

# Let Him Who Is Thirsty Come

*Pilgrimage Meditations*  
*Israel 1989*

Let him who is thirsty come; let whoever  
desires take the water of life without price.

*The Revelation of John 22.17*

Peter Sills

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#### *Acknowledgements*

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#### *Cover*

The Mount of Olives

*Author's image*

## *Preface*

The Pilgrimage to the Holy Land for which these meditations were composed took place from 1 – 12 May 1989. We were a party of thirty-three, mostly from the six churches in Barnes. Apart from a few changes to the wording, the meditations are as I gave them on the pilgrimage. I tried to make them a connected series, although primarily they relate to the main events of each day. Those given in Jerusalem begin with the idea of pilgrimage and our expectations of the journey we were making together, and move to reflect on Jesus' life and death and how God meets us in him. The Galilee meditations reflect on the Church which is viewed as a holy people, called, forgiven and sent, and end with some thoughts on baptism, the way into the Church's fellowship. I have added my postscript. Unlike the meditations it was given extempore and I have tried to re-construct from my notes what I remember saying!

Inevitably, the written word read some time later and away from the atmosphere of the Holy Land, will lack the freshness and immediacy of the spoken word. I hope, nevertheless, that this booklet will help those who came as pilgrims in the process of drawing the on the experience of those twelve days and in keeping it alive, and that it will help others in their reflection on their own Christian journey.

Peter Sills  
June 1989

## 1. On the Road to Jerusalem

### **DRAWING NEAR**

*And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*PSALM 122.2*

JERUSALEM must be one of the most ancient and most frequented places of pilgrimage. Long before Christians began to come here in the centuries following Jesus' death, the Israelites came here year after year for many, many centuries beforehand. As they came toiling up the mountain roads they sang songs, the so-called Psalms of Ascent. Psalm 122 is one of them.

I rejoiced when they said to me,  
'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'

Now we stand within your gates, O Jerusalem:

Jerusalem that is built to be a city

where people come together in unity ...

*Psalms 122.1-3*

Every pilgrim, like each one of us, has his or her own reasons for coming. They might have come to fulfill a promise, to perform a religious duty, or simply to seek and hopefully to find. In every age people seek out the holy, to make some contact with the places where God has come close, looking for the answer to their heart's desire. Truth and peace, meaning and purpose in life, are an eternal quest, present in all people and in every age.

As we draw close to the Holy City it is right to remember that we are just a few more in an endless pilgrimage of millions, and that we make our pilgrimage in the company of those others, the saints who have gone ahead, and that we are supported by their prayers. Jesus also is with us. He said he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, but he also said he is the Way. He is with us not only in spirit but also in those with whom we travel. We are part of the way for one another. The journey and our travelling companions are just as important for our pilgrimage as the places we are going to visit. So too the people

who live here. Each one, like us, is loaded with history, and has a story to tell. Be open to them; be open to the new and the unexpected; don't kill it with the known and hoped for. And as we travel be open also to the living church whose roots in this land go back to the very beginning – to the Upper Room. Before there were any Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist or Orthodox Christians, there were Christians here who were known simply as followers of The Way.

But this land is not, and never has been a place in which being a Christian is something that you can take for granted. 'Christian' is not a desirable description here; it is a label that involves risks to those who wear it. Most of the small minority of Christians here are Orthodox by tradition and Arab by race, and because of the political situation their young are rapidly leaving and their numbers are declining. There are many, many more Muslims than Christians in this Holy Land, and we have to be aware that the barbarous crusaders (who like us came from north-west Europe) are still a nightmare in the psyche of the Muslims who are the majority of the Arabs. Both Christians and Muslims, however, are now far outnumbered by the Jews who have come here in increasing numbers this century, and for whom this is now their national homeland. We have to remember that the barbarous Nazis (who like us came from north-west Europe) are still a nightmare in the psyche of the Jewish majority. For all three communities, Jews, Muslims and Christians, this is the Holy Land, and all three see their origin in the call, faith, courage and obedience of Abraham. As so often happens, there is now conflict and strife between the different branches of the one family.

It is easy for us to look at the present conflict between Arab and Jew and echo the remark of an American Senator: 'Why can't they settle their differences like Christian gentlemen?' It is maybe not surprising that both Jews and Arabs find us wanting. The Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet and his birth as miraculous. Many call him 'the Lord', and he is mentioned with great respect in the Koran. Many Jews look on his teaching as marking a peak in the moral development of mankind. But both the actions and attitudes of Christian gentlemen stand in stark

contrast with Jesus' life and teaching. This land, which has been governed by Christians too, most recently British Christians, bears also the scars of our brutality. So in our pilgrimage over these twelve days we shall walk with repentance as well as with joy along the way that Jesus followed trying to draw near in heart and mind to him in whom, as we believe, God took our flesh, and who said of himself, 'Before Abraham was, I am.'

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

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## 2. On the Temple Steps

### **STEPS AND STONES**

*In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*

ACTS 3.6

IT IS NOT everywhere in this city, nor in this Holy Land, that you can be sure where you are standing. But here you can be sure. These steps are original. They go back to the time of Herod the Great and led up to the Temple which he built – the Temple which Jesus knew. Up these steps countless Jews walked on their way to worship and among them would have been Jesus, Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, Herod and Caiaphas. And near here on steps like these at the Beautiful Gate a cripple was cured by Peter, the first miracle performed after the resurrection in Jesus' name. Our contact with the sacred stones won't always be so close. This city, like all ancient cities, has been destroyed and rebuilt many times, and more often than not it is impossible to say where a particular event took place. At best the general area might be known, as with the Via Dolorosa, but sometimes not even that much. There are

three or maybe four places, for example, which claim to be the Biblical Emmaus.

The desire to touch the holy and to be touched by it goes deep, so much so that we tend to want to place something exactly: these are the steps, this is the cross; there is the tomb. The danger is that the place or relic becomes a substitute for the event itself, and both are emptied of meaning, and lose their power to speak. People would rather worship a fragment of the true cross, endowing it with almost magical powers, than ponder the meaning of the crucifixion – the event that the cross signifies – and let that change their hearts and minds.

It may be just as well that most of the sacred history lies buried. It makes us use our imagination as well as our senses to bring the sacred past into our experience and so become the sacred present. It is just that sort of interior journey that lies at the heart of a pilgrimage.

Here a man was cured with the words, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' And he went on his way rejoicing and praising God. We all want to hear the words of grace in our hearts and be sent on our way rejoicing. We are more likely to find our desire fulfilled if we can be open to what God wants to do and say, and let go of what we want to find and hear. Our expectations have to become part of the rubble and we have to learn to walk over them. If we can let go I expect we shall find God gives us more than we dare ask or desire. The crippled man, after all, asked for silver and gold, but what he received was wholeness.

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### 3. Bethlehem

## THE COMING

*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.*

JOHN 1.14 RSV

ON ONE occasion when Jesus spoke to the crowds about John the Baptist he asked them what they had come out to see: 'A man dressed in silks and satins?' 'Surely', he said, 'you must look in palaces for grand clothes and luxury.' Our expectations always go before us, and often they lead us astray. When the Wise Men set out to seek the child born to be king of the Jews they went first to a palace, Herod's palace in Jerusalem. Maybe we no longer expect God to look like an oriental potentate, but we do use rather magnificent words to describe him: almighty, ineffable, sovereign Lord. He is these things, of course, but when he came to show us what he was like, the picture was rather different.

The Wise Men ended up in a cave like those you can see in the Shepherd's Fields (the area above Bethlehem). We are misled by the word 'inn'. There were no inns as we know them in those days. In the towns guests were accommodated in ordinary houses, built over caves where the animals slept. When Joseph and Mary came here there was no room in the house, so the holy family had to use the cave. The crypt in the Church of the Nativity, as we shall see, underneath the hangings and oriental decoration, is just such a cave. The Son of God was born in a cave. He laid aside the garments of his glory – there were no silks and satins at his birth – and was content to be laid in a manger. 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.' The Wise Men found a baby, small and vulnerable, drawing a response out of love, not compelling obedience through fear.

This picture of God still confounds our expectations. Many people feel happier with a God of Wrath hurling down thunderbolts. Others want God to be a magician fixing things, pulling strings, getting them out of a mess. And others want God to be guru telling them exactly



what to do and relieving them of all effort and responsibility. A baby does none of these things, and neither does Jesus. Instead he stands like a guest knocking at the door inviting us to ask him in. His invitation is really a way of asking us to be clear about what we worship. Is it to be him or something else? What is it that is most important in our lives? What gives us meaning and purpose? What shall we become?

The Wise Men came from afar bearing gifts, and that seems to me to be a lovely picture of worship. Worship is a process of movement and offering; drawing close bearing gifts – and being sent home another way. Worship enables the worshipper to grow into what God made us to become. Pilgrimage is one way we can respond to Jesus' invitation, one way in which we can draw close to him bearing our most precious gift: ourselves.

Two of the people who walked up the Temple steps were Mary and Joseph. They took the baby born in a manger to make the offering prescribed by the law for his birth. The Temple was the place of their worship, the place where God was encountered. Christians believe that God is not encountered in a place but in a person. Jesus is our encounter with God; he is the place of our worship; in him is our becoming.



#### 4. Abu Ghost

### THE CONFLICT

*They recognised him at the breaking of bread.*

*LUKE 24.35*

THE INVITATION that Jesus extends to us to walk with him is not as straightforward as it may seem. Where do we find him? What path does he travel?

Cleopas and his companion experienced this problem. Jesus was beside them but they did not recognise him. Their difficulty seems to have been bound up with their understanding of what he really was about: as they said to him, they had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel. Their hope seems to have been that the Messiah would free their land from oppression; that he would throw off the Roman yoke and overcome the history of domination and exile. David had made them top nation; great David's greater son would restore that lost status – and do so for ever.

The prophets are full of this theme of restoration; we heard two examples today. At the Shrine of the Book there is the scroll of Isaiah with the words:

Comfort, comfort my people;  
– it is the voice of your God;  
speak tenderly to Jerusalem and tell her this,  
that she has fulfilled her term of bondage,  
that her penalty is paid ...

*Isa 40.1, 2*

And from the Book of Ezekiel:

I will take you out of the nations and gather you from every land and bring you to your own soil. I will sprinkle clean water over you, and you shall be cleansed from all that defiles you... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; ...you shall become my people, and I will become your God. I will call to the corn and make it plentiful.

*Ezekiel 36.24-29*

But this is not all that the prophets say. They speak also of the suffering servant, the one who makes restoration possible by this own self-sacrifice; the one who makes peace by bearing the sins of others. The words of Isaiah are well known:

But 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*

This liberation through suffering was not seen by the prophets as just for Israel, but for all nations. God came among us to overcome division and strife, to make all things new by reconciling the world to himself, and he did this by bearing the burden of the world's pain and evil.

Making peace through this kind of self-giving is part of the ordinary experience of most people. When we are divided against one another – individuals, groups, nations – reconciliation requires a peace-maker. We actually appoint people specially to undertake this work, e.g. diplomats, industrial conciliators, and marriage counsellors. And this peace-making is a costly process because the peace-maker inevitable gives something of him- or herself in building the bridge of reconciliation. Peace-making involves self-sacrifice, putting yourself on the line, accepting that you will be hurt as you bear the anger, the hurt, the lack of trust.

Jesus was the suffering servant, the peace-maker who build the bridge of reconciliation between God and his creation that no-one else could build. 'Through him', wrote St Paul, 'God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross.' (Colossians 1.20) At Emmaus, it was when Jesus broke the bread – when he performed the sign of his self-giving – that he was recognised. And it is among those who are broken in the same way that he is to be found today: those who give themselves to make peace: between brothers, families, races, and nations; and he is also to be found among those who are broken because they bear the burden of

the world's evil: its hatred, greed, fear, meanness and brutality. Christ is found amongst the peace-makers, the refugees, the starving, the oppressed, the outcast and the marginalised. Martin Luther King said that he believed that all unmerited suffering to be redemptive. I am reminded of his words at Yad Vashem and by the refugee camps in this land, and I will try to remember them when I see on the news the anguished faces of the world's hungry, the peasants of Latin America or the war-torn victims of the battles in Beirut.

Wherever people work for peace, true peace which faces and absorbs conflict rather than merely papers it over, there Jesus is to be found. This morning a few of us visited Neve Shalom, the Oasis of Peace. It is a community of Arabs and Jews trying to work together so show this land that it is possible for the two peoples to live together. They are not Christians, but who would deny that they do the work of Christ?

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5. Avdat – *Ascension Day*

## **STREAMS IN THE DRY SOUTH**

*Full authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to me.*

*MATTHEW 28.18*

IT SEEMS amazing that anyone should want to live in this desert, let alone so many that this hill-top became an important city. But not only did people want to live here, the desert became an important place in the religion of both Jews and Christians.

The desert experiences in an extreme form the precariousness of life which is found throughout this land. In the alternation of good fortune and bad, rain and drought, scarcity and plenty, a religion of hope was

born. For the Jews it expressed itself in an intense longing for God, an intense longing for his deliverance:

Turn once again our fortune, Lord,  
as streams return in the dry south.

*Psalms 126.4*

Not so far from here, in Sinai, around 300 AD, St Anthony withdrew into the desert to seek God in his heart that from him might flow the streams of living water. Others followed him, and the Desert Fathers, as they have come to be known, became much sought after as spiritual guides, and they are regarded as forerunners of the monastic life.

Going apart to be alone with God is an important aspect of Christian discipleship, and it is how Jesus began his ministry. After his baptism he withdrew into the Judean desert, a stony wilderness like this one, and there, we are told, he was tempted. Solitude is not easy; the desert is the place of testing. Here there is nowhere to hide and we have no choice but to face our true selves. This was the experience of Anthony and his companions; they faced the demons within in solitary spiritual warfare. Jesus, too, faced the demons in the desert. He was tempted, says Henri Nouwen, with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant: 'turn these stones into bread'; to be spectacular: 'throw yourself down'; and to be powerful: 'I will give you all these kingdoms'. It was a time of inner conflict through which he came to understand more clearly God's will for him as the Messiah. Against the demons he affirmed God, and God alone, as the source of his authority: 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' Because Jesus faced these basic questions in his own heart he found the strength, God's strength, to live his life as the Messiah, the anointed one. In his life, death and resurrection he fulfilled the hope that God would visit his people, as streams return in the dry south, and therefore he is now highly exalted. That we celebrate on this Ascension Day.

However we understand the Ascension, its true significance lies in what it says about Jesus. The one who was obedient even unto death is the one who is highly exalted, that at his name every knee should bow. To him full authority in heaven and on earth has been given. He has

conquered the forces of darkness and he reigns as Lord of all the world. This is profoundly hopeful for those who put their trust in him. Inner conflict is not something experienced just by Jesus, or the great saints like Anthony. Everyone faces basic questions in their life and knows the anguish of inner turmoil: trying to find meaning in life when it seems denied by suffering, betrayal or depression; the struggle to find inner peace in the midst of bereavement, or when dark thoughts come unbidden into the mind; trying to work out what to do for the best when faced with conflicting moral choices; or just trying to hang on to faith in the midst of doubt and despair. However it comes, this sort of testing is very uncomfortable, and the temptation is to run away. But the wisdom of the desert is that the only way forward is to stay and face the conflict. For God is in the conflict even though we feel more his absence than his presence. On the cross Jesus cried out in deep anguish of spirit: 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' If we are trying to find God – trying to find meaning amidst the darkness – we can't ignore the cross. The cross is the path to victory.

Going apart to be with God in solitude is not about re-charging our batteries, or getting a bit of peace and quiet; it is first and about giving ourselves space to hear God's word, the still small voice that came to Elijah alone on Mount Horeb. That word is drowned by the clamour of voices in the world offering so many different meanings of life that none in fact can be heard. Going apart is about trusting that God has overcome the world, that his light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never prevail against it. Going apart is about transforming our inner struggle, like the desert Fathers did, into an intense longing for God, re-focussing our concern away from ourselves and on to him.

My soul thirsts for you  
My flesh longs for you,  
As a dry and thirsty land  
Where no water is.

*Psalms 63.2*

The desert is the place of awakening, of conversion, of true encounter with God. Here where meaning seems denied, meaning actually breaks forth. If we offer Christ our anguish and our emptiness he will fill us

and heal us and, as St Paul understood, in union with Christ we shall be raised up and enthroned with him in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 2.6)

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## 6. The Upper Room

### **REMEMBERING**

*Do this in remembrance of me.*

*1 COR 11.25 RSV*

SO FAR in leading our thoughts I have talked about our own hopes and expectations on this pilgrimage, and about how God meets those hopes and expectations in Jesus Christ. The journey now moves closer to him as we remember the last two days of his life.

We begin here at the Upper Room, the place of the Last Supper; we pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in his trial, betrayal and condemnation at the House of Caiaphas; and we walk with him along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. For Jesus these events followed one another without interruption. There was no rest or refreshment save for the meal, the Last Supper, which he shared with his disciples in this room. And he left that meal to us as a memorial of the whole series of events which constitute his Passion. In leaving it to us he commanded us to do what he had done: blessing and breaking the bread, blessing the wine, and sharing them both with his disciples in remembrance of him.

Doing things in remembrance of a person or an event is an important part of life. Memory makes us what we are. Without memories we should be lost, a series of incidents without connection, meaning or purpose. Memory connects our past and our present and gives us our future; it gives us an identity and a place in the world. When we

remember something, when we really recall it in our minds, we make it present again; we make it live again, potent in our lives for good or evil. We lack a word to describe this in English, 'remember' is too weak, 're-present' conveys more the idea: 'Do this for the re-presenting of me.' So St Paul said of the Eucharist, 'every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.' (1 Cor. 11.2)

Remembrance is at the heart of Christianity. When Jesus sat down to eat the Passover meal with his disciples he was clearly aware of the imminence of his death because he made that meal into a symbol of its significance. A shared meal is symbolic in itself. It is a sign of unity and brotherhood, of reconciliation and peace. The sharing of a loaf is a sign of sharing the same blessing; the sharing of the one cup is a sign of sharing the same fate. Jesus' death is to be proclaimed and made present through the sharing of the one loaf and the one cup because his death was the means by which God reconciled the whole universe to himself. Jesus' disciples were to be a united community who shared in both his blessing and his fate, and in that they would find their peace. We who are part of that community which gathers round his table, a community which now spans the world and runs down the centuries, remain in communion with Jesus by eating and drinking the tokens of his Passion: the bread, his body broken and distributed; the wine, his blood poured out in sacrifice. We don't simply remember why he died, we keep alive the power of his death and through it we receive for ourselves his last and greatest gift, the forgiveness of sins.

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## 7. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre

### THE OVERCOMING

*He has been raised ... and is going on before you into Galilee.*

MARK 16.6, 7

PEOPLE venerate this building because it marks the two most important places for Christians: Calvary and the Empty Tomb, the place of Jesus' death and the place where the resurrection was revealed. It is right that the one building should contain them both, because Jesus' death and resurrection are one continuous movement. We misunderstand God and his work if we try to separate them and look on Easter Day as somehow cancelling out Good Friday, putting right something that had gone wrong.

There is a deep mystery about the resurrection as an event. How it was brought about is something we cannot know; but the fact that it is unknowable does not mean that it is totally unapproachable. It is clear that it was not the simple resuscitation of a corpse. That is what we are told happened to Lazarus. He was restored to a normal human life and presumably died again a normal human death. Jesus, by contrast, was raised to a new order of existence entirely, beyond the limitations of time and space. Like God he is present to all people at all times simultaneously, but at the same time this new existence is recognizably linked with the body and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son. St Paul uses the analogy of seeds and plants to help us approach the mystery. Both seed and plant are forms of the same substance: in the plant we see the fullness of all that was contained in the seed; yet the seed had to die before the plant could come into being. The plant is both continuous with and distinct from the seed (1 Cor 15.35ff). St John said much the same: 'a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.' (John 12.24)

The resurrection, says Richard Harries, is God's unqualified seal of approval on all that Jesus was and stood for. The authority with which

he taught, his claim to forgive sins, his special care for the lost and outcast, his relationship of a son to the Father – all this is revealed to be grounded in God himself. The resurrection does not make these things true: they were always true. The resurrection is the clearest demonstration of their truth. The resurrection is the most profound statement of what God is like. The eternal movement is from life, through death to new life. We know this in our everyday experience of growth and maturity. Life is a series of little deaths which lead us into a fuller, more complete life. Growing up means accepting the loss of the securities of childhood, the certainties of adolescence, the ambitions of later years. Accepting this with grace is part of growing into what God made us to become. It is one of the deepest Christian insights that this personal movement is one with God's eternal movement. If we learn to trust, it is our intimate proof that God's purposes of love cannot fail.

Jesus' resurrection is the sign in time that God's eternal victory over sin and death has been won. He has completely vanquished the forces of evil and his purpose must succeed in the end in respect of every soul. Our destiny is eternal life with God: Jesus has shown the way; he is the Way: 'He has been raised and has gone on before you.'

Alleluia! Christ is risen.  
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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## 8. St George's Cathedral

### **A HOLY PEOPLE**

*You shall be holy, for I am holy.*

1 PETER 1.16

PEOPLE HAVE LIVED at Ein Gedi since before 3000 BC. Along the shore of the Dead Sea and all over this land communities have come and gone. Each had its own way of life, its beliefs and traditions, which were passed down through the generations. We saw the remains of two of them at Masada and Qumran. Two communities very much concerned to preserve the truth; so much so that at Masada they chose to die rather than betray what they held to be sacred.

Communities are important; they keep alive the memories that make us what we are. Without them we should have no sense of what it means to be British, Jewish, Muslim or Christian. It is through a dialogue with our community that we establish our identity and discover who we are. The Jews who perished at Masada were part of a nation who knew themselves to be God's chosen people, and at their best they understood this calling not as a privilege, but as a responsibility. It was through the Holy Nation that God made his will and purpose known. They were his instruments and he bound himself to them through a Covenant: He was their God, they were his People. Jesus began his ministry by calling the twelve to be the nucleus of the new Israel, a new People, bound to God through a new Covenant, who would keep the faith alive and proclaim the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. To that community Jesus promised great things: 'In truth, in very truth I tell you, he who has faith in me will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still...' (John 14.12) The People are what they are because God is what he is: 'You shall be holy for I am holy.'

The faith and the community go hand in hand; you cannot by-pass the Church. 'To be a Christian,' said Michael Ramsey, 'does not mean being "on the side" of Christianity, like one who supports a movement or approves of a cause. It means submission of the self to Christ, and

the sharing in the life of his family.' Sharing in the life of that family is seen most clearly in the celebration of the Eucharist, the family meal in which Christ is made known. This, too, is not something which Christians can by-pass: 'In very truth I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you can have no life in you.' (John 6.53) '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 declared to be his own.' (Victor de Waal) That body was given for all people, not just for Jesus' followers, and so the church comes together not just to celebrate and to keep the memory alive; it comes together in order to be sent. Jesus described it as salt for the earth and as light for the world. At its best the Church is a sign to the world of how men and women are meant to live: in unity with God and with one another. In Christ, St Paul wrote to the Galatians, 'there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one in him.' (Gal 3.28) And St Augustine saw the whole life of the Church as Eucharistic:

'You are the Body of Christ, that is to say in you and through you the method and work of the incarnation must go forward. You are meant to incarnate in your lives the throne of your adoration. You are to be taken, consecrated, broken and distributed that you may be the means of grace and the vehicles of the eternal charity.'

That is what it means to be a holy people. That is what it means when we are dismissed to go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

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## 9. The Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth

### **CALLED BY GOD**

*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*

LUKE 1.38 RSV

THIS AMAZING CHURCH stands as a memorial to an event which was a turning point in the history of God's dealings with his people. The central actor in that event, apart from God, was Mary, a young girl engaged to be married and looking forward to her wedding day. Somewhat surprisingly, Mary has become, in later centuries, the centre of controversy. It's what other people say about her that has caused the problems, so much so that in some Christian traditions her place in God's plan is virtually ignored. But if we let what God said to her in the first century be our guide we shall better understand her place of honour in his sight. It would be sad indeed, as Ron Brownrigg remarks, if, when we reach the pearly gates, Jesus has to say 'I don't think you know my mother?'

It was through Mary that God fulfilled his promise to come among his people and lead them from darkness to light. God's mighty act of deliverance came through the obedience of a young girl. To the astounding news that her child would be called the Most High, and that God would give him the throne of his father David, she replied in humility, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word.' It is because Mary heard God's call and believed that he would fulfill his promise to her that she is accounted blessed. Mary's response of trust and obedience is the same response as Jesus made in his own life. It is the same response that faithful Christians have made in every age enabling God to come close to his people, for he waits upon our co-operation. Obedience and trust are the hallmarks of God's people, those whom he has called. Mary traditionally has been looked on in every age as a model both for individual Christians and for the Church; through her we can learn what it means to be called.

To be called is not the same as to understand. Mary does not seem to have had any special insight about her first born son, and a little later in his Gospel, St Luke records Mary's lack of understanding. When she and Joseph found Jesus in the Temple talking to the learned men, clearly they did not know what he was about. To their anxious questions Jesus replied 'Did you not know that I was bound to be in my Father's house?' And St Luke records that they did not understand what he meant. Another similar incident is recounted by St Mark. Jesus was teaching in a house, and when Mary and his brothers heard about it they set out to take charge of him, for people were saying that he was out of his mind. (Mark 3.21, 31-35)

To be called is not to feel worthy. Bethlehem was the least in the land of Judah, and David was the last of Jesse's sons. God calls high and low alike, but for his special tasks he seems to choose the poor, or rather the poor in spirit. Not being puffed up with worldly vanity or success they are better able to be filled by his word. As Jesus said, they are blessed because they know their need of God. Unworthiness is a common feeling among those who are called – from Moses, who had to have Aaron to speak for him, and Isaiah, who said he was a man of unclean lips, to Mary. When she lived here, Nazareth was a small and insignificant place; so much so that the saying was, 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' (John 1.46) Yet God looked with favour on his humble servant from Nazareth and dealt wonderfully with her, and Mary rejoiced in what God had done:

He has shown strength with his arm:  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts  
he has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.

*Luke 1.51-53 RSV*

To be called is to treasure the word of God in your heart, as we are often told that Mary did, believing that God will be faithful to his word. As St Paul said, those whom he calls he empowers. To be called is to bear the pain of the world. To be the Mother of Jesus was to share in his

suffering with a mother's love. When she and Joseph brought their firstborn to the Temple for his dedication, the saintly Simeon warned her, 'This child is destined to be a sign which men reject; and you too shall be pierced to the heart.' (Luke 2.34) And standing at the cross she knew the truth of his words:

She have her body to be God's shrine,  
Her heart to piercing pain;  
she knew the cost of love divine,  
When Jesus Christ was slain.

To be called is to embark on a journey like Abraham, without map or travelling instructions. Faith is our guide, hope draws us on, and love sustains us. These three, said St Paul, last for ever. Now we may see only through a glass darkly, but following God where he calls we shall see face to face. Our knowledge now is partial, then it will be whole like God's knowledge of us (1 Cor 13). To be called is about transcending ourselves so that God may use us and so reveal himself to the world. That is what Mary did. Responding to God's call she became the God-bearer, the Mother of God. She did not understand, nor did she feel worthy; she did not know where God would lead her, but she obeyed his word, treasuring it in her heart, and for this all generations call her blessed, and take the angel's greeting joyfully on to their lips:

Hail Mary, full of grace,  
The Lord is with you.

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## 10. The Lakeside

### **FORGIVEN SINNERS**

*By his wounds you have been healed.*

1 PETER 2.25

‘SIMON, SON OF JOHN, do you love me? Jesus asked this of Peter three times at this spot on the lakeside. The question found its mark because Peter was grieved at its repetition. He had been one of the first to respond to Jesus’ call to follow him; he had made the great confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi; he had protested that even if the others fell away he would never disown Jesus, even if it meant dying with him; but at the first test, taunted by a young girl in Caiaphas’ courtyard he had fallen away; with an oath he said, ‘I do not know this man.’ Three times he denied Jesus, and here by the Sea of Galilee where it all began, three times Jesus asks, ‘Do you love me?’ And each time Peter replies, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus doesn’t respond with a doubtful, ‘Do you really?’, but with a commission, ‘Feed my sheep.’ Peter was forgiven.

Forgiveness is not a matter of agreeing to say no more about it, nor of trying to pretend the hurt wasn’t bad, or didn’t happen; forgiveness is about restoring the lost status, overcoming the wrong with love. The story of the Prodigal Son makes the point well. The Son having squandered all that his father gave him, is not merely accepted back in sufferance or out of charity, he is welcomed back with a banquet, sitting in his rightful place at his father’s table; his father refuses to treat him as a slave and restores his lost status as a free born son. This was just a story to show us what God is like, to illustrate the point that indeed there is more rejoicing in heaven over the one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance. But here by the lakeside Jesus turned that story into deed. He restores the one who forsook him to his rightful place as leader of the group of disciples: ‘Feed my sheep.’

Saints are made out of the ordinary frail material of human nature. They are not perfect; they haven’t got it all worked out. Some, like



Peter, are strong headed and impetuous, but with feet of clay. At first, no doubt, this following Jesus seemed straightforward; 'Just tell me what to do Lord, and I'll get on with it!' But, as Peter found out, if you try to do that in your own strength you will fail. Only God's strength is adequate for his service, and his strength comes to us when we repent; when we acknowledge our failures and seek his forgiveness. As Peter himself later wrote to his fellow Christians, repentance is about turning to God: 'You were straying like sheep, but now you have turned towards the shepherd and guardian of your souls.' (1 Peter 2.25) The church is a community of forgiven sinners.

The first miracle recorded in The Book of Acts shows a different Peter. The cripple on the Temple steps is healed in the name of Christ. Peter is clear that he had nothing to do with it: 'Why stare at us as if we had made this man walk by some power or godliness of our own? ...The name of Jesus has strengthened this man.' (Acts 3.12,16) Peter no longer denies that he knows Jesus; openly he heals in his name and calls the people to repent in his name. The coward has become the Rock upon which the church will be built, a transformation brought about through God's forgiveness.

All of us try to do too much in our own strength; all of us are a bit wide of the mark; all of us have strayed like lost sheep. Sin is the great leveller. What God did for Peter he has done for countless others, and he will do it for us – for you and me. In his own son he carried our sins to the cross; he set them aside nailing them to the tree. Jesus says to each of us, 'Do you love me?' How do we reply? Do we want to love him more, to receive his strength? If so, we have first to accept his forgiveness. Remember what he said about the woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair: 'her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven; where little has been forgiven, little love is shown.'

## 11. Caesarea Maritima

### **LED BY THE SPIRIT**

*We are all met here before God, to hear all that the Lord has ordered you to say.*

ACTS 10.33

WILLIAM TEMPLE once remarked that the church is the only organisation in the world which exists for the benefit of those who do not belong to it. The church was not founded as a cosy club for the like-minded, but as a movement to reach out to all the world with God's good news. Here at Caesarea that great outward movement of the church began when Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman soldier, asked Peter to come and visit him. Peter was staying further down the coast at Joppa where he had had the puzzling vision of the sail-cloth full of creatures. When he arrived here at Cornelius' house its meaning became clear: God intended the Gentiles as well as the Jews to benefit from the new covenant which he had made through Jesus. The church was not meant to be a Jewish sect but a worldwide family. It was the other apostle associated with this place, Paul, who was God's instrument in fulfilling that part of this plan. Paul carried the Gospel to Rome, the centre of the civilised world, and from here he set sail.

Paul, like Peter, must have seemed an odd choice for an apostle. He persecuted the church; he stood by as Stephen was stoned; and he set out for Damascus breathing murderous threats against the disciples, but God turned him round. He called him, forgave him, and sent him out into all the world. Paul, who said he was the least to be called an Apostle, outdid all the others. Imprisoned, flogged, shipwrecked, he never lost heart; he worked tirelessly in the service of Christ. If you asked Paul where all his drive and energy came from, he wouldn't have written you an epistle, nor given you a talk about the Holy Spirit; he would have told you his story. Like everyone whom Jesus met or touched or healed, Paul had to tell others about it. It was his encounter with Jesus that had set him on fire.

We tend to be wary of people with that sort of story to tell. Enthusiasm seems to be a problem for most Christians. When the Gospel fills ordinary men and women, putting a new light in their eyes, or altering their pattern of speech, we're inclined to think them a little mad. As Paul told his story to Festus and Agrippa here at Caesarea, Festus shouted at the top of his voice, 'Paul, you are raving; too much study is driving you mad!' And on the day of Pentecost Peter had to reassure the crowds that those who had been inspired by the Spirit were not drunk! It may be disturbing, but amid all the passions of the world, God wants some people to be passionate about him; in a world in which people are filled with greed, fear, envy and pride, God longs to fill them with his new wine. God does not want zealots who are determined to put the world to rights, nor does he want slaves who force feed people with religion, nor does he want servants who are just doing their duty. First and foremost God wants friends: people who love him because they have experienced his forgiveness and who are not embarrassed to tell their story.

If we will allow it God will draw us to himself as friends and open our lips. After his resurrection Jesus came to his first group of friends and breathed on them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. When we were baptised we received that same Holy Spirit. He is at work in our hearts as he was with Cornelius. Jesus wants us, like Cornelius, to experience the fullness of that gift, to grow in the spirit, to become a little crazy for him. He wants us to stop simply doing our duty and to act out of love; he wants us to stop merely being a follower and to become someone whom he can send; he wants us to move from being a disciple and become an apostle like Peter and Paul. This transformation is the work of the Spirit, God within us, inspiring, leading, guiding, opening our inward eyes. It is not something to be wary of; the Spirit is gentle, symbolised by a dove:

Spirit of God unseen as the wind,  
Gentle as is the dove;  
Teach us the truth and help us believe,  
Show us the Saviour's love.

God doesn't give us more than we can handle. As we come towards the end of our pilgrimage will you ask the Lord to give you some of his new wine?

Breathe on me breath of God;  
Fill me with life anew.

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## 12. Caesarea Philippi

### **LIVING WATER**

*If I do not wash you, you are not in fellowship with me.*

JOHN 13.8

IT IS EASY to see how in this land water became a sign of God's favour. Most of it is a dry, thirsty place, and the existence of a water supply determined where there could be life. Wells are named after the people who discovered them, and they became the centre of a settlement, a place to meet and talk. Water is essential to life. It refreshes and revives us; it makes us clean and it makes us grow. Thirst is the most basic of our desire: it has to be quenched.

'I thirst' is the cry that echoes from the pages of the Bible. This was a thirsty land, both physically and spiritually. The thirst is still there but over the centuries we have got better at covering it up. In his letter for this month the Bishop of Woolwich pointed out that we create false thirsts like the desire for alcohol which have the perverse effect of making us more thirsty still. These false thirsts, whether for alcohol or drugs, power or money, possessions or status, merely cover up our real deep thirst which is to be accepted and loved. Everyone needs to belong. Only God can satisfy that deep thirst.

As a hind longs for the running streams,  
so do I long for thee, O God.

With my whole being I thirst for God, the living God. *Psalms 42.1, 2*

Jesus offered himself twice as living water: to the Samaritan woman at the well, and to the crowds in the Temple. He offered himself as quenching the thirst that is deep in every creature that God has made, the thirst to know God as creator, friend and inspirer. It's an offer which we find hard to accept, maybe because reaching down to our depths it requires a response from our depths, the place where we least like to be disturbed.

Near this place Jesus asked his disciples, 'And you, who do you say that I am?' Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah.' 'Who do you say that I am?' That's the question which separates us from the water of life without price. At baptism we don't ask, 'Are you thirsty?', but 'Do you turn to Christ?' Turning is the essence of repentance; it is an act of our whole being, and its the only way to the living water. But that turning must go deep; deep enough so that we actually submit ourselves to God and allow him to wash us clean. Just to say 'Jesus is the Messiah', is not enough. We have to let him be the Messiah for us, and in his way. Peter discovered this at the Last Supper. Jesus rose from table, laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple's feet. This menial service, normally performed by a slave for his master, was more than Peter could accept. He protested: 'You, Lord, washing my feet? ...I will never let you wash my feet.' (John 13.6, 7) Peter could not cope with a God who stooped so low; and for the most part neither can we; a God who remains at a distance is much easier to handle. But salvation does not come through the acts of power of a remote deity, but through the self-giving in love of the One who draws close, and asks to wash us.

Water does not always look like this stream, fresh and inviting. Just as easily it can appear dark and foreboding, as I recall looking down from a rowing boat in the middle of a Norwegian fjord. Sometimes water

breaks out in flood bringing chaos and destruction. Water is the symbol of death as well as of life. In our subconscious it stands for both the womb and the tomb. To be washed by Christ is first and foremost to die with him. 'In baptism,' wrote St Paul to the Colossians, 'you were buried with him, in baptism also you were also raised to life with him....' (Col 2.12) To be washed by Christ is to be made clean by the death that is life-giving. 'By his wounds we are healed.' (1 Peter 2.24)

So in the Upper Room Jesus replies to Peter's protest, 'If I do not wash you, you are not in fellowship with me.' In other words, 'you can have no part in what I am doing for the world.' Faced with that choice, Peter caves in: 'Then, Lord, not my feet only; wash my hands and head as well.' But the one action of the Lord is enough. In that one act of tender service, offered and performed with our consent we are brought into fellowship with Christ. We acknowledge the suffering servant to be the Messiah; we allow his wounds to cleanse and heal us; and we accept that if he is to be our God we cannot keep him at a safe distance. In our pilgrimage we have come close to Jesus: now let him come close to us. It was in the waters of this river that he was baptised, and in these waters we shall renew our baptismal promises.

Let him who is thirsty come:  
let him who desires  
take the water of life without price.  
'Surely, I am coming soon.'  
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

*Rev. 22.17, 20 RSV*

### 13. Homeward Bound

## POSTSCRIPT

*Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters*

PSALM 42.7

IT SEEMS much longer than twelve days that we have spent together in this Holy Land, but even so all too soon we are on our way home. I find myself going back just over a year to when I first took my leave of this place, my mind full of impressions – much too full to have sorted them out. Then, as now, I was aware of having been stirred in my depths. We had prayed, sang, laughed and shared each other's company, and often deeply moved, our only response had been tears. I remember my tears at the Western Wall and in the crypt at Bethlehem and round the Rock of the Agony in Gethsemane. I remember to the strange feeling of being in a minority as a Christian and having my faith challenged by the other children of Abraham, the Jews and the Muslims. The silence in the El Aqsa Mosque had a depth and a reverence that, alas, is seldom found in our English churches, and I will long remember two Jewish girls praying quietly at Ben Gurion's tomb overlooking the desert. And on this visit, I was struck by sensitivity of Jerry, our guide, as he led our procession along the Via Dolorosa, and by the other face of Judaism glimpsed in Safad and at Kibbutz Lavi. I find it hard merely to write off Jew and Muslim as wrong or misguided, but this has not meant a weakening of my Christian identity; rather the reverse. Coming close to those faithful to another way has strengthened me in my way.

As I try to understand it, this strengthening does not seem to result in an excluding, us-against-them attitude, but in a deeper sense of identity which enables me to sympathise with those who are different. At the same time I'm more conscious than before that Christianity is about making a choice. You can't fashion a religion by taking a bit from here and a bit from there; that way you build up a picture of God as we should like him to be and not as he has revealed himself to be. What this land will not allow us to ignore is that we are faced with different accounts of that revelation. They touch at some points, but on the

important questions like the nature of God, and of Jesus, and the way to salvation, their answers are sharply contrasted, and we must choose between them. For me, God's self-revelation through Jesus of Nazareth remains the most attractive picture of what God is like, and of how men and women are meant to live together, and of our ultimate destiny of life in union with him. It is a picture that continues to make the best sense of my human experience. This pilgrimage has rooted this faith more firmly for it has given me a new experience of the incarnation. The belief that God took flesh and came among us is reinforced by contact with the very stones that Jesus trod, the stones that he said would cry out – and they do! Ours is a faith grounded upon real events and not upon human speculation.

I also come away this time, as before, with something new about suffering. The ever-present military reminds me that this land has never experienced shalom, the peace of God, the peace that is built on justice and righteousness. The present status quo merely continues the history of conquest, defeat, and re-conquest recorded in the Bible, and reminds me just how much of the world is built on force. Coercion is the bottom line of power, even in our democracy; it's just that over the years we have managed to give it a more acceptable face. This is the Holy Land because here God met the forces of evil and overcame them. No wonder the Mappa Mundi puts the Holy Sepulchre at the centre of the world! The battle that is waged between armies over this soil is the battle between good and evil that is waged in every human heart. It's not that one side is good and the other evil, but that both are caught up in the snare of mistaking our desires for God's purposes. God is in the front line of this battle and just as we believe that the suffering of Christ has ensured the victory of love, so this land somehow transcends the conflict offering the hope that the world's suffering is not in vain.

My other abiding memory is of the desert. Perhaps it speaks to me because it says something of the way we are before God: empty, with not much to offer, waiting to be filled. Its silence is the silence of God into which he spoke and brought forth life. I could sit for a day at Ben Gurion's tomb looking at the view. Because it touched me so deeply I



wanted you to experience it too. It was a long way to go; I hope the journey was worthwhile.

When we are back home people will ask you about your trip. Try to remember as you respond that this is an opportunity to tell your story. Putting your experience into words will help to preserve it and keep the memory alive. Perhaps I may suggest a way? Try to sort out a deep point, and try to work out why it was a deep experience for you. I say a deep point rather than a high point because we're not much help to others when we are on a high. Highs tend to buoy us up, to separate our experience from that of others. Like Elijah after the contest on Mount Carmel, God can't use us when we're high on our own success. It's from our depths that we really speak to one another: 'Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters.' So sort out a deep point and, like Mary, ponder it in your heart, ask God to help you to understand its meaning, and when you tell your story say something from your depths. It will help to cement the experience in your life as something you can draw on in the future, and it will be something beautiful for God.