

A photograph of a river flowing through a wooded area. The water is dark and turbulent, with white foam from rapids. The banks are lined with bare, brown trees and some green plants in the foreground. The overall scene is natural and somewhat somber.

THE LIFE HIDDEN WITH  
CHRIST IN GOD

Peter Sills

*The Life Hidden with Christ in God*

A Journey into what it means to be baptised

*You died; and now your life  
lies hidden with Christ in God.*

ST PAUL

*Colossians 3.3*

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Peter Sills may be contacted via his website: [www.peter-sills.co.uk](http://www.peter-sills.co.uk)

*Cover image*

River Gangites, Philippi

*Title Page*

The Baptismal Pool,  
L'Église Souterraine Saint-Jean,  
Aubeterre sur Dronne,

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# Preface

In October 1990 a group of thirty-four pilgrims spent a few days together following the steps of St Paul in Greece. We began in the north, at the place of Lydia's baptism in the river Gangites near ancient Philippi, and ended at Cenchreae, his port of departure near Corinth in the south. As we travelled I gave a couple of talks each day related to the various 'Pauline places' en route, but with the linking theme of the meaning of our own baptism. These Lenten meditations are based on those I gave in Greece, and are illustrated with a few of the photographs of the journey. There is much more that could be said about baptism, but what is offered here is taken from St Paul's letters to the first Greek Christian communities (most of which he founded), as he urged them to live up to their new life in Christ. I hope that at this mid-point in the Decade of Evangelism this small Lent Book may help us to enter more deeply into the meaning of our baptism, so that we may better become God's heralds in the world.

Peter Sills  
Candlemas 1995

*The Decade of Evangelism is long gone, but the need for Christians to reflect on the meaning of our baptism and the commitment it carries is as strong as ever, and I hope what is said here remains helpful in this endeavour. For this reprinting I have made a few changes to the text, but it remains substantially as originally written.*

PMS  
Candlemas 2016

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# Using This Book

These meditations can be used by a person alone, or by a group, or in a combination of the two.

The material for each week is divided into two sections consisting of a key passage from St Paul's Letters, a Meditation, two other New Testament readings, and some Points for Reflection. How this material is used will, of course, vary from one person to another depending on what each finds helpful and the time available. However, Lent is a time of spiritual discipline, and it is best to plan to make space for following this course rather than simply trying to fit it in. Assuming that a bit of 'Lenten discipline' is possible, the following approach is offered as one way in.

Each section is designed to cover three days. Aim to set aside two reasonable periods of time each week of, say, three-quarters of an hour to an hour, and read through one of the weekly sections in each period. If you can give some time each day, then read the two supplementary New Testament passages on these days, and see how they link in with the meditation. It is useful to have a notebook in which to write down the thoughts and insights which come to you in your time of reflection. You might find it helpful to share your thoughts with a spiritual friend.

## **Praying**

The New Testament passages are intended as a focus for prayer. Read them through slowly speaking the words quietly to yourself. If a word or phrase stands out for you in some way stay with it; don't read on. Repeat the word or phrase slowly to yourself and let it speak to you. Think of the word or phrase as a bell: strike it and listen to the reverberations. When they have died away, so to speak, repeat the word or phrase, or part of the phrase, and listen again. Another way of

picturing this is to think of the word or phrase as a sweet which you slowly savour in your mouth. When you have listened (or savoured) fully, continue to read the passage, speaking the words quietly as before, until another word or phrase strikes you; stop and repeat the process. This way of praying, often called the Benedictine method, is designed to get the scripture inside us so it can form us from within, and help us to listen on God's wavelength. Make a note of any thoughts or insights or connections (with daily life, God, baptism, the Bible) which come to you.

## **Reading**

The Meditations and Points for Reflection may provide further thoughts and insights, and maybe a few answers. Again, make a note of your response to the Points for Reflection, and in this way build up a dialogue with the book as Lent proceeds. Try to keep in mind particularly the question: 'How does this help me to understand the meaning of my own baptism?'

The 'Points for Reflection' are rather like a spiritual audit. At the end of the book there is an invitation to look over your audit and to write down the matters in your spiritual life to which you feel drawn to give attention. Listen to the voice within as you use it: God will guide you.

## **Talking**

If this book is used in a Lent Group, the weekly meeting will be a time to share thoughts and feelings. At the end of the discussion allow a time of silence, at least five minutes, to allow the fruits of the discussion to settle. The meeting might then conclude with a prayer and/or a hymn.

# The Background

## **Lent: The Time of Preparation**

The English word 'Lent' means 'spring', and in the church it is used to describe the six-week period of spiritual discipline before Easter observed at that time of year. In the early Church baptisms took place at Easter, just before dawn on Easter Day, and the preceding six weeks were used as a time of training for the candidates. Indeed this may well be the reason for the origin of Lent. The original six-day period of preparation for Easter (the modern Holy Week) was extended to six weeks on the model of Our Lord's fast in the wilderness. The object of this arrangement was to ensure, so far as possible, that only those of real sincerity in their Christian profession were received into the Church at the paschal baptism. It seems likely that the Lenten fast was meant to apply not only to the candidates but to the Church as a whole. So for those already baptised, Lent became a time of fasting, study, prayer and humility, each Church member being expected to approach Easter each year in the way he or she had done when solemnly preparing for their own baptism.

With the change in baptismal practice over the centuries the idea of the whole Church preparing for Easter by recalling and perhaps re-living the time of preparation for their own baptism has been lost sight of. And one of the sad consequences of more or less universal infant baptism is the fact that the vast majority of Christians have no memory of the sacrament which brought them into the Church, or incorporated them 'in Christ,' as St Paul says. It has, however, become customary for Christians to renew their baptismal promises as part of the Easter celebration, either in the Easter Vigil or in the Eucharist of the Resurrection on Easter Day. If this renewal is to be saved from

becoming simply a matter of routine, then it too ought to be preceded by a period of preparation in which the believer enters into the meaning of his or her own baptism. Then in the Easter liturgy he or she can say truly from their depths, 'I turn to Christ!'

## **Baptism: Jesus and Paul**

Jesus was baptised by John in the river Jordan, and this is one of the few events in his life, apart from the Passion, to be recorded or referred to in all four Gospels. Mark and John, in contrast to Matthew and Luke, use it as the starting point of their accounts, and it seems certain that for the first Christians Jesus' baptism was a far more significant event than his birth. The common element in all four Gospels is that in his baptism Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Son of God. St Mark describes it thus:

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven  
being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.  
And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love;  
with you I am well pleased.'

*Mark 1.10-11*

For Jesus this was the beginning of a new life for which he prepared by a time of fasting and solitude in the wilderness. At some time, and it must have been shortly after the resurrection, baptism became the way in which those who believed in him as God's anointed one (i.e. as the Messiah) expressed their faith and their repentance. In baptism they turned from their former life to their new life in Christ. However, there is no account in the Gospels of Jesus baptising anyone, nor is there any record of him teaching about baptism. The first mention of Christian baptism in the New Testament is in Acts 2 when Peter, on the day of Pentecost, urges the crowd to 'repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus the Messiah, for the forgiveness of sins...' (*Acts 2.38*) Later, in Chapter 8, there is an account of Philip's Ministry in Samaria which resulted in many people being baptised, 'men and women alike.' This

account includes a clear indication that the early practice of baptism involved the laying on of hands with prayer for the gift of the Spirit:

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

*Acts 8.14-17*

St Paul is one of the first believers who were baptised to be mentioned by name (*Acts 9.18*). Like all the other converts, baptism marked for him the beginning of a new life, and it is clear that after his escape from Damascus he spent some time preparing for it. Part of that preparation must have included a deep reflection on what had happened to him in his baptism. As he later wrote to the Corinthians (*1 Cor 1.30*), he was now 'in Christ': How had that come about? And what did it mean for him as a Christian living in the world? The answers to these questions have to be pieced together from Paul's letters to the Churches which he founded, in effect to those whom he and his companions had baptised, and whom he urged to live up to their calling. It is to Paul that we have to turn if we want to enter into the meaning of our own baptism.

## THE FIRST FOUR DAYS

# From Death to Life

*Read: Romans 6.3-11*

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

One of the few persons to be baptised by Paul to be mentioned by name in the Book of Acts is Lydia, a dealer in purple fabric from the city of Thyatira. She was baptised together with all her household in the river Gangites outside the Roman colony of Philippi (*Acts 16.11-15*). Just outside the ruins of the city a church and a riverside baptistry have been built to mark the spot. The ceremony which Paul used to baptise his converts is not known, and it was not for many years that the rites of the church came to be recorded. One of the earliest records is that of St Cyril describing baptism in Jerusalem at the end of the fourth century AD. In the darkness before dawn, the candidate first faced west, and, stretching out his hands in a gesture of rejection towards where the sun had set, symbolically he repudiated Satan and

his works of sin. He was divested of his clothes, symbolically putting off the old nature, and then, turning to the east, towards where the light of the new day was dawning, he stepped quite naked down into the water. (For decency's sake women were attended by deaconesses – the principal reason for the existence of that order.) The candidate stood in the water to confess his faith, and water was poured over him three times as he stood there, initially for his Lord's three days in the tomb, and later also for his Trinitarian faith. Hippolytus, writing about AD 215, ordered:

Let him who baptises lay hand on him saying thus:

'Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?'

And he who is being baptised shall say:

'I believe.'

Let him forthwith baptise him once, having his hand laid on his head. And after this let him say:

'Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,

Who was born of Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,

Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate,

And died,

And rose the third day living from the dead,

And ascended into the heavens,

And sat down at the right hand of the Father,

And will come to judge the living and the dead?'

And when he says: 'I believe', let him baptise him the second time. And again let him say:

'Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church,

For the resurrection of the flesh?'

And he who is being baptised shall say: 'I believe'. And so let him baptise him the third time.

Then the candidate came up out of the water and, as was usual after a bath, was rubbed with oil (this later became an anointing, or

christening). He put on clean clothes, probably white clothes (putting on the new nature), was brought before the assembled church, where the bishop received him by laying hands on his head with prayer that the Holy Spirit would by his gifts confirm the candidate in his new faith. He participated for the first time in the Holy Communion, a foretaste of the Kingdom, and there may have been an additional cup of milk and honey as a sign that he had entered the Promised Land.

Victor de Waal (from whose book *What is the Church* this account is taken) comments: 'For the Christians of the first centuries, what we separately call the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and first communion were a unity which spoke clearly. And one can readily imagine the impact it had on a man.... Such an experience cannot readily have been forgotten.'

The central part of the rite is washing with water. Water is a powerful symbol. It speak to us of life, and cleansing, and also of death. The waters stand in our unconscious both for the womb from whence we came, and also for the grave to which we shall return. Baptism, like other rites of initiation, is not simply a matter of purification, it is much more: in baptism the believer participates in the decisive events in which the Church, the community that he is joining, sees its own origins, namely the death and resurrection of Christ. St Paul, writing to the Romans, uses the power of water to symbolise both birth and death to show how in baptism the believer participates in the death and resurrection of Christ: 'By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead ... so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life.' (*Romans 6.4 NEB*)

Baptism unites the believer with Christ through a sacramental participation in his death and resurrection. The nakedness of the candidate is first the nakedness of death, and then also the nakedness of birth: 'We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it.' (*1 Timothy 6.7*) Dying is central to the understanding of baptism, a point emphasised by the primitive meaning of the three washings: a

drowning man did not come up a third time. Like death, baptism cannot be repeated.

The movement in baptism is the same as the eternal movement disclosed in the Cross and Resurrection, a movement from life through death to new life. Paul understood this new life as bringing the believer into Christ. He or she was raised to a new order of life, just as Jesus was in the Resurrection: '...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old order has gone, the new has come.' (*II Cor 5.17*) The new life brought a new identity, not apparent to the world but known to God, just like the sign of the cross marked on the believer's forehead. So, writing to the Colossians, Paul said: 'you died; and now your life lies hidden with Christ in God.' (*Colossians 3.3 NEB*) In this hidden life the believer experiences both a foretaste of the life of the Age to Come, and the call of God to live this 'risen' life now on earth. Its hiddenness is not about any sort of magical preservation from the trials of life, but about the grace acting from within which enables Christians to withstand those trials and still to work for the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Not for nothing did Paul remind the Philippians that they must work out their own salvation 'with fear and trembling'; but he also assured them that 'it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose.' (*Philippians 2.12,13 NEB*) The agent of this hidden life is the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which descended on Jesus at his baptism, and which is now poured out in fulfilment of the prophecy of Ezekiel as the sign of the New Age:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

*Ezekiel 36.22-28*

### ***For Prayer***

Ezekiel 36. 22-28

II Corinthians 5. 16-21

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. Pour some water into a bowl, and think about its symbolism. Do events concerning water in your life have any memories for you?
2. Imagine yourself undergoing the baptism ceremony described by St Cyril. What would it have felt like?
3. St Paul was very insistent that baptism involved a dying with Christ: what sense do you make of dying with Christ?

## A Word About Magic

Superstition is the bane of religion. It arises from an attitude of mind which invests a ritual or an object with a magical power or significance. It is often connected either with a desire to be protected from evil forces, or a desire to establish control over other people; either way its roots lie in fear, and in its more extreme forms it becomes involved with black magic, witchcraft and Satanism. It was a problem in early Christian communities and it remains so today. Writing to the Colossians St Paul met this head on. He warned them to be on their guard against 'hollow and delusive speculations, based on traditions of man-made teaching and centred on the elemental spirits of the universe.' (*Col 2.8*) He reminded them that every power and authority in the universe is subject to Christ, and that on his Cross God 'discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession.' (*Col 2.10,15*) By contrast with the superstitious attitude, Christian baptism is an open, public act which proceeds from love and trust and not from fear. One of the great attractions of Jesus was that he freed people from the feeling that their lives were controlled by dark, unfeeling powers.

Baptism involves a rejection of all superstition and magic, as Paul reminded his converts:

Did you not die with Christ and pass beyond reach of the elemental spirits of the world? Then why behave as though you were still living the life of the world? Why let people dictate to you: 'Do not handle this, do not taste that, do not touch the other' – all of them things that must perish as soon as they are used? That is to follow merely human injunctions and teachings. True, it has an air of wisdom, with its forced piety, its self-mortification, and its severity to the body; but it is of no use at all in combating sensuality. Were you not raised to life with Christ? Then aspire to the realm

above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and let your thoughts dwell on that higher realm, not on this earthly life. I repeat, you died: and now your life lies hidden with Christ in God.

*Colossians 2.20-23 & 3.1-3 NEB*

For all that, the power of superstition lives on in the church, and not least in baptism. There are strong pressures to get the baby 'done', and strong feelings that unless he is 'done' he will not be 'all right'! This superstition is grounded in fear and comes from a wrong view of God. The popular image of God has too much of Olympian Zeus, opposed to man, and hurling down thunderbolts. By contrast Jesus taught us to call God 'Our Father', not opposed to us, but delighting in us, in whose love we were made, and of whose love we are the supreme expression. There is nothing to fear of such a God, and no need of protection from him; nor is his love dependent upon the performance of a given ritual. Baptism is not about protection but about response. It is the outward sign of an inner response to what God had already done for us in setting us free. Dying and rising with Christ in baptism is the way we are made one with him 'in whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven' (*Colossians 1.14 NEB*), and through whom we receive the life of the age to come. There is in baptism no guarantee of a charmed life, no magic protection against evil; there is only our response to Jesus' call to follow him; his gift of the Spirit enables us to do so, and we take hold of his assurance that whatever may befall us he will be with us. The meditations for the next five weeks consider what St Paul believed to be involved in our response and in the divine gift of the Spirit.

## WEEK ONE

# A Common Life

*Read Philippians 2.1-11*

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul urged the Philippians to let the way they behaved towards one another arise out of their common life in Christ Jesus, and one of the first things that we need to do if we wish to enter more deeply into the meaning of our own baptism is to take seriously its communal dimension. Baptism is an individual act, but it is about becoming a member of a community. Each believer, individually and in his own person, undergoes the death and resurrection of his Lord; he 'dies to sin' and 'sets his feet upon a new path of life.' But in doing this he participates in the events that brought into being the new People of

God. Peter, James and John, and all the first apostles and other believers, were transformed by their experience of the resurrection. After the crucifixion they were a band of frightened men and women who met behind locked doors 'for fear of the Jews'; after the resurrection they became a bold group who were not afraid to defy the chief priests to their faces, nor to suffer for the name of Christ. The same power that transformed them is released in baptism into the life of the believer and he or she becomes one of the People of the New Covenant. For Paul himself his membership of this community was made real when he was received into its fellowship at Damascus (*Acts 9.19*), and later at Jerusalem (*Acts 9.27*). Like all the first Christians, and like the Church in its teaching down the ages (if not always in its practice), Paul saw his converts not as a bunch of individuals but as a community with a common life.

The communal nature of the Christian faith is derived from the fact that in baptism the believer receives a new identity and becomes one with Christ. A Christian is not just a follower of the teachings of Jesus, as for example, we might be a Platonist or a Marxist, or even perhaps a Buddhist, still less does he or she become a member of a holy club. The only way Paul can describe the effect of baptism is to use a bodily metaphor. The Christian community is described by him as the Body of Christ, and it is as a new limb or organ that the new Christian is grafted into the Body at baptism. This new identity was symbolised by the putting on of new clothes after baptism; Paul refers to putting on 'the new self, created to be like God' (*Ephesians 4.24*), or more poetically: 'Baptised into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment.' (*Galatians 3.27 NEB*)

Paul frequently refers to his own experience of this new identity as being 'in Christ'. (He uses this phrase 164 times in his letters.) Donald Coggan suggested that by this Paul meant that in Christ he was 'in his element': 'the element in which he alone can reach his fulfilment and come to the full stature of manhood, the destiny God intended for him.'

For Paul this identity was so strong that he could write: 'the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me;' (*Galatians 2.20 NEB*) and it was the experience of this new life in the Church which enabled it, in its common life, to transcend the three great divides of the ancient world – and indeed of the modern world: race, class and gender. In Christ there is no division, Paul proclaimed: 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (*Galatians 3.28*) John Macquarrie has commented that the transracial and transnational character of the Christian church was so deeply impressive in the early centuries that it seemed like the advent of a new humanity.

It is important for Christians today to take to heart the communal dimension of their baptism and to celebrate their common life in Christ. We need to do this particularly in the West where individualism is so rife, and its harmful consequences so apparent. It is only in community that we find our true identity and our true fulfilment. The community of the baptised is called by God to be the light for the world, to show it a better way. 'Baptised into Christ we are members of a community which is at once the sign, the instrument, and the foretaste of God's Kingdom. The church, in the words of Karl Barth, is "God's provisional demonstration of this intention for all humanity"' (*Donald Coggan*)

### ***For Prayer***

Acts 2.41-47

1 Corinthians 12. 12-27

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. Think about yourself as being 'in Christ': what does it feel like?

2. What sense do you make of Karl Barth's description of the church?  
What needs to be done in your church to enable it to fit this description?
3. Does the common practice of individual baptisms outside the main Sunday service witness adequately to the reality of the new baptised joining a community?

# The Common Meal

*Read 1 Corinthians 11.17-34*

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

When Paul visited Corinth it was a proud and prosperous city, more important than Athens which was just a provincial town. It had all the problems of a large metropolis including social divisions, lax morals, and a worldly attitude to life. These problems affected the Christian community which was sharply divided into factions each following a different teacher. According to Paul, some said, 'I follow Paul,' others, 'I follow Apollos' or 'I follow Cephas', or 'I follow Christ'. (*1 Corinthians 1.12*) A particular scandal was their conduct at the Eucharist. The common meal which should express the unity and peace of the community had become the focus of its divisions. The congregation split into factions, the richer members failing to care for the poorer; some having too much to eat, the others going without. (At this time the Eucharist was a proper meal.)

Paul heard about this from some of 'Chloe's people' who had travelled to Ephesus to see him. His response goes straight to the heart of the problem; division is a sign that the Spirit has not really taken root among them: 'Can you not see that while there is jealousy and strife among you, you are living on the purely human level of your lower nature?' (*1 Cor 3.3 NEB*) Paul reminds them that the wisdom of the world is folly in God's sight. They should ponder the text of scripture which says 'He traps the wise in their own cunning' (*1 Cor 3.19 NEB; cf. Job 5.13*) More importantly, he points out that their first priority must be to get their worship right. Worship lies at the heart of the Christian community, and if it is not right little else will be either. The tradition he passed on to them came, he says, 'from the Lord himself':

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of

me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you  
proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. *1 Cor 11.23b-26*

From this Paul draws an important conclusion:

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. *1 Cor 11. 27-29*

But above all they must take to heart the true nature of the Christian fellowship which Paul likens to the human body with its limbs and organs, which, many as they are, make up a unity. The Body of Christ is a picture of unity in diversity. Paul reminds them that they are Christ's body, and each of them is a limb or organ of it. Those with more spectacular gifts, *e.g.* the gift of tongues, must learn that this does not give them any pre-eminence over those with the humbler gifts. There will only be unity in the Body when each member works with the others in love. (*1 Cor 12.22-26*) Paul then, in a wonderful passage, describes the nature of Christian love.

Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men's sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.

*1 Cor 13. 4-7 NEB*

The Eucharist is the great celebration of this love revealed in Christ. It is a participation in that love; it is the receiving of the gifts of that love. And it is, first and foremost, a communal celebration for the building up of the Body, rather than an individual devotion for strengthening the believer. Paul will not let this corporate nature of the Eucharist be

lost sight of. He instructed the Corinthians 'to greet one another with the kiss of peace.' (*II Cor 13. 12 NEB*) Just as in family life the kiss is a sign of kinship and affection, so as part of the Eucharistic liturgy the kiss of peace is a tangible sign of the oneness of the community. Oscar Cullman has described the kiss of peace as signifying that a complete brotherhood has been established that the Lord may come to his people. Too often in the Church today the Peace is simply an exchange of greeting, and its deeper meaning as a sign of reconciliation is lost.

The sacramental signs of Christ's presence also point to the oneness of the community in its corporate celebration:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

*1 Cor 10.16,17*

The one cup and the one loaf symbolise the corporate nature of the celebration. 'The cup that is shared signifies the Christian's participation in the New Covenant; the bread broken and distributed, his membership of the one Body, the body which Jesus had declared to be his own.' (*Victor de Waal*) The eating of a common meal has always been recognised, and still is today, as the effective symbol of the unity of a family, and of peace between men who have been estranged. It is in the Eucharist that the Christian fellowship, to which the believer is admitted in baptism, is most fully expressed and made real.

### ***For Prayer***

Luke 22. 14-20

John 6.35-59

### *Points for Reflection*

1. Baptism and Eucharist are both rooted in the death of Christ: what does it mean 'to proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes'?
2. How do you feel about the sharing of the Peace as a sign of our oneness in the Eucharistic fellowship? How might the Peace be shared in a way which fully expresses the oneness of the community?
3. What are the divisions in your church which need healing?

## WEEK TWO

# Conversion of Life

*Read 1 Thessalonians 4. 1-8*

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

*Colossians 3.1-16*

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew,

circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

'God called us to holiness, not to impurity.' In all his letters Paul stresses the moral regeneration that being in Christ required. 'You my brothers, were called to be free,' he implored the Galatians. 'But do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather serve one another in love.' (*Galatians 5.13*) In the moral struggle, if nowhere else, Christians need no reminding that their liberation in Christ through baptism does not work like magic but requires continual effort and repentance. Like today, in Paul's time immorality was a problem that came out of a rebellion against a strict moral code. The corruption of paganism owed much to the Dionysian rites in which groups of people would resort to the woods and, disguised with animal skins, indulge in various forms of sexual licence secure in the belief that no one would know. But paganism was morally weak, being in essence essentially a religion of fertility, and sacred prostitution was an established phenomenon. The hill-top temple of Aphrodite at Corinth was said to have had one thousand priestess-prostitutes. Conversion to Christianity was not a simple matter of substituting one god for another, but a complete change of life. Because the change required was so great, three years' preparation for baptism became common.

Paul is always concerned to emphasise that faith in Christ involves a radical renewal of man's behaviour. Dying with Christ meant putting

to death 'whatever belongs to your earthly nature,' he wrote to the Colossians, 'sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and the ruthless greed which is nothing less than idolatry' (*Colossians* 3.5). This was symbolised in baptism by the candidate being stripped of all his clothes, 'taking off your old self and its deeds' (*Col* 3.9), and turning from west to east, from darkness to light. The new identity in baptism was not just the receiving of a new name but the renewal of the whole person: 'you have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.' (*Col* 3.10) Paul saw the whole person as a unity of body and spirit, a Hebrew conception that contradicted strands in Greek thought which emphasised their difference. The Hebrews did not view the body as a sort of temporary resting place for an immortal soul, rather they saw a person as a whole, an enfleshed spirit, or an ensouled body, and thus what happened to the body affected the spirit also. This explains Paul's predominant concern with sexual morality. It was not simply its social consequences which made it wrong, but its effect on a person's spiritual development. He spelled this out most clearly to the Corinthians:

The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your

Paul's concern with sexual morality is still relevant today in a world which cannot control the sexual energy which the permissive society of the sixties and seventies released. AIDS would quickly be brought under control if people practised chastity. But there is, maybe, an equal moral problem confronting Christians today, the ethics of business. 'The ruthless greed which is nothing less than idolatry' (Col 3.5), showed itself some years ago in the Guinness Affair, in the dealings of the late Robert Maxwell and many others since, and most recently in the banking crisis of 2008. It was the subject of a paper from the Catholic Truth Society, *The Root of All Evil?* Based on a series of interviews with those working in the financial world, it discloses a widespread belief that the world of money is simply not the province of the Church, despite a general recognition that the traditional sins of greed and theft played a part in business. The money market is pushed along by a logic of its own and the demands which ethics and morality make upon it seem idealistic and impractical, if not impossible. Part of the reason for this is the separation that has opened up over the centuries between ethics and religion, a separation which would have made no sense to Paul. Following the classical prophets like Amos, he insisted that religion and ethics are one; belief and conduct are the two sides of the same coin. Overcoming the separation is not just a matter of cleaning up business, it is also a matter of repentance – getting ourselves right with God. For Christians, whether in business or not, this ought to be a serious matter. Far from freeing us from the moral struggle, baptism intensifies it by giving it a new, spiritual dimension.

### ***For Prayer***

Amos 5. 6013; 8. 408

Luke 6 173

### *Points for Reflection*

1. What conflict do you feel between your faith and the way you have to live your life? What would be a first step towards resolving or lessening these conflicts?
2. Paul describes immorality as not just an offence against our neighbour but also an offence against the Holy Spirit, something which inhibits our spiritual growth. Can you see his point?
3. What do you think is the greatest moral challenge facing the church today?

# A Matter of Obedience

*Read: 1 Corinthians 4.6-21*

Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign – and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

Paul loved the Corinthian Church, but it caused him pain, not least because of the way it divided into factions, some following him, others Apollos. It is this division that prompted the above passage, and Paul writes to his converts as a father to his children, exhorting them: 'follow my example'. The Christian life is one of obedience, and obedience was to the fore among Paul's virtues. He had been a Pharisee, the sect who lived by the law in all its particulars. He was 'a Hebrew born and bred ... in legal rectitude, faultless' (*Philippians 3.6 NEB*), but all his former attainments he wrote off because of Christ. In Christ he found an obedience so fulfilling that everything he had before he counted as 'sheer loss'. 'I count it so much garbage\*', for the sake of gaining Christ and finding myself incorporate in him.' (*Phil 3.8,9 NEB*) It is this fullness in Christ that is Paul's prayer for all his converts, and which is the object of the life of obedience.

Obedience, though, is not an easy matter. Apart from our self-centredness which fights against it, it is not always easy to know what the Christian path is in a particular situation. A common way out of this dilemma is to place oneself under obedience to a more experienced Christian, someone more deeply rooted in the faith. In monastic communities the members make a vow of obedience, first to scripture, then to the Abbot (who, said St Benedict, as head of the community 'is believed to act in the place of Christ'), and also to one another. But the monastic calling is given only to the few, and does not necessarily make being obedient any easier! The question remains: What does obedience mean in practice for those who live in the world under no vows other than their baptismal vows. To his converts who had expressed their repentance and their faith in Christ, Paul offered himself as a guide for their new way of life: 'Agree together, my friends, to follow my

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\* Literally 'dung'

example,' he wrote to the Philippians. 'You have us for a model; watch those whose way of life conforms to it.' (*Phil 3.17 NEB*)

Paul must have been an excellent, if exacting guide, for so closely did Christ become his life that he received in his body the stigmata, the wounds of Christ (*Gal 6.17*). As their father-in-God he constantly encouraged his converts, prayed for them, praised their courage, and kept before them the vision of the heavenly destiny of the baptised: 'You have been through the purifying waters; you have been dedicated to God and justified through the name of the Lord Jesus and the Spirit of our God.' (*1 Cor 6.11 NEB*) He also gave much practical advice on what it meant to live as a Christian in the world. An entire section of the first Letter to the Corinthians (chapters 7-11), deals with the behaviour and attitudes required of those who had turned to Christ.

Despite all sorts of material progress, the spiritual state of the world is not so very different from what it was in Paul's day. The idols of paganism have survived, albeit with new names, immorality is as pervasive and as corrupting as ever, and the values of society are far removed from those of the Beatitudes. The common assumptions today that conventional attitudes are indeed Christian attitudes, and that baptism requires no great conversion of life, would have cut no ice with Paul. Our need for a guide in working out our obedience to Christ is every bit as great as the need of the first Christians. And a living guide is so much better than a rule-book, and closer too to the spirit of Christianity, which looks to a person and not to a code as its source of knowledge about God.

We need to return to the original idea of a God-parent. In the early Church this was someone from the community appointed to help the new Christian find his or her way in their new life. We should not expect such a God-parent simply to copy what Paul did and said. Sometimes his teaching is influenced by his expectation of an imminent second coming, and this made him tolerant of slavery and rather negative about marriage. (*1 Cor 7, esp. 29-31*) Sometimes also his

teaching reflects the understanding of his day about matters in which the Holy Spirit, true to Jesus' promise, has led the Church to a deeper appreciation of the truth. (Paul's teaching about the position of women is, perhaps, the most notable example of this.) Our need is for a wise guide who, like Paul, has made the journey before us, and who, like him, can help us use scripture creatively to illuminate the divine dimensions of our daily life. Where there is no word from the Lord such a God-parent should follow Paul's example and give his/her own ruling as one who has the mind of Christ.

Where is such a God-parent to be found? Traditionally, Christians have turned to religious communities, or to their parish priest; today many others also offer this ministry. In the last few years there has been a renewed interest in spiritual direction: men and women, lay and ordained have responded to God's call to reflect on their own spiritual journey and to help others to do the same. It is one very noticeable way in which the Church has responded to the needs of an age that has lost contact with the things of the Spirit. Most Dioceses now have a network of spiritual guides, but in contrast with the past the emphasis today is less on direction and more on discernment. A spiritual guide offers his or her ministry in a spirit of partnership with the one seeking guidance; together they listen to God seeking to grow in obedience to his Son. Growth in Christlikeness, as St Paul put it, is the purpose of the Christian life:

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to

win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ  
Jesus. *Phil 3.10-14*

***For Prayer***

Philippians 3.17-4.1 / Luke 6.46-49

***Points for Reflection***

1. How do you feel about the idea that obedience is central to the Christian life?
2. Who have been the models in your life? To whom do you look up as a Christian?
3. Have you ever considered finding a pod-parent in adulthood? Does the idea appeal to you?

## WEEK THREE

# Born From Above

*Read: 1 Corinthians 12.4-13*

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

There is no record of Paul ever visiting Delphi, but its ruins stand as a reminder of the spiritual battle he fought as he founded new churches. Delphi was the principal sanctuary of Apollo, and people came to it in their thousands to consult the oracle. For all the magnificence of its setting and the beauty of its buildings, Delphi was a place of pagan worship and it took its character from its pagan god. Despite his charm and sweet singing, Apollo was a violent and unforgiving god, as skilled with the bow as with the lyre. Like the rest of the Olympians he was immoral, loving women and men alike with equal promiscuous passion. Whatever the value of the oracles given in his name, they did

not come from God. The possession of oracular gifts is no guarantee of true divinity; other, darker powers can use the truth to their advantage. It is vital to look beyond such gifts to see to what they point. It is spirit which imparts character, and Paul continually reminded his converts from these cults that at their baptism they had received the Spirit of Christ, and he now was the source of their life. Writing to the Corinthians he said that when they were pagans they had been swept off after dumb, heathen gods, however they happened to be led. But as Christians, Christ was their only Lord, and, baptised into his Body, they received his gifts to enable them to lead the risen life.

The cults are still with us today. Some are easily recognised as evil: witchcraft, Satanism, the Moonies, Scientology; others present a more benign face: New Age, Theosophy, the School of Economic Science, Transcendental Meditation, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Spiritualism, and so on. But whatever their countenance, they all depart from the teaching of Jesus to a greater or lesser degree, and draw their inspiration from other sources. Christian baptismal promises lead in a different direction. *I turn to Christ*: turning to Christ means turning away from all other cults, religions and so called 'philosophical systems'; *I repent of my sins*: repenting of our sins includes refusing the temptation to dabble believing it cannot do much harm; *I renounce evil*: renouncing evil means rejecting their inspiration as false and corrupting. Baptism is about making an uncompromising choice for Christ, for as he said, no man can serve two masters (*Matt 6.24*). Baptism is about letting Christ become our life, as he did for Paul. God gives us the power to do this because baptism involves the gift of his Spirit: baptism is in Holy Spirit. It is, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, being born again, or born from above (*John 3.47*). The work of the Spirit is to build Christians into a temple not made with human hands, the Body of Christ, and to conform every member of that Body into the full likeness of the stature of Christ (*Ephesians 4.13*). The Spirit makes us Christlike.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

*Romans 8.14-16*

John Robinson likened the gift of the spirit to the healing power of Jesus: 'By participation in the Body of Christ the powers of the age to come are released into the bodies of those who make it up, just as they were in the healing miracles of the incarnate. Jesus.'

It is important to dwell on Paul's teaching about the objective reality of baptism, and to let it form us from within. Baptism imparts the free gift of God's own spirit. It simply happens; it is part and parcel of being baptised. God does this because he loves us, and not because of any special merit on our part. He gives us his spirit because he wants us to become Christlike: 'God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying 'Abba, Father!' (*Galatians 4.6*) So Paul is led to claim that all who have received the Spirit have the mind of Christ (*1 Cor 2.16*). This is a mighty claim and seems light years away from the reality experienced in the church. It poses the question: how is the reality of our experience to be brought closer to the reality of God's gift?

Paul would have been the first to stress that there is nothing magical about the gift of the Spirit. Some people, like him, might experience the truth about Jesus in one life-changing, blinding flash, but the process of actually converting one's life, the deeper conversion of attitudes, habits and values, is a much longer process, and seems to have been so even for Paul himself; after his conversion he spent several years preparing for his ministry during which time he came to understand the deeper truth of what it meant to be 'in Christ'. The Spirit is like a seed planted in the earth and it requires care and nurture to make it grow. The process of spiritual growth is a combination of grit and grace. Paul

constantly reminded his converts that growing in the faith required effort, especially in moral reform. His language to the Galatians uses powerful symbols: they must crucify their lower nature, putting to death all within them that fights against the Spirit; only then would they bring forth the harvest of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.' (*Gal 5.22*) But in this we are not alone. Conversion is enabled by grace, and, as Paul explained to the Romans, the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness.

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

*Romans 8.26b-28*

Learning to give the Spirit space to work in our lives is perhaps the essence of being born from above.

### ***For Prayer***

Romans 8. 1-16

John 14. 15-26

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. Today there are many different meanings of life on offer. How firm is your commitment to Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life?
2. 'God gives us his Spirit because he wants us to become Christlike.' How do you feel about becoming Christlike?

3. What is the balance of grit and grace in your endeavour to live the risen life?

# Sealed with the Spirit

*Read: Romans 12.1-18*

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

In baptism everyone has received a measure of the one Holy Spirit poured out for all of us to drink, but the gifts given to each person have differed. Among the gifts listed by Paul are wisdom, wise speech,

healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, ecstatic utterance, teaching, leadership, administration and generosity. While it is true that all such gifts are needed in the church, it is also true that some are more remarkable than the others, and this difference has always caused problems. The most notorious example in the New Testament is the Corinthian church, where maybe the greatest problem was that those with the more spectacular gifts considered themselves to be better Christians than the rest. Paul roundly condemns such attitudes, and against them emphasises the uniting work of the Spirit.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

*1 Cor 12.4-11*

Above all Paul bids them to put love first. Love in the brotherhood is the true sign of the presence of the Spirit and by love Paul meant self-giving.

One of the features of the church today is the charismatic renewal movement which has brought new life in the Spirit to thousands of Christians. But in its train have come the problems all too evident at Corinth: elitism, party spirit and jealousy, and this has caused some Christians to fight shy of it. One of the underlying causes of these problems is the mistaken belief that the gift of the Spirit is not really given in baptism, particularly if there are no accompanying dramatic

signs. Paul would have made short shrift of this. Baptism is in Holy Spirit, and charismatic renewal does not supply something missing in baptism. It is a new experience of the love and power of God, a renewal (as its name implies) of a gift already imparted. Moreover, as Paul warned the Corinthians, it is not dramatic signs but spiritual depth which is important (1 Cor 14.1-25).

Another underlying cause is the long and general neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, a neglect which Victor de Waal sees as related to the decline of a genuinely communal life in the church. In consequence, he says, 'in the popular mind the Spirit tends to be thought of on the analogy of a stimulant or a drug, to which Christians have private access, a nebulous commodity for their soul's metabolism to work on nourishing what is called the "spiritual life". Such an analogy is misleading because it depersonalises that gift of himself which is God's grace, and which Christians recognise above all in the coming of Jesus. Convinced as he was that the Spirit which vivified the Christian communities was the Spirit of Christ, Paul, while conceding the possibility of private gifts such as "speaking in tongues", put all his emphasis on those moral gifts that build up the community, that promote justice and peace and reconciliation, the qualities of Jesus himself.' Life in the Spirit cannot be separated from life in the Church as the union of the two was plainly expressed in the early baptismal confession: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church.' It is when the energy realised in charismatic renewal has been channelled into the Church, so that both individuals and community are renewed, that there has been realised in our own day something of that 'new humanity' for which the first Christians were known. The Taizé Community in France is one of several examples today of new life in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church. The renewal at Taizé has a quality of openness usually lacking in the more dramatic manifestations of renewal, and its emphasis on the Christian life as one of both struggle and contemplation reflects precisely the example of Jesus.

Renewal in the Spirit is not just for the few. Christians cannot really be heard to say that they do not desire to grow in the gifts of God, and it is this desire which is expressed and enabled in Confirmation. The modern rite is the final part of the original single ceremony. In the early church, after the candidate came up out of the water, he was rubbed with oil. Paul speaks of being 'christened', that is anointed by the Spirit. 'It is God who has set his seal upon us, and as a pledge of what is to come has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts.' (*II Cor 1. 21-22 NEB*) The candidate was then brought to the assembled church, and the Bishop received him by laying hands on his head. Confirmation is administered through these two outward signs of anointing and the laying on of hands, and its central prayer, which draws on a prophecy of Isaiah (*Isaiah 11.2-3*), is one for strengthening in the gifts of the Spirit:

Almighty and everliving God,  
you have given your servants new birth  
in baptism by water and the Spirit ...  
Let your Holy Spirit rest upon them:  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding;  
the Spirit of counsel and inward strength;  
the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness;  
and let their delight be in the fear of the Lord.

*From the Alternative Service Book 1980*

As the Spirit descended upon Jesus after his baptism in the Jordan as a sign of his calling, and to strengthen him for his ministry, so Christians are sealed with the same Spirit in Baptism, and confirmed in Confirmation. Anointing is the sacramental sign of being sealed with the Spirit. It is a sign that the new Christian has received his or her personal charism for his or her work as a member of the Body of Christ. Michael Marshall writes of the anointing of God's people to be a priestly people, that is, a people whose service is on behalf of others. Laying on of hands is also one of the biblical signs of imparting a

character, of being set apart for God's service. Confirmation is at one and the same time the completion of our baptism and the renewal of its commitment. It is a renewal that will need to be made many times, for learning to live in God's strength, learning to know him in our depths, is a lifetime's work. Anointing and laying on of hands with prayer is a ministry that can be repeated, and at important moments we should seek such a further chrismating (or Christening), making us bright with the Spirit who comes like the wind and the fire to lead us into all truth.

### *For Prayer*

1 Corinthians 14. 1-12

John 15.26-16.5

### *Points for Reflection*

1. How do you feel about renewal in the gifts of the Spirit? Is it something you desire?
2. What charism do you think you have received for your work as a member of the Body of Christ?
3. Think about the symbolism of wind and fire: what does it say about the Holy Spirit?

## WEEK FOUR

# From Disciple to Apostle

*Read: 1 Thessalonians 1*

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The Church at Thessalonika was very close to Paul. They had suffered for their faith like Paul himself and the congregations in Judea, as they steadfastly set out to live up to the Gospel in a pagan society. The cathedral in Thessalonika is dedicated in honour of St Demetrios, one of the descendants of those first Christians, and an example of the courage which inspired them. Demetrios was a Roman soldier under Galerius in the fourth century A.D. When it became known that he had

become a Christian he was arrested and held prisoner in the local baths, the site of the modern cathedral. Together with his friend Nestor, another convert, he was summarily executed. Showing the same courage, the first Christians at Thessalonika welcomed the Gospel, and news of their conversion spread far and wide. They, like the Philipians, brought joy to Paul because they remained faithful, to the point of self-sacrifice, and spread the faith.

We speak of the church as apostolic or 'sent'. Baptism into Christ means being sent into the world to share Christ's ministry, and that means joining with him in witness, service, and suffering. In the modern liturgy of baptism the new Christian is immediately commissioned as a witness to the resurrection. In the Anglican liturgy this is signified by giving a lighted candle with the words:

Receive this light. This is to show that you have passed from darkness to light. Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.

The whole movement of baptism is from one who follows to one who is sent: from disciple to apostle. Thus the newly-baptised takes his or her place in a long line of witnesses: Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Demetrios, Benedict, Francis, Catherine, Teresa ... and so on to the saints of our own time.

For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine', has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation – the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

*II Cor 4.6 NEB*

The community at Thessalonika took their apostleship seriously: they told their story. A sign that the Spirit is at work is the desire to tell other people about Jesus. Paul must have told his story hundreds of times. On some occasions he would speak about his conversion or what it meant to him to be an Apostle; on other occasions, *e.g.* before the Court of Areopagus in Athens, he would speak to the situation in which he

found himself, countering the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God (*Acts 17.16-31*). Paul spoke of hope and of love to a world that had lost sight of both, and he did so because he knew that God had touched his own life in love and in hope: 'For the love of Christ leaves us no choice, when once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all ...' (*II Cor 5.14 NEB*) Christianity speaks of the reconciliation of men and women to God through Christ. This was the message above all which Paul proclaimed, and which he prized as a high calling.

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors...

*2 Cor 5.19-20a*

Donald Coggan summed up the spirit of the times in which Paul lived: 'Multitudes of intelligent men and women, tired of the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, doubtful of the 'mysteries' of the new religions and cults, were seeking a deliverance which would save them from a sense of fatuity and hopelessness.' The world is in a similar state today, and Paul's message is still relevant. We have lived through times when science was believed to be able to provide all the answers, leading us into a paradise of ever-increasing material prosperity. Despite the failure of this hope, and despite the collapse of communism and its inexorable march into a brave new world, there is still a distressing tendency for us to treat the world as though it were ours and to rely on human wisdom for a solution to our problems. But even so, there is increasing evidence of a yearning for something deeper. In this situation God expects those baptised into Christ to follow Paul's example and say a word for him. He wants people to speak of what is true out of their own experience, for Christianity is a faith grounded in experience of the resurrection, and not in human philosophy. What is the experience which makes us claim the title 'Christian'? What can we say of God's reconciling love? God expects us to know where we stand, and to be able to stand up for him. All around us today, as around Paul

in Athens and Demetrios in Thessalonika, there are 'gods many and lords many;' 'yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all being comes towards whom we move; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came to be, and we through him.' (1 Cor 8.5-6 NEB)

### ***For Prayer***

Acts 26. 1-29

11 Corinthians 4. 1-6

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. How do you feel about being sent?
2. Recall a deep moment in your life, when God felt real or close: could you tell someone else about it?
3. What convinces you that the resurrection was real, that Jesus is alive?

# Salt to the World

*Read: 2 Corinthians 8.1-9*

Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: they gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

When Paul met the other Apostles in Jerusalem they asked him to keep their poor in mind. This he made it his business to do (*Galatians 2.10*), and the arrangements for this great collection are a constant theme in his letters. He exhorted and encouraged the new churches he founded to be generous in their support of their poorer brethren in Israel, and their response brought joy to his heart. Generosity towards others is a sign that the Spirit is at work; it is a mark of the risen life. Paul urged this virtue upon his converts for three reasons. Firstly, he commended generosity specifically towards those of the household of faith as an expression of their oneness together in the Body of Christ. To be a Christian meant incurring obligations not merely towards the local

community, but also towards their brothers and sisters in the faith in other lands. The aim of this mutual support was equality of provision:

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. *2 Cor 8.12-14*

Secondly, Paul commended generosity as an important ingredient in spiritual growth: 'Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.' (*2 Cor 9.6*) This connection between practical action and spiritual growth hardly needs explaining: Christians do need to put their money where their mouth is. The way we act in the world demonstrates how valid our prayer has been; and what we offer to God will be used and multiplied, thus swelling the harvest of our thanksgiving. So Paul concludes: 'Through our action such generosity will issue in thanksgiving to God, for as a piece of willing service this is not only a contribution towards the needs of God's people; more than that it overflows in a flood of thanksgiving to God.' (*1 Cor 9.11-12 NEB*) Finally, and most importantly, Paul urges generosity in obedience to the example of Christ: 'For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been; he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.' (*1 Cor 8.9 NEB*)

These three reasons are the mainspring of Christian stewardship today, which teaches that giving is part of our total response to God, and not merely a matter of putting up the money to pay the bills. Christian giving is not determined primarily by need but by what we have received – a point Paul made clearly to the Corinthians: 'Every Sunday each of you is to put aside a sum in proportion to his gains.' (*1 Cor 16.2 NEB*) This clear, scriptural authority for planned, proportional giving

ought not to be ignored. These practicalities have their part in the risen life.

Christians are, of course, not alone in making a spiritual virtue of generosity; it is part of our heritage from ancient Israel. At the annual celebration of the Covenant, the Israelites were reminded of the grace of God in saving them from slavery in a foreign land, and in turn were bidden to show kindness towards those among them who were less well off: the poor, the widows and orphans, and the strangers in their land. Simeon the Righteous, a famous pre-Christian Jewish teacher, taught that this 'imparting of kindness' was, along with the Law and worship, one of the foundations of a true and lasting civilisation. True to this heritage, Christians in very age have been concerned in practical ways to demonstrate God's special concern for the poor and vulnerable, and those on the edges of our society. Particularly, they have shown compassion to those whom others reject: prisoners, the homeless, prostitutes, drug abusers, the mentally ill, AIDS sufferers, and today, refugees. There are no untouchables in God's kingdom.

God's Covenant with Israel, however, went beyond imparting kindness to people and included imparting kindness to the land and to all creation. Many of the rules in the first five books of the Bible (the Law) are about caring for the earth, and today we are having to face the truth that caring for the earth goes beyond good husbandry to the very survival of the planet. Christians cannot avoid being concerned with the care of God's creation simply because we believe that it is *his* creation. So, just as in the past Christians pioneered education, healthcare, prison reform and civil rights, and were in the forefront of the battles against slavery, bad working conditions, the exploitation of children, and racial discrimination, so now we need to be pioneers in the ecological movement with all its difficult political, economic, industrial and personal issues. Standing up for God includes standing up for the world that he has made. To do this with integrity means

adopting a lifestyle that lessens consumption and shows generosity towards the earth.

Paul seems to have seen the whole of creation as one, and in his letter to the Romans he connects the destiny of the Planet, indeed the whole universe, with our own eternal destiny:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

*Romans 8. 19-23*

Paul's longing for the universe to be 'freed from the shackles of mortality,' and 'brought into a unity in Christ' (*Ephesians 1.10*), resonates with Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. Both look forward to getting our relationships right: with God, with our neighbours, and with the earth. The Kingdom has been described as God's creation healed. Healing is a hidden process which brings about an inner transformation. In the same way there is a hiddenness about much Christian action in the world. As we are transformed from within by the Spirit, so we are to work in the world, like leaven or salt, healing its relationships. The Kingdom is akin to the biblical idea of shalom, the peace which is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice and righteousness. It is in creating shalom that the virtue of generosity is most put to the test, and it is here, maybe, that the baptised will learn anew what it means to be salt to the world.

## *For Prayer*

Matthew 6.19-21; 25-34

James 2. 14-26

## *Points for Reflection*

1. Is your giving to the church proportional to your income (The Church of England, e.g., has adopted a target of 5 per cent of disposable income)?
2. How do you feel about being salt to the world, and taking sides in the campaign to save the planet?
3. In what ways do you show concern for and support the unloved and outcast in our society?

## WEEK FIVE

# Completing the Suffering of Christ

*Read: 2 Corinthians 4.6 -12*

God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

There are many places in the world which remain sacred to acts of heroism and self-sacrifice, and the battleground at Thermopylae is one of them. Standing there and reflecting on what took place in 480 B.C. when 300 Spartans died defending the city of Athens rather than betray their code of honour, it is impossible not to be moved. Christians especially ought to be moved because we place the highest value on a life offered for the sake of others. A Christian is baptised into the death of Christ because his death was the saving event. This was the great reality for Paul. He offers little by way of explanation about how we are saved (i.e. reconciled to God) by Jesus' death, because no explanation is adequate to the reality. Fundamentally the atonement is a mystery: something which can be experienced and explored, but not explained. It was Paul's experience that he had been saved through Jesus' death, and that experience is central to his Gospel:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. *I Cor 15.3*

Vicarious suffering has its own appeal. We know, like the poets who commemorated those who died at Thermopylae, that it does something for us, and it is this universal experience which gives it its value. Part of that universal experience is that vicarious suffering brings about healing and reconciliation; it enables the making of peace. If this is true of the death of the sons of men, how much more is it true of the death of the Son of Man? As Paul confidently affirmed, 'through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross,' (*Colossians 1.20 NEB*)

But Paul goes further. Writing to the Colossians he described his own suffering for those he had converted as a continuation of the suffering of Christ, 'helping to complete in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ's afflictions still to be endured.' (*Col 1.24 NEB*) That this was true not just for Paul alone but for all sent out as apostles in Christ's name, he made clear to the Corinthians: 'wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives.' (*11 Cor 4.10 NEB*) At first sight this may seem an odd thing to say, but reflecting on it we may appreciate its sense. Baptism makes us one with Christ, a part of his Body, and baptism is into his death. The salvation wrought by that death ever remains with us; we carry it around in our bodies. And because the death of Christ is a transforming event, being the fount of new life, we are being conformed by it in our own bodies to the likeness of Christ, and this brings new life and hope to those around us.

Many Christians sit light to all this, finding the Cross a problem for faith. Alas, the centrality of the Cross, and its celebration on Good Friday, are all too often supplanted by the joyful festivals of Easter and Pentecost. It is, though, the Cross which gives us the most profound insight into the nature of God, fulfilling the words of the prophets that

God would save his people by bearing himself their burden of sin and evil. Jesus was in flesh and blood the Suffering Servant of Isaiah: 'he was pierced for our transgressions, tortured for our iniquities; the chastisement he bore is health for us and by his scourging we are healed.' (*Isaiah 53.5*) Paul insists that the fact of Christ on his Cross must have its full weight:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. *1 Cor 1.18, 21-24*

Entering more fully into the life of the baptised means taking the Cross and its celebration on Good Friday seriously. The Resurrection is the sign that our faith in the atonement wrought through the Cross is not misplaced. Easter Day is the glorious confirmation of all that God did through Christ on Good Friday. And those who enter more fully into the life of the baptised can expect to help to complete in their poor human flesh the full tale of Christ's sufferings still to be endured. Christians often feel that they have drawn the short straw, wonder why the good seem so often to die young or unrecognised, and experience the path of righteousness as a hard and narrow way. The Cross enables us to give a positive value to such experience. Through our baptism we are joined to Christ in his suffering, and it is our vocation also to suffer for the world. We have seen this notably in the martyrs of our own times: Martin Luther King, Janani Luwum, Oscar Romero, and others. The Christian experience of suffering and self-sacrifice is one with those who in every age have given their lives in the cause of right, but joined

through baptism to the sacrifice of Christ, it is given a divine meaning and raised to the level of eternal significance.

### ***For Prayer***

Colossians 1.20 -27

Mark 15. 22-39

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. Christianity places a positive value on vicarious suffering. Is that your experience too?
2. How do you feel about helping to complete the sufferings of Christ? Does this help in some way to give meaning to your life?
3. What has your observance of Good Friday involved? Is there room for improvement?

# With Christ in God

*Read: Romans 8.29-39*

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The monastery at Osias Lukas is chiefly known for its beautiful mosaics, but it also stands as a memorial to a local man called Luke who was revered for the sanctity of his life and for his works of mercy. The Greek Church remembers Blessed Luke among its saints. Paul frequently described those to whom he wrote as saints; those who, through Christ’s work and God’s calling, participate in the divine holiness. The community of the baptised is a holy people. Holiness is

something which God gives and which we cannot attain on our own, for example by re-doubling our efforts at righteousness or good works. Holiness is fundamentally about being set apart for God's service in the world, and baptism is our consecration for this service. Holiness marks the Church out in the world, but not of the world, and it points to a destiny for men and women beyond this world in a life lived in communion with God. The life of the baptised is lived out in a tension between this life and the life to come, and the hope which makes this tension creative is the hope of heaven. 'If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all men are most to be pitied.' (1 Cor 1.29) Paul clearly expected the Christian life to end in union with Christ:

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. *Philippians 3.20, 21*

The hope of the life to come is the logical conclusion of the movement in baptism from life, through death to new life. Because of our baptism, death for us has lost its sting, and Paul's hope for himself is the hope for all the baptised: 'you died; and now your life lies hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is manifested, then you too will be manifested with him in glory.' (*Colossians 3.3-4*) Among those who have died are Christians like Blessed Luke who remind us of our true life hidden with Christ in God. They remind us that we are set apart as a holy people.

'How are the dead raised?' asked the Corinthians. 'A senseless question!' Paul replied; but nevertheless he gave an answer using the analogy of seeds and plants.

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has

determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.

*1 Cor 15.36-38*

The essence of Paul's understanding of resurrection is that it is the resurrection of the whole person, but 'clothed' in a new way, that is without the limitations of time and substance that we experience on earth. Our whole being is re-clothed and its full potential brought out, precisely as the plant is full expression of the potential contained in the seed, and is re-clothed accordingly. As we have noted already, the idea of an immortal soul which survives death separated from the body was quite alien to Hebrew thought, and has no part in Paul's theology. It is a Greek idea which came into Christianity later through the use of Platonist philosophy to develop Christian doctrines. Hebrew thinking saw body and spirit a unity; an unfleshed soul was not a possibility for Paul. Modern Christian thinking has returned to its Pauline origins and affirms a belief in the resurrection of the whole person. All that we have in us to become, including the potential that has not been realised, all that God made us to be, will be brought to its fullness in that closeness to God which we call heaven. This is the consummation of the life hidden with Christ in God, and about this Paul is quite confident:

If on your lips is the confession, 'Jesus is Lord', and in your heart the faith that God raised him from the dead, then you will find salvation.

*Romans 10.9 NEB*

It is not really possible to say how this consummation will occur. Paul believed in a sudden transformation at the last trumpet call, but his belief was part and parcel of his belief in an imminent second coming. Today the long delay in that second coming makes it difficult to assent to Paul's view. Times and methods are, in any event, secondary to the hope itself. However it shall come about, we believe, with Blessed Luke and all the saints, that we shall be raised with Christ, and that in his resurrection God has given us a sign that the death of this body does not mean separation from him, but a movement into this closer

presence. 'God be praised, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' (1 Cor 15.17)

Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labour cannot be lost. 1 Cor 15.58 NEB

### ***For Prayer***

John 20. 19-29

Ephesians 1. 3-14

### ***Points for Reflection***

1. What are the marks of saintliness? How do you feel about being called a saint?
2. Do you find Paul's analogy of seeds and plants as a picture of resurrection helpful?
3. 'You received the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; and that Spirit is the pledge that we shall enter upon our heritage, when God has redeemed what is his own, to his praise and glory.' (Eph 1.13-14)

# Postscript

This exploration of the meaning of our baptism has had many facets, but at the centre of them all is the understanding that Christianity is about a change of values governing our life in the world. We began by seeing how this change is symbolised in baptism: the dying and rising with Christ, and the passing from darkness to light, and we reflected on how baptism brings the believer into so close a relationship to Christ that Paul can only describe it as being 'in Christ'. The baptised form a new community, a holy people, called by God to live in obedience to Christ, characterised by high moral standards, enlivened by the gifts of the Spirit, sent into the world to share Christ's ministry of witness, service and suffering, and whose eternal destiny is in heaven.

'You have been through the purifying waters,' Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 'you have been dedicated to God and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and the Spirit of our God'. (*1 Cor 6.11*) What was true for them is also true for us, and at Easter when we renew our baptismal promises in token of our desire to walk in the light and obedience of Christ, let us do so in confidence and with the prayer that what God began in us at our baptism he may bring to completion in Christ.

May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy in every part, and keep you sound in spirit, soul, and body, without fault when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. He who calls you is to be trusted; he will do it.

*1 Thess 5.23-24 NEB*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

## **An Invitation**

The 'Points for Reflection' at the end of each meditation are to prompt reflections on the meaning of our own baptism and to suggest ways in which our spiritual life might be helped to grow. As a conclusion to this process make a list of the three or four most important things that will help you live the risen life more fully. Ask God to guide you as you do this, and listen to the voice within. On Good Friday place the items on your list before the Cross and ask Jesus to give you strength and grace to carry them out.

## **Books Referred to**

Victor de Waal, *What Is The Church* (SCM Press, 1969)

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