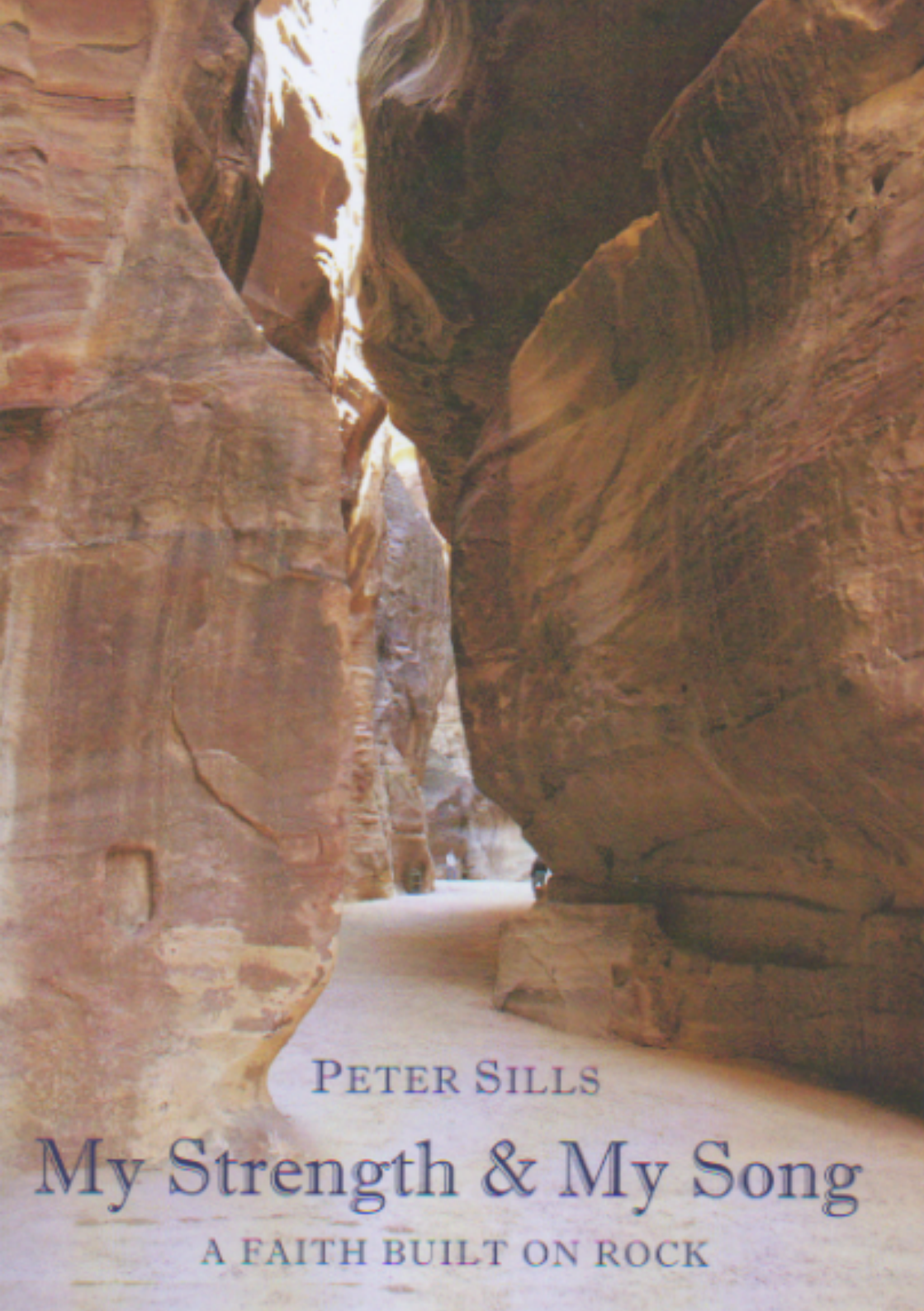

PETER SILLS

My Strength & My Song

A FAITH BUILT ON ROCK

My Strength and My Song

A FAITH BUILT ON ROCK

On one of his journeys Pope John Paul said of the Church, 'We are an Easter people, and Alleluia!' is our song.' It is easy at times like Easter, and when things are going well, to have a lively faith and confidence in God. It is in the hard times that faith is tested, and it is not so easy to believe that God is in control. But if faith has depth, if it is built on rock, the Christian will be able to proclaim with Isaiah, in adversity as well as in fortune, "The Lord God is my strength and my song!"

This baker's dozen, taken from sermons and addresses that I gave during the first decade of my ministry (1981–1991) at Christ Church, West Wimbledon and Holy Trinity Church, Barnes, are loosely grouped around the theme of relating our Easter faith to some of the difficult questions that arose during those years. I hope they will be of help in the process of discerning the hand of God in the world, for this, I believe, is among the chief functions of the priest.

Peter Sills
St Francis' Day, 1991

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Cover:

The Siq at Petra, Jordan

I love you, Lord, my strength,
my rock, my fortress, my saviour.
My God is the rock where I take refuge;
my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.

PSALM 18.1–3 (Grail Psalter)

Also by Peter Sills

My Strength and My Song is the first booklet in an occasional series of meditations and addresses. The others are: *A Word in Season* (2001), *Your Kingdom Come* (2006), and *Deep Calls to Deep* (2015). For details of these and Peter's other publications visit: www.peter-sills.co.uk

My Strength and My Song

Easter Day 1985

The LORD God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.
ISAIAH 12.2 KJV

THE GOD in whom the prophet Isaiah delights is the God who is ever active in the world to draw all people close to him that they may, with joy, draw water from the well of salvation. He is the God whose nature is uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the God who in the resurrection of Jesus gives us the true sign that his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. But it has not always seemed like that, nor has his nature always been rightly understood.

When he saved the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus, the biblical authors saw this deliverance as the outcome of a great battle between God and Pharaoh, in the course of which all Egypt was devastated by locusts and thousands of innocent children were slaughtered. This deliverance 'with mighty hand and outstretched arm,' was wrought by the God of Wrath, and later when the Israelites forgot Yahweh and forsook his ways, his wrath was turned against them and they were taken into exile. When in time, they were brought back to the promised land after the years in Babylon, this restoration was seen as the result of the God of Wrath relenting when he was satisfied that his people had paid the penalty for their disobedience.

The God of Wrath is a very familiar Old Testament image. That was the God whom the Jews expected to come as the messiah, to set them free and finally restore them as his chosen people. But when God took flesh and came among us it was not as the conquering King, the mighty warrior, but as the suffering servant that Isaiah had foretold. And the victory he won was not the victory of battle, nor of judicial judgement, but a victory at the cost of his own life which he gave as a ransom for many for the forgiveness of sins. That was not at all the God whom the Jews were expecting, and even some of those who had believed in Jesus as the messiah during his lifetime, lost their faith after his death.

All the stories of the first Easter Day show that the disciples had not been expecting the resurrection. St Luke tells us that as Clopas and his friend walked home to Emmaus in the evening, they confessed their disillusionment to their unknown companion: 'we had been hoping that he was to be the liberator of Israel.' Early that morning Mary of Magdala went to the tomb to anoint his body wondering how she might roll away the stone. When she saw that it had been rolled away and that the body was gone she said through her tears to the same unknown companion, 'If it is you, sir, who removed him, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' She, too, was not expecting the resurrection. The God who is our strength and our song is rarely the God whom we expect. We know that it is love, not power or wrath that overcomes evil and gives new life, for that is the God revealed in Jesus, but we are no better that the Jews or the first disciples in our expectations. The God of popular belief is the God who is supposed to have shown his wrath at a certain episcopal appointment by striking York Minster with lightning, or who punishes wrongdoing with illness or misfortune.

The God of Wrath is still very much with us but the Resurrection of Jesus shows that image of God is an image of superstition. The true image is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, to be our advocate in heaven and to bring us to eternal life. His likeness is that of the risen Christ who stood among the disciples and showed them his hands and his side, the man with the wounds, the marks of judicial execution, accounted accursed by the religious people of his day.

The gospel writers do not present the crucifixion as a ghastly mistake which was happily reversed in the resurrection. Rather they say that in the crucifixion God absorbed sin and evil and made it the basis of a new good, and of that the resurrection is the sign. Christians are not those who believe in the God of Wrath: they are those who say that the only God is seen in the One who was bruised and wounded; he comes close to us in love and bears the burden of our sinfulness.

The God who comes close is more than most of us can bear. Far better the Jesus who does not touch us and show us His wounds. Far better the Jesus who gives us joy at Christmas and Easter, not the Jesus who

disturbs us in Holy week. Good Friday is not an optional extra, but the pivot of the whole gospel. Thomas à Kempis wrote: 'Jesus always has plenty of lovers of his heavenly Kingdom, but few bearers of His cross. Everybody is ready to share his joy, few want to endure anything for Him.' The promise of new life which we celebrate at Easter is only real if we let him heal us with his wounds. Like Mary Magdalene we need to let him come close to us and call us by our name. Jesus said to her 'Mary!' She turned, and through tears of sorrow turned to joy, said to Him 'Rabboni' – Teacher. It is this turning and letting him be our teacher that is so hard, and the longer we leave it the harder it gets. It means letting go, and the longer we leave it, the more we have of which we must let go. And we have to let go not only of our disordered lives and our selfish desires, but also of the God of Wrath with whom, perversely, we seem to be more comfortable.

On Good Friday Jesus had to let go. He had to let go of the God who had guided him in his ministry and on whom he had relied. On the cross he cried in anguish, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' In that cry he let go, and only then came the new life. It's the same for us. We have to let go of our image of God in order to receive the God of whom Jesus is the human face. Then, and only then, comes the true joy of that new life in Christ which is the risen life, eternal life. Then, and only then, are our eyes opened and we see that in Jesus we behold the Christ in whom is revealed the ultimate truth about God and about ourselves. It is the suffering servant not the God of Wrath who is highly exalted and upon whom is bestowed the name that is above every name. It is at the name of Jesus that every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

A Letter from James

25 July 1982

A letter had arrived from Jerusalem!

The scattered communities of the early church didn't find it easy to keep in regular contact. Letters, and the messengers who brought them were their only links. The arrival of a letter always kindled excitement. What news did it bring of other Christians?

News of the letter passed quickly round the town and the elders began to gather. They went to the house of Thaddeus, one of the apostles who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution which followed the martyrdom of Stephen. Linus was one of the first to arrive.

'Lydia said you've had a letter. Who's it from?'

'It's from James, the Lord's brother. He's now the leader of the brotherhood in Jerusalem.'

'What does he say?' asked Linus. His voice showed a touch of apprehension; he had struggled with some of the letters from Paul.

Thaddeus caught the feeling, 'Oh! It's OK. Very heartening and practical; lots of sensible advice.'

And so the elders gathered and the letter was read. It talked of the problems facing the early church; of riches and poverty, faith and works, patience and prayer. All agreed it brought great support. The elders discussed it briefly and then, in ones and twos, they went home. 'A down-to-earth fellow, that James.' One of them remarked as he took his leave.

After everyone had left, Thaddeus sat down to study the letter. He would have to speak about it next Sunday. But his thoughts drifted, and he found himself re-living those incredible days when they had been with Jesus in Galilee. What a mixed bunch the twelve had been! And those three closest to the Lord, Peter and John and John's brother, the *other* James. Three hotheads! Especially James. What sort of letter would he have written?

Lydia, Thaddeus' wife came in. 'You look deep in thought,' she said, 'was the letter well received?'

'Oh! Yes. Good practical stuff. It was mainly about how a local church ought to conduct itself – fellowship, prayer, healing, almsgiving. Actually, I was just thinking about that other James, you know, one of the inner three; one of the sons of Zebedee; strong-willed, impatient fellow. Do you remember what the Lord called him – him and his brother John – Boanerges! Songs of Thunder!!'

'Boanerges,' repeated Lydia, savouring the flavour of the name. 'Yes, I remember. James and John wanted to call down fire on those who wouldn't welcome Jesus!'

Thaddeus remembered that alright. The other ten had had a good laugh at the brothers' expense. He also remembered, more shamefacedly, that sometimes they had been a bit jealous of the three special companions. They went with Jesus when the rest had to stay away. He voiced his thoughts.

'I wish we could have gone everywhere with the Lord like they did.'

'Like the time when he brought Jairus' daughter back to life,' added Lydia. 'Poor old Jairus. He could hardly believe it. It was so wonderful.'

'Yes it was,' said Thaddeus, 'but you know for a long time they didn't understand what it meant to be a *special* companion of the Lord.

'By heaven, we were furious when James and John asked for the places of honour in the Kingdom – one on the right and the other on the left! The Lord put them in their place alright. "If you want to be first you must be the willing slave of all!" That's what he told them!' Thaddeus spoke with some feeling.

'But that was a lesson we all had to learn.' His wife gently reminded him.

Thaddeus fell silent again reliving those incredible days. He did not know it, but John had gone to Ephesus where he later wrote his gospel. James, though, had been executed by Herod these fifteen years since, and this was a bitter memory. James was the first apostle to die for the Lord. At first impetuous like Peter, later he had shown true courage in standing up to Herod for the faith. The early church was built on the faith and courage of men like James.

Lydia broke the silence again. 'Jesus said something else that James really took to heart; something about a cup!'

Thaddeus had been thinking about that too. 'That's right,' he said, 'the Lord said his apostles would drink the cup which he drank. He also said that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

'At first we didn't understand Him. It seemed such a strange thing to say – like many of the things he told us. But then we didn't know what he was going to have to go through. After he had died and had risen, we remembered those strange words and realised that he'd been talking about what it would really mean to be one of his special companions. There would be no easy glory. The way was one of self-sacrifice.'

Lydia, too, remembered how vividly Jesus' sayings had come back to them, how they had burned in their hearts. Thaddeus continued:

'James had been one of the first to grasp that. He had been with the Lord on the mountain and in the garden. He had seen him transfigured and in torment before he died. At first he'd been afraid, awestruck like one who sees God face to face. He saw the glory and the agony of God as no other had done. Later he saw the connection and knew the truth deep in his heart: without the agony there was no true glory.'

Thaddeus stopped speaking. There was nothing more to say. James had witnessed to that truth in his own life. He drank the cup which the lord had drunk.

The Question About Divorce

28 August & 11 September 1983

He was asked: 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' This question was put to test him. He responded by asking, 'What did Moses command you?' They answered, 'Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife by a certificate of dismissal'. Jesus said to them, 'It was because of your stubbornness that he made this rule for you. But in the beginning, at the creation, 'God made them male and

female.' 'That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife; and the two become one flesh.' It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.'
MARK 10. 2-12

'What God has joined together, man must not separate.' The words of Jesus are very clear: no 'ifs' or 'buts'. Even so the question is raised, 'Are we to understand this saying as an absolute rule prohibiting divorce? – And if not, where are we to draw the line?' Some people are unhappy that the question is even raised; for them the words of Jesus are an absolute rule, and they know where they stand. Others, maybe most, take a different view. Divorce, they say, will always be with us, but they are perplexed as to where the line should be drawn. What guidance on this issue do we obtain from the New Testament?

That there was a Word from Jesus opposing divorce is undeniable. St. Luke in a single verse gives what is likely to be the most primitive form of this saying: 'A man who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery; and anyone who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.' *(Luke 16.18)* But this verse is in fact a ruling against re-marriage rather than against divorce, and Luke gives no hint as to the context in which it was said. It comes as one of a miscellany of sayings between the parables of the Dishonest Steward and Dives and Lazarus. This is important because any saying, of Jesus or of anyone else, derives its full sense only from its context. When we turn to Mark, we find the saying reproduced and set within a context that enables us to be clearer about Jesus' meaning.

Mark sets the scene by telling us that Jesus left Galilee and came into the regions of Judea and Transjordan. A crowd gathered round him, and he followed his usual practice and taught them. He was asked: 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' Jesus does not answer this question but, characteristically, asks another in return: 'What did Moses command you?' His purpose in doing so is not to answer the question from the crowd, but instead to direct attention to the heart of the matter, the true nature of marriage. It is important to catch the emphasis in his reply. The rule laid down by Moses is given short shrift: 'It was because of your stubbornness that he made this rule for you…' The vital thing is

to understand God's purpose in the gift of marriage: 'But in the beginning, at the creation, "God made them male and female." That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Therefore What God has joined together, man must not separate.'

Jesus places the emphasis on the ideal and Mark shows him as clearly impatient with those who ask legalistic questions designed to trap him. The Lukan saying on re-marriage is added by Mark as an after-thought, addressed to the disciples alone. It merely reinforces in private what has already been said in public.* Mark is not concerned to provide guidance by way of moral rule. The moral issue is raised by him only to make a theological point: understand God and his purposes, and your morals will take care of themselves.

The importance of the context is brought home when we turn to St. Matthew's gospel. He records the same incident, but to quite different effect. Jesus is asked by some Pharisees not whether divorce is legal – the question posed in Mark – but whether it is lawful for a man 'to divorce his wife for any cause he pleases.' By this question Jesus is being asked to take sides in a dispute between two Rabbis. Rabbi Shammai held that divorce was only permissible where there had been sexual misconduct by the wife, whereas Rabbi Hillel held that any conduct which displeased the husband would suffice. Jesus takes the strict view and thus sides with R. Shammai, and that, says Matthew, is the rule for Christians: 'I tell you, if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than unchastity, and marries another, he commits adultery.' *(Matthew 19.9)*

Matthew sets the incident in a different context to Mark because he is writing to meet a different need. His gospel was written some twenty

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* The setting of this private dialogue is generally regarded as artificial. It is, like other explanatory passages *(e.g. Mk. 4. 10-20)* inserted by the evangelist to give his own understanding of what Jesus meant. That this is so is clearly indicated by the reference to a woman divorcing her husband. This was not possible in Jewish law and Jesus would not have considered the possibility. Mark is extending the words of Jesus to cover the situation in the society for which he wrote, most likely Rome, where women could take the initiative in divorce.

years after Mark's when the Christian community had settled down and had to face the inevitability that some Christians fell short of the full demands of the Gospel. For Matthew's church it was vital to know the grounds on which divorce was permitted. So the emphasis in his account is on the rule, not on the nature of marriage. This is made plain by Matthew through the device of inserting a supplementary question after Jesus had stated the ideal of marriage: 'Why then,' they objected, 'did Moses lay it down that a man might divorce his wife by a certificate of dismissal?' Matthew reverses the order of the Markan story and in doing so gives us a completely different understanding. It follows that we cannot use the New Testament as a rule-book on the issue of divorce. We have in Mark and Matthew two different ways of looking at the same problem. Mark is theological: rules are unimportant; Matthew is ethical: rules are vital. This leads us to one clear conclusion: simply to say 'No divorce!' is wrong; it misunderstands Mark, and it ignores Matthew. So, where do we draw the line?

An answer to this question must take account of the whole tenor of Jesus' teaching rather than taking each account in isolation. In particular we must take seriously the impatience which Jesus clearly showed towards those who sought to reduce religion to rules. Rules are necessary to regulate our affairs, but we must not read them as a substitute for God. This was the fault above all for which Jesus criticised the Pharisees; in contrast he demanded a radical obedience to God; a constant return to the roots of faith, before which all rules must give way. The truly righteous attitude is not moralism, but repentance. So, for example, according to Matthew Jesus allows divorce for unchastity, but that is not the last word, as, according to John, Jesus forgives the woman taken in adultery *(John 8. 1-11)*; he forgives the very fault which alone gives grounds for divorce in the first gospel. That she has broken the rules was of secondary importance to the fact that she was repentant. This leads us to a second important conclusion: moral rules do not have an absolute character. The only moral absolute is God himself, and we fail him if we make another god out of a moral rule, even out of Jesus' sayings against divorce!

St. Paul clearly thought along these lines. In his first Letter to the Corinthians he gives advice on divorce *(1 Cor. 7. 10-15)*. In mixed

marriages, *i.e.* those between a Christian and a non-Christian, he permits divorce on grounds wider than unchastity, and this is justified by an appeal to the principle that 'God's call is a call to live in peace.' In the circumstances of a mixed marriage this principle takes precedence over the principle of the lifelong ideal of marriage, and this seems a reasonable approach in our society where most of the marriages blessed by the Church are between those whose adherence to the faith is unclear. Jesus said that Moses permitted divorce because the people were 'stubborn', or 'hard hearted'. So long as that hard-heartedness exists marriages will break down and society must be protected from the greater evil of constant and bitter domestic strife by allowing people to divorce. It follows, therefore, that a Christian society ought not to refuse to end a truly endurable marriage; to do so is to worship marriage as a substitute for God. And that seems to me to be about as far as the New Testament will take us.

'But,' you may say, 'where do we draw the line? – You've not told us what we want to know!' I think the answer must be that it is unrealistic to expect clear, precise answers to difficult problems. Divorce is a problem precisely because, when intimate relationships fail, the pain and the consequences are such that there are no clear answers. But more than that, surely the desire for clear answers shows that we are looking for the wrong sort of security in our lives. Rules are a poor form of security. They can be changed, ignored, bent or evaded. The only true security is God, and the Christian aim is to know Him better and better, rather than to expend our energy working out rules for living. That is the truth behind Mark's story of the question about divorce. There are no easy answers to difficult questions and the Christian faith does not pretend otherwise. As Archbishop Donald Coggan said, 'Jesus doesn't give us easy answers; he throws out an enormous challenge and says, "Now go and work that out, and it will be travail for you as you do it"'.

THE TRAVAIL to which Donald Coggan refers is the hard work required to be true to Jesus' understanding of marriage, and to avoid falling into

an inflexible moralism. This work is where we find our true security. Jesus' purpose in the encounter recorded by Mark was to point to the heart of the matter, to the true nature of marriage, and, as so often, he said that the wrong question was being asked. The right question is: What is the true nature of marriage? And to that question Jesus gave the following answer:

> In the beginning, at the creation, 'God made them male and female. That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife; and the two become one flesh.' It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.

The nub of this answer is in the phrase, 'the two shall become one flesh'. The union between a man and woman in marriage is such that they become one, like two parts of the same body. Indeed that is how St. Paul describes marriage in his letter to the Ephesians, where he likens the union between husband and wife to that between Christ and the Church *(Ephesians. 5. 30-32)*. Christ is the head, we are the body: head and body together make a unity; so it is with husband and wife in marriage. The bond between Christ and the Church is the bond of love, the same love that unites and Father and the Son. Jesus spoke of this love in this way: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love. If you heed my commands, you will dwell in my love, as I have heeded my Father's commands and dwell in his love.' *(John 15. 9-10)*

The love between husband and wife, the love in which they dwell, is thus the same as the love between the Father and the Son. It is the same as that unconditional love which is the source of creation, which sustains it, heals it, and enables it to grow. The gift of God in marriage, therefore, cannot be separated from his great loving purpose in creation, namely that we should have life and have it more abundantly. God desires us to grow more and more fully into that likeness of him in which we were made, and marriage is given to that end. His desire is for us to become fully mature, to become ever more completely the people he made us to be; and that maturity, St. Paul tells us, is 'measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ.' *(Ephesians. 4. 13)*

We are to become Christ-like, and marriage is given to that end. The ideal of marriage as a life-long union is the ideal, not because that makes for nice, tidy relationships, but because only such a union provides the security in which people can grow into their Christ-likeness. And it also provides the security which children need in order to grow into their own Christ-likeness.

It's easy to be sentimental about love and marriage. Love is too often seen glibly as merely a thing of the feelings, but the love of God is far, far more than that: it is a thing of the will. Consider St. Paul's hymn to love *(1 Cor. 13)*; the beautiful words contain some difficult demands:

> Love is patient and kind. Love envies no one, is never boastful, never conceited, never rude; love is never selfish, never quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs, takes no pleasure in the sins of others, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.

The love of which St Paul writes is not some objective entity which is apart from us, to be admired like a painting in an art gallery; it is a dynamic quality which is to become part of us by the effort of all our being, not least of our will. Patience, unselfishness and toleration are not feelings, but dispositions of the heart acquired through the discipline of our will. And what about love keeping no score of wrongs, not delighting in other men's sins? Such attitudes are all too often clean contrary to our feelings!

As we mature we have to learn the difference between falling in love and growing in love. Growing in love is something to be worked at; it is all part of creating a free space in which our beloved may grow – a free space in which we are accepted as we are, and not as someone else would like us to be; a free space in which we can come to know our true selves. That knowledge is the beginning of growth.

Alas, many marriages today fail to reflect even a shadow of the ideal. Too often there is a reluctance to share the truth in which love delights. Our vanity is harmed when we have to face the hard truth about ourselves, and when we can no longer pretend, because the one we love knows us too well for the pretence to work. And so there comes the temptation to seek out someone more sympathetic in whose hands our

vanity will rest unharmed, and marriage becomes infected with the spirit of consumerism. When things become difficult love is allowed to become cold and we trade in our old marriage for a new one more to our liking. No one grows that way. The love between husband and wife, if it is kept warm and compassionate, like the love of God, will create an atmosphere in which failure can be acknowledged and a new start made. That is hard work, and our vanity suffers cruelly, but true growth is never easy. It is founded on repentance and the way to new life is always through death and resurrection.

If we look at marriage this way, as I believe Jesus meant us to, preparation for marriage becomes all-important. It is not something that can be done in a few talks with the priest beforehand, however well they may be done. The attitudes instilled in us by our consumer society simply cannot be changed in so short a time. Preparation for marriage needs to begin much earlier, even in our schools we need to move from sex education to marriage education. It follows also, I think, that we should be far more careful about those whom we will marry in church. With centuries of history behind us, it may be too late to change, but I do wonder what the Church is doing blessing the marriages of couples who have not even begun to grasp the religious meaning of life, let alone the biblical picture of marriage. It is absurd to agonise over those whom we will re-marry, when really we should be far more concerned about those whom we marry for the first time.

There remains, however, the certainty that however hard we try some marriages will go wrong. The Orthodox Church, I believe, accepts that a marriage can die, and following their example, instead of debating the precise grounds for divorce we should make it our priority to provide mature Christian people who can help the estranged couple to take an honest constructive new of their failure, and find the strength to begin again. And that is the hardest work of all. It requires a willingness to see ourselves truly as we are, a willingness to change, a willingness to surrender our vanity in love. Where this willingness is not found we face that hardness of heart of which Jesus spoke, and which obstructs our view of the ideal of marriage. Here, we should have the courage to say that there was no true marriage; similarly, where a marriage has become unendurable because it lacks the love in which husband and

wife can grow more fully into that likeness of God in which they were made, we should say also that there was no true marriage.

Speaking of that love Jesus said, 'I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.' *(John 15.11)* A marriage in which husband and wife grow in love, living faithfully together for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do them part, is one of the chief means given by God whereby his joy may be in us and our joy complete.

The War of Jenkins' Doubts

24 June 1984

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say I am?' They answered, 'some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others one of the prophets.' 'And you,' he asked, 'who do you say I am?' *MARK 8. 27-29*

Whatever else it may have achieved, the so-called 'War of Jenkins' Doubts' has brought home the central importance of Jesus' question to his disciples. Can we, in the light of modern scholarship, reply unhesitatingly with Peter, 'you are the Messiah?'

David Jenkins, formerly Professor of Theology in the University of Leeds, was consecrated Bishop of Durham in York Minster on July 6 in the midst of a storm of controversy about the orthodoxy of his beliefs. Some weeks previously on the TV programme 'Credo' he had cast doubt on the literal truth of the virgin birth of Jesus, and also, it was alleged, on the resurrection as a definite historical event, describing it as 'a quasi-physical, quasi-psychological experience.' He said also that he would accept as Christians those who viewed Jesus as a great moral teacher, though not necessarily as divine.

The torrent of criticism which these views unleashed is hardly surprising. How can someone, especially a bishop-to-be, say these

things and also conscientiously recite the Creed which, in its Nicene version, affirms that 'by the power of the Holy Spirit' Jesus 'became incarnate of the Virgin Mary', and that 'on the third day he rose again'? Are Jenkins' doubts consistent with Peter's confession that Jesus was God's Messiah?

Unfortunately, as so often happens, this sort of controversy has served to generate more heat than light, and has directed attention away from the fact that many people, including many of the Church, do ask questions about the meaning of the basic propositions of the Christian faith, and would like something more by way of an answer than to be told 'we believe it because we always have!' The Creeds were not vouchsafed to the church on tablets of stone bearing the mark 'Made in Heaven'; they were hammered out over a period of 450 years by the early Church as it sought to make sense of its experience of God in Christ. At the centre of this controversy is the need for all Christians in every age to do the same – to make sense of their experience of God in Christ: to ask what is the foundation of my faith? Why am I a Christian? To hear Jesus' question addressed to us personally: 'And you, who do you say that I am?'

My guess would be that most of us tend to avoid such questions, either because we're not sure what we believe, or because they bring us face to face with our doubts and we are fearful of where we may find ourselves as a result. It is easier to opt for the tempting security of an unexamined orthodoxy. Again, my guess would be that this kind of fearfulness lies behind many of the vehement protests directed at Dr. Jenkins.

But need the facing of doubts be the destructive process that we fear? Surely not. God has given us a questioning spirit through which we are led into new truth, and who in the midst of the achievements of this century can doubt this? God did not give us this spirit to guide us in all aspects of life apart from religion, and modern scholarship has led to great advances in our understanding and to a consequent deepening of our faith. Christianity to be credible must command the assent of our minds as well as of our hearts, and this is not a matter for the scholars alone. Archbishop John Habgood, addressing the York Diocesan Synod said, 'I am worried about the assumption that lay people constantly

need to be protected from questions which in their heart of hearts they do ask. Every morning I have a sheaf of letters from clergy complaining that their people have been bewildered or disturbed; and I wonder what such clergy have been doing in planting such a fragile and protected faith that it is threatened by the most ordinary kind of question.'

What can we say about the basic questions which Dr. Jenkins and other scholars have asked? The Church down the ages has for the most part been content to affirm that Jesus was incarnate, *i.e.* that he was both God and Man, and that he is alive and reigns, *i.e.* that he was raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand. It has not spelt out precisely how these two miracles were accomplished, but it has affirmed that they were actual events within history. Archbishop Robert Runcie in a subsequent edition of 'Credo' said, 'It won't do for us as Christians simply to think of the stories about Jesus as beautiful, helpful or meaningful. The Christian faith is fundamentally a historic faith, and therefore historic memories are of great importance within it.'

One of these historic memories was the belief that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit and not through the action of a human father. In other words when God chose to take human form he by-passed the normal processes of human reproduction. There are those, David Jenkins among them, who find it difficult to accept this belief literally. To them it seems far more likely that God acted through the normal processes for creating new life in order to bring forth the Saviour. That, it is said, is much more consistent with the overall biblical revelation of the character of God who uses his creation to achieve his purposes and does not by-pass it. It testifies to the continuity of the supernatural with the natural to which the Bible bears witness.

Against this view must be set the agreement of Matthew and Luke that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit, and as Alan Richardson has said, it is difficult to suggest motives for the invention of the story were it not true. It is in fact unique in the history of religions. There are stories of miraculous human births like John the Baptist, and of the offspring of the union of a god and a woman, as in ancient Greek religion, but none of a virginal conception. It is perhaps significant that this belief came late into the faith after Jesus' divinity had been established on other grounds. It was the resurrection and the

Pentecost experience which convinced the disciples that Jesus had triumphed over death, and out of this conviction there developed the church's belief that on earth he had been both God and man. It followed that in Jesus God had inaugurated the New Age which he had promised through the prophets, and that this new creation, like the first, was the work of the Spirit. Thus Ronald Preston explains the deepest meaning of the Virgin birth of Jesus as affirming 'that he is not simply the product of human evolution but it a new beginning.' David Jenkins does not deny this belief, and it is precisely this belief which Matthew and Luke seek to convey in their stories of the birth of Jesus. We have, though, to reckon with the possibility, even the probability that the stories grew out of the belief, like the stories of the original creation, rather than that the belief grew out of the stories. However, that may be, whether the virgin birth of Jesus is historical or not, it is certainly secondary, because the primary ground for believing that Jesus was both God and Man is the Resurrection.

Writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul said, 'if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so too your faith.' *(1 Cor. 15.14)* The belief that God had raised Jesus from the grave grew directly out of the experience of the disciples in encountering him after his death, and in knowing that he was a living presence in their lives. This experience has been repeated in the lives of countless Christians down the ages, and continues in our own day. David Jenkins has denied none of this; he has merely speculated about the nature of the disciples' experience.

A comparison of the resurrection stories shows that Jesus' resurrection appearances were not unequivocal events. For example, he is not always recognised. In St. John's version Mary Magdalen mistakes him for the gardener, and in St. Luke's version he is not recognised by Clopas and his friend on the Emmaus Road. When he is recognised there is confusion as to what the disciples have seen. St. Luke is at pains to make it clear that Jesus is not a ghost; but how does a body of flesh and bones suddenly appear in a room, especially when the doors are locked? In these stories the New Testament authors struggle to put into words an experience that is literally beyond description, but of the reality of that experience there is no doubt. David Jenkins' description of it as 'quasi-physical and quasi-psychological' does not seem too wide of the mark.

So on the two central doctrines of the Christian faith Dr. Jenkins' may be acquitted by heresy.*

But has the cost been too great? Archbishop Runcie has warned that 'it won't do for us to strain out of stories all that we find difficult because it has an element of miracle and mystery about it. In that way,' he said 'we shall erode, adulterate and water down faith to our own twentieth century level of insight.' Some may think we have done just that and, grateful for the Archbishop's words, turn again to embrace the faith of the Fathers. There is nothing wrong in that but two words of caution are required. The first is that the church has always permitted liberty in interpretation; it would be sanguine to assume that the Holy Spirit ceased leading us more deeply into the truth in 450 AD and that modern scholarship can be ignored. Twentieth Century insights are not necessarily inferior to those of the fifth century.

The second word of caution is that embracing the faith of the Fathers must not be a way of avoiding the question 'Who do you say that I am?' Nor must it be a cloak for intellectual laziness. Archbishop Runcie also said, 'Jesus appealed to peoples' minds, not just to their hearts. Again and again he had said "What think ye?" or "Have ye never read?" when asked a question. Nothing that Jesus did or said carried its own proof. His stories were parables, his miracles were signs, pointing to a greater reality: but only those with ears to hear or with eyes to see understand where the signs pointed. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus who he was he did not give a direct reply. He said, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are brought good news – and happy is the man who does not find me an obstacle to faith.' *(Luke 7.22.23)* He asked John to consider the evidence and to draw his own conclusions, and he asks us to do the same. The evidence is not neat and tidy and at many points it

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* Dr Jenkins willingness to accept as Christians those who see Jesus only as a great moral teacher gives more cause for concern, but the Church is compromised on this issue. It has for years accepted for baptism the children of parents who believe no more than this, and as a result has forfeited its right to criticise. If we are to make a stand on this issue, as indeed we should, we must first sort out our baptism policy.

throws up questions and inconsistencies for us to puzzle over. Many people in Jesus' time, and today, do not find it convincing. It is not the way of faith to ignore the questions and inconsistencies and pretend that the biblical picture presents no difficulties. The way of faith is to respond in the way that Jesus expected of John, and, to the best of our ability, work things out for ourselves. Faith is the expression of our own response to the evidence. David Jenkins has put it this way: 'When God is at work in Jesus it seems that he respects persons and requires faith. [This will mean] a great deal of uncertainty, risk and suffering, as well as excitement, discovery, joy and surprising newness.'

That is the promise held out by Our Lord to all who grapple with the one question that will never go away: 'And you, who do you say that I am?'

A Heart Skilled to Listen

23 September 1984

One of the ways of dividing the world is between those who believe that the answers to all our problems are to be found in the onward march of technology, and those who question that belief. In *Small is Beautiful* E F Schumacher describes these different attitudes:

> I think we can already see the conflict of attitudes which will decide our future. On the one side, I see the people who think they can cope with our threefold crisis by the methods current, only more so; I call them the people of the forward stampede. On the other side, there are people in search of a new life-style, who seek to return to certain basic truths about man and his world; I call them home-comers.

There is a disturbing compulsion about technological advance, which Ian Kennedy, in the Reith Lectures of 1980, described as the 'technological imperative'. He said we seem to have reached the position where if we can do it, we must do it regardless of ethical considerations. Ian

Kennedy was speaking of advances in medical science, but the point applies more widely. Advances in weapons technology come immediately to mind, and also advances in computer technology which seem to be close to realizing the nightmare of humans being controlled by machines. We seem in many ways to have joined the forward stampede without pausing to reflect whether the society this will create is one we really want. It is the same story at home. We are persuaded by advertising or social pressure to acquire new goods, or adopt new attitudes, without any real consideration of whether the destiny to which they lead is one that we really desire.

Our knowledge is enormous and it is ever-increasing, but where is it leading us? Dazzled by our very cleverness, we seem to have lost our power to choose. As Schumacher said, 'we have become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.' Wisdom differs from knowledge; it requires a maturity, a quality of discernment which weighs what we know against criteria of right and wrong and of ultimate significance. It is about seeing clearly and making right choices. Wisdom is not so much something that can be learnt, but something which is given. It is a gift beyond price. It is this gift that Solomon asked of God: 'Here I am a mere child, unskilled in leadership… Grant your servant, therefore, a heart with skill to listen, so that he may govern your people justly and distinguish good from evil.' *(1 Kings 3.7–9)* Solomon asked to be able to choose rightly, and God granted his request, so much so that the name Solomon has become a byword for wisdom. When Solomon speaks of his heart he is speaking of his whole person. Listening is not just a question of hearing with the ears, but of being sensitive to all that is being expressed: demeanour, posture, feelings, attitudes, and, what is being said between the words. The Bible illustrates this in the story which follows the granting of Solomon's request, the story of the two women who claimed the same child as their own. Solomon's proposal to divide the child in two enabled him to hear which of the two women really loved it, despite the words used. Solomon listened in his heart and heard what was really being said. At a deeper level, the heart must become skilled at listening to God, literally taking to heart his truth and his virtues; then, as Solomon asked, we shall know how to distinguish good from evil.

Alas, we live in foolish times. In what passes for political dialogue confrontation has replaced communication; in the solution of disputes allegation has replaced negotiation; and in morality what is possible has replaced what is permissible. We no longer listen to those who views we find uncongenial; the important thing is to win, and facts, opinions, and standards are adjusted accordingly. A graphic picture of the end of this road is provided in the story of the beheading of St. John the Baptist. *(Mark 6.14ff.)* John had criticised Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. She waited for an opportunity for revenge, and it came after her daughter beguiled the king and his courtiers with her dancing, so much so, that Herod promised her whatever she asked, even up to half of his kingdom. Prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a dish. Herod was greatly distressed because he respected John, 'yet because of his oath and his guests he could not bring himself to refuse her.' Herod was not a wise man, and like many in the news today, he had allowed his own pride and self-esteem to push him into a situation where the alternatives were either to do the wrong thing or to lose face. Herod did the wrong thing. He did what he knew in his heart to be wrong, and had John beheaded.

John was not just an ordinary man – though that would have been bad enough – he was a prophet, one sent by God to proclaim his word and to prepare the way of the Lord. Herod's pride led him not only to authorise an act of mindless cruelty, but also to reject God. He had not even the defence of ignorance for St Mark tells us that Herod 'went in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and holy man,' and that he liked to listen to him, even though the listening left him greatly perplexed.

Herod was a man who listened but did not really hear. He took the road of pride and pragmatism, and the end of that road is separation from God. Its a road takes a lot of traffic these days; maybe it always has for our society has many Herods: politicians whose concern to retain power causes them to overlook the greater claims of justice and peace; industrial and union leaders who have become deaf to the argument that work is not simply about production and profit, or maintaining differentials; neighbours who box up those with whom they differ into a convenient category which they can reject, and refuse to build on the things that they have in common; and any one of us who do the wrong

thing out of regard for our status and self-esteem and refuse to hear the voice of conscience which points the other way.

Our society, like Herod, has cut itself off from God. It makes wrong choices because it refuses to listen. As Schumacher says, it takes a good deal of courage to say 'no' to the fashions and fascinations of the age; but to have this courage requires deep conviction; alas 'we are a people who know far too much and are convinced of far too little.' *(T S Eliot)*

Those whom Schumacher calls the home-comers have realised the truth that the end of pragmatism is separation from God. They have grasped the vital importance of listening to the prophets of our day, and of striving to hear what they are really saying. Schumacher himself was one such prophet. He pointed to the dangers in the pursuit of bigness and of relentless economic growth. Rather like the Bible, he has become someone whom everyone quotes, but whom no one heeds. Other prophets fare no better; many are organisations and charities like Christian Aid, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Shelter, the NSPCC and others who speak out for the homeless, oppressed and disadvantaged. It's all too easy to dismiss these groups because their message is uncomfortable, but as the Bible shows, prophets are awkward figures who never say quite what we want to hear.

The prophets of our day may not be right in all that they say, but, by and large, they point to the sort of society which results from the forward stampede, and they ask whether that is the society in which we really want to live. I believe that they point to the fact that we are on the road that leads away from God and his Kingdom, though I am aware that not all of them would wish to put it quite like that. Nevertheless, a Christian has to say that their message points to the need for our society to reclaim the religious dimension of life. John Taylor, the former Bishop of Winchester has said, agreeing with Schumacher, that the vision of the home-comer is a religious vision: 'Technology is safe only in a context of worship. Science should walk hand in hand with sacrifice.' *(Enough is Enough)*

It is only from God that we shall gain the strength to oppose the forces which separate us from Him and the wisdom that enables us to choose

rightly. This will always perplex the Herods who listen but fail to hear, and who lead us headlong into the forward stampede.

Politics and the Church

10 March 1985

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is discord, union;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

PRAYER ATTRIBUTED TO ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

One of the events that stays in my memory is the day in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, and standing outside No. 10, in response to a question from a reporter about her aims, she replied: 'Let me just say this: "where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union: where there doubt, faith; where there despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy."'

It is not often that Prime Ministers begin their term of office with a prayer – at any rate a prayer said in public! It may be thought an unwise thing to do, particularly if, like the prayer of St Francis, it sets out a course of action which in the nature of things is hard to accomplish in ordinary life, let alone in a political life lived in the full glare of publicity. History will judge Mrs Thatcher's record in living up to the aspirations of St. Francis, and indeed of the wisdom of using his words upon her appointment, but during her years as Prime Minister, the relationship between politics and religion has come to be an important question in our society; last year these questions were asked more urgently than before. The miners' strike was the occasion for most of the

questioning, as Bishops and others from the mining areas drew attention to the division and bitterness being sown deep in their communities, and called on the Government to do more to bring about the harmony, hope, light and love of which St. Francis spoke. There were also the debates in the General Synod on 'The Church and the Bomb', on unemployment, and on a report from the Board of Social Responsibility highly critical of the Government's economic policies. One way and another, the Bishops have had more publicity for their views and for the faith they represent than for many years previously. And to crown it all there was the success of Terry Waite in bringing about the release of the hostages in Libya. The Church had clearly succeeded in an area where the political process had failed.

But none of this has answered the questions about what is the appropriate relationship between religion and politics. Many people, although they applaud the success of Terry Waite, and maybe agree with what the Bishops say, feel that it is inappropriate for the Church to maintain such a high political profile. They would tend to go along with the views of one Tory backbencher who advised the Bishops to give up politics for Lent. But complex problems are not solved by making cheap points; the problems are complex precisely because there is no easy solution. I offer my own thoughts as reflections on the problem and not as a solution, and, I hope, in the spirit, of St Francis' prayer. There are five thoughts I wish to offer.

1. The Church is, in our times, undergoing a deeper change than it has experienced so far this century, and probably not since the evangelical revival at the beginning of the last century, and I believe this change to be the work of the Holy Spirit. It is not necessary to catalogue the darkness and despair of our times, nor its moral and spiritual malaise. In response to this, as the prayer asks, the Church is called to be an instrument of peace, a sign of hope and light. As in all times of spiritual change and renewal we care called to re-examine familiar ways of understanding the Church and its mission in the world – ways which have become too comfortable. One of these understandings is that a sharp line can be drawn between our religious and political lives. That is false because it reduces God to being God of only part of our lives. The truth is otherwise. God is the Lord of all life; he is God of the market

place as well as of the holy place, and he calls his church to proclaim the Gospel in the market place no less than in the holy place.

2. We have become too much a Church of the New Testament, and have neglected that part of our heritage contained in the Old Testament, so it is not surprising that we find unfamiliar the idea of the Church as a prophetic community speaking truth to power and setting forth the demands of God for justice and righteousness. For the prophets, worship was very much a matter of how you treated your neighbour, how you ran your business, and not just whether you went to church and said your prayers. The values of religion were seen as informing and directing the economic and political process, not as separate from it. The same concern is clearly there in the first five books of the Bible, which set out the the Law, and provide, as part of Holy Scripture, detailed rules for the conduct of daily life, economic as well as domestic, rules which showed a special regard for the poor and disadvantaged members of society. They are not literally transferable to our own day, but the values they represent are: thrift, self-denial, good stewardship, fair dealing, and generous provision for the poor. Respecting these values through political action is part of our worship, and they challenge many of the economic policies of the West today.

3. Christianity cannot simply be identified with any one party in politics; it would cease to be true to itself if it did so. The Church has no political programme. In its prophetic ministry it is called to set the demands of God before the world. It stands as a sort of loyal opposition to all parties; and following the example of Christ, it does so out of a special concern for the poor, the homeless, the starving, the outcast and the stranger. The Christian vision of the nature and destiny of Man is in sharp contrast to the prevailing view in the West, where economic views predominate reducing people to the status of consumers, rationally maximising their utility. As Lesslie Newbiggin has said, this religion of progress characterises both communism and capitalism. Part of the Church's role is to point out the inadequacy of these views. The economic view fits ill with the Christian view that we are destined for life in union with God, not unceasing consumption. I think many people, who would not regard themselves as religious, feel the same,

and this goes a long way to explain the widespread feelings of dissatisfaction that are evident today.

4. Jesus taught us to pray for the Kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, and so the church must be mindful of those things on earth that obstruct the fulfilment of the Lord's prayer. For example:

– The amount of money needed to ensure a supply of clean water through the world is roughly the same as that spent on arms each month.

– The policies of the EEC cause huge surpluses of food to be created in Europe while millions in Africa and Asia starve.

– The trade and aid policies of the West by and large operate in the interests of the rich, developed nations and against the interests of the poorer, developing nations.

– UK taxation policies help the rich to become richer and impoverish the poor.

– Support for repressive regimes in Central America, tends to support the privileged in those countries and to oppress the poor and needy.

These are facts about people for whom Christ died; these are facts about the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and those in prison, by whose plight the nations shall be judged *(Matt. 25.31–46)*. It is not meddling in politics, it is the Church's mission to proclaim these facts, and to do so in the name of God. Inevitably the Church will find itself challenging the political leaders of the day to develop policies that will bring heaven nearer to earth. As George Hoffman said, 'It's no good just loving a man condemned to a life sentence of poverty and oppression, whilst at the same time we remain silent regarding the factors responsible for them.' The Church is called to remind the state that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of justice.

5. The Church stands before the world as a witness to a Saviour who died on a cross. Following his example it proclaims the value of self-denial and self-offering, and it does so in the conviction that they have meaning not only for the individual but for communities. The kingdom, which it is God's good pleasure to bring about, is a society built on interdependence and relatedness. In it the pursuit of happiness consists in seeking to fulfil God's will and not our own pleasure. Nationally and

globally this requires, at the least, restraint in the appetites of the rich. The value which God places on self-denial and self-offering as the means of building his kingdom must inform and direct our economic policies. It is only when we strive to do this trusting in God and his crucified son that the prayer of St. Francis ceases to be a pious sentiment and becomes a true prayer for the Kingdom.

The Living Reminder

14 April 1985

Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he gave us new birth into a living hope. *1 PETER 1.3*

CHRISTIANS are especially a people of hope, and as St. Peter reminds us, there is nothing that can destroy or spoil our hope, or cause it to wither, because it is a living hope. But although our hope is sure, laid up in heaven, there are times when we lose sight of its brightness beckoning. And at such times we, like Thomas, need a living reminder to light up our way and to rekindle our hope.

It is one of the great strengths of Christianity that it is rooted in the particular. God uses particular people and places and things to be those living reminders. It was through one particular man, Jesus of Nazareth that God revealed his essential nature; and it was through the death of that man on a particular Friday, at a particular place – a hill called Golgotha – that the salvation of the world was won. It was on the third day that God raised him from the dead, and it was eight days later that the risen Christ appeared to Thomas and answered his doubts and re-kindled his hope. This concern of the gospel writers to root the events of Jesus' ministry in the particularities of time and place is important. True religion is founded on particular events in history, and, as St. Benedict later made plain in his Rule, it is in the ordinary experiences of every-

day living that our search for God will be fulfilled. All who come to the monastery, he said, are to be welcomed as Christ himself. And that's the point: the particular, whether persons or places, will not direct us to heaven unless we see it alright. St. Benedict merely echoes the teaching of Jesus and the prophets that we must learn to see the ordinary transfigured into the extraordinary. We must learn to see it as God sees it, as signs of his glory. Maybe Robert Browning put it best:

> Earth's crammed with heaven
> And every common bush
> Afire with God;
> But only he who sees
> Takes off his shoes.

Those ordained into the ministry of the Church are, in a special way, called to help people to see the signs, to see the world transfigured. They are themselves called to be living reminders. No one, I guess, can approach such a calling without the same feeling of unworthiness that Isaiah knew when, in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw the Lord in glory and heard his call. 'Woe is me!' he cried, 'I am a man of unclean lips.' *(Isaiah 6.5)* But those whom God calls he also empowers. Isaiah's lips were cleansed, and he was assured that his sin was forgiven, his guilt taken away. He was then sent out to speak in the name of the Lord. 'What shall I say?' he asked, and received a commission to speak to a people who would hear but not understand. The same question received a new answer from the lips of the risen Christ. His commission to the disciples was to go forth in his peace: 'As the Father sent me, so I send you. …Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.' *(John 20.21–23)* They are to speak especially of the forgiveness of sins, they are to be living reminders of the great work which Christ accomplished on the Cross, and of which we make memorial in this Eucharist, the celebration of the new covenant sealed with his blood which, he said, is shed for the forgiveness of sins

Henry Nouwen, whose writings I have come greatly to appreciate, says that 'the great vocation of the minister is continuously to make connections between the human story and the divine story.' To my

surprise, I soon found that it was the sharing of the sorrow and of the painful parts of life that brought me the most fulfilment as a priest. But that really ought not to have been a surprise because it was to deal with the pain of the world that Christ came, and our hope, of which Easter is the true sign, is of new life through the pain. To be a living reminder is to reveal the connections between our small sufferings and the great story of God's suffering in Jesus Christ, who took the pain of humanity upon himself and transformed it. So Henri Nouwen says that to be a healing reminder 'does not primarily mean to take pains away but to reveal that our pains are part of a greater pain, that our sorrows are part of a greater sorrow, that our experience is part of the great experience of him who said, "But was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into the glory of God?"'

The priest is not sent as the man with the answers, but as a living reminder of the living hope into which we are born. In the Eucharist especially, at which the priest alone is privileged to preside, we recall the memories of Jesus without which there is no hope. In memory of Jesus we teach, heal and break bread together. Through his broken body and blood outpoured we find the strength to live the risen life, and to proclaim the works of Him who called us out of darkness and into the light. It is the memory of Jesus that guides us and offers us hope and confidence in the midst of a failing culture, a confused society, and a dark world. The inheritance to which we are born is one that nothing can destroy or spoil or wither because it is kept for us in heaven.

Struggle and Contemplation

October 1987

WHEN I READ St. Paul's letters sometimes I wonder what sort of person he was. Would he have been easy to get on with? Did he have a sense of humour? How did he relax? – indeed, did he ever relax? On the whole I'm inclined to think that he was a bit of a paradox: both attractive and

difficult. He must have had great personal gifts and one would have felt drawn towards him, but at the same time, he held his opinions very forthrightly, his zeal was unflagging and his energy abundant: such people are often difficult to work with – they tire you out! Even so, we need more people like St. Paul in today's Church: people who can inspire us; people who can keep a clear head in times of doubt and confusion; people who can actually get the mountains on the move. Where do we find them? Well, we find them within our churches; everyone can be a bit like St Paul, and some can be a lot like him. Personal gifts are important, but even more important is striving to get the various parts of our lives in balance. St. Paul was a great worker and thinker, but he was also pretty good at praying.

It was I think from this combination that St Paul derived his spiritual power and the depth of his Christian vision. Today's Church by comparison seems a bit unbalanced, involved either in struggle or in contemplation, but not always striving to bring them together. In parish terms it usually means that we get so tied up with running parish events that we forget that we're actually meant to be in the conversion business – the same business as St Paul. Bringing things into balance is not so hard as we might think; it starts with trying to see Christian meaning in our everyday life; learning to find God where we are. A remarkable example is Richard Passmore's book *Moving Tent*, an account of his experiences as a prisoner of war. It's a story of appalling degradation and of the depths to which human beings can sink, but through it runs a thread of light which makes the darkness bearable, and which at times has you rolling in uncontrollable laughter. Richard set himself the task of becoming aware of his feelings, and by reflecting on them he learnt much about human nature and about himself. He maintained his own balance and was a source of strength to others. In the midst of brutality and degradation, he grew in compassion and sensitivity; he grew closer to God.

Much the same process was described at a seminar which I attended earlier this year. The speaker was a civil servant who had set herself the task of seeing echoes of God's activity in her work. So it was that she began to realise that the annual appraisal interview with her staff was about their own growth as people as much as about their efficiency in

their jobs. In looking at the goals they set and their achievement, their feelings about the job and so on, her concern was in fact nothing less than a concern for their spiritual growth. And when one said how her working in a team had felt like a breath of fresh air, she had wanted to say: 'Holy Spirit!' Through the resolving of conflicts, giving encouragement and clarifying objectives, she began to see management as part of the process of reconciling and blessing, leading and prophecy. God is to be found at work, but it does mean taking a few moment to stand back and reflect on what you see.

Suffering is perhaps the most difficult thing to come to terms with. Where is the meaning in physical and mental anguish? People often find that it was through serious illness that they began to think more deeply about life, and the illness became for them a point of turning (it is better, though, if the process of reflection starts in good health). Last summer I went to see a lady of fifty-four prematurely dying of cancer. Everyone went to see her was deeply moved by her ability to be open and honest in the face of death. She had been reluctant to see me because she wasn't at all sure about God, and feared that I might 'offer her religion as a life raft'. I asked her what meaning she had found in her suffering. It was, she said, about discovering what really mattered; bringing her family together, healing the hurts, speaking the truth in love. The meaning was found through healing and reconciling. I have no doubt that although she could not name him, in the midst of her struggle she had found God.

Assisting this process of balancing struggle and contemplation is what spiritual direction is all about. The more we learn to find God in the events of our ordinary lives, the more we shall become God's people, and the doing of his work will become as natural for us as it was for St Paul. And more, this learning to interpret one's own experience is the way to a deep faith built on rock, a surer foundation, as Jesus made plain, than either dry learning or miraculous gifts.

God is in the Conflict

October 1988

A FEW WEEKS AGO I received a letter from a friend saying that he had resigned from the Church of England. He hadn't joined another church; he had made himself churchless. Over the last ten years or so one thing after another had made him feel uneasy about the direction the Church seemed to be taking. The resolution at the Lambeth Conference on the use of violence was the last straw: he no longer recognised in the contemporary Church the body that he had once loved and which had drawn his allegiance. To resign was the only adequate statement he felt he could make. He is not alone in feeling as he does. I seem to hear many people today saying the same thing. The issues are various: the ordination of women, moral confusion, liberal theology, the Church and politics, homosexual clergy, the new services. I responded to my friend sympathetically for he had made a brave decision, but what can one say to those who continue to struggle within the Church?

Maybe there is something to be said about expectations. Church and religion have a strong appeal as a rock to cling to. The Church is not the place where we expect to encounter struggle and bitter disagreement. Yet has there ever been a time when the Church has not been marked by these things? In Jesus' time the disciples quarrelled with one another about who was the greatest, and the infant Church had scarcely got off the ground before there was a dispute between the Jewish and Greek believers, not to mention the stand-up row between Peter and Paul, and the scandals at Corinth. Our theological disagreements pale in comparison with those in the early centuries, or indeed of the Reformation. On reflection, it is not surprising that something as deep and as basic as religion should produce conflict and debate. It is precisely because it touches us in our depths that we feel so strongly about it. We forget, maybe, that Jesus was a profoundly disturbing figure. Many people may have flocked to hear him, but as St John records, many fell away at the hard things he had to say, and the scribes and the Pharisees opposed him from the first. It is not wrong to look to Church and religion for peace and security, but the peace is that of the One who said he came not to bring peace but a sword, and to set a man against his father and a

daughter against her mother, and who resisted even to death; and the security is that of knowing that he is on our side.

This too is a hard saying. Conflict is never easy to handle but it does seem to have a place in God's scheme of things. The promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth must mean taking into account new knowledge about the world, about human beings, about our history, for these things are part of the Spirit's work. It is this new knowledge that has led to the new services, the modern Bible translations, new emphases in moral teaching, the renewed concern for those on the edge of society, and the debate about the ordination of women.

It has also led us to look anew at the Old Testament, and especially at what the prophets had to say about God's vision for his people. They did not pull their punches when speaking of corruption and injustice, nor did they avoid political issues. They acknowledged no clear distinction between the political and the spiritual. It was not enough merely to help the poor; true righteousness meant taking the further step of asking why they were poor. And so, following their example, the Church today has found a new boldness to speak out on public issues. What it says is not always right, but neither are the pronouncements of those who bid the church be silent. What is undeniable is that there is a debate going on about the sort of society we wish to be. Is it really to be argued that Christianity, which claims to have the answers about the nature and destiny of human life, and which has been the major influence in shaping our society, has nothing to contribute?

At certain times in history there is an outburst of prophecy. It happened in the eighth and sixth centuries BC, at the time of Christ, in the Middle Ages, and at the Reformation; and it seems to be happening today. In the past these times were times of challenge, confusion and conflict, but they were also times of great movements forward, of liberation and purification. Truth seems to be born from the tension between struggle and contemplation. Afterwards the verdict has always been good news: God was in the conflict.

The Darkness of God

November 1989

RECENTLY two lies from T S Eliot's poem East Coker have been in my mind like a recurring theme:

> *I said to my soul, be still, and let*
> *The dark come upon you*
> *Which shall be the darkness of God.*

Darkness is a very powerful image, and conjures up pictures of fear and destruction, the work of our lower nature. Much of contemporary art reflects this darkness, warning us of the abyss before it's too late. Last May, the Independent newspaper reviewed a new collection of photographs by the war photographer Don McCullin which had this theme. He has portrayed his native Somerset, not in the beautiful colours of the pictorial calendars, but in sharply contrasted black and white; heavy skies, deserted fields, bleak winter sea shores and overgrown tracks. They were pictures of man at war with his environment, the most terrible and senseless war in which mankind is involved. This image of darkness is of the darkness of man. What is the darkness of God?

As I pondered this, the opening verses of Genesis came into my mind: 'In the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep'. This was a different darkness; it was full of the potential of new life. It was into this darkness that God spoke and brought forth all that he created. This is a darkness full of hope, not despair; this is the darkness of God. It seemed to me that it was in this darkness that God did his deepest, most mysterious work, the work of creation and redemption. My mind then moved to the Cross, another time when darkness was over the face of the earth. One view of the Cross is of the evil that led to it: the rejection of the Son of Man, the mockery of his trial, the weakness of Pilate, the viciousness of the Sanhedrin, and the crowd baying for blood. And this is a true view. It shows the same darkness as Don McCullin's photographs, of man defeated by his own pride and selfishness.

But another view has to be held alongside it, because in that darkness God was at work overcoming the evil with good. This indeed is the truer view. What looked at first like the darkness of despair was in fact the darkness of hope. In those three hours of darkness we encounter God in his most unfathomable, most unknowable aspect; it was the time when he wrought the salvation of mankind, his deepest, most mysterious work.

It seemed to me as I pondered this further that much of our experience has this dual aspect. Everyone knows dark times, and the temptation is to regard them simply as negative. Sometimes this may be the right attitude, but more often than not, I feel, if we are prepared to go into the darkness rather than resist it, we shall find that has another aspect, indeed we shall find God at work in it. There are countless examples of people finding this to be so, whether the darkness be acute physical suffering, mental anguish, depression and disorientation, or remorse following wrong doing. It requires faith and courage to follow the darkness, to let it come upon us. We may, like Jesus on the Cross, experience the absence of God rather than his presence, but whatever we feel he will be at work. God can transfigure the darkness of man so that it becomes the darkness of God, the source of hope and new life.

Sister Death

All Soul's Day 1989

SAINT FRANCIS of Assisi, in his 'Canticle of the Sun', praised God for all that he has made, and that includes sister death:

> *And thou most kind and gentle death*
> *Waiting to hush our latest breath.*
> *Thou leadest home the Child of God,*
> *And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.*

St Francis embraces a very positive view of death in contrast to most modern attitudes. Today death tends to evoke fear; not perhaps in itself,

but the process of dying and the unknown that lies beyond. So much has this negative view of death gained ground that much of modern medicine is based on the view that death is the worst thing that can happen to us. (This, of course, is not the only view as the Hospice movement witnesses, but the idea of allowing us time to make a good death would seem to most people strange if not morbid). It is essential to regain a positive attitude to death, like that of St Francis, as essential as death is inevitable.

Death comes to us all, and it does so because we are finite creatures. Because it is the only thing that will happen to everyone, it is in fact the most significant fact about human existence. It is a horizon that closes off the future; it brings a perspective to life. If life went on for ever, it would lack urgency, there would be no desire to order our lives because all could be accomplished in an infinity of time. But when we have lots of time it tends to be wasted and little is achieved. Without the prospect of death life would soon be emptied of meaning and purpose. It is not too absurd to say that without death there would be no life worth living. Death also acts as a judgement upon our concerns. It exposes the superficiality and triviality of many of our ambitions and aspirations. Without death there would be no growth, but for all its importance it is hard to think positively about something that seems just like the end. Can death, with the fears it evokes be looked forward to, embraced like St Francis did, as a gentle sister?

Part of the fear is fear of judgement: there will be a reckoning. This, alas, is too much glossed over in most funerals. But it is there below the surface. We all know that we have fallen short, and fear that the judgement will go against us. Such a fate would mean eternal separation from God (the so-called second death), rather than eternal union with him. But God's judgement is not like that of a court of law, a final verdict. God's judgement is aimed at bringing about repentance, a real turning to him; God's purpose is reconciliation, not condemnation. The other face of judgement is hope, and for the Christian there is a true hope. In our baptism we have already died with Christ, and as he rose from the dead so shall we. This hope was very real for St Paul. He believed and taught that for those baptised into Christ the worst was over, and the life we live between baptism and our physical death was one with the

life we shall live on the other side of death. Writing to the Colossians he said: 'You died, and now your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you too will be revealed with him in glory.' *(Colossians 3.3–4)*

The Christian hope in the life to come is central. It is based on the nature of God himself. Those who know anything of communion with God in this life cannot believe that this communion will be destroyed for ever at death. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is not capricious or arbitrary. He does not have dealings with the living, only in order to let them die eternally. This might be thought of as no more than a pious hope were it not for the fact that Jesus overcame death. The resurrection is the sign that gives our hope substance, which makes it real. It is in Christ that all is being made new.

Death may be a transition into the unknown, and it may cause apprehension but it can be welcomed positively. The transition is into a closer union and communion with God, a union and communion which we partially experience now, as in the Eucharist, and in the love we shared with those whom we commemorate this evening, and which we shall experience ever more fully in the life to come. So as we commemorate those whom we love and who have died, we pray that their journey will be a continual turning towards the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who in his great mercy gave us new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Trouble in Oiled Waters

September 1990

Events in the Gulf brought a reminder last week that I had once been asked if I were interested in being a Chaplain in Baghdad. I don't care to think what my fate might now be had I said yes. Those now taken hostage are caught up in a vicious cycle of events that has characterised the Middle East at least since biblical times. The present conflict

between Arab and Jew seems to be a continuation of the events recorded in the Books of Joshua and Judges, and the military might and barbarity of Iraq has its parallels in the conquests of the Assyrians and the Babylonians recorded in the Prophets. In thinking what a Christian might say about the present crisis, this continuity in events and problems was the first thing to come to mind.

For much of recorded history Iraq was a world power. In 2300 BC Sargon the Great was the ruler of Iraq's first empire, and nearer our own time in 700/800 AD, the Abbasid Caliphs ruled from Bagdad an empire that stretched from Morocco to Pakistan. Twice the size of the Roman Empire, it was the largest imperial system the world had seen. Between these two eras there were the Assyrians and the Babylonians who in the eight and sixth centuries BC, respectively, conquered the Middle East and deported its leading citizens. The great Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, showed, if anything, less human feeling and moral scruple than his modern successor Saddam Hussein. The brutality and suffering were appalling. These two conquests were the basis of much of the great prophetic books: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; and looked at in the light of contemporary events the prophetic view is disturbing, if not shocking. The prophets saw the hand of God in the conquest of Israel. God had acted through a tyrant like Nebuchadnezzar to bring judgement on his people. This view may not have cut much ice at the time, but it is the only one that was preserved, and preserved as Holy Scripture no less! That ought to make us think.

Coming to terms with brutal, capricious evil has never been easy for Christians who believe in a loving God. It is often easier to agree with Freud that dark, unfeeling and unloving powers determine human destiny. But it is also easy to overlook the fact that Jesus is shown in the Gospels to be in a constant battle against just these forces of darkness. The Good News is, of course, that he overcame. While it is important and right to fight against evil, it is also important to remember that God's overcoming was wrought through the cross and not through force of arms. God overcame evil through the suffering of the sinless one. If God is anywhere in this conflict he is to be found in the suffering of the victims and the hostages rather than in either of the opposing armies.

But I find myself coming back to the cause of this conflict and that is oil. We all know, and so do the Saudis and the Kuwaitis, that the West wouldn't be so concerned about them if they had no oil. We have developed a greedy lifestyle based on increasing consumption, and on the assumption that energy will always be available in the quantities we require. We all also know the consequences: global pollution, the greenhouse effect, the rape of the earth's resources, and so on. We all know that this is the cost of consistent short-term thinking, but we refuse to face it. So God makes us face it. As the prophets insisted, God is present in the Gulf crisis in judgement. We may have difficulty in acknowledging this because it is not the way we want to look at God, especially when things are in a mess. We should much prefer him somehow to sort things out, like a parent separating quarrelling children. But God is not like that and never has been. There were times when Israel thought of him in this way as their national champion, but the Bible witnesses to the abandoning of this view over the centuries in the light of history. God is saviour, not a champion or a fixer, and his salvation involves judgement. The better biblical view is that God becomes judge at every crisis in history.

In exile in Babylon Israel had to learn the painful truth about how she had strayed from the ways of God. Today a similar lesson faces us. We know that we have turned out to be unfaithful stewards of our planet (the destiny of which God has graciously shared with us), and now we are being brought face to face with the consequences of a million wrong human choices which have built a world economic system based on greed and exploitation rather than upon justice and righteousness. We are all part of this. We all encourage our leaders to make short term decisions based on our own self-interest. I doubt if God is using Saddam Hussein directly as his instrument (as the prophets might have said) but who can doubt the presence of his judging hand?

But God's judgement is not directed to condemnation and punishment, but to repentance. We need to see the question of energy supplies not simply in economic or political terms but in spiritual terms. Spirituality is not just about saying our prayers; it is about our whole understanding of life. Spirituality is lifestyle; and it desperately needs to become less materialistic and a more creation centered. Saddam Hussein

is an evil, brutal man who has power over us because of our greed and stupidity. He will pass away, but other evils will follow, and we shall continue to have trouble in oiled waters until we return to God who 'judges the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.'

The Well of Salvation

April 1991

I USED TO LIVE in a house which had a well in the garden – at least we were told there was one when we moved there, but alas, it must have been filled in, because we never found it. That was a shame because there is something special about a well. Wells are cool and deep and a bit mysterious. You can hear your voice echo as you talk, or as you wait for the splash as you drop in a pebble. And at the bottom there is water, refreshing and life giving. Before we had piped water, wells were vital for life in this country, as they still are in many places. If you had a well in your garden you were safe.

It is like that in Bulawayo today where water is rationed. Some houses, like the one I stayed in January, have bore holes in the garden and in them you feel safe. It was the same in Jerusalem in Isaiah's time. The city depended on them; so much so that he likened God's good favour to drawing water from a well: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. On that day you will say: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name; make known among the peoples what he has done, proclaim that his name is exalted."' *(Isaiah 12.4)* God can be relied on; his grace will never dry up; he is deep and refreshing; he gives life just like the water from the well.

At this time of year signs of God's life-giving power are all around us. After the death of winter comes the new life of spring. Each year we go through the cycle of existence; from life though death to new life. Resurrection is not simply about what happened to Jesus; it is about life,

about the pattern of God's work in the world – a pattern that is experienced in our everyday life. Growing up is a process of putting away childish things in order to embrace the new realities, first of youth, and then of adulthood. At difficult times the pattern is the same: illness, bereavement, divorce, redundancy and other crises, move from life through death to new life. At times like these we have to draw deeply on our inner resources, and afterwards we find ourselves saying, 'I don't know what kept me going.'

Easter makes plain what otherwise is just a puzzle. God is in these turning points. He is the ever-widening vision, the ever-flowing stream, the well that never runs dry. Out of despair he brings hope; out of defeat victory; out of death new life. But a turning point can become a sticking point. Opportunities for growth can be refused; suffering can lead simply to anger and bitterness. Resurrection is a gift; it has to be received; it is not magic. Jesus had to let go on Good Friday: 'Father,' he cried out, 'into your hands, I commit my spirit.' *(Luke 23.46)* Then, and only then, came the new life. In his self-surrender to God is revealed the pattern for Christian living; at our turning points we have to let go and let God. In that self-surrender we draw on the depths of God like the thirsty drawing water from a well.

In this way maybe we can see the importance of Jesus' death. It was only through his death that the resurrection could be revealed, and for us who are baptised into his death, his resurrection is the sign that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is the sign that God is in the ordinary cycle of life; in him can we trust and not be afraid. With joy we shall draw water from the well of salvation.