblical

values, So, for example, the understanding of life as a divine gift and not as a personal possession, needs to be brought to bear on debates about bringing life to an end, whether through abortion or assisted dying. In some difficult matters science will establish the truth, for example whether homosexuality is an acquired or a genetic orientation, and where it does we have to accept its conclusions. But, as with creation, this does not mean that the Biblical perspective is irrelevant; it points to values that should shape the way we come to terms with new knowledge, like the importance of fidelity in intimate relations, and, of course, our conclusions need to be measured against the teaching and attitudes of Jesus. Even so, there will always be issues on which Christians will disagree, no matter how hard we wrestle with the text. This is painful, but ought not to occasion surprise. In these cases, at the very least, the Bible sets parameters within which the argument should be conducted; but more than this, it calls us to maintain fellowship with those of different opinions, and to resist the temptation to demonise our opponents. This, I think, is what the divine imperative of forgiveness means in ethical arguments.

Perhaps the most challenging area where we need to put ourselves under the authority of scripture is politics. While I do not think that you can use the Bible in a party-political way – both Christian Democrats and Christian Socialists have turned out much the same as their secular counterparts – the Bible does disclose clear social preferences that have political implications. A good example is the divine concern for the poor and the stranger, which I considered earlier. The more I read, the more this divine concern weighed upon me, and it became apparent to me that from a Biblical perspective the justice of an economic system is determined by the state of the poor, and not by the general level of prosperity. Here we are faced with a clear economic and social imperative which we are challenged to bring to bear upon issues such as welfare benefits and immigration. This realisation made a deep impression on me; it was clear that if I believed in God I had better adjust my world view so that it coincided with his. For some these preferences will appear overly political, but this is to get things the wrong way round. These preferences, like the priority given to the poor, were Biblical long before they were political. Rejecting the divine preference on political grounds is to let your politics shape your

religion, whereas your religion should shape your politics. Adjusting our views so that they are aligned with the divine view is challenging and uncomfortable, and many reject the challenge, but that is to turn our backs on Jesus. As George Caird said, 'his gospel was not a political manifesto, but it had political implications: as Messiah he had summoned Israel to reconsider her vocation as the people of God and to repent of the national pride which interpreted that vocation in terms of privilege and of greatness'. In the same way, Jesus summons us to use the scriptures to reconsider the way we think about God and his world, and not just to seek support for our own ideas and our own comfort.

Taking the Bible seriously goes beyond knowing who said what, when and to whom. This is merely to have information about the Bible, the equivalent of a tourist visiting a cathedral and learning about its history and the style of its architecture, but ignoring its purpose, symbolism, and worship. The Bible is not there to give us information about God, any more than prayer is about giving information to God. The purpose of both prayer and the study of scripture is to enable us to get on to God's wavelength and deepen our faith in him. We need to do this if we are to escape Jesus' criticism of his contemporaries that they did not know how to interpret the signs of the times, particularly in this age when so many of the conflicts and problems in the world are linked to matters of faith. The widespread feeling today that something is missing from our lives is the result of the same pride, the conviction that we can do without God, and we see around us the same lack of justice and righteousness as did the prophets. In this situation God looks to his people to be his witnesses. He looks to us to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. If we are going to respond to his call, the two essential steps are to learn to pray and to take the Bible seriously. Those who ask will receive: deep calls to deep.

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