A Word In Season

A Journey Through The Christian Year

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Cover

The Prophet Jeremiah

Detail from Modena Cathedral: author's image

Also by Peter Sills

A Word in Season is the second booklet in an occasional series of meditations and addresses. The others are: *My Strength and My Song* (1991), *Your Kingdom Come* (2006), and *Deep Calls to Deep* (2016). 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

PREFACE

St Paul urged Timothy to preach the Gospel in season and out of season. The Church took this injunction to heart, and organised its liturgical life into seasons, arranged around the major festivals of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost, to give an orderly shape to its proclamation of the faith based on the earthly life of its Lord.

These addresses offer a journey through the Christian year based on its main festivals. They were given between 1992 and 2001, the second decade of my ministry, ten years that included the advent of the third millennium. The Church saw the dawn of the new age in Biblical terms as a Jubilee, in which wrongs are to be righted and the people offered a new start. These themes are reflected in these addresses, and do so out of the conviction that to be true to our faith means affirming that God is Lord of all our life, public as well as private. The collection concludes with two 'non-seasonal' addresses occasioned by events that prompted a deep and widespread spiritual reflection: the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the dawning of the Year 2000.

The prophet Jeremiah, pictured on the front cover, lived and worked in a time of unrest during the sixth century BC, one of the great wave of prophets of that century. He found much to criticise and challenge in the affairs of his day, when Israel was conquered and its leading citizens were exiled to Babylon, but he also held fast to the conviction that God would not forsake his people, and that their destiny was to live in communion with him. If I echo his criticisms, it is because I also share his conviction.

Peter Sills

Michaelmas 2001

ADVENT

THE END IS NIGH!

ADVENT SUNDAY 1997

When I taught law the Head of Department was Dr Bruce Renton. Bruce was a specialist in jurisprudence, a legal philosopher. His favourite question was, 'What does it mean?' And the rest of the staff used to get a lot of amusement by taking him off. Faced with some perfectly straightforward proposition we would ask with all seriousness, 'What does it mean?'

But some things are genuinely puzzling, and Bruce would have had a field day in Advent with its readings about strange people appearing in the wilderness announcing that every valley shall be filled and every mountain made low, not to mention the warnings of signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, distress among nations, and people fainting with foreboding of what is coming on the world. To have replied to Bruce, 'It means the End is nigh,' would simply have drawn the further question, 'What do you mean by the End?' And its a good question; many faithful Christians ask it. What do we mean by the End?

If the events described in the gospels are the signs of the End we do have a problem because there can scarcely have been a period in history when there has not been distress on earth and strange signs in the heavens, but the End has not come. These signs are clearly fulfilled today. Not so long ago we had signs in the heavens: Haley's Comet, an eclipse of the sun, and pictures of supernovae exploding. Among the nations distress is only too evident. Children murder other children on their way home from school, nations are ethnically cleansed, and the climate has gone crazy: here we have floods, in Africa harvests fail and drought increases, and no doubt in the Pacific Islands people are fainting with fear and foreboding as they face the

extinction of their land through rising sea levels caused by global warming. But the End has not come. Will it ever come? What do we mean by the End?

Because of the human capacity for violence we tend to think of the End as violent, a cataclysm; and the Bible seems to support such ideas with its violent warnings and the image of Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil. But these stories need to be read with a health warning: they are coded writing. They read as though they are about the future, but in fact when they were written they were about the present. They are an example of apocalyptic writing which talks about the present as though it were the future. For example, the Book of Revelation reads as though Armageddon is a future event, but the readers at the time knew that it was actually describing the conflict in which they were there and then engaged, as they were persecuted for their faith. The message was: Don't weaken or give up; you will win in the end.

In the face of these warnings, it is important to remember that the Bible also contains different pictures of the End. For example, Mark opens his Gospel by recalling the prophecy of Isaiah foretelling that the crooked shall be made straight, the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Mark 1.2–3) The message is clear, and it is hopeful. This is the time long foretold by the prophets when God would come among his people and dwell with them. It would be a time of judgement, but it would also be the time of rejoicing, as Malachi said: 'the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in days of old and as in former years.' (Malachi 3.4) We are assured that we shall all see God's salvation. The End will be a time of fulfilment, not of destruction.

This must be right. If God is love, we cannot imagine that he would wish to destroy his creation, the work and object of his love; rather he would wish to save it from destruction. Whatever the End will be, it will not be less than a work of love. As St John said: 'God did not send

his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him…' (John 3.19)

But a work of love can be disturbing. As Malachi puts it: 'Who can endure the day of his coming; and who can stand when he appears? (3.2) The coming of God cannot be other than a time of upheaval. The coming of Jesus was a huge upheaval. Rulers were con-fronted, religion purified; the mighty were put down and the lowly exalted. The appearance of goodness is a time of judgement; it cannot be otherwise. This is so in every age, and so it is bound to be the case that the signs are always and everywhere fulfilled. The End is now and always.

I hear Bruce asking, 'What kind of End is that?' I doubt if my answer would satisfy him. The End which is now and always is the challenge to faith and obedience which Jesus preached, and which he places before us today. The End is the Light which came into the world and shows up the evil deeds of men. When the prophets and other Biblical writers speak of the End, they are not speaking of the end of time, which we know will occur some millions of years hence because the earth is cooling down. The End of which the Bible speaks is best captured by the sandwich-board man with the message: 'Prepare to meet thy God!' – the same as the message of John the Baptist: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' The End is our personal meeting with God.

When do we meet him? At death certainly, but also in life; we meet him in blessing, in the love of family and friends, for example, and we also meet him in judgement. Did not Jesus say we meet him in judgement in the hungry, the naked, the sick and the prisoner? And also in the atrocity of child murdering child and in the catastrophe of global warming? The End is now and always.

I hear Bruce asking again, 'But if the End is now and always, what do we mean when we say the Lord will come again?' The Biblical emphasis on a future End is clear. As with many things about our faith when we talk about the End we talk about a paradox: the End is now

and always, but it is also to come. Creation has a destiny, but faced with the world as it is, can we really say that the destiny of creation will be in fulfilment and not in destruction? We can, but to say this is an act of faith. God has made it possible for us to walk in the light through sending us Jesus. Jesus shows us what it means to be human; he shows us the virtues to live by; and through his death he reconciles us to God. Putting our faith in him means not only that we can stand before God with confidence, but that through his strength we shall overcome the problems and challenges which face us.

This is not just a pious hope; there are other signs that this is true, and earlier this year I had a timely reminder of this when I attended the Second European Ecumenical Assembly at Graz in Austria. One of the speakers was Sir John Houghton, Vice-Chairman of the International Panel on Climate Change, and a committed Christian. He spoke convincingly of the ability of modern technology to overcome the problems which face us, even the problems of climate change. The challenge is huge, but God has not left us without the means to tackle it. The End is in our hands.

For those who try to live in the light there will always be travail, and feelings of fear and foreboding. The first Christians knew this only too well, but they believed that the events we see and experience are not the whole story. They believed that behind the events we see and which disturb us, God is at work ensuring that the final outcome will be good and not evil. Modern prophets like Sir John Houghton say the same. Only God sees the whole picture, trust in him. The End is God's.

Like many I find it hard to be optimistic in the present state of the world, but I remain faithful and hopeful. Like St Paul, I trust that the One who began the good work among us will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. But hopeful though I am, I cannot give a precise answer to Bruce's question. We can say that the End is judgement, a personal meeting with God; we can say that it will be the fulfilment of God's purposes, but we cannot say exactly how he will

bring his creation to its fulfilment; nevertheless, we can trust that it will be for our good. Of that God has given us the only sign which matters, his son Jesus, the Christ, whose coming among us we are preparing to celebrate. The End will be Christ-like.

To him be the glory, now and for ever.

THE GREAT STORY

CHRISTMAS 1993

As usual, the tax man was being difficult! Actually, Joseph thought, difficult was the understatement of the decade. This new poll tax required everyone to be registered, not where they lived or worked, but in the town that their family came from. People were having to travel the length and breadth of the country to return to their home town. It was a long way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, over 100 miles, and they would have to walk. It would take at least a week, maybe ten days. And of course at just the wrong time with Mary expecting their first child.

A first baby meant so much to devout Jews, and their hearts should have been full of joy, but Joseph was in a turmoil; he knew that he was not the father of Mary's child. He agonised over what to do for the best, and that's when he had the dream. In his dream an angel spoke to him, assuring him that all would be well. God had come to Mary, and had enabled her to conceive; the child she bore was the one spoken of by Isaiah and the prophets, the one who would come to save Israel from their sins. The angel told Joseph to call the child 'Jesus', a name which means 'God saves'.

That had been many months ago. Although he was unsure, Joseph decided to listen to his inner voice. He stood by Mary, determined to hold on to the message of the dream. And now, as her time drew near, it all came flooding back to him. On top of all the preparations for the journey, there was the disturbing memory of the angels' message. Just what was this child to become?

The journey was hard and long, and it was winter. The short route through Samaria was too dangerous (just like it is today), and so they went by the long route along the Jordan valley as it dropped down,

and down, to Jericho 1000 feet below sea level, and then made the hard climb up to Jerusalem and on to Bethlehem. They made it just in time, both for the census and for Mary. Her child was born in a cave under a house, the place where the animals slept. It was the only place they could find to stay. The birth, like all births, seemed miraculous. Joseph remembered what the angel had said and he called his son Jesus.

Joseph then fades from the scene. Only Jesus' mother and brothers are mentioned in the story of his adult years. And what a story that was! Joseph's child lived up to his name. People flocked to him as to a saviour. He held the crowds spell-bound with his teaching, and he cured all kinds of diseases. All the people were astounded at his powers. On one occasion he calmed a storm on Lake Galilee – even the wind and the waves obeyed him! But in the end it was too much. Jesus was too challenging, too radical for the rich and powerful, and he was hanged as a common criminal. But death couldn't hold him. He rose to new life beyond death, and ever since countless millions have acclaimed him as the Son of God, Lord and Saviour!

Joseph's dream came true in the greatest story ever told. We celebrate Jesus' birth because it is in Jesus that we meet God in all his fullness; as St. John wrote, 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. (John 1.14) St. John's insight came at the end of a lifetime's reflection on the story of Jesus. Not everyone saw it that way. The taxman ignored the story: he was rich enough; he had no need of a saviour. The chief priests and the Roman officials saw him as a trouble maker, and brought about his death. New ideas about God always cause trouble: the only good prophet was a dead prophet.

But the poor people received him gladly, like the shepherds at his birth, or Mary Magdalene just before his death. The poor had nothing to loose; Jesus called them blessed; heaven would be theirs because they knew their need of God. For the poor Jesus came at just the right time, and also for those in the surrounding countries. People were tried of the official religion, the myths of Greece and Rome. They

rejected the new cults that were springing up. They wanted something that would renew their spirits, and deliver them from cynicism and hopelessness. The religion which Jesus taught did just that. He offered a profound and morally compelling understanding of God as love. He taught that love was about service, reaching out to others, putting them first even though they were from another race or class; he taught that personal fulfilment came through self-sacrifice, and not through self-satisfaction; he taught that everything that God had made, people and the whole of creation, should be received as gifts, and not exploited for selfish gain.

If Joseph were alive today, he would not notice much difference in the fundamental human condition. We are tired of the official myths, only now they have economic names: communism, monetarism, market forces. We are surrounded by new cults promising all kinds of spiritual experiences, but which in the end enslave rather than liberate their devotees. We have the same easy-going, please-yourself-morality, which brought about the collapse of the Roman civilisation, and which is undermining our own. Joseph would have seen the signs in the fragmentation of the basic institutions of human society: nations, communities and families. Nations are divided by ancient enmities; communities find it hard to discover a common identity; families are falling apart. In ancient Rome this moral and spiritual collapse opened the way for the barbarians, and they are among us again – in the form of the far right.

Like the ancient world we suffer from a chronic poverty of spirit, a suffocating collapse of vision and imagination. Now as then, only God can supply the vision we lack, only God can re-vitalise our imagination. Now as then, Jesus, the Word made flesh, shows us the way. Jesus shows us that the only power that can overcome fragmentation is love. There is no alternative to loving our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus shows us that the only adequate basis for morality is self-giving. Utilitarianism (determining value by usefulness), the basis of today's morality, is only a short step away from selfishness

and self-satisfaction. Jesus shows us that the only basis for a just and sustainable economic order is a responsible caring and sharing of the earth's resources. Jesus shows us that the only way to true spiritual experience is through the one who overcame death and liberated us from fear.

His story is as relevant today as when it was first told. How do we hear it? Like the tax man, confident in his own self-sufficiency? Or like the shepherds, who knew their need of God? I believe that today there are more shepherds around. There is a widespread recognition that something vital is missing from life, and a far greater willingness to talk about spirituality. Although there is a reluctance to name him, this desire is, in truth, a desire for God. But, understandably, most people seem not to know quite how to respond to his call. Finding God – or rather allowing ourselves to be found by God – begins, as it did for Joseph, by listening to our inner voice. We all have an inner voice, but it tends to get crowded out. We all notice the signs of God's presence, but their meaning tends to be obscured. Who has not experienced a sense of wonder at a new birth? Who has not been moved by the beauty of nature? Who has not been humbled by the courage of those who refuse to give in to despair: in response to personal tragedy, or in the face of a humanitarian crisis like Bosnia? Who has not admired the selflessness of those who work tirelessly among the world's poorest in Africa? We see the signs but we do not see where they point, and our sight is not helped by our obsession with technology, which stimulates the senses but which stunts the imagination. We have the experience, but miss the meaning.

If we are to glimpse the meaning, we must have a space and time to do so. Christmas gives us that space and time to wonder, a few day's holiday when we can listen to our inner voice, and let our imagination lead us into the mystery of God's coming among us. Christmas is a good time to begin our own journey to God as we think about Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem. God calls us as he called them, and at the end of the journey he is there with arms outstretched in

welcome like a child in a crib. At Christmas we enter into the truth that our story is part of God's great story, and with the shepherds, we join our voices to the angels' hymn of praise: *Gory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!*

EPIPHANY

THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
for a journey, and such a long journey:
the ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
T.S. ELIOT

Stories of journeys have a special appeal. They have all the ingredients of adventure and romance, and more than that they speak to us of our striving to find purpose and meaning in life.

Journeys are not like they used to be: the speed and comfort of modern travel have robbed us of so much of the experience of a journey that the image has lost much of its power. And modern communications have enabled us to experience the world from the comfort of our armchair as we follow the travels of David Attenborough, Michael Palin or Michael Portillo. Like them, those who set out on a journey must first plan and prepare; then there is the leave-taking, often with its own poignancy as the sadness of parting is made bearable by the excitement of of what lies ahead. The high spirits of the first part of the journey may give way to tiredness, boredom or anxiety as the hours or days pass; and then there is the anticipation of arrival, and the excitement of arriving at the destination. Later may come the the re-living of the adventure as the tale is told and re-told, and, if our destination brought with it a discovery, or a new experience, then in the re-telling we shall find that the end of the journey was a new beginning; more a resting place than a destination.

It is not surprising that the Christian life is often portrayed as a journey, for progress in faith has that recurring quality of finding that

a point of arrival is really just another point of departure; that our destin-ation is just a resting place before we journey on deeper into the mysteries of God. So, it is not surprising that a story of just such a journey is told by Matthew at the start of his Gospel:

> When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.
>
> MATTHEW 2.1-2

The story of the Magi is one of searching, a sense of being led, and finding – and in the finding a knowing and a loving, which changes the rest of the journey: the Magi went home another way.

The story has some striking features, and has much to teach. It is *wise* men who go to pay homage. Matthew gives us a picture of wisdom in search of worship. This is not quite how the world sees things. Cleverness has displaced wisdom as the goal of the pursuit of knowledge, and worship is held of little account. E.F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*, questioned our preoccupation with cleverness. He said, 'we have become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.' The effects of trying to live without wisdom are seen in the moral debate, for example in the current discussion about the de-criminalisation of cannabis and other soft drugs in the wake of the Straw affair. There may indeed be a case for this if, as some say, the effects of using cannabis are beneficial, but the argument is more generally pursued on the basis of the liberal view, that your body is your own and what you do with it is your own affair. Christians would not agree. The human body, as St Paul wrote, is a temple of the Holy Spirit; it is not ours to use or abuse as we wish. True wisdom shows the liberal view to be misguided. Life is safe only if we approach it through worship.

The story of the Magi is about those who come from *afar* drawing closer to God than his chosen people – those outside the faith finding it easier to respond positively to the new than those within it. Religion can so easily obscure our view of God – maybe because it conditions us to look for God in familiar ways and to overlook his new disclosures of truth. We box up God and try to keep him just for our tribe. A good example right now is the row in Ireland about Catholics receiving communion at Anglican Eucharists. For all its apparent openness it seems that the Roman Catholic Church finds it hard to accept the new insights which have come from the ecumenical movement.

And then for all of us there is the huge question of the insights of other faiths. *The Independent* ran a Christmas series in its 'Faith & Reason' column. Among others a Jew and a Muslim were invited to reflect on the Christmas story, and they had good and faith-full things to say. It reminded me of a course I attended on World Religions. In response to a question about the truth of other religions, the lecturer mentioned the great religious revivals that all occurred in the sixth century BC: Jeremiah and other prophets in Israel, Buddha in India, Confucius in China, and others too. Was God only at work in Israel? Have others afar off also heard his voice?

The story is also about the fulfilment of *prophecy*. We tend to argue over whether the Magi actually existed. We cannot say, and it would not have been a meaningful question for Matthew. He would have said it must have happened like this because this is the way it had to be. Had not God said through Isaiah:

> Nations shall come to your light,
> and kings to the brightness of your dawn....
> They shall bring gold and frankincense,
> and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.
>
> ISAIAH 60.3,6b

And so it was. As St Paul put it, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Our preoccupation with 'the facts' blinds us to the deeper significance of what God is actually doing. In Christ God sets before us not only a model for personal life but for the public life of kings and nations also. It is not only individuals whom God will send home another way.

The story of the Magi is our story; the story of the profoundest of human experiences, like falling in love: the searching, the leading, the finding and the yielding – in which we find a new identity. It is also the story of the world as it struggles to find a way in which the nations can be reconciled, a new order in which war, poverty and injustice will be no more. It is the story of the whole Bible: the story of a people's search for God, the journey and the destinations, which turn out just to be resting places before the journey continues, a journey in which we all have our part: Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Matthew, Augustine, Francis, Luther, Wesley, and so on down to the saints of our own day, and to ourselves. The journey is where Christ is made known. Luke ends his Gospel with the story of another journey: of Clopas and his companion walking to Emmaus. Like the Magi they met Jesus as they travelled and their journey was transformed. To often we hang on to what we know, secure against the new. We declare to the world: 'I know where I stand.' If faith is a journey, and this is where Christ is made known, God is not concerned with where we stand but with where we are travelling.

The journey of faith is not easy. To quote Eliot again: 'A cold coming we had of it...' And often we have to make it at a time not of our choosing: 'Just the worst time of year...' But if we seek wisdom, if we want to be open to the newness of God's truth, if we want the world to be a better place, we have to make the journey, and like the Magi we have to make it bearing gifts, the most precious gift being ourselves. At Epiphany God asks us whether we are on a journey towards him, or are we content to sit in an armchair and let others do the travelling?

CANDLEMAS

THE ECONOMICS OF GENEROSITY

FEBRUARY 2000

> *And the child's father and mother were amazed*
> *at what was being said about him.*
> *LUKE 2.33*

Candlemas is a turning-point. It was a turning-point for Mary and Joseph: as they brought their first-born to the Temple extraordinary things were said about him, so much so they were amazed. They must have wondered: Who was he? What destiny was he to fulfil?

It was also a turning-point for Simeon and Anna who recognised God's moment when it came. In that moment they understood that he was not just God of Israel but of all nations; the child was to be the glory of Israel and a light to all peoples. For us also Candlemas is a turning-point, marking the transition from Christmas to Lent, maybe especially so in this Jubilee Year which marks the turning of the ages.

Joseph and Mary came to the Temple to offer their first born, and as they did so they had another turning point in mind, one etched deeply in the history of Israel. For God commanded the presentation of the first-born as a memorial of the Exodus:

> The Lord said to Moses, 'Consecrate to me all the first-born, whatever is first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and beast is mine.... Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the land of bondage...
>
> EXODUS 13.1-3.

The Exodus was a free and gracious act of liberation on the part of God: he gave his people freedom because he loved them, and to remind them of this they are to respond in the same way, freely and graciously giving their first-born to him. We might call this the economics of generosity. For a Jew there was no more precious possession than a first-born son; he represented all their life and and all their future, and in offering him to God, Joseph and Mary acknowledge that in the end he is not theirs. This surely is one of the important turning points in life: not simply the realisation that our children are not our possessions, but more fundamentally, that all that we have we hold on trust. And in this year 2000 the year of the Great Jubilee, the year for a New Start, God recalls us to that realisation, that his economics are the economics of generosity.

This realisation is important because economics has come to provide the basic understanding of modern life. Economics provides the language through which our problems – personal and social as well as industrial and commercial – are discussed, and economic theory provides the framework within which we look for solutions: we hope for economic miracles and we look for economic salvation. But the hope for those miracles has turned out to be an illusion, and that salvation has never dawned. The economics of the free market has not brought us to the promised land; they may have brought increased wealth and many material benefits (and this must be acknowledged), but they have also brought the biggest gap between rich and poor in the history of the world with all the resulting social and ecological problems: the breakdown of communities and families, apathy, crime and substance abuse, the pollution of the atmosphere, the destruction of the forests. The individual is centre stage; nothing is consecrated to God, least of all our most precious possessions.

Even Christians are caught up in this privatising crusade, and are largely unaware of the Christian social tradition which teaches that we must love our neighbours as ourselves. As Christians we believe that the common good is central, taking precedence over individual

interests, and we insist upon the universal destination of earthly goods. The Second Vatican Council stated that everyone had the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family. Such a right can only exist within a system based on the economics of generosity. The search for market solutions, based on the economics of self-interest, sets such a right at naught, and de-humanises the rich as well as the poor because, as the Catholic Bishops said in their document *The Common Good* (1996), allowing the distribution of wealth to be determined solely by market forces reduces people 'to the status of isolated economic agents, whose life has meaning only as a consumer.'

The effect of this is seen in the current crisis in NHS funding. The market oriented, individualist approach has become so entrenched that raising taxes is no longer a practical option even to provide the funds so desperately needed to bring us up to the general European standard in health care. The common good is sacrificed on the altar of individual advantage. It is unfair to place the blame on the politicians: we are all to blame. A hospital doctor writing in the *The Tablet* two weeks ago, said:

> Who is to blame then? You and me, for allowing the connection between tax and public service to get lost. What is wrong with us, why are we as a nation so obsessed with the tax burden? Are the rich so greedy that they do not feel any responsibility for the sick, the dying and those in need? Are the middle classes so determined to have yet one more foreign holiday?

We have lost contact with the economics of generosity. We are at a turning-point in our national life. The market may have brought many benefits, but its operation has to be constrained by moral criteria; economics must be reconnected with ethics. We Christians have much to offer here if only we will learn from our own tradition which insists that life is about more than consumption, and that the condition of the

poorest is the basic criterion of the justice of an economic system. The Churches need to bring their moral authority to bear on economic policy, and when they do this together they punch well above their weight. The success so far of the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the remission of the unpayable debts of the poorest nations is perhaps the most startling example of this.

We are at a turning point: God comes to his Temple. As Malachi said, the coming of God is a time of judgement:

> I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me says the Lord of hosts.
>
> MALACHI 3.5.

A time of judgement not just for the immoral but also for the ungenerous. Jesus is the icon of God's generosity. His coming was *the* great turning point of history. Simeon took the child in his arms and beheld his salvation; Anna gave thanks to God and proclaimed her redeemer. Jesus is our saviour and redeemer; he showed us how to live our lives as though all that we have and all that we are is held on trust. Such a life is life-giving; it is the foundation of the economics of the common good. As we turn the corner into the new millennium he challenges us to take our faith out of the closet into the market place, to work with him to reconnect economics with ethics so that all his peoples will be freed from bondage.

REDEEMING THE TIME

ASH WEDNESDAY 1998

> *Teach us to care and not to care*
> *Teach us to sit still*
> *T. S. ELIOT, ASH WEDNESDAY*

At the heart of any creative process there is a tension between the vision and its realisation. A sculptor is constrained in what he can carve by the properties of the wood or stone with which he works. A poet struggles with words and metre to express the truth which he senses but which defies articulation. A composer may write the music of the angels but per-formed by the orchestra it may sound less than heavenly.

It is not only artists who experience this tension: we all know it to some extent. Part of being human is both to have ideals and to fall short of realising them. We set ourselves goals: parents want to be good parents; executives want to achieve certain objectives for their company; politicians want to make the world a better place, but the vision is never entirely realised. Our religious life fares no better. As Christians we want to live up to our baptismal promises – *I turn to Christ, I repent of my sins, I renounce evil* – but we who have chosen the way of obedience to Christ are painfully aware of the extent to which we oppose him. Maybe the hardest thing in life is to keep pursuing our ideals given our track record of not coming up to the mark. And this is made harder in a culture which sets so much store on achieving. So much time spent, so much time wasted; can it be redeemed?

It can. Lent is about redeeming the time. Lent is the time for getting things in perspective, for sorting out priorities, for detaching ourselves

from the things of God in order to attend simply to God. *Teach us to care and not to care: Teach us to sit still.*

The traditional disciplines of Lent: prayer, study, fasting and alms-giving, are the Lenten disciplines precisely because they help us to focus simply on God, and thus to redeem the time.

Prayer is about tuning in to God's wavelength; about coming to see ourselves and the world as he sees it. Prayer is more about listening than asking. St Bene-dict taught his monks to pray by reading the Bible slowly, and, when a verse or phrase arrested their attention, to stop and savour it by repeating it over and over again until it felt part of them. In much the same way we might linger over a beautiful work of art or in a place of natural beauty until we feel we had taken in the whole experience. As we pray in this way the word of God comes alive for us, his values and perspectives become part of us, and our concern for his peoples and his world is deepened. Godly action proceeds from a godly stillness; a progressive detachment from the world heightens both our compassion for the world and our effectiveness in serving the world. *Teach us to care and not to care: Teach us to sit still.*

Its the same with study. We need to become better informed about what we believe so that we are saved from the perils of a shallow faith which withers in adversity, and from an un-informed confidence which repels rather than attracts. Fasting and alms-giving help us to redeem our material appetites and to re-direct our worship. Voluntarily going without in a world of plenty may seem perverse, but it is better seen as a protest against a world drowning from a surfeit of material goods, and a society in which every appetite, no matter how immoral or perverse, is over-indulged. Food, money and material goods have become gods which seduce us away from the one true God. Maybe they have seduced us more than we know. Part of our redemption is to resist their appeal. But fasting and alms-giving are more than this. To give up a meal, to give money to the needy, is also to show solidarity with those for whom God has made plain his

special concern. Archbishop Anthony Bloom has said that only he who is detached from himself can commit himself to others. Godly action proceeds from a godly detachment. *Teach us to care and not to care: Teach us to sit still*

St Paul described the Christian life as a creative process through which we are conformed by the Holy Spirit to the likeness of Christ. This is far from being an automatic process. We need to work with the Holy Spirit, giving him room to do his work, sorting out our lives as Jesus did in the wilderness. No one pretends that this is easy. Prayer, study, fasting and alms-giving require effort. The way is not smooth but strewn with the rocks of temptation, and the Devil whispers in our ears, just as he did to Jesus, 'Why all this striving? I'll show you an easier way.' But as we know in our hearts, Christ is the only way to God. It is those who call upon the name of the Lord who will be saved.

Calling upon him, striving to follow him, we feel the same tension as does the artist between the vision and its realisation. This tension is creative only if we acknowledge our dependence on God, confessing our failures to him, not abjectly, but in the faith that through his forgiveness the dust of our lives will become the soil of new growth. The ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday remind us of this. Our willingness to receive them is a sign of repentance; a humble acknowledgement that God is our judge; a cry to him to redeem our time.

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in his will.

THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF GOD

GOOD FRIDAY 1994

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?
PSALM 22.1

Mark records only one cry from the cross, the most anguished and the most mysterious. It is a cry of desolation; the deepest point of the passion. Jesus, for so long the master of the action, is now its object; he is no longer in control; he has handed himself over.

What was in that cry? Some take it at its face value and believe that it shows that Jesus felt alone, abandoned by the Father to his cruel death. The cry is a cry born of human feeling, not of faith. But this view is liable to grave misinterpretation. Maybe because of this the cry is omitted by Luke and John, who each give their own three different words from the cross. Others say that the cry should be read in the opposite of the literal sense of the words as a cry of confidence. They point out that Jesus spoke the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm which, taken as a whole, is a psalm of confidence in God. The psalmist moves from his opening cry of desolation to a confident affirmation of faith:

> For kingly power belongs to the Lord;
> Dominion over all the nations is his …
> I shall live for his sake;
> My descendants will serve him.
>
> PSALM 22.28-30

So, it is argued, that when Jesus utters the first line he implies the whole psalm. Perhaps he did; but such a view seems too neat to convince.

My own feeling is that the cry speaks of Jesus' feeling of the absence of God, while yet believing in his existence. It is not that he feels abandoned, nor that he disbelieves, but that, bearing the weight of the sin of the world he experiences the alienation of the world from God. Dying, Jesus no longer feels that close communion with the Father that he has had throughout his life.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'. In this experience of alienation we glimpse the abyssal depths of God, the utterly unknown aspect of the Father. It is a mystery that we may intuit or approach, perhaps even experience, but never comprehend. God is one, and God is three: a trinity in unity. At this moment the close bonds of this unity are not felt, they are simply believed. It is as if the Father has withdrawn from the Son in order to do his deepest work.

Darkness falls over the land. In the darkness, in his apparent absence, God does his greatest, his most mysterious work: a new way is opened by which those who have turned away from God may return to him and be healed.

Dying is something we have to do alone, and so it was with Jesus' offering of himself. It was something he had to do in faith, without the assurance of God's presence. This was his passion, his undergoing. Jesus does this not with a supernatural foreknowledge of events – that was an interpretation which came later – but as a man no longer in control of events, perhaps no longer understanding how God will work through his death, yet trusting that as in life so in death: 'I shall live for his sake; my descendants will serve him.' (Psalm 22.29)

Here we see an important identification between God and his people. A saviour who knows it all in advance is far from us; but a saviour for whom the future is a mystery is one with us, and can teach us how to live – so long as by 'mystery' we understand not a problem beyond solution, but a truth that can be known only in experience. The cry is only possible because God is a God of love, not power. Love seeks not to control, but to serve, to be with. Passion is to want to be with someone utterly, to be one with them. The cry shows God utterly

one with us in our human condition. The cry turns on its head all our popular ideas that God is the power behind the scene who will ensure that everything will turn out well. Rather we see a God with an infinite capacity to bear pain and not to be destroyed by it, and more than this, able to transmute it into good. This is the deepest work of love. But it does not leave the one who loves unaffected. Does not human love when it is bearing all remain silent… appear to withdraw… seem absent? Yet all the while it is absorbing the pain and transforming it. Perhaps we may understand the cry in that way.

The feeling that God is absent is common today, especially when an earthquake or other disaster occurs. The innocent suffering that results corrodes what faith we have. Callous and brutal behaviour, as in ethnic cleansing, or in the abuse of children, has the same effect. 'How can God allow this?' we cry; or, in the words of the psalmist, 'Why are you so far from helping me?' (Psalm 22.1) When Alexander Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia in 1995 he said: 'I used to be an optimist, but its impossible to be one now. All I can say is that I haven't given up hope.' I feel like that too, particularly because of the moral malaise that seems to so characterise our age. And the worst part of it is that it goes largely unnoticed. It is as though we have forgotten what morality is about, and it is debased, in the name of freedom, into personal choice.

The big challenge today is not political or economic, as we tend to be told, but moral. The big question is about how we use our freedom. This is the question posed by the Pope in his encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*. Robin Gill, writing in *The Church Times*, put the question this way:

> In a democracy, how can individual freedom not degenerate into a general licence? How can liberties supported by a majority of people avoid becoming rights for all, but with no correlative duties? How can a process of moral liberalisation not lead eventually to a state of moral anarchy? Why allow individuals an

> ever-increasing amount of personal autonomy and choice, when they are less and less clear about how any moral choices can be made?

The Pope addresses these questions through the issues of abortion, euthanasia and artificial methods of conception, three issues fundamental to our existence where new technology has aided the overthrow of traditional morality through the exercise of personal choice. The Pope notes that there is a deep irony in attempts to legalise abortion and euthanasia, 'precisely in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death.' Christians will differ on the Pope's choice of issues, but whether we take these issues of personal morality, or public issues like ethnic cleansing or the growing gap between rich and poor, we face the same basic question that those who held Jesus' life in their hands had to answer: How do we use our freedom? It is not so much that God has forsaken us, as that we, like Pilate and Caiaphas, have forsaken him. Is God at work in the moral darkness of our times as he was then in the darkness of the cross? The answer must be 'Yes.' In the darkness we have to believe with Jesus that God is not absent even if we do not feel his presence; that this love is there even if we feel forsaken.

> For he has not scorned him who is downtrodden,
> Nor shrunk in loathing from his plight,
> Nor hidden his face from him,
> But he has listened to his cry for help.
>
> PSALM 22.24

The day was dark on Good Friday, but God was at work reconciling his people to himself. He is at work now. Praise the Lord!

THE WELL OF SALVATION

EASTER DAY 1994

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
ISAIAH 12.3

I used to live in a house that had a well in the garden. A well is a good thing to have: cool and deep and mysterious. There is something that draws you to lean over the well-head and look down, listening to the echo of your voice, waiting for the splash as you drop a pebble. And at the bottom: water: life-giving and refreshing.

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem; he knew about wells. Jerusalem depended on them, just like many places in the world today. Their life-giving water was so important that he likened God's favour to drawing water from a well: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'. Like a well, God can be relied on; his grace will never run dry; his resources are deep and refreshing. He gives life just like the water from a well. But it can't have seemed like that to the disciples as they gathered together after the crucifixion, behind locked doors because they were afraid. Where was God's overflowing grace now? How could their time with the One who promised them living water have ended like this? The well of salvation had run dry.

And then – imagine the scene – on that first Easter morning there came, suddenly, an urgent knocking at the door. The disciples ask anxiously, 'Who is it?' The familiar voice of Mary of Magdala replies: 'It's me. And Mary and Salome. Let us in!' The door is opened … it is them … the three women pale are with fright. The disciples, fearing the worst, close the door again quickly and fasten the bolts – the women may have been followed. It is some time before they are calm enough to tell their story. The tomb was open … the stone rolled away … with hearts beating they looked inside … they are speechless … the

tomb was filled with light … an angel spoke to them: 'Fear not. Jesus whom you seek is not here: he has risen!'

The story seemed incredible and no one believed them. But then, that same evening, Jesus appeared among them. Their eyes told them what their hearts wanted to believe: He is risen indeed! It is true! The well of salvation had not run dry.

Just like a well, there is a deep mystery about the resurrection. It is beyond the limits of our knowledge, but not beyond the limits of our experience. In the events of the first Easter Day God confronts us with an experience and challenges us to build it into our understanding of life.

We miss the fullness of what God did in the resurrection if we think of it simply as something that happened to Jesus. Resurrection is God's way in the world. At Easter we see all around us the signs of springtime, the signs of new life following the death of winter. The seed must perish if the plant is to grow, but in the plant we see all the potential that was in the seed given expression and brought to full flower. The cycle of nature is from life, through death, to new life. We see the same pattern in our own lives. We mature only through the painful process of growth: dying to childish things in order to embrace the adventure of youth, and then dying to youthfulness in order to grow into adulthood. Growth in adult life will mean enduring loss, and suffering the so-called little deaths which prepare us for our final journey into God. Again the pattern is from life, through death to new life. Immaturity is not so much because we have not grown, but because we have not properly died.

Sometimes we look back on these experiences of growth and say, 'I didn't know what kept me going.' Easter makes plain what is otherwise just a puzzle. God is in these experiences, the living, the dying, and the new life. God comes to us in the depths, just as he did to those first disciples, in the depths of their despair. God is the well that never runs dry; God is the ever-widening vision, the ever-flowing stream. Out of despair he brings hope; out of defeat victory. And we believe

that in the end his hope will be fulfilled; his victory will be complete. Of this, the resurrection of Jesus is the sign.

Just as a stream will eventually overcome every obstacle that is put in its path, so will the overflowing love of God overcome all that is opposed to it. We can resist or we can go with the flow. Even though our everyday experience points to the truth of the way of resurrection, we can fail to take it to heart, and what could be a turning point in our lives, becomes a sticking point. It is easy to harden our hearts in tough times, refusing to let go childish ideas, stubbornly rejecting the new, failing to accept that there is not growth without pain. If we want to experience the depth of the love of God we have to let go, just as Jesus let do in Gethsemane and on the Cross, and just as the disciples let go in the upper room. Then, and only then, will the love of God flood over us and the waters bear us up. It is by letting go and letting God, that we experience his mystery and draw on his depths. In the resurrection God says to us, 'You can trust me with your life,' for in the end nothing is able to separate us from his love. So turn to him; trust in him; be not afraid and with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation!

CHRIST TRIUMPHANT

ASCENSION DAY 2001

The late Spring is one of the best times of year, and Ascension Day is one of the best festivals. It is a true festival of faith – in the sense that what it celebrates can only be known by faith. As Geoffrey Preston said, 'When we celebrate the Ascension we are not so much remembering the last time Jesus took leave of his disciples, perhaps in some rather spectacular way. Rather we are trying to realise and to celebrate the way Jesus now is.' There is no evidence for the way Jesus now is apart from the faith of the Church.

And what is our faith? Writing to the Ephesians St Paul said Jesus is 'enthroned at God's right hand, far above all government and authority, all power and dominion, and any title of sovereignty that can be named, not only in this age but in the age to come!' (Ephesians 2.20,21) Or, as Michael Saward put it in his hymn:

> Christ triumphant ever reigning,
> Saviour, Master, King,
> Lord of heav'n, our lives sustaining,
> Hear us as we sing:

On this day our song of praise proclaims that God has raised Jesus to the heights and given him the name above all names, the name at which every knee shall bow.

> *Yours the glory and the crown,*
> *The high renown,*
> *The eternal name.*

Our faith in Jesus begins with the conviction that he makes known to us the true nature of God:

Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By your humble birth:

Jesus is the human face of God. If the infinite God is to be expressed in human form Jesus is what he looks like. Jesus is the almighty, ineffable God expressed in a way suitable for human understanding, and the surprise is that his nature is love not wrath; he comes in forgiveness not in condemnation. Nor does he force himself on us; as his birth was humble, so his glory is veiled. Jesus doesn't come with a sign: 'Made in Heaven'; he leaves us free to draw our own conclusions. Jesus reveals the humility of God, inviting faith rather than demanding obedience.

Yours the glory and the crown,
The high renown,
The eternal name.

The eternal name of God is Love – a love which bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things:

Suffering Servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the cross defeated,
Sinners justified:

The love of God seen in Jesus is self-giving, self-sacrifice, even to the point of laying down his life, the victim crucified. It is this kind of love that makes new relationships possible because it brings forgiveness, and it reaches even beyond death. We see in Jesus that God is not remote from us but near to us; not beyond us, but beside us. In his love our acts of self-sacrifice and all unmerited suffering have meaning. Caring for the sick and infirm, going without, turning the other cheek; the suffering of the hungry, the thirsty, the falsely

imprisoned, victims and refugees – all this is gathered up in Christ and given an eternal value. The cast-down are exalted, and the mighty are brought low, as Mary said in the *Magnificat*. The love of God confounds a world built on power and prestige.

Selfless love alone gives the right to reign, and it is Jesus above all who has won that right.

> Priestly king, enthroned for ever
> High in heaven above!
> Sin and death and hell shall never
> Stifle hymns of love:

Jesus is the priestly king. A priest is one who stands before God on behalf of others; a king is one who rules over others; in Jesus, true kingship is shown to be of a priestly nature, self-giving in service rather than self-indulgence in privilege. As Daniel foresaw, it is to Jesus that all authority in heaven and earth has been given:

> To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.
>
> DANIEL 7.14

It is above all this aspect of the way Jesus now is that we celebrate today. When St Luke describes Jesus as being lifted up into the cloud, the symbol of God's glory, he is saying that Jesus becomes one with God and shares God's authority. By giving him authority God makes Jesus' life the standard by which we all shall be judged. He is the Lord before whom the indifferent and those who reject him will have to appear, just like those who believe. His justice is the standard by which all human institutions and policies will be judged.

Christians often miss this and shy away from the public dimension of our faith. We are not sure about those who campaign for the

remission of the unpayable debts of the poorest nations; or those who campaign for justice in world trade; or those who campaign for stronger protection of the environment. I see these campaigners as our brothers and sisters, uniting in a common cause of reconnecting our lives with the common good. Love and self-giving are not virtues just for our private lives. If Christ is the King he is the king of the whole of our lives, public and private, and our plans and our policies, even our economics, must be brought into line with the values of his kingdom.

The way Jesus now is gives us confidence that our faith is not in vain. In him we see the true, forgiving face of God; through him our pain and the pain of the world is given meaning; by him our lives and our politics are judged that all may live in justice and peace; therefore to him we offer our joyful song of praise:

> So, our hearts and voices raising
> Through the ages long,
> Ceaselessly upon you gazing,
> This shall be our song:

Our song is one of joy and praise that God has exalted Jesus to his right hand and given him all authority. But this is clear only to those who believe. Or rather, believing in Jesus enables us to see things as they eternally are. The world proceeds as though the final standard is human judgment, but we know differently. Faith enables us to know now what, in the end, will be apparent to all: that Jesus is the One upon whom the Father's favour eternally rests; his is the only Name by which we shall be saved.

> *Yours the glory and the crown,*
> *The high renown,*
> *The eternal name.*

THE BONFIRE OF SIN

MAY 1998

One of my earliest memories is of a bonfire. It was in Oakwood Park, near where we lived in Southgate, north London. I must have been about four at the time because it was part of the celebrations to mark the end of the War. It was huge – in my mind as big as house! – and it had an opening in one side into which the man who lit it had to walk. My Dad carried me on his shoulders so that I could see. It was lit from the inside, and so it was a little while before we saw the flames, and when they came it was straight out of the top. I don't remember thinking any more about the man who lit it; I guess he got out in time! Soon the whole thing was burning furiously with huge flames! It was exciting, and I have loved bonfires ever since. But at the end there was only a huge pile of ashes. The 'house' had been destroyed.

A visitor from Mars might think it a little odd celebrating peace with something so destructive – and he might also find it a bit odd that a I get so much pleasure out of ordinary bonfires. But maybe, we could convince him that its not so odd. Bonfires burn up waste, trash, rubbish; the stuff we no longer want to carry around. At a deep level, perhaps, in Oakwood Park we were burning up the wrongs of war – the enmity, the violence, the brutality, the black market, the evil desires – to give us a fresh start. Fire is not only destructive, it is also purifying.

Fire is also exciting. Somehow the vigour of the flames communicates itself to us, not only warming us, but making us more lively. We talk of those who are excited as being 'lit up', and of those who are passionate as being 'on fire'. Fire is empowering.

When Luke tells the story of Pentecost, fire is one the images he uses to convey the reality of the event: 'Divided tongues, as of fire,

appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.' (Acts 2.3) The fire of God was there in that upper room, purifying and empowering, burning away all the rubbish in the disciples' lives, all that prevented them from responding to Jesus' call to follow him, and setting them on fire with passion to continue his work in the world.

Purifying, empowering: this is forgiveness. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells us that as soon as we repent, as soon as we really turn to God, he comes running towards us in forgiveness. Easter is the sign that the story of the Prodigal Son is true; that God's forgiveness is for all who turn to him. Pentecost, says Geoffrey Preston, is the day 'when Easter comes out and goes public. It is the day when Easter breaks out from behind closed doors, where the disciples are hiding in their fear, and takes to the streets.' They were forgiven: purified and empowered! Pentecost was the bonfire of sin.

This is different to the way we usually think of forgiveness. 'So often our image of forgiveness is watery. We think of the blotting out of sins, or the wiping clean of the slate.' And while this is true, it is only part of the truth: 'the image of forgiveness as fire is more significant. If sin is blotted out, its record erased, its slate wiped clean, it is only too likely that the writing tablet will be written on again. The house swept and polished is a standing invitation to a squat by seven spirits more wicked than the one we have got rid of!' (Geoffrey Preston) But if sin is burned up in the Pentecostal fire then not only are our sins turned to ashes, we are lit up by the flames, made lively, set on fire for Christ. The new thing that comes into our lives deals with what is old and dead, and also makes us new people.

What would it be like to be new men and women in Jesus through his Holy Spirit? The New Testament gives an ample answer. It talks about a whole new relationship with God in which his commandments are not burdensome, but easy to bear. Living the Christian life is no longer the dull slog of duty performed we can so easily find it to be, but a joy and delight:

> Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me…. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.
>
> MATTHEW 11.29-30

Isn't this what we all want? Too many Christians fail to realise that the gift is ours already; we received it at our baptism. The water is not just about making us clean; we should think of it also as a sign of God pouring his holy spirit on us; drenching us with his fire. If this gift seems to have passed us by, we must risk coming closer to the fire. And this will probably mean looking again at our repentance, and asking ourselves honestly: How real is it?

Two pictures may help us. Jonah went a day's journey across Nineveh crying, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed.' And the people believed him and repented. Jesus came into Galilee saying, 'The Kingdom of God is upon you; repent and believe the gospel.' And the people followed him. Are we like the people of Nineveh? Do we repent because we fear we have been found out and disaster threatens? Or are we like the people of Galilee? Do we repent because it is the only way to deep fellowship with God? And do we desire that fellowship because we want God for himself only, simply because he is goodness and love?

Long before Christianity is any kind of ethical requirement, long before it is a matter of morals and behaviour and rewards, it is simply a response to what is good and true. But this is where we come near to the fire. Goodness and truth, like the fire burn away all the rubbish in our lives: the false motives, the bent devices, the wrong desires; the seeds of evil in our lives. God makes a bonfire of all the trash which prevents us from responding fully to Jesus' call to follow him. But goodness and truth also warm our hearts. God sets us on fire with passion to continue his work in the world. The Pentecost experience can be ours. It requires nothing except a change of heart.

And what is a change of heart? It is like falling in love. It is, as the psalmist says, deep calling to deep (Psalm 42.7); we know we have no choice but to respond, and their fire joins with ours, and there is a new creation.

TRINITY SUNDAY

THE SEA IS ALL ABOUT US

JUNE 2001

> *The river is within us, the sea is all about us*
> *T. S. ELIOT, THE DRY SALVAGES*

Some years ago, when I was training for ordination, I found myself in one of those conversations which one tries hard to avoid: pinned down by someone whose thoughts seem to have no connection with each other, exhibiting a peculiar logic of their own. We were standing on the pavement not far from our house; the conversation took another abrupt turn, and she asked: 'Can one have authentic knowledge of God?' Poised as I was on the kerb – how is it that these people always seem to get you into a vulnerable position? – I stumbled into the gutter with surprise at the directness of the question, and some inadequate words of reply stumbled from my lips.

Can one have authentic knowledge of God? Can one know what God is like? The answer must be 'Yes', but as St Paul says, in this life our knowledge can only be partial; it is in the life to come that fullness comes:

> Now we see only through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me.
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 13.12

God has, of course, disclosed himself to us in human form through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What we see in Jesus is authentic knowledge of God, but even this supreme revelation is partial. It is a mistake simply to equate Jesus with God. He is not God; he is the expression of God in human form. If the infinite, ineffable God is expressed in human form Jesus is what you get. We may think

of Jesus as the human face of God, but if we approach God solely through a human image we run the risk of limiting him to the human. God then simply becomes superhuman, rather like the gods of the Greeks, subject to all-too-human desires and weaknesses. Seeing God as a superhuman lies behind the explanation of death, which I heard once after a young person has died, that God loved them so much that he wanted them for himself. It sounds comforting, but the image of God it paints is grim. A God who takes someone simply because he desires them, causing overwhelming anguish and grief, is a capricious monster, devoid of all moral character, unworthy of love and worship. The human image needs to be supplemented by other images.

When St Paul spoke to the Athenians he described God as 'the One in whom we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17.28) Here is an understanding of God for which the human image is inadequate; instead we need an image that takes us beyond the finite to the infinite. God, says St Paul, is beyond form and time; he is the ground of all being; it is because he *IS* that all else can exist. It is not that God is beyond time and space; he is time and space; it is in him that time and space exist. One image which the Bible uses to express this understanding of God is eternal wisdom:

> The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.… When there were no depths I was brought forth…. Before the mountains were shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth…. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep … then I was beside him like a master worker.
>
> PROVERBS 8

Another image is offered by the poet T.S. Eliot. In his poem, *The Dry Salvages*, inspired by a group of rocks off the coast of Massachusetts, Eliot explores the timelessness of God. Like the *Book of Proverbs* he uses the sea as an image of the timeless, unknowable God. Hearing

the bell of a whistling buoy (one that emits a warning sound as it rises and falls with the swell of the waves), Eliot glimpsed eternity:

> The tolling bell
> Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
> Ground swell, a time
> Older than the time of chronometers, older
> Than the time counted by anxious women
> Lying awake, calculating the future …

Time not our time… Like Eliot I have stood on the shore looking at the ocean, just one among countless others who have gazed in fascination and fear at the waters of the deep; gazed on a scene which was there to be seen millions and millions of years before there were people to see it. So Eliot says,

> We cannot think of a time that was oceanless.

The sea is both in time and beyond time. Ever-changing, yet ever the same, it speaks to us of the mystery of the God who is always active within his creation, yet eternally the place of rest, underlying and enfolding his creation as the waters cover the earth and embrace the land.

I stand at the water's edge absorbed in the ebb and flow of the waves, sometimes a gentle lapping on the shore, sparkling with light, at other times angry, overpowering and destructive. The sea speaks of both life and death; of creation and destruction. So Eliot speaks of

> The menace and the caress of wave that breaks on water …

The *menace* and the *caress:* the sea speaks to us of the God who is both love and power, creator and destroyer, redeemer and judge. But beyond its different faces the sea is one; there may be a storm on the surface, but in the depths there is calm. To know the sea we have to

hold its paradoxes together. It is in God that all paradoxes are resolved; in him all opposites are reconciled: finite and infinite, time and eternity, past and future, creation and destruction, striving and stillness, mercy and judgement. Or as Eliot put it:

> Here the past and future
> Are conquered and reconciled...
> Time the destroyer is time the preserver.

One of my favourite places is Cuckmere Haven on the Sussex coast, where the Cuckmere river runs into the sea. As the river in its gentle estuary spreads out over the sand it becomes one with the sea; there is no longer river and sea; there is no duality, instead a perfect unity; river and sea are one. So Eliot speaks of the union of the creature and the creator:

> The river is within us, the sea is all about us . . .

Our journey is towards the God who is both known and un-known, both within us and beyond us; and the end of our journey is not extinction but union. Our life now is from God, then it will be in God, as the drop is of the ocean, the river of the sea. And the goal of all our striving is to arrive, like the river, at the place of our beginning, where we shall know our beginning as our end, time taken up into eternity. As the river is within us, so the sea is all about us. This spiritual experience is not unique to Christians. When the Buddha was asked about Nirvana he replied:

> There is no measure to him who has gone to rest...
> He is profound, hard to fathom, deep like the ocean.

Nirvana, which Christians know as eternal life, is an expansion of the consciousness, from time to the timeless. It is not so much the drop rejoining the ocean as the ocean invading the drop. St Paul talks of 'God's love being poured into our hearts'. (Romans 5.5) At the end of

our journey all that we are, all that we shall become, will be filled with the life of God, and we shall be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Can one have authentic knowledge of God? The answer must be 'Yes!' Maybe, like me, you have sat by the shore and gazed at the horizon, seeing now what men and women have always seen, yet endlessly absorbed as if seeing it for the first time. Maybe you have sat and watched the ebb and flow of the water, felt the power of the tide through your toes, been overawed by the breaking of the waves on the rocks, or heard the running of the pebbles as they are endlessly rearranged by the waves. Maybe you knew this as an experience of God. Or, maybe, as Eliot says,

> We had the experience but missed the meaning.

Reliving the experience restores the meaning. God works through his creation to make himself known, as Wisdom puts it:

> He has made everything beautiful in its time.
> He has set eternity in the hearts of men.
> ECCLESIASTES 3.11

Authentic knowledge of God is within us.

> Men's curiosity searches past and future
> And clings to that dimension, But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint -
> No occupation either, but something given
> And taken in a lifetime's death in love,
> Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

To the God who is, and was, and is to come, be praise and honour and glory and power, now and for ever. Amen.

The death of Diana, Princess of Wales produced a huge outpouring of grief. The depth and extent of the mourning was astonishing, taking virtually everyone by surprise. Looking back it was a Kairos moment, a period of significant time, a time of destiny or judgement, in which we feel ourselves addressed by God. This address was given at a Service of Remembrance at St Mark's, Woodcote, three days after her death.

In Memoriam
PRINCESS DIANA

> *Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters.*
> *PSALM 42.7*

One of my first thoughts on hearing the news last Sunday was, 'I guess it was always going to end in tragedy.' Tragedy speaks to everyone because it is part of the human condition. Not all will be wealthy, rich, powerful, happy, fulfilled or loved, but everyone will experience tragedy: loss, failure, despair, bereavement, self-doubt… We are all vulnerable, and Diana touched our vulnerability because she was able to show and share her own. Deep calls to deep.

Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters. The deep things are drowned out in the roar of modern life. It is noisy, uncaring, competitive, harsh, brutal, selfish, exploiting. We may call this the world of the paparazzi. Diana was caught up in this world as we all are. She was no plaster saint – after all she died after dinner with her lover – but across its roar her depths called to ours. All the television coverage since her death has brought home how she made contact through touch: with children, the elderly, those suffering or in hospital – all whom she met. Her touch was a sign of real contact. It had a warmth which expressed far more than just politeness; it spoke of depth in a superficial age, and it changed people and attitudes. Her

famous handshake with the AIDS patient simply changed the way we related to that disease and its victims. Suzanne Moore, writing in *The Independent* on Monday said, 'Her immense significance was that she brought into public life an intensely personal language of pain and distress and love and affection.' Deep calls to deep.

Here was royalty with the common touch, and also with the common problems of the age: the preoccupation with image, the search for personal growth, the confusion between what is properly private and what is public, the struggle between duty and desire. This too spoke to us across the roar of the waters. This search and struggle seemed to be on the path to resolution once she was freed from the official royal routine. It is said that she had found her spiritual path. Her visit to Angola in support of the campaign against land mines seemed to point this way. Here her concern for humanitarian issues was taken right into the heart of politics; Diana connected the personal and the political. All too often these two areas of life have been kept apart, and their separation has corrupted our politics arousing widespread anger and apathy. By going to Angola Diana brought them together, insisting, in effect, that political issues must be subject to the ordinary standards of morality that most of us try to live by. And how her action changed the political realities! Popular opinion might feel that she was much more in touch than the hopeless Tory MP who described her as a loose cannon. What else might she have achieved if she had lived?

The extraordinary response to Diana's death, the global outpouring of grief, shows that she had become a powerful symbol. But grief is a complex thing and often makes us look again at our own lives. *The Times* described her death as holding a mirror to the way we live. In bereavement things we try not to look at come to the surface. Part of our grief is for the state of our world.

The debate about the activities of the paparazzi and the standards of the press should not obscure the deeper issue which is the erosion of moral sense, the tearing down of standards in pursuit of selfishness or

money. Language fails us in the face of men who not only drove her to her death but failed to go to the help of those who were injured – even to the point of impeding those who did – but instead, in a sickening display of callousness and greed, exploited the situation for their own personal gain. Today anything goes; we are afflicted with a moral blindness which means that we destroy the hand that feeds us. No wonder we weep for our world.

The fascination with Diana's love life should not obscure our deeply confused attitudes to personal morality, and the devastating effect on families, especially children, of adultery, promiscuity and emotional deprivation. The quest for personal fulfilment is too often a quest for sexual fulfilment, with tragic and destructive consequences.

Her concern for the poor and the outcast should not blind us to the way they continue to be marginalised in an uncaring world where the gap between the rich and the poor has widened to the point where it calls in question our right to call ourselves a civilised nation.

Our appetite for gossip should not blind us to the appallingly low standards of journalism shown by the tabloid press through which that appetite is satisfied. There will be other examples too: her death is a mirror in which we see the state of of the world. If we ask where is the hand of God in this tragedy, I think we shall find that it is holding the mirror.

However we respond to Diana's death, the scale of the response is extraordinary – crowds queuing for nine or more hours to sign the book of condolence. Brian Hanrahan on the television news last night expressed surprise that in this day of instant communication, when we can experience everything in our living room, people still wanted to be there. Of course we do! We are human; we need the personal contact; without it we are diminished as people. That is what Diana understood. She touched because she cared, and she cared because she loved.

When Jesus went to dinner with Simon the Pharisee, a woman came in from the street and washed his feet with her tears and dried them

with her hair. It was an offering of love, but what she did outraged the respectable guests. Jesus turned to her and forgave her, and he said to Simon and his guests that because she loved much she could be forgiven much. Diana loved much and we forgave her much. Deep calls to deep.

But, alas, it ended tragically and prematurely. No life, not even the the most privileged, is completely fulfilled. Some never even have the chance, some are overtaken by illness or ill fortune, some are cut down in their prime. If God is a God of love he cannot create creatures with such potential only to see it stunted and wasted. Love and Justice demand a life to come. There must be a life beyond this one if God is to be God. It is in that hope that we come together to pray and to keep vigil and to repent. Christian hope looks to Jesus for its fulfilment. His resurrection enables us to believe that death is not the end; through it we see that there is no experience which God does not share, and that there is no tragedy from which he cannot bring new life. His love is the other side of his judgement.

But whatever our hope and belief, death, especially premature death, brings to the surface the deep questions we all have in the back of our minds, questions we know have no answer. In our need to believe we feel God's absence rather than his presence. I think Martha felt like this when, grieving for her brother Lazarus, she greeted Jesus. Her greeting voiced her feelings of the absence of God: 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.' But at the same time she wanted to believe: 'Even now I know that God will grant you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus responded by inviting her to trust in him: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though he dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die.' To our questions and our feelings God gives no answer; instead he offer us an invitation to trust. We know he can be trusted because his words are true. And in that trust we commend Diana to his care.

Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters.

The end of the Millennium was celebrated by the Church as a Year of Jubilee – not only a time of celebration, but a time to right wrongs and to begin anew. The year beforehand is kept as a year of preparation. The principal entrance of the church is sealed up to be broken open as the Year of Jubilee dawns. The year 2000 was a Great Jubilee.

THE GREAT JUBILEE

> *Behold I am making all things new….*
> *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*
> *REVELATION 21.5,6*

I hope Bob Geldorf was right when he said that the millennium would be remembered in history for the decision of the British Government to cancel the debts of the world's poorest nations rather than for domes or wheels or the other hyped-up attractions of the celebrations. Christians especially should applaud this decision because it is essentially Biblical in its morality; it is what a Year of Jubilee is really all about.

We heard in the reading from Deuteronomy that one of the basic rules of Israelite society was a remission of debts every seven years:

> At the end of every seventh year you must make a remission of debts…. Everyone who holds a pledge shall return the pledge of the person indebted to him … for the Lord's year of remission has been declared. There will never be any poor among you if only you obey the Lord your God.
>
> DEUTERONOMY 15.1-5.

This was part of the sabbatical principal that the land should have a rest every seven years. And after seven periods of seven years, that is

after forty-nine years, a year of jubilee was to be proclaimed. The fiftieth year was to hallowed and liberation was to be proclaimed for all who lived in the land. Not only were debts to be remitted, but everyone was to return to his property and to his family. No work was to be done on the land; it was to be a year of celebration in which the Lord would provide. At the end of a thousand years, therefore, we celebrate a Great Jubilee.

One reason for the sabbatical rules was good husbandry, letting the land lie fallow so that it could regenerate; but an equally important reason was to preserve social cohesion. The reading from Deuteronomy ended with the statement that if debts were remitted every seven years 'there will be never any poor among you.' Poverty, as we know only too well today, is enslaving, and leads to all sorts of social evils: poor health, low attainment, increased crime and delinquency, and an apathetic, divided society. It was no different three thousand years ago: in every age poverty enslaves and dehumanises. The object of the jubilee laws was the elimination of poverty. These laws and all the other detailed rules for living in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (which most of us skip over – its not the most gripping of stuff!) were given to Israel as she prepared to enter the promised land. They are the conditions upon which God's land was to be occupied, and underlying them is the jubilee principle aimed at creating a just, inclusive and united society. To achieve this the rich must help the poor.

The Jubilee principle is probably new to most of us – I only found out about it a few years ago – and yet it is one of the basic biblical social principles. It represents an equally basic conviction about God, namely that his ultimate purpose is to bring about heaven on earth; that he is making all things new.

This conviction lies behind the prophecy of Isaiah with which this service began, the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favour.

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord
> has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted;

> he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
>
> ISAIAH 61.1-2.

Jesus took these words of Isaiah on to his lips when he began his ministry; it was in him, he said, that Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled. We may wonder what he meant; after all the poor are still with us, and over the last few years the gap between the rich and the poor has widened to scandalous proportions. Merely his coming has not brought about the change required: Where is this new heaven and new earth in which all things are made new?

We might like it to be otherwise, but there is nothing automatic about Christianity, and one of its truths is that God depends upon our co-operation for the achievement of his purposes. Jesus came among us to show us how we should co-operate with God. His way was the way of love, and in social and economic matters Bishop Simon Phipps described this as taking everybody's interests seriously. (It is only in such a way that a general remission of debts could work, avoiding the temptation to sharp practice and other less than generous behaviour.) The kingdom is what comes to pass when people live in the world in the way of Jesus.

Today the way of Jesus requires a major challenge to the operation of the world economic system which signally fails to take everybody's interests seriously. On behalf of the Churches *Jubilee 2000* has led that challenge so that AD 2000 might be truly a year of the Lord's favour. The British Government's initiative is a sign that the challenge is being heard, and as the year 2000 dawns we need to pray that by its end other Governments will have followed suit. We need also to pray that in other ways too people will live in the world in the way of Jesus. His way is the only way in which we can live together in our increasingly complex and crowded society.

We began this service by blessing the church door. In Greek churches it is common for in icon of the head and shoulders of Jesus to be placed over the principal door of a church, the doorway thus becomes his body. It is through Jesus that we enter. That is the millennial message of the Church to the world. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. All time belongs to him: all time exists in him. As we enter this year of the Great Jubilee our prayer must be that we and all the world may enter it through Jesus so that it may become a year of the Lord's favour, a year in which he makes all things new. To him be the glory, now and to the end of the age.

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