



LOCKDOWN HOMILIES

1 - 200



John Aitchison
Parish of St John the Divine
Glenwood, Durban

Lockdown homilies

John Aitchison

**Parish of St John the Divine
Glenwood
Durban**

Lockdown Homilies

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Most of the stained glass windows in St John the Divine, Glenwood, Durban were made by Arthur Edward Buss in the London studio of Goddard and Gibbs and by Martin Travers.

Foreword 1

Very Revd John Forbes

Former Dean of the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity, Diocese of Natal

The 2020 Lockdown has brought to light many people's contributions to help us all find a way ahead during these peculiar times. These two hundred homilies can help us as individuals persevere with our life and faith. They can help us collectively become the people of God who are involved with justice and peace in the society in which we live.

John is well placed to do this as he was Locked Down by the apartheid government in the 1960s and 1970s with two separate banning orders for a total of ten years. He came out of that experience with a stronger faith and a great love for the church and for God.

During the ten years he did a great deal of reading. This comes out in the homilies which cover a number of topics. There is a freshness and relevance about life today. The quotations are splendid.

Each homily ends with a prayer. There are well known prayers, and there other prayers that have been adapted. The third group of prayers are ones that John has written which are beautiful.

Some of these homilies could well be converted into a "book about the faith". And I hope he will produce a collection of his prayers in book form.

Foreword 2

Deacon Gwynne Lawlor

Parish of St Mary's Daggakraal, Diocese of the Highveld

When Deacon Professor John Aitchison asked me to write a short preface to this collection of 200 homilies he had written – one for every day of Lockdown in the Republic of South Africa, I was both honoured and dismayed!

... Honoured, to give recognition to an enormous work so faithfully undertaken by a fellow deacon in the Anglican Communion of Southern Africa.

... Dismayed, for two reasons... both personal:

The first reason being that these homilies which had been a mainstay and source of stability for me in lockdown life for 200 days were to cease. I knew others would also be dismayed.

The second reason being that I doubted I could do justice in this preface to this work of love, faith and obedience undertaken by Deacon John.

In giving me permission to circulate his homilies widely, John reached many people, not only in our country, but also beyond our shores. The Faithful drew strength from his words, his explanations and his teachings. People, cut off from their church services, were thirsting for the Word of God, and for a connection with fellow Christians.

Deacon John's homilies went a long way to meeting these needs to connect (we are by nature social animals!) and to quenching this thirst!

The homilies also stirred a deep desire for further knowledge of our own faith, Christian history and teachings. Many mentioned that they now read their Bibles with new insights. Some said that they had realized how superficially they had read Scripture before, and that this had changed.

Above all, Deacon John's homilies, read by so many, created a new community of hope and connectedness through the recognition of the bonds between us, because of our shared Faith in the One True God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Through Deacon John's faithfulness and willingness to share his gifts of knowledge and insight through this particular lockdown ministry, a seed of new faith and hope has been sown in the hearts and minds of each of the original recipients of these homilies. It is my hope and prayer that these homilies will continue to touch many more of the Faithful.

Thank you Deacon Professor John Aitchison for sharing your deep knowledge and love of God with all your readers, both now and in the future. And thank you for going way beyond the initial 25 homilies you had anticipated writing before lockdown was extended!

A note from the writer

John Aitchison

Parish of St John the Divine, Glenwood, Durban, Diocese of Natal

I would like to thank all the first readers of these homilies who sent responses, comments and suggestions. They were much appreciated.

Those readers who would like an initial take on what my idea of a homily is, should, look at the Day 100 homily.

The Bible translations I have used are mainly the New Revised Standard Version, the Hart New Testament and the Phillips New Testament (see Day 190).

The prayers are either as acknowledged, adaptations by myself of acknowledged prayers, or ones I developed myself, though often in the latter case I have been influenced by models or wordings of other people's prayers in books or on the internet. My apologies for any missing acknowledgements.

My eldest daughter describes some of the homilies as "hectic" and one reader response I got said that it was "social justice on a surreal religious platform". I am happy to accept these evaluations. The homilies do contain many strange juxtapositions and combinations of the Word of God with the surreally unnatural environment of a global pandemic and the corrupt and flailing world of national and international politics. Our lives should be suitably hectic if we truly respond to the call, "the still small voice", that we hear in the midst of the darkness and the tempest.

First day of total lockdown

And now we give thanks because through him you have rescued us from the power of darkness and have brought us into the kingdom of light. (Based on Colossians 1:12-13)

Yes, we are now in total lockdown, and even for those of us who have already been in semi-self-isolation, it is likely to be something of a shock. Human beings are, after all, social animals and we will miss mixing with other people, even if it is just missing the buzz of hearing people around, talking in the street, cars passing. We will miss those body language cues – smiles, handshakes, hugs, that tell us that we are part of a human community.

Last night we held a last service at St John the Divine, the last for at least 21 days (unless some of us die and we have small funerals). We reminded ourselves that, for the Christian faithful, strictly speaking we are only in physical isolation. We are the body of Christ and that social bond can never be broken. In that small congregation, though sitting far away from each other, the sense of being bound together was strong and real.

As we try to get over this physical isolation shock we must not feel sorry for ourselves. We can wish that it was not us, whether young or old, to be in this world crisis. But we are here. All we have to do is be faithful and behave well at this time.

As the twenty-one days start, we need to constantly think of, pray for, and take what action we can to help others who are going to be in a far more serious fix than we are.

At a very practical level, and this applies particularly to families where its members have previously been out most of the day – at school, work or whatever – we need to rapidly set up certain basic routines for the day (and that should include physical exercise). We have to love ourselves as well as our neighbour.

Prayer

I want to end with a prayer prepared by the Greek Orthodox Church:

Lord our God,
You who are rich in mercy, and with careful wisdom direct our lives,
listen to our prayer, receive our repentance for our sins,
bring an end to this new infectious disease, this new epidemic,
just as you averted the punishment of your people in the time of David the King.

You who are the Physician of our souls and bodies,
grant restored health to those who have been seized by this illness,
raising them from their bed of suffering,
so that they might glorify You, O merciful Saviour,
and preserve in health those who have not been infected.

By your grace, Lord, bless, strengthen, and preserve,
all those who out of love and sacrifice care for the sick,
either in their homes or in the hospitals.
Remove all sickness and suffering from your people,
and teach us to value life and health as gifts from You.

Give us Your peace, O God,
and fill our hearts with unflinching faith in Your protection,
hope in Your help, and love for You and our neighbour.

For Yours it is to have mercy on us and save us, O our God,
and to You we ascribe glory:
to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
now and forever, to the ages of ages.
Amen.

Second day of lockdown

And now we give thanks because through him you have rescued us from the power of darkness and have brought us into the kingdom of light. (Based on Colossians 1:12-13)

I hope you weathered the shock of the first day of lockdown and also didn't spend too much of the day glued to the television screen watching reports that indicated quite a lot of teething problems on the first day. It seems that a lot of people are still quite confused about what they can and cannot do.

What one can and cannot do? Yes, in much of our lives we are unclear about what we should do. Often the customs and habits of our society give very poor guidance on what is really right. Even our consciences sometimes are not the best guides because our consciences are often mis-shaped by the way we were brought up or by the way we have lived. For us, Jesus gave us the double command (Mark 12: 29-31):

The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." 31 The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.

We have to love God and our neighbour (and therefore ourselves for we have to love our neighbour in the same way that we love and care for our own self). If we can keep these priorities – God first, neighbour/self second – the days ahead will be simpler and we will know what we can and cannot do.

I have been inspired by the news that in the United Kingdom more than 600 thousand people answered a call to be volunteers to help in the National Health Service as the crisis in that country worsens. As our own country's infection and death toll rise, we should be thinking about what we may be able to do to help.

This week was the Wednesday Feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We can surely take comfort and strength from her example. She answered God's call, and in humility served as the God-bearer and humble mother and suffered the anxiety, pains and loss because of what happened to her Son. May we follow her example and carry her Son in our lives. May all the mothers in our country be strengthened at this time to keep families and homes together.

Prayer (inspired by some of the words in a prayer by Pope Pius 12)

Holy Father, in this tragic hour of the world's history,
we entrust ourselves to you.

Have pity on this world,
damaged by conflicts and exploitation of people and nature,
and now infected with a most terrible disease.

We pray for our families,
our country and the whole of humanity.

Protect and save us!

Fill our hearts with your divine love
and grant that people and nations may understand
and fulfill the command of your Son to love one another.

Amen.

Not amputees

God of all consolation and hope, who breathes life into dry bones and weary souls:
pour out your Spirit upon us, that we may face despair and death in the hope of
resurrection;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

(Collect for Sunday 29 March 2020)

Today is a day of feeling like an amputee. I want to be in Church participating in that recalling into the present of Jesus with his twelve disciples at the Last Supper. I want to receive the bread and wine, the signs that the very Word of God is present among us. I want to look round at the congregation with amazement, knowing that this strange collection of people is also the sign of His presence, for it too is the Body of Christ. So I feel cut off. Today must be the first day in South Africa where we are without a celebration of the Eucharist.

But we are never cut off. As Paul says (Romans 8:38-39):

neither death nor life nor angels nor Rulers nor things present nor things soon to come nor Powers nor height nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God.

The Church has been through periods when Christians could not attend Mass. In times of persecution they often could not, both in past times and in the present. This does not mean that we are deprived of the presence, for the divine Word is there at all times. He is surely there when people are affected by disasters such as this one.

There are three elements of church life: liturgy, koinonia (fellowship) and service.

For the time being we no longer have the benefit of **liturgy**, the common services of worship of the Church (though of course, in our homes we can, alone or with family, hold simple services).

Fellowship is also under strain because of the physical separation during the lockdown – but we can ensure that, as much as we can, we stay in contact with family, neighbours and friends. Indeed, this lockdown is a good time to communicate with friends and family and fellow church members whom we perhaps do not have much contact with normally.

Lastly, there is **service**. For many of us the only service we can generate at this time is to send money to assist the needy and people whose income has stopped (and we have to remember that we still need to keep the clergy and the church buildings going). Some of us will be in essential work and others may be able to volunteer. Volunteer worker will undoubtedly be needed as the scale of the virus infections grows.

Try and hold a simple service in your home at the normal time you would have attended church. A service book helps but otherwise the simple ACTS formula is useful: Adoration, Contrition for our sins, Thanksgiving and Supplication (prayers for ourselves and others).

Prayers

We can use these use simple prayers for a spiritual communion. (The first is adapted from one by St Alphonsus de Liguori and the second is the well known Anima Christi.)

My Lord and my God, I believe that, as you promised,
you are present in the Holy Eucharistic meal.
Today, along with my fellow faithful,
I cannot be present at that giving of your sacramental body and blood.
But come spiritually into my heart.
I embrace you as if you were already there
and unite myself wholly to you.
Never permit me to be separated from you.
Amen.

Soul of Christ, sanctify me
Body of Christ, save me
Blood of Christ, refresh me
Water from the side of Christ, wash me
Passion of Christ, strengthen me
O good Jesus, hear me
Within thy wounds hide me
Let me never be separated from you
From the malicious enemy defend me
In the hour of my death call me
And bid me come to you
That with your saints I may praise you
Forever and ever.
Amen.

The lockdown silence

I live on the Berea in Durban and the Sunday lockdown silence was overwhelming – nothing but the occasional bird call. Sad as the reason is for that silence, it is also good. Maybe in this silence, not just here but all over the world, I can hear messages that I and others have ignored. We hope that the powers of this world may also listen in the silence and hear the message that we all have to change.

We can no longer live in societies where everything, including ourselves and our identities, are simply commodities to be exchanged for profit. Certainly, we in South Africa, once we win against the virus, must ensure that the viruses of poverty and the lack of the essentials of life are ended rapidly and effectively. It was reported yesterday that the state has bought up every available JoJo water tank in the country for use in places without adequate water supplies. It should have been done before the epidemic but better late than never.

Sunday morning, yesterday, was the first online Eucharist for my wife and me. We followed the service prepared at St Aidan's in Durban. The Gospel reading for today was the narrative in John's gospel about the raising of Lazarus. The sermon raised the important point that when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth", Jesus commands the group of onlookers "Unbind him, and let him go." The Son of God saves and resurrects but he expects his followers to 'unbind' and 'free' people. We, as Christians, and we as citizens, have a challenging task of unbinding and freeing – from misery, unemployment, malnutrition, hopelessness – the people of this land in the future. We can remain mere onlookers no more.

So, today, on the first day of the working week, we can ensure that we start living a more disciplined life. We need to do this to stay sane and together during the lockdown, but we can see it also as a time to work and train for the future and to restore previous disciplines that may have lapsed in our ordinary pre-pandemic lives.

Prayers ('Living prayers')

Father, I come to you today in need of self-discipline in the days ahead. My will feels weak and my mind is disturbed. I come in need of your grace and power.
Holy Spirit, may your presence be in my life.

Where I am impatient and resentful make me kinder, generous and forgiving.
Where there are temptations help me to deliberately distance myself from them.
Where there are distractions help me to stay focussed and true to the things you have called me to.
Where there are obstacles before me, may your light shine a way through.
Lord, I ask that with your strength and love to guide me that I might live a simple and holy life.
Amen.

Hail Mary and St Corona

I currently work from home on a higher education teacher education project so daily life is not that different, except that I cannot go for my usual runs. In addition, I am used to lockdown because as a young politically active anti-apartheid activist I was restricted without trial for ten years, during which time I was prohibited from all social contact – so I really am an expert at social distancing. As a largely online worker, I use computers and search engines such as Google a lot. So I thought that today I would say something about the resources and disinformation that we can find by using the marvellous tools of electronic information and communication technology.

Here for example are two interesting things I learned today from the internet:

The Hail Mary

Most of us are familiar with the “Hail Mary” prayer that Catholics in particular use:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death.

The first sentence come from the angel’s annunciation to Mary: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28). The next sentence is the greeting from Mary’s relative Elizabeth: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:42).

Originally this prayer consisted of only these two sentences. However during the Black Plague, which killed about 20 percent of the population of the entire known world in the mid-1300s, the last sentence was added: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death.”

We can take comfort from two things: the world has been here before and has come through, and that the divine resources are available to us

St Corona

The relics of St Corona lie in the city of Anzu, Northern Italy. She was martyred, probably in Syria about 170 AD. She was the 16 year-old wife of a Roman soldier and a secret Christian. Another soldier, Victor, had been arrested and, seeing him being flogged prior to execution, she went to him and prayed and comforted him. She too was then arrested and executed. Her name is simply “crown” (meaning she had gained a martyr’s crown). It is good to know that there is another ‘Corona’ that symbolises sacrificial service to others.

So there I found two bits of information that inspired me.

Now for the downside.

The Internet and particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are cesspits of misinformation. During this Corona virus epidemic we are being deluged with misinformation. Some of it is simply the result of people passing on what is essentially gossip but some of it is malicious. We live in a world that has put profit before everything – the most astounding example of which has been some United States of America senators and governors saying that old people should be willing to die so that the lockdown can end quickly and the stock market can rise again. Commercial fraudsters are deliberately stoking up anxiety and fear so that they can sell face masks and other items at exorbitant prices. Other people propagate conspiracy theories while others try to get us to load malware onto our computers.

As the faithful, this is where we have to abide by the truth: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” We cannot but be the people of the truth. We must tell only the truth and we must discern whether what is communicated to us is the truth.

There are simple tests for screening out suspicious messages:

1. Does it have a source? No source or vague sources (“A friend of mine told me that their firm’s computer expert told them.”, “A policeman told my friend that ...”) usually indicate fake news.
2. Even if a source is given, check out that it really was said on the SABC or the BBC or CNN. (It is usually enough to put the fake statement into your Google search plus the name of the alleged source for it to be revealed (e.g. put this into your Google search “tea can cure the Corona virus + CNN”).
3. Be suspicious of any news that comes to you first from Facebook or WhatsApp or Twitter, particularly if it is anxiety-producing or emotive.

We can play an important role by keeping information exchanges during this pandemic and lockdown truthful and helpful. We are the people of the truth.

Prayer (adapted from Kerry Weber)

Lord Jesus Christ, you travelled through towns and villages curing every disease and illness.

At your command, the sick were made well.

Come to our aid now in the midst of the global spread of the corona virus, that we may experience your healing love.

Heal those who are sick with the virus.

May they regain their health and strength.

Heal us from our fear,

which prevents neighbours from helping one another.

Heal us from our pride,
which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders.

Good Lord, healer of all,
stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow.

May those who have died from the virus rest in peace
and rise in glory.

Be with the families of those who are sick or have died.
As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair.

Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek
to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process.
May they know your protection and peace.

Be with the leaders of all nations.
Give them the foresight to act with prudence and charity for the well-being of the
people they are meant to serve.

Stay with us, Lord, and grant us your peace.

Amen.

How things change

We hear the reports from all over the world about how world governments are tearing up all the economic rules they claimed they could never break (or the sky would fall down) and how people are engaging in behaviour they would have considered inconceivable a few weeks ago (like singing arias from their windows overlooking the street, volunteering to work in hospitals though doing so may kill them and actually really talking to family members). So we have to ask ourselves afresh – what is real? What are the real constraints on how our world is run? Have we let ourselves be deluded into accepting the way things are as rigid and immovable?

Jesus of Nazareth brought the new. The old way of doing things was ended – he broke the Sabbath to heal the sick, he touched the unclean and the lepers, he ushered in a new way of life that meant doing the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. The early Christians were accused of turning the world upside down – as indeed they were. That is part of the joy and creativity of the Christian faith, that things can be changed utterly (as of course they were on Easter morning).

We have become so accustomed to obeying the dictates of economists and politicians that the world had become stuck in a false belief system that nothing could change. Now governments in many parts of the world have shown us that the austerity and growing inequality that characterised the last few decades was built on the lies and fantasies of rich elites. The economy and the market are not gods. The purpose of human society (and it is now recognised that there is such a thing as society) is to serve human beings, to protect them and advance the welfare of all.

So amidst the horror of this world pandemic there is one great gain. We have been given a chance to abandon false beliefs about what can and cannot be done. We can re-look at how we live our lives, at the macro-level of our various countries and at the micro-level of the family and the individual. In a very real sense we have all been sent on a very tough, soul-searching retreat. What are our lives for? Does our society actually have a real purpose?

Jesus brings the new. He brings all possibilities to us. He brings us the freedom to live in the Kingdom. “The proper time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near; change your hearts and have faith in the good tidings.”

May the lockdown be a time of liberation too.

Prayer (Jan Richardson)

To your table
you bid us come.
You have set the places,
you have poured the wine,
and there is always room,
you say, for one more.

And so we come.
From the streets
and from the alleys
we come.

From the deserts
and from the hills
we come.

From the ravages of poverty
and from the palaces of privilege
we come.

We are bloodied with our wars,
we are wearied with our wounds,
we carry our dead within us,
and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing,
we dream of a new creation,
we know the things that make for peace,
and we struggle to give them wings.

And yet, to your table
we come.
Hungering for your bread,
we come;
thirsting for your wine,
we come;
singing your song in every language,
speaking your name in every tongue,
in conflict and in communion,
in discord and in desire,
we come,
O God of Wisdom,
we come.

Foolishness

Yesterday was April Fools' Day and not many people seemed to find it funny or sent around prank news, as distinct from all the humourous videos and posts over the last week trying to see some humour in the lockdown situation we find ourselves in.

Actually the Christian faith has quite an interest in foolishness. It uses the Old Testament which has a great many descriptions about God's people behaving foolishly – in the bad sense, and that is the only sense in which the Old Testament uses the word “foolish”. As Jeremiah put it (4:22):

For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.'

Jesus also spoke of the foolish, not so much as sinners but as people who do not understand the consequences of their actions or inactions:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (Matthew 7:26)

Yes, we know all about our foolishness. This whole pandemic is a consequence of utter foolishness – the foolishness of exploiting and degrading the earth, the foolishness of putting growth and profit above the welfare of human beings and nature, and the foolishness of politicians who put short term gains above the need to prepare the health and other services for disasters. This foolishness (and its evil) is epitomised by the USA billionaire bragging about being in lockdown on his huge ocean going yacht, safe in the middle of the sea, abandoning the rest of humanity.

But there is another, more positive kind of foolishness which shows itself in the New Testament and in actions today.

Paul writes in an astounding passage in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

It is precisely that kind of foolishness and weakness that goes out to heal the sick, to build hospitals, to comfort the dying and bereaved. It is the foolishness of those who do not make much of themselves but care for others. And, astoundingly, it is the politicians, whether late or not, who have now put the lives of the old and vulnerable before those of the 'economy'. And it is this foolishness that shares in the foolishness, the utter freedom and joyfulness of God.

It is to be hoped that we and all the nations, come to recognise that they have been foolish (in the bad sense) and that now, as fools (in Paul's good sense), multi-nationally, nationally, and individually, we can begin to enjoy ourselves, our fellows and our world.

Prayer

The prayer for today comes from St Francis who was the epitome of a fool for God:

Praised be you my Lord with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom you give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of you Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be you, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which you cherish all that you have made.

Praised be you my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be you my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be you my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth
who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praise be you my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of you and bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace, by you Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be you, my Lord through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Blessed are they she finds doing your Will.

No second death can do them harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.

Kind and gentle death

Last night a grandmother in her 90s died in the flat below us, peacefully and not from the virus. It brought very much to mind the reality of what the lockdown is about – fighting a particular and virulent form of death. A form of death that seems to target the old and vulnerable, though of course all ages can succumb to this destroyer.

We are mortals and death is an inescapable part of our being alive. We know we will die and we know that every child we bring into the world is given the gift of death as an inheritance. How inescapable death is was made very real to me, when amidst all the statistics pouring out of the media on the Corona virus was this one – half a million people die each year in the United Kingdom. The figure is probably the same, if not higher for South Africa.

There is an Easter hymn by William Draper (loosely based on St Francis' Canticum of the Sun) that includes the words:

And thou, most kind and gentle death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him, Alleluia!
Thou leadest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way has trod.

This verse is often left out in modern hymn books because for us moderns, death is a taboo subject, but it movingly expresses the reality of our human condition and is itself a prayer that death will indeed come gently. In our pandemic reality we pray that the inevitable deaths will be gentle and we also pray that the ventilators that will ease the lot of the dying will be sufficient.

Something strange has happened in the last month as we face the reality of death. We are in the midst of the sorrows of this time, the deaths and the fears of dying, of getting infected, and the harsh reality of hunger. Yet something good has happened. Everywhere, in country after country, governments – good and bad, effective and incompetent – are putting the lives of the vulnerable, the “useless” economically unproductive old people ahead of the economy and profit. It is also clear that this is what people want. And that is good news for humanity. The people of the world are saying that the old, our ancestors, are part of our humanity. We cannot be fully human without them. They cannot be discarded. And we also pray, that after the victory over the virus, we will look at the world in a new way, and prepare to fight for the future of our children and grandchildren against destructive climate change and inequality. We cannot be fully human without caring for and loving our descendants too.

Prayer for the dead (www.daily-prayers.org)

In your hands, O Lord,
we humbly entrust our brothers and sisters.
In this life you embraced them with your tender love;
deliver them now from every evil
and bid them eternal rest.
The old order has passed away:
welcome them into paradise,
where there will be no sorrow, no weeping or pain,
but fullness of peace and joy
with your Son and the Holy Spirit
forever and ever.
Amen.

Surviving in isolation

My eldest daughter forwarded to me a photo of Nelson Mandela in his old cell on Robben Island with the caption "In isolation for 27 years. No family, luxuries, phone. Just hope and a vision. We can do this." Indeed we can. For we do have a hope and a vision of a better and gentler and more caring human world and one that is more in harmony with the natural order.

But to survive in isolation also means discipline. It was the kind of discipline that Mandela had – and over 27 years he remained disciplined, both physically and mentally. Many of us are unfamiliar with the so-called Desert Fathers and Mothers who were such a formative influence upon how Christianity developed after it came out of those first 300 hundred years of illegality and persecution. They have much to teach us about isolation and spiritual and physical discipline.

The earliest of the Desert Fathers became hermits in the desert at a time when persecution had ended and Christians were becoming a bit lax. They saw the solitude and harshness of the desert as a replacement for martyrdom for the faith. They focused their lives on prayer, fasting, silence, giving to the needy, caring for the sick and living in harmony with others who joined them, also seeking this solitary life. What they emphasised was to live and practise the teachings of Christ and to overcome negative emotions such as anger and judgment of others. Helping a fellow hermit or traveller who was ill or struggling was the greatest priority. When one desert father told another of his plan to shut himself in his cell and refuse to see anybody so that he might perfect himself, another monk answered: "Unless you first amend your own life going to and fro amongst people, it shall not help you to dwell alone." One can see why, out of this period of isolation came the monastic movement, where dedicated people lived in community in monasteries and convents and helped transform the world with agriculture, the encouragement of literacy, learning and scholarship and the first real hospitals for the sick.

We have been placed in isolation, not of our own will, but by a mixture of government regulation and our own fears for ourselves and the people we love. But we can try and emulate those desert fathers who saw the isolation as a discipline to strengthen their spiritual lives. We can try to be disciplined and live the lockdown with helpful routines that we abide by, however long it takes. With grace we can come out of this 'desert' experience stronger and kinder and less judgmental. And fitter to take part in the rebuilding of our country and world.

Prayer

O Lord, I pray that with the help of the Holy Spirit I can be self-disciplined in this lockdown.

I ask that you will do more with my minutes and hours and days than I, alone, can do.

Give me the grace to impose what is required upon myself.

Help me to discipline my mind and tongue.

Help me to do what is right and not what is easy.

May I do the best I can and trust to leave the rest to you.

Amen

Palm Sunday

On Saturday afternoon I went gingerly outside our building to cut a branch off a palm tree to put in our flat window to welcome Palm Sunday. Today, there will be no long procession of the congregation bearing palm fronds and palm crosses as we walk to the church building for the Palm Sunday service. I will miss the procession and the people, this remembrance of something seemingly ancient and old but which is yet startlingly in resonance with the present.

The entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem was of course, in modern language, a demonstration. Demonstrations occur regularly near Jerusalem in the present. Demonstrations, at their best try to say something about a desired future and an end to present evils or injustices. In demonstrations, we often find that very ordinary people own the streets.

Looking at Palm Sunday we should not understand it in a shallow way along these sort of lines: 'Well, you see Jesus came into Jerusalem and he is popular and look, then he gets arrested and the same people cry for him to be crucified at his trial.' And we must draw from this the banal conclusion that people are fickle and all sinners. Sin is individualised in a moralistic way. And so the full meaning of Palm Sunday is emasculated. (I might add that the people who welcomed Jesus in the streets were definitely not the rent-a-crowd pulled together by the Temple priests and the political authorities to yell for the lynching of Jesus).

Let us get it straight. The entrance into Jerusalem was a demonstration. In the most obvious sense it was a claim to power against the prevailing authorities in that city. It was the rightful king coming to claim what was his. And the general population received Jesus with joy. So we need to understand that Jesus leads a demonstration into Jerusalem formally and symbolically to claim it for God as God's messiah. He claims the city, its people, its institutions, its commerce, its religious sites, for God. And what that claim means is graphically illustrated when he goes to the temple with his disciples (and no doubt followed by the enthusiastic crowd) and starts whipping the corrupt bankers out of the building. This is no gentle Jesus meek and mild. This is the Messiah of God restoring righteousness in commerce and religion – at the end of a whip!

Yet, we also have to understand more. Jesus **does not become the new ruler of Jerusalem**. He does not live in a palace protected by security walls and gates and soldiers. Rather, he is arrested as a dissident, put through a farce of a trial, and killed on the cross.

We should therefore look at the implications of that first Palm Sunday.

Jesus does not shy away from **direct action in the everyday world**. He confronts it head on with God's claims. This is God's world, God's country, God's people. The nation needs to acknowledge God's reign and the message of Gods' Messiah. We too cannot shy away from directly confronting the world we live in (and it can literally include such

things as demonstrations and telling the truth about what is happening in the world). There is no endorsement from Jesus of a quietism that hides away from the everyday world or from its pain and sorrow and disasters such as the present one.

Second, Jesus **confronts the corruption and greed** in the intersection between religion and business. He deals with it first right at the top – in the Temple of Jerusalem where the temple hierarchy have made a deal with the moneychangers, financiers and bankers of the day. I once saw a poster which had the slogan “What would Jesus do?” (a slogan usually used for moralistic reasons to induce guilt in teenagers and young adults). Below it was a picture of Jesus whipping the bankers out of the temple and the text below said : “Jesus would get a whip and beat the shit out of the bankers”. It is an action which could well be applied to all the prosperity churches and cults that seem to worship material wealth. It would apply to the super rich in our country and the world who literally own billions. We too must fight the materialism and greed and corruption of our society and its lack of real concern for the poor.

Third, Jesus comes **in humility**, on a donkey. He would not be in any blue light convoy. His disciples are not to have bodyguards at their beck and call. Jesus is indeed the servant Messiah (a point made in the other readings selected for today in the Anglican lectionary – Isaiah speaking of the persecution and humiliation of the Servant of God and Paul in Philippians speaking of the one who “being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” We too must be humble, not seeking special privileges for ourselves.

Fourth, **people did welcome Jesus with joy**. Common people saw in him hope – yes, they wanted an end to Roman oppression and Temple priesthood extortion but they also wanted the good and they saw in Jesus the truly good. They had such high hopes. All dashed to smithereens on Good Friday when hope and goodness die on the cross – beautifully expressed in Luke’s account of two disconsolate disciples walking to Emmaus saying of Jesus: “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Christians too welcome Jesus of Nazareth with joy and in every Eucharistic prayer we say the words that echo the crowds at that first Palm Sunday:

Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

For us every Sunday, every Eucharist, is a Palm Sunday event. He is our hope.

Though today we are off the streets and the church buildings are silent and empty, participating in the Eucharist only spiritually, we are people of hope. Palm Sunday, like the rest of the gospel message, is an annunciation of liberation, of freedom from all the elements of this world that restrict, endanger and destroy humanity.

Prayer

Lord, you gave us a simple instruction: God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Give us the courage to welcome your coming into our world, our lives and cities and homes with joy.

Enable us to do your work in the world.

Strengthen our resolve to do what is right and necessary.

Be with us in dark times when we are afraid or fail.

Blessed are you.

Amen

On economic matters

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to deal with a number of things. It is quite interesting that he first chose to deal with the businessmen.

The idea that many people have that Jesus was some kind of starry-eyed religious mystic who didn't really understand how the ordinary world worked, is totally false. Jesus of Nazareth, a working man in a country under the rule of a mighty colonial power, understood perfectly how the economy worked. In fact his teaching and parables are full of acute observations of commerce, taxation, employer and employee (or, in fact, slave) relations. He understood all about tax collectors screwing more money out of the poor than they should, of worldly wise foremen and managers cooking the books to their own future advantage. [And his followers continued in that understanding, as anyone who reads James 5:1-6 or Revelation 18: 9-24 will agree.]

When Jesus arrived on Palm Sunday it is recorded that "he entered into Jerusalem, into the Temple; and on looking around at everything, the hour now being late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." (Mark 11:11) Today we might call that a fact-finding tour.

The very next day he took action (Mark 11:15-18) .

And they come into Jerusalem. And entering the Temple he began to throw out those selling and buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling the doves, And did not permit anyone to carry a container through the Temple, And he taught and said to them, "Has it not been written that 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den." And the chief priests and the scribes heard, and sought a way by which they might destroy him; for they were afraid of him, for all the crowd was awestruck at his teaching.

The action was swift and decisive. Jesus had no patience with commerce that was an exhibition of greed, exploitation and corruption. Can we, as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, have any patience with the greed, exploitation, profiteering and corruption of businessmen and the worship of the so-called market as a kind of god? Can we have patience when churches themselves become commercial prosperity cults worshipping wealth and success? Can we as followers of the Christ tolerate our own activities of petty tax-dodging and small bribe paying for such things as traffic offences or a higher place in the queues of our bureaucracies? And why have our own church institutions been so slow to challenge our own society?

Words in today's collect are appropriate here:

True and humble king, hailed by the crowd as Messiah:
grant us the faith to know you and to love you,
that we may be found beside you on the way of the cross
which is the path of glory

If we wish to “be found beside you on the way of the cross” then we also have to be beside Jesus as he cleanses the Temple market.

When the Corona virus pandemic nears its end and we have to restore the economies of our societies are we going to be at the forefront of working for a better, fairer, more equal economic deal for all the people on this planet and in South Africa?

Prayers

(from *Common Worship*)

Almighty God and Father,
You have so ordered our life
That we are dependent on one another;
Prosper those engaged in commerce and industry
And direct their minds and hands
That they may rightly use your gifts in the service of others;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Adapted from Prayer for Economic Justice from Australian Catholic bishops)

O Almighty God,
Whose blessed Son called Matthew the tax-collector
To be an apostle and evangelist:
Give us grace to forsake the selfish pursuit of gain
And the possessive love of riches:
That we may follow in the way of your Son Jesus Christ,
Who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever.

God of justice and compassion,
whose light shines into our hearts
and into our nation’s halls of power,
strengthen our faith as we acknowledge
the enormity of our task:
to include all in the prosperity of this land.

We pray for your spirit of generosity
in challenging greed and neglect.
Give us your grace to reach out
to the lowest paid workers,
families subsisting on meagre incomes,
people who are homeless,
the dispossessed and evicted,
so that we may achieve change,
inspired by the Gospel,
that leads to human flourishing.

We pray for your spirit of truth as we place
our own economic choices before you,
reflecting on our own motives as we strive
to give and to keep,
to save and to spend,
to invest and to speak out
in ways that honour every human being.

We pray for your spirit
of fierce love and determination
as we seek to assist and empower
the most vulnerable,
to create jobs and opportunities
where they are most needed,
to build an inclusive economy
that enables government and business
to champion a society
where justice and equity abound.

May we be instruments of your compassion
as we take up the needs of the poor,
May we be instruments of your mercy
as we bring truth to greed and neglect,
May we be instruments of your creative spirit
as we seek to make our world anew.

In Christ and through the Spirit we pray.

On intellectuals and opinion makers

After cleansing the Temple of the profiteers and commercial exploiters, Jesus of Nazareth then turned his attention to challenging those who were responsible for teaching the people of Judaea what they should believe and think. As it says in Mark 11:27 and following verses:

And they come again into Jerusalem. And, as he was walking about in the Temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders come to him, And said to him, "By what power do you do these things? Or who gave you this power, that you might do such things?" And Jesus said to them, "I shall ask you one thing, and you answer me, and I will tell you by what power I do these things: . . .

And they send some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to him, in order that they might trap him in words. And approaching they say to him, "Teacher, we know that you are truthful and that you have no anxiety concerning anyone, for you do not regard men's persons, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to render the poll-tax to Caesar or not? May we render it or may we not render it?"

Jesus is willing to enter into debate with the religious/political/educational/ideological leadership and opinion makers of the day. It was dangerous work, for most of the questions flung at Jesus were trick ones, designed to trip him up into saying something that would get him immediately arrested. Yet he does so because ideas and beliefs and opinions are important. False and untrue ideas lead to drastic consequences in the ordinary world. South Africans, above all, should know the truth of this – apartheid was a false idea that caused untold destruction and misery for the people of this country. Because of the human gift of language we also have the deadly gift of being able to lie – to use words to describe things that are not true as if they were true, to say that certain things are real when they are not and to deny that other things are real when they are.

Jesus is the truth bearer – he is indeed the very truth, the truthful heart of reality. His road to the cross is marked by his truth telling, to his disciples, to the crowds he preached and told parables to, and finally to those who had obscured the truth with perverted religion and false economic and political ideas. And that bringing of the truth is meant to set people free – free to be in a world where we can see and speak about reality as it actually is.

But there is a famous comment by journalist Gloria Steinem on the saying of Jesus in John 8:32 that his disciples "will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." She said: "The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off." Jesus's truth telling, his bringing of the truth to the intellectual elite of Jerusalem also leads to his death on the cross. St Paul was so enraged by the message of Jesus that he persecuted the young church until his conversion. Telling the truth is both unpopular and difficult. We don't often like the real truth.

As we look forward to a world beyond lockdown we need to commit ourselves to building a world on the foundations of truth. The all too easy lies, half truths and gossip of the media and particularly the new social media, needs to be corrected. We need to understand what genuine truths experts and scientists are saying. We have to, as well as becoming immune to the virus of Corona, also become immune to the fake news of the social media. This will require discipline and better education because how can we have a population able to detect the lies in the media and on the lips of crooked politicians when most children never learn to read well in school? The church as an institution must also once again become an intellectual force in society and be able to authoritatively give moral guidance to the nation.

Prayer (from Holy Name parish, Pennsylvania)

Lord, Jesus Christ,
You are the Way, the Truth and the Life.
Hear our prayer for truth and integrity
in all segments of society today.

May the truth be spoken by us and affirmed in others,
that in seeking truth, the world will come to find You,
the Source of All Truth.

Wherever relationships are weakened by deception or hypocrisy,
strengthen good Christian character among us
that we may bear witness to the critical need for truth.

May your Spirit of Truth fashion minds and hearts
open to a moral integrity so strong
that both words and actions can be trusted.

In public and private life,
deepen among us a genuine commitment
to honest, sincerity and truth-telling.

Let nations and peoples not compromise truth
by rationalization or pretense,
but safe-guard and defend it always
as Your most precious gift.

Lord, may those around us come to know
that they can take us at our word,
until that day when all the world lives in truth
and the Truth sets us free.

Amen.

In the Leper's house

Most of us are familiar with the story of a woman anointing Jesus, a sombre foretelling of his burial in two days time. But it is the context of the story that is also startling. As Mark 12:3 puts it:

And when he was in Bethany, in the home of **Simon the leper**, reclining at table, there came a woman who had an alabaster phial of pure, precious unguent of nard; breaking the alabaster phial, she poured it over his head.

In Jewish Law it was prohibited to eat with persons that had leprosy. Maybe Simon had been healed – perhaps by Jesus himself. But it is significant that Jesus is willing to stay with someone, and eat with someone, who had been, or still was, stigmatised as unclean.

There is even a possibility of a wider context. It is thought that Bethany may have been one of three places for the care of the sick, including one for lepers, to the east of Jerusalem. So Bethany may have been a poor-house, a centre for caring for the sick and aiding the destitute and poor Galilean pilgrims to Jerusalem.

Jesus of Nazareth associates with the poor, the sick, the leprous – all those who are stigmatized, for one reason or another, by society.

The elites and wealthy in society have always stigmatized the poor – it is not for nothing that a Google search on the linking of “poor + crime” gives 489 million hits and the link between “wealthy + crime” gives only 94 million. South Africa has had its full share of stigmatising people in its history – on the basis of skin colour (hence apartheid), not having a matric (hence billions to subsidise university students but minuscule sums for adult basic education), HIV status, being a black person from North of the Limpopo, and so on.

Positively, at least we have defeated apartheid (well sort of) and we had a vibrant effort by the Treatment Action Campaign which used advocacy, information, health materials, street theatre, demonstrations and law court actions to defend the rights and lives of HIV-positive people. But the struggle on behalf of the poor, the migrants, the sick and the stigmatised continues.

Jesus of Nazareth stays with the leper, the poor, the stigmatised. In the days ahead during lockdown and beyond, how will we, in whatever sense is meaningful, ‘stay’ with the homeless, the already unemployed and the newly coronated unemployed, the devastated hawkers and small business people, the elderly alone, the alcoholics and drug-dependent people going cold turkey without support, the depressed and mentally ill?

Prayer (Mother Teresa)

Jesus is the Word - to be spoken.
Jesus is the Truth - to be told.
Jesus is the Way - to be walked.
Jesus is the Light - to be lit.
Jesus is the Life - to be loved.
Jesus is the Joy - to be shared.
Jesus is the Sacrifice - to be given.
Jesus is the Bread of Life - to be eaten.
Jesus is the Hungry - to be fed.
Jesus is the Thirsty - to be satiated.
Jesus is the Naked - to be clothed.
Jesus is the Homeless - to be taken in.
Jesus is the Sick - to be healed.
Jesus is the Lonely - to be loved.
Jesus is the Unwanted - to be wanted.
Jesus is the Leper - to wash his wounds.
Jesus is the Beggar - to give him a smile.
Jesus is the Drunkard - to listen to him.
Jesus is the Little One - to embrace her.
Jesus is the Dumb - to speak to him.
Jesus is the Crippled - to walk with her.
Jesus is the Drug Addict - to befriend him.
Jesus is the Prostitute - to remove from danger and befriend her.
Jesus is the Prisoner - to be visited.
Jesus is the Old - to be served.

In the night of plague and liberation

I Corinthians 11: 23b-26:

The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, And, having given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is [being broken] for your sake; do this for my remembrance." Likewise, after supping, the cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink, for my remembrance." For as often as you eat the loaf and drink the cup, you announce the Lord's death until he come.

We can sympathetically imagine this last supper, Jesus and his disciples sharing a meal at night, aware that the forces opposed to Jesus are gathering and poised to strike. Jesus, conscious that he was about to die. This is the time for last words, a testament, a final statement about who he is, and also about the tasks the disciples will inherit.

But that scene is all played out in the context of another night scene, probably twelve to fifteen hundred years earlier, where groups of foreign aliens in Egypt shelter in their homes in the midst of some kind of pandemic which kills young people, as they prepare to flee the country. They escaped the contagion, death literally 'passed over' them, and the next day they embarked on the exodus to liberation. Jesus and his disciples are participating in this annual Passover recollection of that last meal in Egypt. The Passover meal had food ingredients with deep symbolic connotations.

Now, at his Last Supper, Jesus uses the food and drink on the table to illustrate, symbolise, and evermore to be, the sign of his presence. The unleavened bread and the wine are him, his body about to be broken by flagellation, crucifixion and death – for them, for us. His death will have meaning. And the meaning is simple – the divine gives himself totally in his love for his creation. And we know that this death, this self-giving of God, opens up the road to a second more glorious exodus.

Jesus makes a command. "Do this." Repeat this meal "for my remembrance". The English word "remembrance" unfortunately does not adequately translate the Greek word "anamnesis", which means not passive remembering but the active calling into the present of the past event – or inverting the idea, becoming actively present in the original event.

Tonight, in lockdown, we will not be able to share in a physical Last Supper remembrance meal. But as we huddle isolated in our homes, while a modern plague scours the world outside, we align ourselves with the disciples at that last meal, we recall into our present the message of that meal and its inauguration of the New Covenant in which nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Prayer

Lord, may we be your disciples.

May we participate in your meal with the faithful.

May we directly participate in you – in your life and death, in your body and blood.

May we be protected from the plague outside and from betrayals.

May we participate in the life of your body – for all your disciples are your body – and see you in all our brothers and sisters.

May we, like your disciples, be made alive again by your resurrection, and go forth, in and out of lockdown, to do your work on earth.

Amen

The crucified God

Crucifixion was a deliberately horrific form of execution for criminals and enemies of the state. I think it is difficult for most of us to really imagine the scene on that Friday. Almost impossible to see anything in it as 'good'. Yet a scene in which something utterly, incandescently impossible and unbelievable was happening: 'God' was being killed by his own creation. God's love for his creation had led to this singularity – a point at which we humans are incapable of deciphering its exact properties, where all our human equations, calculations and explanations no longer make any sense.

For me, the most vivid insight into Good Friday is a painting made by Matthias Grünewald between 1512 and 1516. He painted it as an altarpiece at the Isenheim hospital built by an order of monks to care for sick and dying peasants, many of them suffering from the effects of ergotism, a disease caused by consuming rye grain infected with fungus. The disease caused hallucinations, skin infection and attacked the central nervous system, eventually leading to death.



The dying Christ is shown stretched on the cross, his weight (he is bearer of the world's sin) bending the cross bar. His hands are rigid from the agony. His body is marked with livid spots of pox. Pieces from the flagellation whips are embedded in his body. His body looks as if it has been plucked. This is the God who has emptied himself of all power – has given himself utterly.

It was this figure that those dying in the hospital would see before them – he was like them, his skin like theirs, dying like them. Jesus was with them, was them.

The meaning of this painting is partly given by the figures depicted at the foot of the cross.

Mary, the Mother of God is supported by the disciple John. Jesus has asked him to care for her. The caring work of the disciples has to continue. Another Mary, the one who anointed Jesus two days before at Bethany is there with her jar of nard (now it really will be used for the burial). The worshipping work of the disciples will continue. And then, paradoxically, there is John the Baptist – who couldn't be there because he was dead. His words are printed there: "he must increase, but I must decrease." What irony is this? 'Increase' means to get to be murdered on a cross? The Baptist points with a long, almost impossibly pointed finger at the God on the cross. Believe it if you dare.

Prayer (the hymn in Philippians 2:5-11)

May we all be of that mind that was in Jesus the Messiah:

Who, subsisting in God's form,
did not deem being on equal terms with God a thing to be grasped,
But instead emptied himself, taking a slave's form, coming to be in a likeness of
human beings;
and, being found as a human being in shape,
He reduced himself, becoming obedient all the way to death, and a death by a cross.
For which reason God also exalted him on high and graced him with the name that is
above every name,
So that at the name of Jesus every knee – of beings heavenly and earthly and
subterranean – should bend,
And every tongue gladly confess that Jesus the Anointed is Lord,
for the glory of God the Father.

What a world

We usually think of the word 'world' as having two meanings – the visible world of a planet in space and the ordinary human social world we live in. What the New Testament calls the world, the *kosmos* in Greek, is something much broader – it is the whole ordering of the universe, visible and invisible, including the present human and suprahuman world order. This *kosmos* is an object of God's redemptive love, for it has in some way become a slave of death. Yet even in its plight it bears witness to the grandeur of God. The current *kosmos*/world order enslaves creation and wars against the good and the true. The negative side of the this world order is exploitation of human beings and nature, envy, violence, falsehood and lies, ignorance and a spiritual wasteland.

We cannot really understand where the evil that infects humanity comes from. We know that we as ordinary human beings are subject to massive powers that mould and contaminate our lives. The writers of the New Testament saw these massive forces as angelic and demonic powers. However we see them – as forces of the economy or a spirit of fascism or whatever, or as the spiritual and world forces that Paul described: "thrones, dominions, principalities and powers" – it is clear that Jesus and his disciples saw them as enemies. As Ephesians 6:12 puts it:

Because we are wrestling not against blood and flesh, but against the Archons, against the Powers, against the Cosmic Rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the celestial places.

On that Friday these powers dealt with Jesus of Nazareth. The powers of the *kosmos*, working through the hands of corrupt Temple Priests, cowardly Roman bureaucrats and cruel soldiers killed him.

We are left desolate. And the created world is somehow empty.

But Jesus had said to his disciples (John 16:33).

"Be of good cheer, I have overcome the *kosmos*."

We await.

Prayer (Holy Saturday morning prayer from the Divine Office)

All holy God of creation,
whose only Son went down among the dead and rose again in glory.
In your goodness raise up your faithful people,
buried with him in baptism,
to be one with him in the eternal life of your kingdom,
where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and
ever.
Amen.

A new day, a new earth and a new kosmos

A week can be a long time in history. The original Holy Week is no exception.

At its start – on what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus of Nazareth led a demonstration into Jerusalem to confront the capital city, to claim it for God – for it is God’s city, in God’s country, it contained’s God’s people and was part of God’s creation. Jesus called upon its people to acknowledge God’s reign and the good news brought by God’s Messiah.

Though the common people welcomed him, he was confronted by the corruption, greed and injustice in the intersection between religion and business. Jesus dealt with these evils directly, right at the top – in the Temple of Jerusalem where the temple hierarchy had made a cosy deal with the moneychangers, financiers and bankers of the day.

The common people saw in him hope – they wanted an end to Roman oppression and Temple priesthood’s extortion and they desired the good that they saw in Jesus.

Of course many people’s hopes revolved around fantasies of revenge and the reversal of things. They wanted Jesus to lead some kind of holy *coup de etat*. Jesus would be the new Messiah king. He would trample all the enemies of Judea underfoot. The tables would be turned. But Jesus came (as the prophet Zechariah had foreseen) in humility on a donkey not a war horse.

He refused to be that kind of Messiah.

On the Thursday, Jesus was taken by the authorities in a night arrest, put through a farce of a trial, and on Friday executed as a common criminal and rebel.

All the hopes of the common people and the direct followers of Jesus were smashed on Good Friday. Hope and goodness died on the cross – never better expressed than in Luke’s account of two disconsolate disciples walking to Emmaus, and saying of the man from Nazareth:

a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and ... our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.
But **we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.**”

We had hoped, they said. But it was not to be.

But it **was** to be.

It is. **He is risen.**

How do we understand this event. This rising, this reappearance. This reversal of what we know to be true – we all die and stay dead.

One early account comes in Luke's report in Acts 10:39-42 of Peter's first speech to gentile hearers. Peter says that God was with Jesus.

We are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and caused him to be seen; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

The first point to note is that Peter tells us that the man Jesus of Nazareth **did not raise himself from the grave**. God did.

And by so doing God authenticated that this man, the carpenter from Nazareth, was indeed the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ, the Word of God.

God authenticated that he was indeed the "one to redeem Israel"

and as Peter continues (10:43):

To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The second point is something more mysterious. And the mystery goes back to the very nature of God.

Who is this God who raises Jesus, authenticates that he is the Messiah by demolishing death, **but does it quietly, behind the scenes**, to a demoralised group of scared disciples on the run from the authorities?

Why did Jesus not appear triumphant in the Temple and break down its doors?

Why did he not appear to Pilate and compel his homage?

Why did Jesus not appear followed by the endless train of all the dead of the past, parents, grandparents, their parents, their grandparents and great grandparents, their forebears, their ancestors, going back and back and back to the beginning of life – restored, nothing lost, no longer forgotten, all recovered, anew?

Certainly Christian theology and Christian art depict a triumphant Christ breaking down the doors of Hades – the place of the dead – and yanking out our first ancestors (in Genesis' language, Adam and Eve).

But as far as the world order – the kosmos – is concerned the resurrection is not visible – apart from the effect it has on the witnesses, on their lives, their testimony, their often heroic deaths in times of persecution.

Why was the resurrection shown only to a few – the witnesses chosen by God?

There is a concept – *Tsimtum* – in the Jewish teachings called the kabbalah – that throws some light on our understanding of this. *Tzimtum* refers to the idea that in some paradoxical way, God had to withdraw or retract himself, if it were to be possible at all for there to be existence outside of himself. Paradoxical, because the creation can only happen because God causes it to be, yet God has to leave a 'space' in which the physical world and human free will can exist.

If the resurrection were obvious and death no longer existed in the world would not everybody believe and be devout? Humanity would never grow up, nor individual character be tested.

That is why the account of Jesus' appearing to Mary the Magdalene is so important in its message.

John's gospel describes how Mary had discovered the open tomb and run to call Peter and John. They went into the tomb and John, seeing the flat burial cloth, empty of a body and with the face covering lying nearby, neatly rolled up, understood and believed. They then left and forgot that Mary was in the nearby garden, weeping.

She turned round and saw a figure, whom she thought was the gardener. The figure asked her why she was weeping and she said that the body of her Lord had been removed.

He says "Mary". She recognises the voice. And she replies in Hebrew: "Teacher."

Then there is a strange conversation. One suspects that Mary wants to cling to him, never to let him go again. She had lost all. Her teacher had been crucified. Dead. Gone.

Jesus tells her not to cling to him, not to hold on to him. He has to return to the Father to become truly available across time and eternity to all. He cannot remain in bodily form for ever.

Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my disciples and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

And so Mary, a woman, becomes the first witness of the resurrection and the first evangelist:

Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

So in God's good humour, a person not considered credible in Jewish law (a woman), became the first bearer of good news to us. A person mistaken for a gardener is the risen one.

The people of Jerusalem on that Sunday morning were signally unaware that the most momentous event in the history of the planet earth had taken place and that a woman whose tears were changing from sorrow to ecstatic joy was running through the pre-dawn streets to tell the followers of Jesus that he was risen.

We are all, inevitably, now or in the future, the sons and daughters of dead parents. Thus we acknowledge ourselves as mortals, living in a world from which God is somehow absent. He lets us die. We will join our parents in due course.

The rising of Jesus from the dead is our entrance into the knowledge and trust that, to the contrary, God **is** active in the creation, and that the raising of the dead is the ultimate message of the good news. It is God's project – this new earth and this new kosmos.

This good news we celebrate weekly in the sacrament of the Eucharist in which the risen one breaks bread with us (as he first did with the two sad disciples on the way to Emmaus). This Sunday, unlike other Sundays, we will not join to break bread together. Maybe this absence will make us conscious that the normal Sunday celebration or even Easter Sunday, is no mere ceremony. For Easter must include the whole year and be celebrated not just in the church building but in the world outside.

As a divine project, resurrection is an accomplished fact, but as action in the world it is not yet completed.

Christ, the Messiah was its first fruits, and, through us, the people of God, it has been continuing and is continuing even now.

The resurrection followed by the ascension expresses that Jesus of Nazareth is now in the 'highest' with God the Father, risen to participate in the almighty power of God and to exercise rule over the whole universe. Jesus now has access to everything which belongs to God. His divine identity with the Father has been revealed, authenticated. And humanity has been lifted up into God. God's gracious entry into human life was not for a time but for ever. We live in a universe that we know to be God's because it is the world of Jesus of Nazareth.

Prayer (Adapted from a Jesuit prayer particularly appropriate when we eat a meal today whether with our family or alone)

Creator God and Lord of Life,
You who call forth from the darkness of death
all those who love you,
we rejoice, on this Easter Sunday,
in the resurrection from the dead
of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Visit our home and this table
with your bright blessing of peace and life.
We pause in the midst of this prayer
to remember all the holy dead of our family
who live now in you and who await
the final and glorious resurrection of the dead.
May they and we,
because of our faith in you, our God,
taste in the victory of life over death.
May the Risen Christ, our Lord and Saviour,
be our guest as we celebrate his resurrection
with this meal.
May you, then, bless this table and this food,
and each of us in this place and throughout the world
in your holy name.

Amen

Jesus is Lord, everything is changed

The first creed of the followers of Christ was three words: “Jesus is Lord”. It is first spoken in the famous words of Thomas the doubter when he finally met the risen Jesus (John 20: 28):

“My Lord and my God.”

Jesus of Nazareth, the dead man on the cross, is now alive and is recognised as Lord and God.

The term “Lord” was not simply a word for an important person or ruler. In Jewish society the word Lord had a special meaning. When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek a couple of centuries before Christianity, Jewish people had already stopped using the personal name for their God, “Yahweh”. Instead they respectfully substituted the word “*Adonai*” (Lord). So the name of God was replaced by the word Lord (in Greek “*kurios*”).

The resurrection showed that God had vindicated Jesus. Jesus is recognised by Thomas and the other disciples as both human and divine – he is Lord. With Thomas’ statement we can see that if that humble carpenter and preacher from Nazareth is “Lord”, everything we believe and practise must change. It means that the teaching of Jesus is supremely important. It means that our behaviour should be aligned with his example. It means that no earthly lord or power or force is superior to Jesus the Lord.

And the first Christians showed this. They recognised that their world, their “kosmos”, had been upended. There was no one superior to their Lord. And many paid for that recognition with their lives, when the Roman authorities demanded that the Roman Emperor was the only real lord (as have many dictators and rulers in subsequent eras).

The consequences of saying “Jesus is Lord” are profound. If we take those words seriously everything changes – we are changed in the orientation of our lives and what we think and do in the human world, the kosmos, changes as well.

Not easy, but the risen Lord says to us (Matthew 28:20):

I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Prayer



The Lord in Glory
Stained glass window at
St John the Divine, Durban

'You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.'

(Revelation 4:9-11)

Lord, may my life recognise you as Lord.
May my words recognise you as Lord.
May my labour recognise you as Lord.
May my influence in human society recognise you as Lord.
May my relationships with all people show that I recognise you
as Lord.

And may your resurrected life give me the grace and strength to
follow you as Lord.

Amen

Jesus is risen and Lord – joy is real!

In the midst of horrific and trying times, when our minds cannot really comprehend that the Corona virus infections are more than a million and there are 120 thousand deaths, one cannot be happy. Happiness does rather depend on there being pleasant circumstances in our natural and human worlds. The first disciples were not happy during the dire events that happened in the courts and execution sites of Jerusalem. Indeed, I suspect that they were seldom happy even after the resurrection of their Lord. Their lives were too filled with urgent mission under difficult and often awful conditions and in most cases they ended up as martyrs for the faith.

But they were filled with something different from happiness, they were joyous. They were joyously and more plentifully alive. And they never lost that joy.

[One cannot make too much of it but the translation of the New Testament that I use has only seven references to happiness (more or less equivalent to being fortunate or prosperous) and more than 70 references to joy – that internal elation that is not about oneself but about a shared sense of ultimate wonder. It is significant that the Greek word for joy (*chara*) is derived from the same root as the word for grace (*char*). Joy is the result of grace.]

Jesus had, according to John's gospel (16:20, 22), promised the disciples that after his death – which would make the kosmos, the false world order, very happy – there would be the coming of joy to them:

I tell you that you will weep and will lament, and the kosmos will celebrate; you will feel anguish but your anguish will become joy. ... And so now indeed you feel anguish; but I shall see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you.

I find it difficult to comprehend the joy that must have been experienced by Mary Magdalene, John, Peter and those two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Everything was now different. It is the same joy that infuses many of the letters of Paul the Apostle, a prisoner on his way to Rome. It is the same joy that is expressed by Christians throughout the ages when they have experienced the Risen One in their lives and been set free to love and forgive and live out the Kingdom in the world.

Prayer (an old Baptist hymn)

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die?
The Lord my Saviour liveth;
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.
When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near,
How can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile,
Our thoughts to them go winging;
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging;
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?
I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;
I see the blue above it;
And day by day this pathway smooths,
Since first I learned to love it,
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his—
How can I keep from singing?

Restoring all things

The current debate on the television and radio is about what happens when lockdown ends. It may be a somewhat premature debate, pushed in particular by those who want their businesses running, but it resonates with what happened after Easter Sunday – a new start. Jesus appears alive and there is joy. Out of horror and terror and despair there is now a new dawn. But we notice in the Gospel accounts how the Risen One is engaged in a ministry of restoration. It is a ministry that tells us that nothing good is lost. It also tells us that this restoration is also greater than what went before.



Jesus takes his broken group of disciples – broken by their loss, their fear, and at times their cowardice. Also at times, disabled by their thickheadedness. The risen Lord enters locked rooms and calms their fears. He eats with them. He gives them commands about worldwide mission. He assures them of his everlasting presence. The restoration of that small group, the seed of a worldwide church, is itself a miracle.

How do we, in our own future, when after the virus is subdued, start again, live a restored life and seek to make this a better, restored world?

I always find the story of Peter's restoration so significant here.

In the parish church I attend there are two wonderful stained glass windows where you enter the church – of St Peter and St Paul, the founder leader figures of the young church. The St Peter window shows Peter holding the keys to the kingdom of heaven, but under his feet is the cockerel that heralded his denial of Christ.

We can all picture the type of man Peter was. His very nickname name tells us what Simon was like – “Rocky” (*Petros*). A tough, simple fisherman, enthusiastic, loyal, open. Yet he denies Jesus when he fears arrest (and he will again sometimes lose his nerve in the future). It is this broken-hearted Peter who is restored by the risen Lord in that remarkable account in John's gospel of the Lord getting Peter to make a threefold reaffirmation of his love for Jesus, rescinding his threefold denial.

Peter, the disciple nurtured and led by Jesus of Nazareth and now restored, must in the future act bravely and decisively. For he has been appointed the visible proxy for the invisible good shepherd in leading the other disciples and growing the young church, confronting its enemies, and making the crucial outreach breakthrough to the gentiles.

The restored Peter leads the disciples, he holds the young persecuted church together, he confronts the hostile religious authorities without a trace of fear and he silences them. And in due course he will lead the young church to embrace the gentiles, the non-Jews, because at the very beginning of the Church's outreach, xenophobia is rejected.

Peter does not just exhibit courage and a sense of protectiveness for the little flock. He shows that the resurrection releases love and ends fear – he heals a cripple, he stands firm against orders to stop preaching the good news, he goes out to embrace the gentiles.

In Peter we see the fruits of the vindication by God the Father, of Jesus as Messiah through the resurrection. First, the new courage, second, the new care, the love, for the people of the church – to the extent of the laying down of life as nearly all the twelve disciples did, and lastly, the love shown to those outside the church.

May Peter be an exemplar to our own life as we prepare for the future and a restored world.

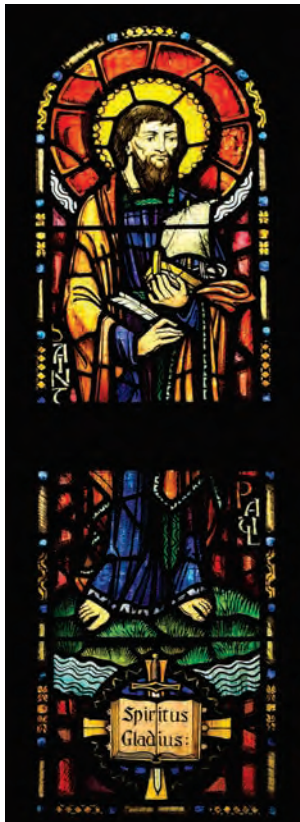
Prayer (adapted from the Church of England St Peter's day collect)

Almighty God,
who by your Son Jesus
gave to the Apostle Saint Peter many great gifts,
restoring him with your resurrected life,
and commanding him earnestly to feed your flock:
May we all follow your word,
care for all people
and live and work
to your praise and glory.
Amen.

“Be of that mind in yourselves that was also in the Anointed One Jesus”

Have we ever experienced a time when suddenly, the views of scientists were taken so seriously? When last did scientific spokes-people become media stars such as South Africa’s Drs Mkhize and Karim and the USA’s Dr Fauci have in the last month? Scientists are usually expected to tell the truth and in their own domain they get into serious trouble when they falsify facts or publish lies. This is a time when, thankfully, most of the world (apart from moral imbeciles such as Trump) are wanting to hear the truth and listen to reason about the pandemic and climate change.

Truth is absolutely foundational to Christianity. How could it be otherwise when Jesus is described as the Logos – the truthful word, the reason of God. The idea that there can be something true in science but not in religion (or vice versa) is a horrendous falsity. Truth is truth, whatever the field. (Of course our backgrounds and limited knowledge and perceptions may see the truth in different perspectives – but truth is one). Thinking carefully and deeply about things, seeking the truth, weighing the evidence, and estimating the consequences of actions, are all moral imperatives for Christians. We value genuine thinkers.



And we have much to thank a man called Saul for having made truthful thinking an important part of the life of the church.

Saul, was initially a persecutor of the first Christians. It is unclear whether he had ever met Jesus during his ministry. But he had certainly taken against his teaching. When doubting Thomas uttered the words “My Lord and my God” to the risen Jesus one can see why Saul was enraged further by this stance of the newly restored disciples. Saul made it his mission to eradicate the young church.

He was called by Christ in a vision, converted, renamed Paul, and made three missionary journeys described in Acts. St Paul wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. He was taken to Rome under arrest and eventually martyred there.

In my parish church the stained glass window of St Paul balances that of St Peter. Paul holds three emblems – a sword (the Spiritus Gladius, “the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God” (Ephesians 6:10-18)), a pen for his writings, and a ship for his missionary journeys.

Who was this man? He was a truly brilliant intellect, devout and conservative in his religious beliefs, obstinate, proud, self-sufficient, a bit obsessive, determined to do what was correct and prescribed whatever the cost.

The risen Christ appears to him in a vision as he journeys to Damascus to persecute the Christians there and he finds out that he is totally wrong in just about everything.

His mind has failed to comprehend who Jesus is.
His devotion was to a false image of God.
His religious beliefs were enslaving him.
His pride led to the deaths and pain of others.
His obsession with obeying every scrap of Jewish law was a mistake.
And what he did was not right and in fact he was unrighteous.

And God literally knocked him off his horse (Acts 9:1-7).

Perhaps he had already known it in his heart his own wrongness as he condemned Christians like Stephen the deacon to persecution and even death. And Jesus, the exalted resurrected Messiah, raised by the Father from death, reveals himself to this god-awful, arrogant, self-righteous man, and remakes him – for our sake – and his intellect is used to the glory of the young church.

Jesus doesn't leave Paul lying on the ground, stunned and destroyed by this revelation – that the Jesus whom he persecutes is indeed Lord and God. It is a crucial theological revelation – these persecuted Christians are the living body of Christ.

Jesus says: “But get up and stand on your feet.” As Jesus says to all us proud intellectuals, self-sufficient in our sins until we get knocked down – Get up and stand on your feet!

And he got up on those feet and after a process of healing and instruction in the Christian faith, he used those feet to walk the roads of the ancient world bringing the gospel message to that world and in particular to the Gentiles – that's us. This Christian Paul, is above all the baptismal father in God of all of us who are not Jews.

And he turned his tremendous intellect to the glory of the Christ.

I want to say something about the bad press about Paul – maybe I should rather say the fake news about Paul. There are so many misconceptions about Paul the apostle. Paul is misunderstood and misrepresented. Typical myths are that Jesus was nice and Paul was not, that Jesus was all mercy and forgiveness and Paul was all rules and regulations and fiercely judgmental of others. Or that Jesus taught a simple faith, homely parables under the Galilean sun, and Paul all sorts of complicated theology and so forth. That Paul was intolerant and rigid. That he was against women. Serious study of his letters show the falsity of these accusations. For example in respect of women Paul fully expects women to speak and prophesy in church, and clearly approves of them doing so. The genuine writings of Paul present an almost unprecedented idea of equality for women (Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Paul gave up all the status that being an educated intellectual could have given him (1 Corinthians 4:9-13):

I sometimes think that God means us, the messengers, to appear last in the procession of mankind, like the men who are to die in the arena. For indeed we are

made a public spectacle before the angels of Heaven and the eyes of men. We are looked upon as fools, for Christ's sake, but you are wise in the Christian faith. We are considered weak, but you have become strong: you have found honour, we little but contempt. Up to this very hour we are hungry and thirsty, ill-clad, knocked about and practically homeless. We still have to work for our living by manual labour. Men curse us, but we return a blessing: they make our lives miserable but we take it patiently. They ruin our reputations but we go on trying to win them for God. We are the world's rubbish, the scum of the earth, yes, up to this very day.

Thinking back on Peter. He is the good, rough, ordinary guy. "Rocky". He is not a great intellect but his heart is in the right place and he dearly loves the Lord, which is why it is on this Rock that the church is built. Most of us are a bit like Peter, ordinary folk. But he also has cowardly lapses, as when conservative Jewish Christians want him to go back on his acceptance of the gentiles into the church without them having to obey all the Jewish moral or ritual conditions.

Paul by contrast is a towering figure of thought. We need those people too, and we need them especially in a crisis, and it is Paul who had the insight and the courage to demand that Peter keep to the call of Jesus and open the church to gentiles.

In this time we need the deep scientific thinkers and the statistical modellers and the doctors who will tell the truth about the pandemic to the world, however uncomfortable and painful it may be. We need brave thinkers and scientists who will not back down when petty rulers try to intimidate them. We need them, as the early church needed Paul and still needs him today.

Prayers

(Church of England Collect)

O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, has caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we ask you, that we, having his wonderful conversion in mind, may show our thankfulness to you, by following his example and teaching; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(A Prayer for my intellect from Catholic online)

Lord, you who are the source of all Life, all Truth, and all Beauty,
I pray to you today, with all my heart, for my intelligence, that it may be used rightly.
I pray for this thing which runs after ideas, symbols and numbers, this thing which can also understand the thoughts of others.
I pray to you that my mind may be penetrated and illuminated by your Word.
Lord, help make my intelligence amenable to all truth, to understand the thoughts of others;
give to me the wisdom to know the meaning and purpose of my life and learning,
so that my knowledge, understanding, and skills may help in some little ways to make this world a better place, for your greater glory.
Amen.

“To behold the beauty of the LORD”

Psalm" 27:4

One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

It is three weeks done. Who imagined a year ago that we would be under house arrest in our own homes? Who could have imagined that we would be called upon, whether we liked it or not, to re-think, re-feel, re-experience (now in the form of absence) our relationships with other? If, as we are constantly told in pop ubuntu speak, we are persons through other people, are we already in a process of dying? Yes and No. Yes, we will all suffer the consequences of social isolation and there is a restoration task ahead for the church in this regard. No, in that the isolation, meaning a certain dying to the noise, clutter and distractions of our previous lives, has enabled us to see into ourselves more clearly. In that sense lockdown has made us more alive, and our senses more alert.

I go up onto the roof of my block of flats to run fifty laps around it to do my 5 km run. I look out over the place I live in and see it more clearly, each house, building, tree, cloud and sunset more clearly defined. I am perhaps seeing them clearly for the first time and the absence of Durban's industrial smog helps.

Undergoing the discipline of writing a homily each day has forced me to look more steadily at the narratives I read in the Bible, watch on television news, and read on the Internet.

And what I am seeing, beyond the suffering and the dislocation and the consequences of stupidity, malice and greed, is the beauty of God.

A reading of the closing pages of John's gospel; the recognition event when Mary Magdalen sees the gardener/risen Jesus, in which I can almost hear the laughter of God; in doubting Thomas seeing the crucifixion scarred Jesus and the comedy of Saul being knocked off his horse to become Paul – all show us that God is beautiful.

Beauty is that free and unforced gift, the disinterested pleasure, that mysteriously and unexpectedly seeing (whether audibly, visually or conceptually) into real being. God is beautiful because he freely expresses his nature – and that nature is loving and good and graceful and beautiful. Looking at that beauty awakens in us a splendour, it restores us to the innocence of childhood. Jesus is beautiful and he shows us the total interplay, the interchangeability, between God and himself – in everything he does,

dying on the cross and rising from the dead and having a meal on the shores of the Lake of Galilee with his disciples. Jesus is not something in addition to God, rather he is the perfect expression of God.

He promises to go forth in us. That going forth is already who he is.

Prayer

Lord awaken in me the sense of beauty to see and enjoy you as you are – the giver of yourself in creation and redemption.

Lord open my eyes to see the beauty of you at work in the acts of love and sacrifice and bravery of nurses, doctors, food deliverers, decision makers.

Open my ears to the sounds of the creativity and humour of people who help us survive this time.

Open my mind and being to love and enjoy you.

Amen.

Saints and dragons

A few days ago I received an electronic version of a book called *My hero is You* designed to be read to, or read by, young children. It was prepared by a United Nations and NGO Inter-Agency Standing Committee group on mental health in disaster situations. It explains in simple terms what the virus is and how children can help defeat it. This got me thinking about the question: “How do we talk to children about what has happened?”

For literally billions of young people (and older ones too), the global lockdown will be one of the most memorable events of their lives. Yet it is a strange experience – there is no obvious enemy. We are not under siege from foreign forces. We are not being bombed from the air. But we have an enemy. Most of us are to some degree frightened, if not for ourselves, then for our children or our parents or grandparents. Educated people such as ourselves can at least conceptualise what the enemy is. It is a particularly nasty and deadly germ. We can also situate the disaster in what we know of our society and the global society. We can understand why inequality and poverty make the people of some countries particularly vulnerable and we can understand why corrupt or self-centred political leadership can make things worse, as has happened in the United States of America. But children are more exposed to the primal fear of something strange, that has upturned their world, makes it dangerous to go outside, and is killing people. It is something evil and ugly in the dark.

We Christians often get rather stuck into a narrative of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. This is of course correct. But, there is another narrative, which is equally strong in the New Testament: it is of Jesus as a hero who defeats death and the evil one. And children immediately understand that: Christ is a victor.

In many cultures there are traditional folk tales or fairy tales that often give children their first idea of the defeat of evil things. We do not need to teach children about evil things. Children, from the moment they have an imagination, know about bogeymen or tokoloshe under the bed or dragons in the dark. These tales do not create the fears. What they do is give the first set of clear pictures of the idea that these terrors have limits and that they can be defeated. We Christians also have such stories. Some of them are of course factual, some somewhat legendary. The best example is the story, originally from the Middle East, of St George killing a dragon (I will have more to say about the real St George on another occasion). From such stories we understand that the shapeless enemies in the dark are conquered by the saints of God – the light will overcome the darkness and love conquers all evil. Evil things can be beaten.



One of the pictures on my wall is of St George astride a magnificent white horse (representing the appropriate use of our physical bodies) piercing the dragon with a spear and thrusting it back into the darkness (its place) from which it has emerged against the will of God.

How resonant with the Corona virus story! A virus, which no doubt has a place in the earth's biological economy, has left its place and invaded the human world. This virus dragon has to be defeated by the saints (doctors, nurses, scientists and all the rest of us), using our material and intellectual gifts to the full, and be pushed back into the darkness from which it came.

Prayer (Adapted from a Catholic Episcopal Conference prayer for the end of the virus)

O Almighty and holy God, holy and strong, holy immortal one, have mercy on us.

Holy father, in union with your Son and the Holy Spirit, we beg you to destroy the power of evil, of all principalities and powers, and rulers of darkness, who fight against your kingdom.

Defend all those who work for our health and safety at this time, strengthen them with courage, endurance and hope.

Hear graciously the prayers we make for those affected by the virus in various parts of the world.

Grant healing to the sick, eternal life to the dead and consolation to the bereaved families.

We pray for the governments and health authorities that they take appropriate steps for the good of all the people.

And in the midst of this, keep us strong in faith, hope and love. Grant us the courage and perseverance to be good neighbours.

Look upon us in your mercy and forgive us our failings.

Amen.

Peter's restoration

John's gospel has a well known addition – the last chapter (21) – which has the famous dialogue between the risen Lord and Peter. In the midst of the joy of the disciples, Jesus takes Peter aside, and gets him to reaffirm his loyalty so that his denial, his threefold betrayal, is undone. This is Peter's restoration and the sending him out on his path of mission.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Foreign as it is to modern urban dwellers, shepherding is a key image in both Old and New testaments. In ancient and many contemporary societies, care of the sheep is absolutely crucial to sustaining life. In the scriptures the idea of shepherding became an emblem of the way in which the leaders of society care for that society and its people.

Many people are unfamiliar with the astounding prophetic words of Ezekiel Chapter 34 in which the prophet, using all the imagery of a shepherd's activities, rails against the political/religious rulers of the time and how they have failed; rails against the sheep themselves, who when they are left effectively shepherdless, turn against each other; and points out how bad shepherding despoils the environment. And on top of that, this text foretells the incarnation – "I myself will search for the sheep and look after them."

I can think of no more appropriate text than Ezekiel's in the context of the current world crises of the virus and climate warming. Surely we have lost our way when in towns, cities and nations we see examples of leadership that has grown sleek and powerful and corrupt. Many of our so-called celebrities indulge in the most crass worship of greed and consumption. Confidence trickster pastors run prosperity cult churches. Politicians and public servants openly say, "It is our turn to feed." And people and nations are led, in Ezekiel's phrases, to shove and butt and trample and muddy and despoil.

Good shepherd leadership is needed in our crises in both church and state. Maybe, in South Africa, we see signs of its return at the highest level. It is still lacking in places such as the United States and Brazil.

Jesus gave the restored Peter the instruction to feed the sheep. That becomes the mission of all people in God's church. We have to feed the sheep and that is not just a spiritual instruction. People quite literally have to be fed, both now in the crisis and after the lockdown. We will have to reorder our societies so that no person goes hungry. We have work to do, a mission to fulfil.

Prayer (Adapted from Jenkins Institute)

Good Shepherd,
we pray that you will guide and protect the good people who give to their time and talent, who toil over difficult decisions, striving to shepherd their people. May their minds and actions be brave and steadfast. May they not be discouraged by setbacks and malicious opposition and mistakes. May they never believe themselves infallible and may they be quick to correct when they need to. Bless them for their sacrificial labour of love in tending your sheep.
May they know that you see them and are with them.
Amen.

Walking through a church

Yesterday, the Sunday service I attended was in a sitting room, watching (and joining in occasionally) a YouTube streamed presentation, put together by a group of technologically adept young people in my local parish. I had the novel experience of watching myself preach a sermon (originally delivered to my cellphone in my bedroom two days before). A novel virus has prompted extraordinary new forms of behaviour for millions of humans.

Of course I miss being in my local church – St John the Divine, Clark Road, Durban – not only because it is a beautiful community of people but also because it is an exquisitely beautiful church with some of the most wonderful stained glass windows in the country.

Today's collect – the prayer that gathers together the intentions of the readings and petitions of the day – focused on the mission that the disciples receive through the resurrected Jesus. And here the beauty of this particular small church building and its beautiful windows is a sermon, a teaching in itself, about the church's mission, who does it and how it is done.

So I am going to describe what the very construction of this church building teaches.

You enter through the double west doors and on one side is St Peter and on the other St Paul. They are the bedrock disciples whose witness tells us where to look and where to go. St Peter expresses that rugged simple faith that we all need (the rock on which the church and its mission is founded). St Paul stands for the necessity of faith too, but above all on the need to think clearly. The church of God is a thinking church which knows that the ideas people have are important for good or ill. Both push us to go forward.

We then walk down the central nave on a journey – the journey of our life, our mission.

And on the left side are the windows of six of the disciples, those who walked with Jesus on his human journey and learnt from the master and in turn teach us: Andrew, James, John, Jude, Thomas and Simon the Zealot.

On the right side, in many ways equally important, are the people who both responded to Jesus, were his personal friends, and supported his ministry. There are Mary and Martha who were supporters of Jesus and were his friends. There is their brother Lazarus, being unwrapped from his grave bindings, a close friend of Jesus (for whom Jesus wept). There is Mary Magdalene who materially supported his ministry and stood with his mother at the foot of the cross. There is Nicodemus, the important but scared person who came to Jesus secretly by night to learn the truth about God and there is Joseph of Arimathea who provided the last human service to Jesus of Nazareth by giving him a tomb.

In our walk of life we need the formal discipleship and the discipline of the church to bring us forward. But we also need the support and friendship of those who will, perhaps less directly, care for us on the way.

We then enter to choir and above us are three of the evangelists – that is the writers of the gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke (we have already seen John). If we are to be disciples we need to know what Jesus teaches us. They are the memory of the church, they provide the writings that can guide us. So we understand that we have to study the scriptures and understand the contexts and meanings of what Jesus of Nazareth said and did in his earthly life.

Then to the side, quite literally, is a side chapel, dedicated to Mary, with windows showing scenes of the Annunciation, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the Visit of the wise men, and Mary finding Jesus in the Temple. Apart from being a place for prayer, it reminds us of the human life of Jesus, that he was once a child, and that his mother had said yes to God. Mary epitomises for us the love of human family, our need to be cared for and nurtured. We need that care and nurture on our way forward.

And then we are in the sanctuary with its altar. Above and behind the altar is a glorious band of windows. In the centre is the figure of Christ – Lord, risen. This is the goal of our entrance into this church building and this is the goal of our Christian life. This is where it all begins and ends. This is the Alpha and the Omega.

And also in this heavenly high up band is, on the left of Jesus, Mary Mother of God, Queen of Heaven – no longer the simple peasant girl who said yes to God. On the right is John the Baptist. Nothing is lost, all the past, and particularly the lives of the Old Testament prophets, is gathered there. And on either side of them are the austere figures of four archangels – Uriel (the fire of God), Michael (the warrior of God), Raphael (the healing from God) and Gabriel (the messenger of the wisdom of God). They are not human, their faces are neither male nor female and they represent the invisible and mighty forces of God's creation. And those forces are on our side against all evil.

And then, at ground level, behind the altar in a walkway (the ambulatory) is the hidden jewel in this church.

Up above this band is the heavenly, the eternal. Down at ground level, where our walk from the West door has finally brought us – and where our human life walk brings us – are emblems of our human vocations. These are the things we can do in the world with our lives. We start with Joseph, the husband of Mary. The symbol of earthly parenthood, of the loving care of family and children and, as a breadwinner, the patron saint of workers. Most of us will play a parent role at some time in our lives. Next is St Martin, a conscripted soldier, bureaucrat and finally a rather unwilling bishop. He shows us that we often have few employment choices in our lives yet we must, whatever we have to do, even in positions of high authority, do so as Christians in loving kindness to all and with true service. He is shown cutting his soldier's cloak in half to give to a starving and cold beggar. Next we have St George killing a dragon showing that as Christians we have to be unrelenting in our fight against evil, tyranny and injustice. And some Christians have a particular vocation to take up that fight. St Hugh of Lincoln is there, perhaps representing good leadership in the church – he resisted the unjust behaviour of the state, protected minorities, cared for lepers and was the friend of wild animals and birds

(an early ecologically aware person). Also in this band are three lesser-known disciples – Philip, James the Less and Bartholemew representing formal Christian ministry. So here, at the end is where we are – living in the world in our respective work roles and vocations, conscious that above all is the Risen Lord. Under him we are in the right place. And there in the centre at ground level – is a window showing the symbols of the Eucharist – the Lord with us in a special way.

I long to be in that church again at the Eucharist. We wait.

Prayer

O heavenly Father,

We thank you for the incarnation of your son, Jesus.

We thank you for your church and all the saints, apostles, and disciples you have given us to guide our path in this our human lives.

May all your holy ones be with us in our earthly struggle and against disaster and death at this time.

May they encourage and comfort us all and always draw us towards you,

Who with you Son and the Holy Spirit are our eternal life and joy.

Amen.

We need good people

I listen to an audio file sent out by our parish priest in which he prays for our government in this challenging situation when the poor and vulnerable will suffer most, that government officials will be true servants of the nation, and that the rich will share with others. We are already hearing stories of crooked tenders in getting blankets for the homeless centres and of food hampers being mis-allocated and sold for money.

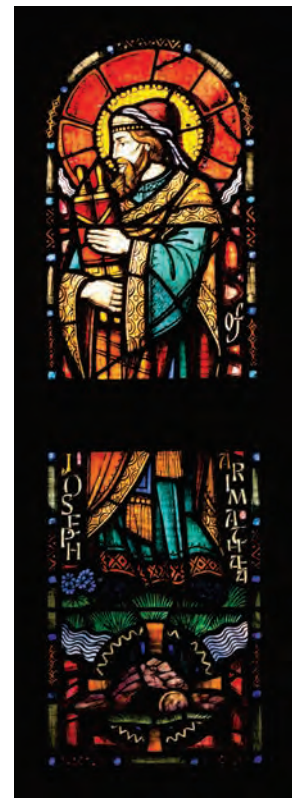
This is a time when we need good people.

The German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in letters he wrote from prison before he was executed by the Nazis, noted that we often think of Jesus as making a special call to the outright sinners, the truly lost, and condemning the 'good' people of the day – the Pharisees who, of course were arrogant as hell being the 'good' people. Yet in crisis times, Bonhoeffer wondered, did not Jesus have a special ministry to good people embedded in evil times and situations?

Which leads to the example of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a "good and righteous man", a rich person in high authority, indeed he was a member of the highest council, the Sanhedrin. Today we might say he was in the Cabinet! Mark's gospel described him as "looking for the kingdom of God". When Jesus is arrested and tried before the Sanhedrin and condemned to be handed over to the Romans, Joseph does not agree. This secret disciple of Jesus finally makes his decision – a decision that will do him no good as Jesus is dead – and goes to the Roman governor to ask to be given the body of Jesus for burial. He and another secret disciple Nicodemus, bury Jesus in Joseph's own tomb.

Joseph stands for all those good people embedded in the institutions, governments, academia and businesses of a corrupt world who are "looking for the kingdom of God" but cautiously keep their heads a bit low. They want to do good and, personally are never corrupt or oppressive of others. But they feel somewhat powerless, scared too. They do not feel that practices or discourses can be changed. So they keep on doing good in their little personal bubbles of control. Their problem is, to quote Bonhoeffer, "if you board the wrong train it is no use running along the train corridor in the other direction." You have to get off the train.

Jesus calls to all the good people in South African and world institutions and bureaucracies. He want them to come out, to get off innumerable wrong trains, to no longer be secret disciples but open ones. Jesus is risen. And this crisis time is one for all to hear his call.



Prayer

We pray for ourselves and for our public servants and politicians,
for our business people, and for our intellectuals and teachers.

We pray that we may continue to do good but that we may be truly turned in the
right direction and bravely and openly seek to do the will of God on earth.

We pray for courage and endurance for the long journey in that right direction.

And may we welcome all secret followers of Christ, followers of his way, when
they reveal themselves, however late in the day.

May we all be blessed.

Amen.

Disappointed people

Most of us have experienced real disappointments in our lives. I am not talking about the habitual small disappointments that come with being alive, rather I am thinking about major bad turns in the way things have gone. I am thinking about this as I start to prepare for a sermon on Sunday dealing with the story of the two disappointed disciples on their weary walk home after the death of Jesus in Jerusalem – the one they had thought would bring liberation.

Often disappointments relate to work. Think of all those people in jobs that they do not care for but have to take because unemployment is so high. Think of those who have been retrenched. What about all those people running small businesses, just making enough to survive and then there is an economic downturn, and they get into more and more debt. And now, with lockdown, the majority of people are in deep trouble. Their income is much less or totally gone. And even if they have a nice car and a flat screen television bought in better days, you cannot eat them when the money for basic foodstuffs runs out.

We are also disappointed when what we have worked for over years or decades is undone. I had a very personal experience of this. I spent twenty-six years of my life building up a large Centre for Adult Education at the local university to attend to the matter that the majority of the adults in South Africa are undereducated or illiterate. Within two years of my retirement the philistine leadership of the university closed it down as they did not think universities had anything to do with poor uneducated people or with training the adult educators to serve them. We think of clergy who often have to serve in heartbreakingly difficult conditions. We think of human relationships such as marriages which disintegrate.

We suffer disappointments in people. Sometimes our own families let us down – sometimes it is the children, sometimes the parents. We are disappointed often at ourselves. We are disappointed when people we looked up to and admired, behave badly. Millions of South Africans have been bitterly disappointed when the political movements and leaders they had been devoted to, and often made great sacrifices for in the struggle years, lost momentum and were infected with corruption, greed and dishonesty, and abandoned the very people they had promised to serve.

It is hard not to feel rather depressed at all this. But it is not for nothing that the medieval Italian poet Dante called his great work about the story of God and humankind, *The Divine Comedy*. For the outcome of the story is not tragedy (though it had lots of tragic elements on the way) but something that is unutterably joyful. Beyond the disappointments and tragedies something remarkable is happening (and perhaps we are witnessing something of that in the good things that are happening during the pandemic). When we walk with the two disappointed disciples to Emmaus, their disappointment is put into an almost comic perspective. We of course, as readers know what is going on. There they are telling their sad story to the stranger and they do not recognise that everything has been utterly changed. This is the Risen One and their lives

(and ours) will never be the same again. We want to shout out to them, bubbling with our own joy, "But can't you see! But can't you see! It's him!"

They do get to see him when they sit down to that really human thing, a meal. They see Jesus in the breaking of the bread. And we too can see Jesus in the breaking of the bread, whether in the Christian Eucharist (which we miss so much at this time) or in the handing over of a food parcel to someone whose disappointments and difficulties are so much greater than ours.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, we ask that you to heal us
when we are crushed by the disappointments we face.
Remove the heaviness within our hearts and give us the strength to forgive.
Help us to release the past and continue moving forward.
May we meet you and joyfully accept that you are risen.
May we trust always that you have overcome the world.
Remind us that you usher in a new heaven and new earth.

Amen.

St George

Today is St George's Day in the ecclesiastical calendar. And so, prompted also by the fact that there is a wonderful stained glass windows in my local church, I want to write about this saint and attempt to demythologise him, though in fact the real story about St George is as wonderful as the legends about him.

The legend of St George and the Dragon was brought back to Europe by the soldiers of the crusades that sought to recapture the previously Christian countries that had been conquered by Moslem invaders. For these soldiers, St George was a warrior saint and he was popular enough to be made the patron saint of England, Georgia, Portugal, and Malta. In the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic and Ethiopian churches he is a great martyr.



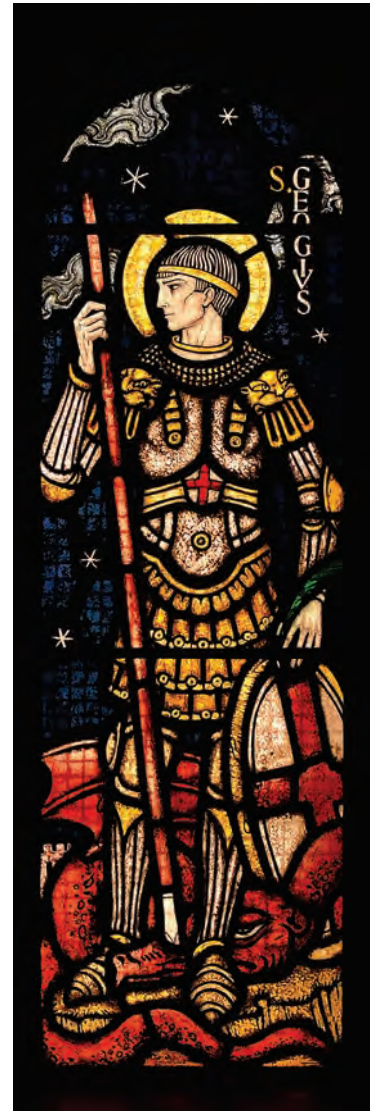
The legendary story they had been told was that somewhere in the country of Cappadocia was a marsh in which lived a terrible dragon. The local people, who were pagans, worshipped it as a god and propitiated it by giving it first sheep, but when they grew scarce, human victims had to be substituted. Child after child was selected by lottery. Finally the lot fell upon the king's daughter. No one was willing to take her place, and she went out, dressed like a bride, to meet her death. St Georgios, a Christian soldier, appeared on a white horse. He charged the dragon and struck it with great force through the mouth with his lance, pinning it to the ground, while his horse trampled it with its hooves. Then Georgios commanded the princess to bind the dragon with her belt and lead it like a tame dog into the town. The people were about to flee, but he told them to have no fear. If only they would believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized, he would kill the dragon. The king and all his subjects gladly agreed and were baptized. Georgios was offered treasure as reward but he asked that it be given to the poor instead.

The real St George was a soldier or official, martyred in Palestine under the Diocletian persecution for the usual reasons – refusing to bow down to the Roman state and worship the Emperor.

He was probably born about AD 280 in Nicomedia in Asia Minor, of Christian parents. His name in Greek, Georgios, means “worker of the land”. He was serving as a soldier when, during the Diocletian persecution that began on 24 February AD 303, he was arrested and executed on 23 April. His body was buried in Lydda in Palestine, where Christians soon came to honour him as a martyr.

The veneration of St George soon spread from Palestine through Lebanon to the rest of the Eastern Roman Empire, then to the Western Roman Empire and he became the patron saint of soldiers.

Though the clash with the dragon is legendary its meaning is not obsolete. George is a personification of the good in people. His armour, lance and shield symbolise his preparedness for battle; the fact that he is a soldier shows that the right and good must be acquired by unflinching, relentless and indefatigable struggle. The dragon represents a corrupt, lower level of power and strength. In the legend, St George freed people from the dragon and by this liberated them also from paganism. St George was a conqueror of his persecutors in a greater measure than most martyrs for, seeing his sufferings, many of them were converted to Christ. He destroyed the paganism of power, though it was in the form of a tyrannical state and not a flesh and blood dragon.



Prayers of St George (Catholic and Church of England Collects adapted)

Almighty God, who gave to your servant George boldness to confess the name of our saviour Jesus Christ before the rulers of this world, and courage to die for this Faith:

Grant that we may always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us, and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

St. George, heroic soldier and defender of your faith, you dared to criticize a tyrannical emperor and were subjected to torture. You could have occupied a high position but you preferred to die for your Lord. May we also gain the great grace of heroic Christian courage that should mark soldiers of Christ. Amen.

May we like George, faithful servant of God and invincible martyr, fight valiantly
against the dragon of pride, falsehood, and deceit.

May we face the difficulties and terrors of the pandemic with courage and
endurance.

And may we, like George, always remember those who are hungry and poor.

Valiant champion of the Faith, assist me in the combat against evil, that I may
gain the crown promised to them that persevere unto the end.

Amen

St Martin

I was asked by a reader whether I couldn't say something about a conscientious objector to balance the warrior St George, so here is St Martin, who, in the windows in my parish church, does literally balance St George. He also happens to give his name to the St Martin's orphanage built right next to the church building.

Martin (316 to 397) was born in Savaria in Pannonia (now Hungary). His father was a senior officer in the Imperial Horse Guard, a unit of the Roman army, later stationed at Pavia, in northern Italy, where Martin grew up. At the age of ten Martin attended the Christian church against the wishes of his parents, and became a catechumen.



As the son of a veteran officer, Martin at 15 was by law forced to follow his father's profession. He was required to join a conscript cavalry unit for 25 years. The church at this time was totally against warfare and killing, but recognised that some people had been conscripted into the armies of Rome. They were not rejected but were told never to execute people. Martin found becoming a soldier so far removed from his desire to be a Christian monk that he had to be held in chains before taking the military oath. Once the oath was administered he felt bound to obey. He was assigned to a ceremonial cavalry unit that protected the emperor and rarely saw combat. Like his father, he became an officer and eventually was assigned to garrison duty in Gaul (present-day France).

At the age of 18, one day in the depth of winter, as he was approaching the gates of the city of Amiens, he met a beggar clad only in rags. He used his sword to impulsively cut his military cloak in two to give half to the beggar.

That night, Martin dreamed of Jesus wearing the half-cloak he had given away. He heard Jesus say to the angels: "Martin, who is still but a catechumen, clothed me with this robe." The dream confirmed Martin in his faith, and he was baptised shortly thereafter.

Even in the military Martin attempted to live the life of a monk. Though he was entitled to a servant because he was an officer, he insisted on switching roles with his servant, cleaning the servant's boots instead of the other way around! As a Christian he increasingly found his duties as a soldier incompatible with the faith and he became an early conscientious objector. One account has it that just before a battle with the Gauls in Germany, Martin determined that his faith prohibited him from fighting, saying, "I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight." He was charged with cowardice and jailed, but in

response to the charge, he volunteered to go unarmed to the front of the troops. "Put me in the front of the army, without weapons or armour; but I will not draw sword again. I am become the soldier of Christ." His superiors planned to take him up on the offer, but before they could, the invaders sued for peace, the battle never occurred, and Martin was released from military service at the age of 40.

He became a disciple of Bishop Hilary of Poitiers and became involved in the latter's struggle against the Arian heresy. He also founded a monastery, the oldest one known in Europe, which became a centre for the evangelisation of the region. Against his will he was made Bishop of Tours. Legend has it that when trying to avoid being ordained bishop he had hidden in a goose pen, where he was betrayed by the cackling of the geese.

Martin was so dedicated to the freeing of prisoners that when authorities, even emperors, heard he was coming, they refused to see him because they knew he would request mercy for someone and they would be unable to refuse. He also objected to the execution of some heretics by the Imperial court.

Martin is a model for several things: being firm in obedience to Christian principle, caring for the poor, and also of persistence – waiting for more than twenty five years to follow his true vocation.

He is the patron saint of beggars because of his sharing his cloak, wool-weavers and tailors (also because of his cloak), soldiers (or some emphasise infantrymen, although how either is reconciled with his having been a conscientious objector is unexplained), geese (because they gave his hiding place away when he tried to avoid being chosen as bishop), vintners and innkeepers, penitent drunkards and France.

Prayer of St Martin of Tours

Lord, if your people still have need of my services,
I will not avoid the toil.
Your will be done.
I have fought the good fight long enough.
Yet if you bid me continue to hold the battle line
in defence of your camp,
I will never beg to be excused from failing strength.
I will do the work you entrust to me.
While you command,
I will fight beneath your banner.

(From Novena to St Martin of Tours)

May we, like St Martin,
not only obtain the forgiveness of our own sins
but also a spirit of love towards neighbour enabling us to be compassionate.
Obtain for us the grace to love all people as brothers and sisters
with a pure and disinterested heart.
May we, like you, one day enjoy the blessed vision of God forever and ever.
Amen.

Triage and tragedy

Many of us are familiar with the word “triage” – the procedure by which it is decided which of a large group of ill or wounded people should be treated first, based on the severity of their condition and the likelihood of their recovery, with or without treatment. But many do not know that the practice was first invented in a situation of war. If there is a large group of wounded soldiers, divide them into three groups:

- the lightly wounded who will live, regardless of whether they get treated or not – send them back into battle
- those unlikely to live, regardless of what care they get – let them die and don’t waste resources on them
- the moderately wounded, who can be healed by treatment – treat them and fix them for the next battle.

It sounds a rather callous and hard-hearted procedure but it makes rational sense in disasters. It has been heart-rending to hear of what has happened in countries in Europe hard-hit by the Corona virus. Doctors have had to make triage decisions about who to give intensive treatment to. When they ran out of breathing equipment, doctors had to make choices about who would be left to die. And generally that decision meant that the oldest would be chosen to die. A truly horrible situation for doctors to be in, but the scarcity of medical resources forces such an action. And we sadly and grudgingly accept it.

But the concept of triage should not be accepted too easily. We must remember that it was invented in war, where its purpose was not actually about caring for suffering people but rather about the most efficient way to get wounded soldiers back fighting. And in the midst of the pandemic a whole new discourse has begun, particularly in the United States of America, but not only there, which says that we should sacrifice the old and the vulnerable to save the market, or the stock market, or the economy! One commentator even argued recently that we should accept that two or three children in a hundred would die if we opened school immediately.

Do not underestimate the very difficult decisions that politician and rulers have to make. We also need to remember that all big decisions like this have real consequences and that some people will die whatever choices are made. When the lockdown in South Africa ends, will the carnage in the roads start again? Will the free access to alcohol lead to murder, sexual abuse and other crimes soaring back to the pre-lockdown levels? South Africa, in particular, where there is such financial inequality, getting the economy going again will be necessary to enable poor people to survive.

But we need to look at this ‘triage’ more critically. Our society as a whole is already in a macro-level triage: the rich can go to their private hospital and fully stock up their pantry for a lengthy lockdown; the salaried and working classes, though they will be wounded, can survive to work for the economy and the market again; and the truly poor and the unemployed have already been discarded. Yet we are not in war and we were

not hit by a tsunami. We had run our society wrong. Across the world we have seen advanced countries have their hospital systems overwhelmed because they had been allowed to run down because of conservative austerity policies that were paid for by the poorest in society. A triage became necessary because of anti-human economic policies and the short-term mind-set of politicians who had no interest in the future (and hence also their blindness to climate changes).

We also need to think very carefully about what our faith says to us about this 'triage'. We are familiar with the ancient story of Abraham feeling that he had to sacrifice his son. We usually interpret the story in a highly moralistic way – that it was God's way to test Abraham's faith. But what God of love would really do that and does it really correspond in any way to God giving himself to us on the Cross? What we do need to know is that Abraham's people lived surrounded by Canaanites and Phoenicians who did regularly sacrifice their infants as a way of gaining the favour of their idol gods. And perhaps the real point of the story is that the faithful should not behave like this. You do not sacrifice human beings. That is not the God of Israel's way.

It is quite clear to me that the discourse about the necessary sacrifice of the old and vulnerable is a mixture of two very different stories.

The one is a rational one about the real cost of different political and economic decisions. It is tough but acceptable if it takes into account that these are real human beings who are being sacrificed and it is utterly impartial (which it invariably is not).

The other story is about the worship of an idol: for the Canaanites it was a god called Moloch, in the present it is the same idol with several faces (profit, the market, the stock exchange). It has no actual interest in the human beings loved by God. Once the crisis is past it will be business as usual.

We need to come out of lockdown dedicated, as best as we can as individuals, to ensure that our new society is not a society of perpetual triage, but one that values all. And in the midst of all this pandemic, one is moved by the news that it seems that in most places, the common desire of ordinary people has been to save the old and vulnerable, even at heavy cost to themselves. This pandemic has shown human beings (well most of them) at their best.

Prayer (John Birch *Faith and Worship*)

'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.'

(Hosea 6:6)

Into your presence we come, Father God,
as your children have done throughout the centuries.
Wherever we are in our isolation we call to you.
Your presence can be seen wherever your Spirit is allowed to enter.
Be with us now, loving Father.

Into your presence we come, Father God,
mindful of our own failings;
our thoughts, words and actions that have shown nothing of your love.
Forgive us, loving Father.

Be with all who have to make hard decisions at this time.
Be with all of us when we make mistakes or do not foresee consequences.

Thank you, loving Father that you are with us in our joys and our sorrows,
the peaks and troughs of our lives,
because you understand our human nature.
You know our hearts,
feel our pain, know our anguish
and enfold us with your love that we might know daily your forgiveness and
healing.

Amen.

Walking with a stranger

This Sunday the Gospel reading is of Luke's account of the how the risen Jesus literally walked with two disciples and revealed himself to them.

It is a perfect story. The two disciples walking home to their village of Emmaus about ten kilometres from Jerusalem. The story starts in despair and ends in joy. It describes great tragedy and yet it is also a bubbling comedy. It shows us misunderstanding that turns into knowledge, it describes people's eyes being opened in recognition to see what had always been in front of them. It is a wonderful account. Also, like all great stories, it has a very practical message for us today because it shows us how what we do today makes past events alive and real now.

The story is simple.

Two depressed men, followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who no doubt had been in Jerusalem for Passover and been through the exhilaration of the palm waving reception of Jesus in his entrance into Jerusalem and then on to the horror of a crucifixion on the Friday, are walking back home. It is going to take them a couple of hours or more. They are talking about the dreadful end to the ministry of the prophet from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth. They have been his followers. We know that because at the end of the story they go back to Jerusalem to find the eleven disciples whom they obviously know.

They are talking over and over about what has happened. Like any of us who have suffered some trauma, or an accident or been a victim of crime, we go through it in our minds repeatedly. But no going over the story is going to change what happened. Jesus was judicially murdered by the leaders of Judaea in alliance with the Romans. All their hopes of liberation have been dashed. In our own human lifetimes some of the older ones amongst us have felt similar grief and despondency at the assassination of a political leader – a Steve Biko or a Chris Hani – in whom we had placed so much hope. They are also confused because of some wild rumour about an empty tomb.

And a stranger joins them. Maybe as disciples of the man from Nazareth they did not move away from him or shun him. The stranger enquires as to the subject of their sombre conversation. He asks them to really think about what they know. They know the scriptures and he points out what those scriptures mean, what they foretold and intimated, what they prophesied would happen. This is the first stage of their eyes being open – they get an insight into the true meaning behind the surface of things.

This is where the story becomes a kind of comedy. In many comedies the fun comes from somebody not knowing what is going on, whereas the other characters, or we the viewing or listening audience do. We know the story. Here these two disciples are being instructed by the very person the scriptures are talking about, the very person they have been grieving for, and they do not realise it. He walks on with them. I imagine he saw the humour in it too.

They get to their home and Jesus seems to be going onward. But they invite him in. "Stay with us, for it is toward evening, and this day has now set." Yes. They may still be somewhat blind but they need to invite Jesus in if they are going to share a meal with him. As we have to do – invite him in if we are going to share a meal with him.

They share a meal and in the actions of breaking the bread, they recognize Jesus.

And they rush off to spread the good news to the disciples and ultimately to us all.

When Luke gathered the information together to write his gospel it was little more than twenty or thirty years after these events. He retells the story as seen through the eyes of a Christian, worshipping the risen Lord year after year. Luke would have listened to Paul and others' expositions of the Hebrew scriptures. The young church went through those scripture with a fine-tooth comb, trying to understand who Jesus was – trying to match their experience of him, living and resurrected, with the scriptures. [And that practice lies behind the reading of the scriptures and the homilies and sermons interpreting them in church services to this day.] Luke the writer would have met the risen Lord in Eucharist after Eucharist, week after week, recognizing him in the breaking of the bread just as we continue to meet the Risen One in our Eucharist. What was in the past on that Sunday, is present now too.

The road to Emmaus was a road that two disciples went down at a time of disaster and turmoil, and the Risen One was walking with them. And they recognised him in the breaking of the bread.

We today walk our own roads, at the moment somewhat circumscribed to our homes. We live in a time of an earth-wide disaster. We may not recognise him, but the stranger walks with us. He walks with many people who do not recognize him and maybe never will. It is hard to recognize him if you blind yourself to a transcendent reality. He continues to ask us to think and study the scriptures and the information in the world which will help us understand what is really true and to assert that truth in word and action. He stands outside our homes and our workplaces and is ready to be invited in. And if we invite him in and if we join in the breaking of the bread with our fellows in faith, we will recognize him and have joy in his holy and loving presence.

Prayer (David Fleming S.J. adaptation of Ignatius Loyola's *Anima Christi*)

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.
May your body and blood be my food and drink.
May your passion and death be my strength and life.
Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.
May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.
Let me not run from the love which you offer
but hold me safe from the forces of evil.
On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.
Keep calling to me until that day comes when, with your saints,
I may praise you for ever.
Amen.

Collect for the Third week of Easter

Risen Christ,
You who revealed yourself to the disciples and calmed their fears:
meet us in our uncertainties
 and walk with us into the new life you bring;
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen

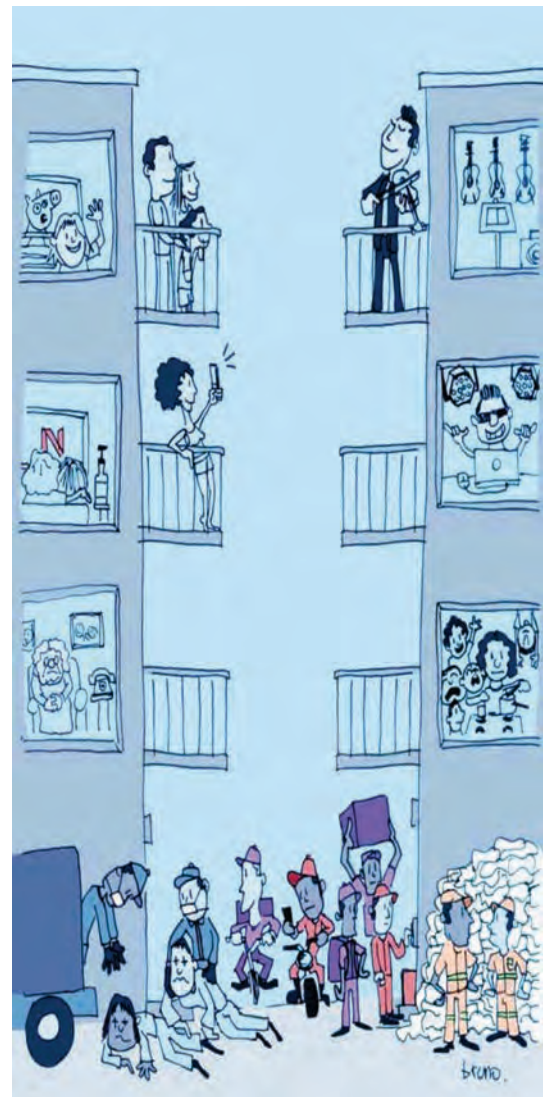
On not romanticising the lockdown

Today there was an exchange of messages on our parish WhatsApp group on how long today's streamed Sunday service should have been. This got me thinking about a recent cartoon I saw that portrayed the different levels of society and how the lockdown was affecting each of those levels for better or ill.

One reason one has to think about service length is the cost of data for cellphone, tablet or computer. Currently, to watch this morning's 45 minute service, if you have to buy airtime, you would have paid about R20 (if that service was streamed at the lowest resolution (480 pixels) or R60 at the next up resolution (720 pixels). Not my problem – I work from home and use electronic communication all the time and the cost of that is factored into what I earn. But this is not so for the majority of people in South Africa and in the parish as well.

That cartoon shows four levels of society, represented by different floors of apartment buildings and street level. The top floor show wealthy people. There is a family with their children watching Peppa Pig on television – they can afford DSTV. They applaud a violinist who is serenading the area from his balcony. Wonderful, heartwarming and how creative! Have we not loved television scenes of people doing that in Italy? But the violinist has the resources of all that education and training and all those expensive instruments hanging on his wall.

The next level down shows people of moderate wealth. A couple watching Netflix (lots of data needed plus R169 a month) and drinking their stock of wine, a young person snapping selfies on her cellphone, a young technology-wise man on his computer listening to his hi-fi. This is the group that with great ingenuity and expertise, have developed all those memes and satirical cartoons and uplifting videos that have entertained us during the lockdown. Thanks to them from all of us. They have helped cheer us all (well, not 'all', those who have smartphones or computers 'all'). These people may well gain much from what they have done during the lockdown, including greater mastery of the online environment.



Then we hit ground floor. Here things are not so pleasant, The elderly woman alone and truly isolated. The mother having to handle five screaming children and cook. No sign of her man, if he is still around, helping her. Lockdown is no fun for her.

And finally there is the street level, and the people there are rightfully called the heroes of the lockdown – the medical and para-personnel caring for the dead and dying, the people delivering food, the rubbish removers, and the virus screeners. They are not having fun and creativity – just being brave and dedicated and doing their jobs to save us all. Homeless people might also be here if special accommodation has not been arranged for them as in that in Durban, organised by the Denis Hurley Centre, the municipality and other organisations.

That cartoon was originally drawn in Europe. We in South Africa have further levels down – townships, informal settlements and rural slums. There the lockdown is a necessary misery but misery all the same.

We, we being the people who can read this electronic, smart-phoned homily, are in a difficult position. We so value the creativity and the love that has flowered as a result of this pandemic and lockdown. We give thanks for that and we bless those who have had the resources to help us through these long weeks. Yet we must also think, pray and act for those who have not had access to these benefits that history and chance have given us.

After the lockdown there is much work to be done.

Prayer (from the *Mass in Time of Pandemic*)

Almighty and eternal God,
our refuge in every danger,
to whom we turn in our distress;
in faith we pray;
look with compassion on the afflicted,
grant eternal rest to the dead, comfort to mourners,
healing to the sick, peace to the dying,
strength to healthcare workers, wisdom to our leaders
and the courage to reach out to all in love,
so that together we may give glory to your holy name.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.

O God, protector of all who hope in you,
bless your people, keep them safe,
defend them, prepare them,
that, free from sin and safe from the enemy,
they may persevere always in your love.
Through Christ our Lord.

Being free

Yesterday was the public holiday of Freedom Day in South Africa and yet, as was wryly observed by the State President in a television address, we are all in lockdown. April the 27 was chosen because on this day in 1994 we had our first universal franchise democratic elections. That is now 26 years ago, and yet, as the President also observed, we are not free from inequality and poverty – all made worse by the impact of the pandemic. No one is free until all are free.

In the world, the kosmos, that battle for human freedom seems unending, although some assure us that things are, in a general sort of way, getting better. So slavery, for example, is now illegal everywhere (but there are still an estimated 40 million slaves in the world!). Apartheid is gone (well sort of).

In the real world, real in the Christian sense, we have a somewhat different picture – everyone is free because all are already free. The victory of Jesus the Christ was the liberation of all.

Paul, writing literally in chains in a Roman prison, talks about the God (Colossians 1:13-17):

Who delivered us from the power of the darkness and translated us into the Kingdom of the Son of his love, in whom we have the price of liberation, the forgiveness of sins, who is the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, because in him were created all things in the heavens and on earth, the visible as well as the invisible (whether Thrones or Lordships or Archons or Powers); all things were created through him and for him; and he is before all things, and all things hold together in him.

We **are** all liberated. Even the immense powers of the supra-human forces in the kosmos and the whole universe (those Thrones or Lordships or Archons or Powers that Paul refers to) are subordinate to that liberation. It is immensely good news.

In the midst of the trials of this kosmos (the inequality, the poverty, the corruption, the foolishness, the self deception, the denials of freedom, physical and mental enslavement) we have an assurance that we are all free. That is one of the reasons why Christians, if they open their eyes like the two men in the room in Emmaus, are joyful. Our lives can be lived in true inner freedom. We are free because the Christ died to redeem the world and was victorious over all its powers. We don't have to try to save the world – that matter has, so to speak, been attended to. We have been set free for love and the free imitation of Christ. Nothing should hold us back.

Prayer

Lord, I recognise that I am no longer a slave,
no longer a prisoner,
no longer held in any kind of captivity.
You have set me free!

I walk in liberty,
no longer bound by guilt,
or shame or a sense of inadequacy.
I am no longer held in bondage by fear,
you have delivered me!

You have liberated me and everyone.

In this season of lockdown I will not be held back.
I accept the gifts inside of me that come from you.
Help me to steward them well.
To use them.
Cultivate them.
Sharpen them.
Refresh them.
Let my life be a blessing to others.

Let me have a better understanding of the liberation you have brought.
May I celebrate that liberation with others.

Amen.

Depending on things

Today my desktop computer packed up. It wasn't some software glitch – it broke, something went wrong with the electronic innards of the thing. As I work from home and am on the computer most of every day, this was disconcerting, to say the least. OK, I can borrow a laptop and I will eventually get the broken one fixed – but only when I can leave my home and get to the computer repair store – when a lower Lockdown level allows me to. I will recover my lost work. But for the moment I am feeling deprived and vulnerable. Oh, and I also wasn't paid my salary – some administrative glitch caused by the Lockdown. And then my son-in-law, his small business effectively closed down and he and the workers without an income, regales me with a horror story. He and the workers have to fill in electronic forms to get the promised government emergency support. Almost impossible for him and utterly impossible for his workers to do so with their old cellphones and no wi-fi.

How dependent we have become on things. Often we mock ancient life forms such as dinosaurs for being so big and clumsy – carrying around those enormous bodies that were shelter from the elements, protection from other dinosaurs and means of getting food, some of them reaching up higher than giraffes to the top of trees. But if you think of it, we in effect are even 'bigger' than the dinosaurs if you include the clothes we wear, the appliances we use to store our food cold and cook it hot, the houses we live in, the furniture we use to live comfortably and the big motor vehicles we use instead of our legs to get around. Oh, and we are a lot clumsier than the dinosaurs and to produce all the things we "need" we wreck the earth.

Our society, our life, is increasingly a life revolving around things. It wasn't always so. Traditional societies were much more about the relationships between people. We need not romanticise traditional ways of life but positively they were not obsessed with things in the way we are. Nowadays we want things all the time, we rely on things (including bureaucratic forms) to maintain our lives and we spend a lot of our lives envying people who have more things than us or better things than us.

Part of the liberation that the Risen One brings to us is freeing us from our obsession with things. He frees us from too much regard for getting and spending. He called his first disciples to join him in his mission hiking around Galilee. They didn't depend on things. They lived simply and relied on food given by supporters. The things that Jesus talks of are the things we really need. We do need our daily bread. We may have to catch fish to live. And we do have to care that all people have daily bread and chance to work. Perhaps in the modern urban society we all need cell phones and cheap data. But can we be free from the endless preoccupation with getting more things, accumulating more profits, growing the economy and becoming wealthier and wealthier?

Maybe, the lockdown gives us a chance to reflect on what we really need and to lessen our dependence on things we don't really need – but may want. Surely, for most of us, we realise more intensely now that what we need is to be in fellowship with other human beings and to live in grace with our natural environment.

Prayer

I have much compared to many others who have so little.

Help me to let go of the things I possess that have no real place in my life.

Show me how to live with less.

Help me to take joy in the things that matter most – joy in you, my family, health.

Help those in poverty, disease and those who lack good shelter.

May my life and work contribute to others living in misery.

In the name of your Son who owned nothing but his love for us.

Amen.

Empathy for others

Empathy is being able to sense other people's emotions and to imagine what they are thinking and feeling. It means in some sense to experience those feelings and thoughts as if they were one's own. It is being able to place oneself in another person's situation. By contrast the word 'sympathy', feeling sorry for other people, does not necessarily mean you know what it is like to be in their situation.

The great thing about empathy is that it can include a realization of the complexity of the feelings, decision making and actions of others. One can even understand why they may make bad or stupid decisions.

I imagine that we all have some basic human sense of empathy but we can train ourselves to be more empathetic and be more accurate in our empathy. And we have to avoid having empathy that does not lead to a response to the other person or persons. Such empathy can be empty and self-indulgent. Real empathy leads to action.

The Corona virus pandemic has led to a great deal of empathy for others. Thousands and thousands of people have put themselves in the shoes of others and responded in actions of caring and support. People who perhaps previously did not think much about the plight of the poor and unemployed are now more aware of what it is like to live in a densely populated shack settlement with no sanitation or facilities – and no food. We feel more now for people in countries we had previously not given a thought to.

Yes we need empathy. As Paul says in Romans 12:15 we are encouraged to:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Jesus had empathy (Matthew 9:36):

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

But empathy must lead to action (1 John 3:17):

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Empathy is St Martin cutting his cloak in half and giving half to the beggar.

Above all, God has empathy, as the prophet Hosea (22:3-9) showed so well:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks
I bent down to them and fed them.

...

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

That is the kind of God who comes and takes action in Jesus of Nazareth.

Prayer

Lord, may I really seek to feel and understand what is within others.

May I not prejudge who they are but see them for what they truly are.

Help me to see within myself and to understand my own thoughts and feelings,
my fears, anxieties, needs and disappointments.

May I accept that I am not alone and that others may understand me too.

Above all, may I accept that you know my feelings and thoughts, and that you will
not come in judgement, but in love and mercy.

Give me the grace to be a responder, both now in the time of disaster, and in the
future.

Amen.

The unknown worker

Joseph, the husband of Mary and the legal father of Jesus, is nowadays regarded as the patron saint of workers and his modern feast day is the 1st of May, Worker's Day. In addition he is seen as the patron of the sick and a happy gentle death – the latter due to the belief that he died in the presence of Jesus and Mary. He is also a model for good fathers.

The New Testament says very little about him. The letters mention Mary but not Joseph. Mark's gospel does not mention him, John has one reference, and Matthew and Luke both explain that Joseph obeyed the instructions of an angelic messenger to marry Mary who was pregnant. He was a carpenter in a small town and Jesus followed in his footsteps as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). The last we hear of Joseph is Luke's account of Jesus, aged 12, going missing during a visit to Jerusalem for Passover and being found by his distraught parents, debating with religious teachers in the courtyard of the temple. None of the gospels mention Joseph as being present during Jesus' ministry. The assumption is that he had died by then.

So there we have the caring, father and worker who is a relative unknown – not famous, not wealthy, not powerful, just working to earn a living and care for his family. And he did care for Mary and her son, Jesus, in extremely troubled times. Insofar as the character and understanding of Jesus developed from birth to at least his teenage years, Joseph is the quiet influence, alongside that of Mary, that nurtured that growth.



Today we celebrate workers. We should, in principle, all be workers, but we tend to think of “workers” as those poorer people who work as employees or as people who service the needs of richer people. They are not at the top of society, they are seldom put first, and it has taken centuries of struggle for the rights of workers to be protected. Joseph is rightly their patron saint.

The majority of people in the world are not famous or wealthy and they work for a living (rather than profiting from the work of others). They lead humble lives and they care for their families, their children. We hope they are respectful to women. If only all of us could emulate the humble and caring life of Joseph. All men who are married and have children would do well to take him as a patron saint.

On this thirty sixth day of lockdown and the easing of some restrictions that will enable more to go back to work, we honour all workers who have enabled us to keep getting food, and water and electricity and all the other things that essential workers provide us with. We honour the nameless nurses, health workers and doctors throughout the world who have put their healing work before their own safety. And may we all become workers for a new society after the pandemic is done.

Prayer

(Prayer to St Joseph for the sanctification of labour)

O God, the creator of all things,
who gave us tasks of labour for the benefit of the
human race;
Graciously grant, by the example Saint Joseph,
that we may do the work you provide us
and earn the reward you promise.
Sustain us with your grace to live up to our duties in
love and justice.
Amen.

Lord may we be loving and responsible like Saint
Joseph,
who felt the tribulation and worry of a parent when
the child Jesus was lost.
May we care for our children and the children of
others like Saint Joseph,
May we nurture them to grow in wisdom and grace
as Joseph did for Jesus.
Preserve them from the dangers and diseases of
this world.
And may we all be united in your kingdom.
Amen.



A note on the paintings

The painting by John Everett Millais shows Jesus as a child in his father's carpentry shop.

Jesus has cut his hand on an exposed nail, foreshadowing his crucifixion. Some blood has fallen on his foot. Joseph holds Jesus' hand and a young boy, who would later be known as John the Baptist, brings in water, prefiguring his later baptism of Christ. An assistant of Joseph, represents Jesus' future Twelve apostles. Other elements in the picture are also symbolic, such as the flock seen through the doorway.

The painting caused uproar when exhibited in 1850. Mary was described as looking like an alcoholic, hideous in her ugliness. Another complained of Jesus being depicted as "a red-headed Jew boy", as a "wry-necked, blubbery red-headed boy in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke . . . playing in an adjacent gutter" Other critics suggested that the characters displayed signs of rickets and other disease associated with slum conditions.

The stained glass window is from St John the Divine, Glenwood, Durban.

Into the pandemic long haul

Yesterday morning, and it was a beautiful morning in Durban, people were out there in their masks, running, walking and cycling. It was the first day of the lesser lockdown level 4. I am sure they felt released, freer, that the worst was over. Many would be hoping that we were beginning to come out of the crisis and that most of us would not have to endure disease and death.

The reality is that the battle against the Corona virus is only beginning. The peak will probably only be reached in August or September and something like normality is a year or two or three ahead of us. And in many ways life will never ever be normal again. In the awful 1918 influenza epidemic the biggest death toll came in the second wave of the disease. We are in for a long haul.

And we are afraid of that. We are afraid of disease and death – the disease that quenches our life force and the bitterness of death that ends our life and our being actors in the world. And we also fear the pain and loss that go with disease and death.

I commend to you Mark's account (Mark 5:21-43) of the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the woman with a discharge of blood. The account directly addresses our fears of disease and death but also the fears that exist among us about others and which drive people and societies towards discrimination, injustice and great disparities of wealth (all of which, of course, have their role as the servants and agents of disease and death).

Mark's account displays to us the gentleness of God shown through the words and actions of Jesus.

The story of the raising of Jairus' daughter is about how God calms our fears and bitterness about death. The story is straightforward:

- A desperate call from the father "that she may be made well and live"
- Jesus' command, when told she is already dead, "Do not fear, only believe!"
- His resistance to the ridicule from the crowd
- Going in to her with father, mother and three disciples
- The Raising her up
- The gentle concern that she be given something to eat.

Noticeable is the quiet compassion shown by Jesus. It is not a matter for a grand show – instead, he urges secrecy about the miracle. But it is precisely this attitude that (of course, in the light of Jesus' resurrection) transforms the attitudes of Christians to death.

We also read of Jesus' healing of a woman which shows the gentleness of God towards the diseased and rejected. Here we see a number of interesting points:

- The woman has been afflicted for years with an unceasing discharge of menstrual blood that, apart from the unwellness of it, renders her ritually contaminated, unclean, untouchable in terms of the Hebrew law, a reject.
- She displays remarkable faith in crossing the line to get to Jesus and we note that the Gospels have a number of remarkable stories of people considered outsiders or foreigners, who break the rules of the society of the time to bring their desperate needs to Jesus (who always commends their faith).

We can compare the ongoing plight of AIDS victims, joined now by the Corona infected.

We are called upon to imitate Christ. Can we, in the long haul ahead of us, calmly, gently and without fear, stand by the sick and dying and, of course, the unemployed and starving? Can we support others? Can we imitate the early church Christians in Corinth who were asked by Paul to give generously to the relief collection for the Christians in Judaea, where the church was made up of the poorest of the poor? (2 Corinthians 8:11-14).

Now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of equality between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be an equality.

Paul, doesn't hector or needle them. He simply puts forward a set of simple propositions:

- Jesus became poor for their sake and they should respond accordingly with generosity towards the poor Judaeans church.
- They are not being asked to burden or impoverish themselves to make others better off, it is rather a matter of equality in which we all help one another.

The long haul is ahead of us. We have been shown God's gentle care for us. We have been given guidance on what to do.

Prayer (Kate Sonderegger)

This hour we turn to you, O Lord, in full knowledge of our frailty, our vulnerability, and our great need as your mortal creatures.

We cry to you, as one human family, unsure of the path ahead, unequal to the unseen forces around us, frightened by the sickness and death that seem all too real to us now.

Stir up your strength and visit us, O Lord; be our shield and rock and hiding place!

Guide our leaders, our scientists, our nurses and doctors. Give them wisdom and fill their hearts with courage and determination.

Make even this hour, O Lord, a season of blessing for us, that in fear we find you mighty to save, and in illness or death, we find the cross to be none other than the way of life.

All this we ask in the name of the One who bore all our infirmities, even Jesus Christ our Risen and Victorious Lord.

Amen.

We have done this before

Do Christians and the church have any special role to play in the pandemic?

The answer to that question is a loud “Yes!” and I will explain that, relying very much on historical research undertaken by Lyman Stone, a research fellow at the Institute for Family Studies in the United States of America.

AD 166 saw the start of a two decade smallpox epidemic that decimated the population of the whole Roman Empire. It was Christians who cared for the sick and dying and also taught that this disaster was not the work of angry and fickle gods. The model of Christian behaviour was one of the reasons for the rapid growth of Christianity. They cared for people. They had a system of thought and feeling fully able to handle times of disaster, hardship and disease.

The next plague, probably something like Ebola, first hit North Africa in AD 249 and led to a catastrophic death toll. In Rome 5 000 people were dying a day. We know more about this plague because Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage wrote about it. His sermons encouraged Christians not to grieve for the dead (they were in God’s hands) but to redouble their efforts to care for the sick. A fellow Bishop Dionysius described Christians as, “Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ.” More people survived the disease if they were within Christian networks. Though the Christians did not have any medicines that could cure these diseases, their simple nursing of the sick could cut mortality by two thirds.

A century later the anti-Christian emperor Julian complained that the Christians cared even for non-Christian sick people, “The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

As the faith spread, Christians created the first hospitals in Europe as hygienic places to provide care and limit the spread of disease during times of plague, on the understanding that negligence that spread disease further was, in fact, akin to murder.

And Christians kept behaving like this throughout history.

In 1527 the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg in Germany. The reformer Martin Luther refused to leave the city and stayed and ministered to the sick. His daughter Elizabeth died. He argued that Christians have to stay at their posts, doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, ministers cannot flee their congregations, and governors and judges cannot escape from their districts. They must also never endanger others through negligence or carelessness.

“This I well know, that if it were Christ or his mother who were laid low by illness, everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone

would come running. And yet they don't hear what Christ himself says, "As you did to one of the least, you did it to me" [Matthew 25:40]. . . . If you do not wish or care to serve your neighbour you can be sure that if Christ lay there instead you would not do so either and would let him lie there. Those are nothing but illusions on your part which puff you up with vain pride, namely, that you would really serve Christ if he were there in person. Those are nothing but lies; whoever wants to serve Christ in person would surely serve his neighbour as well."

Modern people, Christians included, have been somewhat disempowered as active carers because of the rise of scientific medicine and the state take over of health services. Now, suddenly we are faced by something that we have no medicines or vaccines for and the virus happily kills anybody, doctors, nurses, the rest of us.

In this pandemic the love and community that the church brings is in fact what is needed to enable us to face the pandemic. It also means that, even in social isolation, the church community has to use all means possible to stay together as a community.

And our response is guided by three of Jesus' foundational teachings:

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"

"Love your neighbour as yourself"

"Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends."

Christians have an imperative to work against the pandemic and humble caring is their most powerful weapon in this fight.

Prayer (said by leaders of all faiths in Jerusalem on 22nd April 2020)

God of the first and of the last,
God of all Creatures,
Lord of all generations,
He arouses those who sleep and awakens those who slumber,
He heals the sick, opens the eyes of the blind
and raises those who are bowed down.
We come before you with a bowed head, and with bent stature, and plead.

Hundreds of thousands have died,
millions have fallen sick.
Save, we beseech thee, O Lord.
We entreat thee, O Lord, send prosperity!
Send complete recovery to the sick,
avert the plague from Your world.

Please – God,
You who have nourished us in famine and provided us with plenty,
You have removed us from pestilence,
and freed us from severe and long-lasting disease –
Help us.

Until now,
Your mercy has aided us and Your kindness has not abandoned us,
therefore we plead and request before You to heal us, Lord
and we will be healed,
Save us and we will be saved,
for You are our glory.

Using the loudhailer

Yesterday, shortly after midday, I heard a loudhailer and rushed to the front windows to see a convoy of Ethekewini Municipality trucks going past broadcasting a message. None of us could make head or tail of the message, the sound quality was so bad. Later I found out it was a simple “We are now in Lockdown Four. Wearing of face-masks is compulsory. Thank you for your co-operation.”

At least the loudhailer was something different (although also somewhat old-fashioned). During the lockdown we have become almost totally reliant on the electronic media loudhailers – television and the so-called social media. Television is, as we know, dominated by governments and big business and multinational corporations. What is shown is filtered accordingly. The social media are in one sense very democratic – anybody can post stuff on YouTube or Facebook or WhatsApp or Instagram or Twitter and what is distributed can be brilliant. However the real source of material is often opaque. And what is really well presented tends to be forwarded and that slick material is often put together by lobbyists and propagandists for particular causes. A very high percentage of what is circulated on the social media is really lies, faked news and misinformation. Almost every day I receive stuff that is false or misleading, forwarded to me with the best of intentions by friends and colleagues.

Our local parish church has tentatively put its toes into the water of online communication and we are learning fast. One benefit of the lockdown! However what is very clear is that, buried in the deluge of modern communication, the voice of the church of Christ is very faint. It is not very loud and often what it communicates does not work very well. To use the words of the prophet Amos (8:11):

“The days are coming”, declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.”

Both the church as a collective and individual Christians have to wake up and take responsibility for communications. We all need to understand the media environment, be alert to its potential for lies and deceit, know how to discern between the good and the bad, and know how to communicate the good news.

We teach our children and young people about all the sins they should avoid – murder, sexual sins, stealing, and so forth. But do we prepare them for the temptations and pitfalls of modern communication? Are they trained so that they will not bear false witness – wittingly or unwittingly nor become complicit in it? The Old Testament took “fake news” very seriously. Prophet after prophet rails against false prophecies uttered to please rulers or whoever the speakers were trying to ingratiate themselves with. Isaiah (6:9-10) warned of a corrupted people who:

“Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.”
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.

It is passage quoted in several books of the New Testament.

To be truthful witnesses in this modern world requires **effort**. No one is excused from the duty of checking the sources and reliability of news they receive. The temptation to forward some ‘news’ simply because it looks interesting (and perhaps confirms our own prejudices) needs to be trained out of our own media practice. We actually have to work to **receive** news – it does not come magically free. It requires intellectual effort.

To be truthful witnesses in the modern world requires **bravery**. During the years of high level corruption in South Africa so many kept silent, including church leaders. “*Nunca mas!*” Never again.

The church has to get its communication right again – both in word, media and deed. We have failed to genuinely and honestly interpret our sacred writing – and we pay for it in the ignorant crowds who flock to the prosperity cults run by con men, masquerading as new churches and in having the majority of so called evangelicals in the United States back a President who is a compulsive liar, tax dodger, womaniser and racist. As Phillip the deacon said (Acts 8:30):

Then as Philip ran forward he heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ The man replied, “How can I unless I have someone to guide me?”

Good question and good request. Do we understand our scriptures, our faith, and can we speak it to others in a way they can actually hear? As Paul says (Romans 10:14):

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

Prayer (Adapted from USA Catholic Bishops Conference Prayer for Peace)

Lord God of truth, we pray that we may live in the truth.

May our homes, our workplaces and institutions be places where the truth is told and received.

May we recognize the truth that every human being is a child of God, regardless of ethnicity, language or culture.

For the wisdom to receive the stories and experiences of those different from ourselves and to respond with respect, let us pray to the Lord.

For the strength to teach our children how to be truthful and that we provide them with a model of it in our own behaviour, let us pray to the Lord.

For our faith community, that we may celebrate and welcome the truth in our worship, our ministries, and our leaders, let us pray to the Lord.

For our faith community, that we may respond boldly to the Holy Spirit's call to act together in truth, let us pray to the Lord.

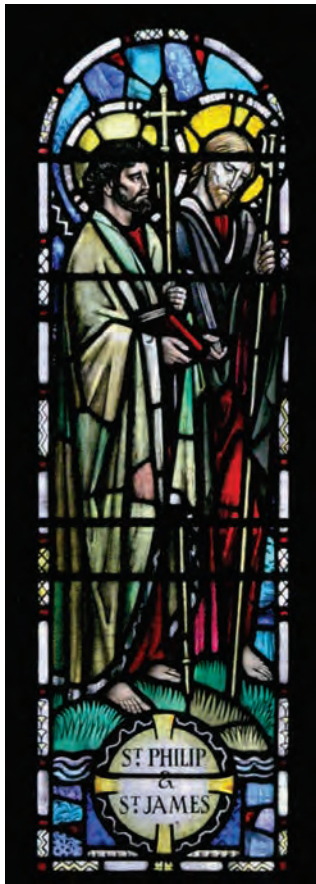
For our public officials, that they will strive to work for fair education, adequate housing, equal opportunities for employment for all, and an end to inequality, and be truthful to us, let us pray to the Lord.

For the courage to have difficult but truthful conversations about what divides us and harms us and not to remain silent, let us pray to the Lord.

For solidarity in our global human family, that we may work together in truth to protect those who are most vulnerable and most in need, let us pray to the Lord.

Philip and James the Less

In the current Anglican Church calendar, yesterday was the feast of two apostle saints, Philip and James (the Less). We celebrate their feast on the same day because, although they died at different times and in different places, their bodies were moved and buried together in the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Rome.



We meet **Philip** in John's Gospel. He may have been a disciple of John the Baptist and we know he was a fisherman. He was the third person Jesus called to "Follow me" (John 1:43). We know that Philip immediately recognized that Jesus had been sent from God. The first thing he did as Jesus' newest disciple was to invite his friend, Nathanael, to come and see Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael didn't think much of the idea: "Can there be anything good out of Nazareth?" But Philip said to him, "Come and see." From the very beginning, he wanted to share the Good News about Jesus with others!

Philip had a Greek name, may have spoken Greek, and may have been known to Greek pilgrims in Jerusalem and introduced some to Jesus (John 12:20-22).

Philip was intent on learning everything he could about Jesus and his teachings. At the Last Supper, Philip said to Jesus, "Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us" (John 14:8). Jesus was shocked by Philip's request. He replied, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Philip's question and Jesus' answer help us to understand that we are called to continue growing in our faith every day.

Philip was also a person who worried about practical things. As seen in the interchange between Jesus and Philip in John 6:5-7:

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.'

He is thought to have taken the Gospel to Greece, Syria and then Phrygia (now central Turkey) where he was put to death at Hierapolis during the time of persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian. His tomb there was discovered in 2011.

James (the Less or Lessor or younger or shorter) was one of the Twelve. His father was Alphaeus. He is not to be confused with James (the Great or elder), son of Zebedee, or with another James, the actual brother, stepbrother or cousin of Jesus who later became leader of the early Christian Jewish community in Jerusalem.

Whilst these two disciples are two of the less well known of the Twelve, they, like the others, had sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. In Luke 18:28, their spokesman Peter said, "Look. We have abandoned all that was ours to follow you." And they did, all except one, John, being martyred.

They were ordinary people who did extraordinary things for their Lord. They set an example and the work of such humble, obscure, disciples expanded the Christian faith across the world.

Prayer (Book of Common Prayer)

O Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life:
Grant us perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life;
that, following the steps of your holy Apostles,
Saint Philip and Saint James,
we may steadfastly walk in the way that leads to eternal life;
through the same our Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The Patronal festival of St John

John 14:1-14

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

The Way



Today, Wednesday 6 May, the Parish of St John the Divine has its patronal festival in which we honour St John the Divine, or, as we would put it in today's English, John the theologian.

Now we don't really know whether John the Divine was John the Apostle, the fisherman brother of James Zebedee, or a different disciple, the writer of John's Gospel who says he was "the Beloved disciple", one very close to Jesus and to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his mother Mary, when he hung dying on the cross.

We don't even really know whether John's Gospel was actually written down by John the Apostle or John the Beloved disciple or even by a group of disciples who gathered around John in his old age before he died in the then Greek city of Ephesus.

But what we do know is that this 'John' grapples with trying to understand who Jesus is and to share that with Jesus' disciples as they too, in the daily lives, try to live as followers of the Christ.

"What does it all mean?" was a question from the first, even when the twelve disciples were roaming around Galilee with Jesus. It was a problem even when they had met the risen Lord and broken bread with him.

They had encountered Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter and travelling preacher – walked with him, talked with him, eaten with him, and seen the signs he performed.

They were frequently bewildered. They saw God in Jesus but they were very close to the man, the physical, normal human being from a small town most considered something of a dump – In John 1:46, the future disciple Nathanael asks, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" They frequently misunderstood what Jesus said, didn't like his prophecies of his own death, ran away when he was arrested, were cowardly (as with Peter), and were slow to believe and trust (as with Thomas).

Yet, as witnesses when God raised Jesus from the dead, they soon came to recognise that through the resurrection Jesus was now, as Thomas finally put it: "My Lord and my God".

Yes, they had seen him in his resurrected body, triumphant over death, exalted by the Father. They had to do a lot of thinking. They poured over texts in the Old Testament, their Bible, and tried to get clues as to what it all meant.

And John's Gospel tries to make sense of what Jesus said in his words and actions and in hanging on the cross and in meeting his chosen disciples after the resurrection.

The reading from John's gospel for Sunday 10 May (John 14:1-14) records words from Jesus spoken shortly before his death that answers questions that his bewildered disciples asked of him. They are good questions for they go to the heart of the issues that the disciples had to understand and in turn teach to the future faithful, the people to whom they were bringing the good news as they went out into the world of that time. The first great question probably came from all the disciples, and particularly from so-called Doubting Thomas, that asker of sceptical questions and demander of evidence.

The disciples are worried. Jesus has been speaking about his going to Jerusalem and dying there. Understandably the disciples are worried, and not just about their own safety and that of Jesus. They had hoped that Jesus would bring in the Messianic kingdom. Was it all in vain? They had trusted in God. They had come to believe that God worked through Jesus? Had they made a mistake?

These are real and important concerns. Every Christian, in coming to trust in Jesus as the true Word of God, has faced these questions.

So Jesus answers them himself:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.'

Jesus, answers directly that he is indeed, the very presence of God. Dare to believe it!

He tries to calm their fears, fears that all human beings have – fear of harm, of death, of hopelessness, of despair – and assures them that he is leading the way and, preparing a place for them ... beyond the immediate threat to them of bodily harm and death.

'I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'

But above all, Jesus assures them, where he is, they also will be.

Thomas, is still not satisfied! He wants more detailed evidence. He wants a route map, tickets and travel itinerary, so to speak. He is still puzzled as to where Jesus is going. "How can we know the way?" And, like the other disciples, he simply cannot conceive of a crucified Messiah.

Jesus recalls them back to what they must do – recognise that God, God the Father, is indeed visible through Jesus.

'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

These words are some of the most important in the Bible.

If we know Jesus, we know God.

The disciples have indeed known Jesus. They have known him and they trailed the dusty roads of Galilee and Judah with him. They have known Jesus in his ministry. In every aspect of their travels together they have in fact, known God in him. Soon they will know

him in his psychological agony in Gethsemane and in his physical and spiritual agony on the cross. In all this, they will know God. And they will come to know him in the garden outside his empty tomb, and in the Upper Room and on a beach at the Sea of Galilee. In all this, they will know God.

So the answer to Thomas, and to us all is that we must stop looking for advance tickets to heaven, or passports to paradise or a Google map of the way to eternity or some special supernatural vision of God. God is **right in front of them**, in the person of Jesus.

That is why they do not have to know “where” Jesus is going. There is no destination other than where they are, with Jesus, for Jesus himself is ‘the Way, and the Truth and the Life.’

The disciples still don’t get it.

Philip now requests:

‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’

He is still expecting some kind of supernatural vision with all sorts of special effects.

Jesus gently replies:

‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still don’t know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’

This is the real meaning.

Look at Jesus.

Know him.

And you will know God.

And Jesus makes a kind of concession. Yes, there will be those believers who really don’t get it and who come to some sort of faith because of the miracles of Jesus and his wise words and in the hope that if Jesus rose from the dead they too will live after death. But they miss out on the glorious truth that Jesus really is the face of God.

And because we have seen that Jesus is the face of God it changes utterly the way in which we will relate to this world and the people in it. If Jesus, the man, living in this natural world was the face of God, then this world is valuable and good and must be cared for and loved. And so must all its people. This true God is involved, concerned and engaged in our world. He is passionately involved in human affairs and history.

John the theologian, recording in old age today’s gospel words of Jesus shortly before his death on the cross, reminds us that it is Jesus who shows us the way: the real Jesus, the one who lived on earth, died and was exalted.

There was only one God-human, who embodied a unique, singular, special coming together of the divine and the human. Through Him we see and know the Father. And it

is Jesus, who is present today every time someone asks for a cup of cold water (to use the Biblical image from the parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25 where Jesus affirms that he will be there in the future every time somebody asks for, and gives one, even if they don't realize it is Him).

'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"That was me." Jesus says.

Prayers

(Sojourners)

Christ, you are the Saviour, the Way to the Father,
The Truth we depend on, the Life that we need.
We trust you, believing! We listen, receiving
The joy of the gospel by which we are freed.
Yet, Lord, you remind us: Through mercy you find us,
By grace you forgive us. The way home is yours!
We dare not judge others, our sisters and brothers
Whom you choose to welcome through love's open doors.

(Preface in Roman Missal 2011)

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, holy Father, Lord of heaven and earth, through Christ our Lord.

For by your Word you created the world and you govern all things in harmony. You gave us the same Word made flesh as Mediator, and he has spoken your words to us and called us to follow him. He is the way that leads us to you, the truth that sets us free, the life that fills us with gladness.

Through your Son you gather men and women, whom you made for the glory of your name, into one family, redeemed by the Blood of his Cross and signed with the seal of the Spirit.

Therefore now and for ages unending, with all the Angels, we proclaim your glory, as in joyful celebration we acclaim:

Holy, Holy, Holy
Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

Guide for the perplexed

Now that we have been in lockdown for seven weeks, many people are getting restive. That is not surprising. The first panic of the pandemic having worn off, we are now assailed by a massive tsunami of unclear orders, information and misinformation about what we should do or choose to do or not do. These things come from various power and interest groups and from big business lobbyists. Some may mean us well, some are more interested in themselves doing well. It is all very confusing and we are left perplexed. Some of the things we are told we should support or not support, we in fact have very little influence on as isolated individuals. But it would be nice to know the correct actions that have to be done in the battle for survival against the Corona virus. We need a *Guide for the Perplexed*.

The most famous *Guide for the Perplexed* was originally written in about 1190 by a Spanish Jewish scholar, Maimonides. He wrote the book to guide religious people who had been trained to believe in the truth and to conscientiously fulfil their moral and religious duties. But they were perplexed in both their understanding of the Hebrew scriptures and how they were to fulfil the Jewish law in a complex world. The book became what we would call a bestseller and was a major influence on Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought. Oh that we had a similar guide for the present!

The problem is that to understand *What is to be done?* (the title of another famous book, by Lenin, and which many of our current political leaders in South Africa will have read) we have to be expert in disease control, economics and politics – and we as Christians would argue for some theology as well– and not biased or self-interested in any way. Few are so expert or impartial and economics and politics are not exact sciences anyway. For example, only a handful of individuals among the thousands of economists in the world predicted the crash of the world's financial systems in 2008. Generally the advice given to the church as an institution today is “Don't mess with giving economic advice. You are even less capable than the useless economists.”

So what do we do?

We have to stick to walking in the truth and caring for people – all people. In many cases we will not know what to do and we will have to guess and hope for the best. We may be asked to make prudent choices between greater and lesser evils. But we can, at the very least, ensure that when we are told certain things, we check – as best we can – whether they are the truth and whether these messages and actions are really aimed at the good of all.

This week has seen a huge furore about the bans on cigarettes and alcohol. Think of what we have been told in newspaper articles and television news and interviews: “These bans are for your own good!” “These bans are dictatorial and undemocratic!” “These bans are hurting the economy!” “The government is losing all the taxes!” “We need the bans to help lighten the expected load on the hospitals!”

How do we make sense of these competing voices?

We have to look very carefully at where the messages come from. How biased are they? Much of the 'information' originates from the multinational and national corporations who make huge profits from alcohol and tobacco and are not particularly concerned about the damage these products do. They are after profits. Other messages come from the health professionals who would be happy never to have tobacco or alcohol on sale ever again – as they would say “Neither of these improves health in any way.” Political forces add their voice – think of all the Methodist teetotallers in the ANC Woman’s League and the police who have to deal with drunken men every weekend. Others say that we need the taxes from these products (it’s odd how businessmen who never want to pay taxes are suddenly so solicitous about increasing tax revenue). Historians tell us that prohibition never works and causes more damage than it is worth. So it is all very confusing.

But we can apply our minds to finding out what the facts are, for example about alcohol and taxes. It is not the wonderful cash cow for governments that one would imagine when one actually examines the real costs of everything connected to alcohol. For example, in the United States of America in 2017, the excise tax on alcohol was about \$10 billion and actual sales were about \$90 billion – and it is true, that pays for a lot of jobs. But, and it is an important “but”, the negative economic and social costs are estimated to be about \$250 billion a year: 72% in lost workplace productivity; 11% in hospital and healthcare; 10% in criminal justice costs and 5% in motor car crash costs. So maybe the informed Christian could argue that yes, we understand prohibition cannot work but there are many ways through higher taxation and restricting the hours and places for alcohol sales that could lower the costs to society. And we can make our voices heard about that.

The next year is going to be increasingly confusing. South Africa has done extremely well in curbing the initial spread of the disease and given the state and hospitals time to prepare (which is not easy, in Durban three hospitals have been closed as they did not handle the sanitation and social distancing well). That breathing space means that the health system will be better able to resist being overwhelmed when the real surge of infections comes in the next four months. Expect to remain perplexed and dismayed on many occasions. We are not going to be given a clear and unambiguous ***Guide to the Perplexed in 2020/2021.***

But we should not be confused or perplexed about who we are. We are the people of Christ who has overcome the world, sin, evil and death. We are a people prepared for any human disaster and the rebuilding in the aftermath. We have done it before and we can do it again. We follow our leader – the Risen One.

Prayer

Almighty God,
Our nation is in a crisis and needs help to stay on the right path.
When we are uncertain about what we should do, guide us.
When we don't know which way to turn, teach us.
Help us to be attentive to your voice.
May we be protected from making sinful choices.

May we not anxiously look forward to what may happen tomorrow,
for you are the same everlasting Father,
who cares for us today and tomorrow and all days.
Shield us from suffering,
or give us of your unfailing strength to bear it.
Shine the light of your love into our confusion.

Oh, Lord, in you we put our trust.

What will survive?

When a disaster is about to strike people usually grab whatever is most important before they run. What do they take? Usually their children first. Maybe IDs, passports and certificates, and of course, money. Things that will help them survive – warm coats, food, jewellery. Equipment – knives, axes, spades, water bottles, laptops. A Bible? What actually is most important to them?

We are not in quite such a disaster, but many things that are not so important will be left behind in this Corona virus crisis. Already some things are going. Decisions made by government have put some businesses into bankruptcy – hairdressers, beauty salons, publishers, airlines, all those shops in the malls selling other than food, cell phones and medicines. No doubt, after the disaster ends, things will return to a new normal but it is quite likely that the world will look somewhat different by then.

The crisis certainly enables us to focus on what is important here at the lowest level – each one of us in isolation or with another or a very few other people, usually family. We may find this a time to look at how important our family links are, or to rejoin some of the links that have been broken with family and friends even if we do it over the phone or online.

At a second level, the neighbours in our city, town or smaller community may become present in our awareness in a way that they were not before. We may have been able to ignore the issue of unemployment or hunger or lack of education, but now when much of the nation is unemployed and hungry, we know it is a reality. We may not be able directly to do much about it, though some will volunteer for food parcel distribution. What we can do is resolve to do something about it after the pandemic – through our duties as democratic voting citizens and through our business practices and ethics and by sharing what we can.

At the highest level, we need to be informed citizens who will play their part, for in a democracy we are ultimately responsible for what governments do. We can make social, governmental and religious institutions flourish or let them die. Are they important? Should we not insist that in the new normality and in preparations for future crises, institutions will be strong and well prepared?

One of the interesting impacts of the fight against the virus has been the rude awakening in many countries to the fact that enormously valuable institutions have been almost destroyed over many decades. They have been decimated by the business world and the politicians in their pockets who argued that government should not regulate businesses or banks and that taxes should be reduced. In the United Kingdom it is ironic to see the poster “Save the National Health Service” on government speaker podiums when the NHS has been systematically starved of resources for years. Now we need them! In South Africa the scandal of kilometre-long queues outside pension and social grant payout offices indicates the lack of resources to benefit of the poor and elderly. How can this be tolerated? The world has a need for good and robust institutions that can be used to care for people.

Do we want to save our religious/ethical institutions? South Africa has only begun to emerge from decades of overt corruption. Many people had abandoned all ethical and religious guidance. These were not petty thieves, these were people in society with some power and agency. And they put their greed and contempt for others first. How can institutions that inculcate respect for all be preserved? What has been pleasing during this crisis is that, on the whole, governments have put their people first and tried to save lives rather than profits. But this moral awakening has to be consolidated and enhanced. And the church has a signal role here.

The churches of the land are physically closed for the present, their buildings unused and their clergy restricted to home and online ministry. Church funds are in steep decline. Do we want our church institutions to survive lockdown and be prepared for what comes after? If so, we have to care for them, as best we can, during this difficult time.

Prayer (Book of Common Prayer)

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church.
Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace.
Where it is corrupt, purify it;
where it is in error, direct it;
where in any thing it is amiss, reform it.
Where it is right, strengthen it;
where it is in want, provide for it;
where it is divided, reunite it;
for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Saviour.
Amen.

Leading the Church – Hugh of Lincoln

Yesterday I suggested that if we want our church to survive as a going institution – congregations, clergy, church buildings, offices, and halls – then we have to care for it during the lockdown. It is a two-way process. The church has to find new ways to communicate – sermons, services, short messages online prepared by clergy and laity (and what talent is being discovered in the process!) – and people still have to fund stipends, assessments, maintenance, insurance and so on at a time when many are no longer receiving their usual income. It is not that this challenge is anything new. The church is always having to find new and appropriate ways to be the body of Christ in a changing and often dangerous world.



Among the many wonderful stained glass windows in the St John the Divine Church in Durban, is that of St Hugh of Lincoln. When you look at the windows in St John's, the St Hugh one is about the last you come to, in the far end of the ambulatory, more or less invisible until you are close to it, very much at ground level. What we know about St Hugh provides a picture of the kind of grounded leadership that the church as an institution needs.

Hugh (born 1135 or 1140, died 16 November 1200), was a Carthusian monk and became Bishop of Lincoln. His left hand rests on the head of a swan, his primary emblem, in reference to the story of a wild swan that would eat from his hand and follow him about, even guarding him while he slept. Hugh loved all the animals in the monastery precincts.

Hugh was born in Avalon, in France. His father, a soldier, retired from the world to an Augustinian monastery near Grenoble, and took his son Hugh with him. At the age of fifteen, Hugh became a religious novice and was ordained a deacon at the age of nineteen. Still young, aged 24, he was sent to be prior of a nearby monastery. Thereafter he left the Benedictine Order and entered the head monastery of the stricter Carthusian order where he rose to become administrator of its financial affairs, until in 1179 he went to

England to become prior of the first Carthusian house there. This had been established by King Henry II of England, as part of his penance for the murder of Thomas Becket, and it was by his special request that Hugh was made Prior there and completed its building. But Hugh insisted that any tenants who lost land or housing to make way for the monastery were fully compensated.

In May 1186, Henry summoned a council of bishops and barons to deliberate on the state of the Church and the filling of vacant bishoprics, including Lincoln. Previously Hugh had to admonish Henry for keeping dioceses vacant in order to keep their income for the royal chancellery. The cathedral chapter of Lincoln was ordered to elect a new bishop and Hugh was elected. But Hugh insisted on a second, private election by the canons, securely in their chapterhouse at Lincoln rather than in the king's chapel. His election was confirmed by this more democratic process.

Almost immediately he established his independence of the King, excommunicating a royal forester and refusing to seat one of Henry's courtly nominees as a senior priest of Lincoln; he softened the king's anger by his diplomatic address and tactful charm.

As a bishop, he was exemplary, constantly in residence or travelling within his diocese, generous with his charity to the poor, scrupulous in the appointments he made.

With his own hands he used to tend people afflicted with leprosy, then so common in England.

He raised the quality of education at the cathedral school.

Hugh was also prominent in trying to protect the Jews, great numbers of whom lived in Lincoln, in the persecution they suffered at the beginning of Richard I's reign, and he repeatedly faced down armed mobs and made them release their victims.

Hugh, together with another bishop, resisted King Richard I's demand for 300 knights for a year's service in his futile French wars; the entire revenue of both bishop's offices was then seized by royal agents. He also rebuked the king for his infidelity to his wife and his encroachments on the Church's rights.

As one of the premier bishops of the Kingdom of England, Hugh more than once accepted the role of diplomat to France for Richard and then for King John in 1199, a trip that ruined his health. While attending a national council in London, a few months later, he was stricken with an unnamed ailment and died two months later on 16 November 1200. He was buried in Lincoln Cathedral.

Hugh was canonised on 17 February 1220, and is the patron saint of sick children, sick people, shoemakers and swans.

What a model of church leadership, absolutely dedicated to Christ, fearless when he had to rebuke kings or xenophobic mobs, willing to touch and care for lepers, astute in his financial management of the church, willing to be a diplomat when the political rulers failed, and an early Green, valuing the natural world.

Prayer (Collect from Book of Common Prayer)

O holy God, our greatest treasure,
who endowed your servant and bishop Hugh of Lincoln
with wise and cheerful boldness for the proclamation of your Word to rich and
poor alike,
and taught him to commend the discipline of holy life to kings and princes:

Grant that we also, rejoicing in the Good News of your mercy,
and fearing nothing but the loss of you, may be bold to speak the truth in love,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

The window is a memorial to the Revd Hugh Vivian Fairbourn, first priest-in-charge of St John the Divine.

The Word of Truth

I saw an interview yesterday on YouTube with the famous American actor Robert De Niro. He said that in lockdown he hadn't been able to watch films or read books as he was obsessed with watching the news channels and getting more and more upset and angry by the lies and bad decisions he saw on the news. I fear we are probably in a similar position because most of the news and information and misinformation that we hear these days is about the pandemic and the people telling us what we should think and do about it. How do we know and follow the truth in this avalanche of "news"?

Those first disciples, enlightened and enlivened by having met the risen Jesus, still had a long road to travel to find where the truth of the Christ would lead. Much of what they had to do they did grudgingly, complaining, resisting, going against their own background and upbringing. But they did so. They followed the truth and that led to the enormous expansion of the Jewish church into a universal church for all people of all ethnicities and traditions. They were led by the Spirit of Truth that enabled them to obey Christ's command that we love one another as he loved us.

Some of my favourite New Testament passages are in the final pages of the book of Revelation where we are given a vision of the ends of things. And it is important to note that this is not a vision of some unearthly heaven – it is a vision of a new earth – an earth in which God can feel at home, make his home with us, one where the Spirit blows and we love one another.

And that God who wants to make his home with us, that Lord, is titled the Alpha and the Omega.

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Given that we use a Roman alphabet the title might better be that the Lord is the A to Z, the beginning and the end. But there is something else in that title which is missing in translation. In the Hebrew alphabet the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet make up the word for **Truth**.

Aleph, the first letter of the word **Truth** denotes that God is the first of all things. There was no one before Him from whom he could have received the fullness of truth. Tav, the last letter, signifies that God is the last of all things. There will be no one after Him. This title is encoded in the word Truth. So this title tells us that God, the beginning and the end, is the God of living, active, doing it, truth. In God truth dwells absolutely and in all fullness.

So we recognise and glorify in the fact that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of God's truth.

As Jesus says (John 16:13):

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

Paul to the gentiles in Ephesus puts it this way (1:13):

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

That is the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit that inspires, guides and drives us forward.

Prayer (Holy Name parish, Ebensburg)

Lord, Jesus Christ,
You are the Way, the Truth and the Life.
Hear our prayer for truth and integrity
in all segments of society today.

May the truth be spoken by us and affirmed in others,
that in seeking truth, the world will come to find You,
the Source of All Truth.

Wherever relationships are weakened by deception or hypocrisy,
strengthen good Christian character among us
that we may bear witness to the critical need for truth.

May your Spirit of Truth fashion minds and hearts
open to a moral integrity so strong
that both words and actions can be trusted.

In public and private life,
deepen among us a genuine commitment
to honest, sincerity and truth-telling.

Let nations and peoples not compromise truth
by rationalization or pretense,
but safe-guard and defend it always
as Your most precious gift.

Lord, may those around us come to know
that they can take us at our word,
until that day when all the world lives in truth
and the Truth sets us free. Amen.

What about the bad guys?

I read many online opinion pieces about our country and its travails. There is a regular complaint: “When are the corrupt going to be placed in orange clothes?” – that is, arrested, tried in court and jailed. There is dismay, dissolving some of the optimism about the “new dawn” in South African politics, that nothing has happened to the bad guys involved in corruption and the stealing of the resources meant for the ordinary and poor people of the country. The complaint is well taken. Justice is needed and justice should be swift, certain and fair.

Christian thinking has often had a certain ambivalence about justice. It aligns itself to the demands for justice that infuse the pages of the Old Testament. The God of the prophets was the God of justice and that justice would be certain and fair. Jesus’ parable of the last judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) is also about justice, though with a twist to it. Justice is not just about what happens when you break the law of God but about how your actions did or did not help the poor and oppressed. But the message of the New Testament also tells us that, though we are subject to the law, that does not save us, for what we are really looking for is love.

It is not that the church has not had rules that ruled out people continuing in bad behaviour. All humanity might be saved by Christ on the cross and all forgiven, but it did not mean that turning to right behaviour – and suitable restitution for past wrong– was not a necessity. In its earliest days the church developed lists of certain professions and work that were prohibited to Christians. One such list, that of Hippolytus from the second century AD, lists some obvious dodgy jobs: brothel keeper, gladiator, violent athletic games, idol maker, actor in pagan plays, and so on. Soldiering was also prohibited, though it was recognised that many soldiers had become Christians and they were simply told never to execute anyone or take oaths to the rulers. Getting jobs in the pagan ruling class or civil service were also ruled out. One wonders what an update to such a list would be: tenderpreneur, financial market manipulator, profiteer, fake news blogger, fake news re-tweeter, pension looter, professional lying politician?

The good news is that such people can be saved. The disciple Matthew is a case in point (Matthew 9:9; 10:3). He was a tax-collector and the Jews of that time loathed tax-collectors, not only because they extorted more money than was due, but because they also were officials of the colonial Roman regime. But Jesus called Matthew to a new life. Hence the Christian faith has an unwavering and unique commitment to the reality that bad people can be made good. People who do bad things can turn to the good. The turning of Saul (the accomplice in Stephen’s murder) into Paul the Apostle is another prime example of this.

This raises the question as to why the church in South Africa has not more directly called on all those people we know, often personally, who have been crooks and destroyers of the institutions of society to come clean, confess, be forgiven, be restored and make restitution.

Simply hoping that someone will put them in orange overalls is not a sufficient answer. We should have better good news than that.

Prayer (Adapted from Prayer for Prisoners)

Father of Mercy, the secrets of all hearts are known to you alone.
You know who is just and you forgive the unjust.
You alone are the Almighty Judge.
None of us is worthy of judging anyone.
We rely on your righteous judgement and mercy.

Be with all those who have sinned and acted in criminal ways and enlighten them.
Hear our prayers for those whose who have been corrupt and exploitative in our land.
May their hearts be turned.
Give them repentance and let them trust in you.
Be with their families and comfort them in their shame.
May they be brought home.
We trust in Christ and live with hope.
Amen

Get up and go

John 14:27-31

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe. I will no longer speak much with you, for the ruler of the world is coming. He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me. Get up, let us go.

John 14:27-31 is today's reading in my lectionary.

This passage is almost unbearably profound.

Jesus of Nazareth gives us real peace, his peace. It is not the peace that the world – the current world order kosmos – gives. It is the peace that can surmount every challenge, withstand all chaos.

He tells us not to be afraid. Not to be anxious or troubled.

That assurance that we do not need to be afraid is backed by an argument that at first sounds strange. The disciples have been told that Jesus is "going away". Surely they will be really afraid with him gone away – gone away, meaning dead, destroyed by the forces of evil? But Jesus explains that he is going to the Father and the Father is greater than he.

There is a certain inevitability about this. The individual Jesus of Nazareth is no longer to be confined to one spot in time and space. He, beginning in the resurrection and completing in the ascension, becomes present to all of us in all spaces and times and in eternity. And as the eternal, ever present Word of God, he is back with us.

Jesus of course had forewarned the disciples about what was to happen but they tended to be in denial. It was only in retrospect that they understood.

Consider also the enormous practicality, the realism of Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth. He knows what is going on. He understands the dynamics of political and religious power in Jerusalem. He understands the power dynamics even amongst his disciples. He knows that the time is short. He can literally no longer speak much more with his disciples – he will be arrested within hours. Can we take this lesson to heart too? We often have not had enough time to listen to the word of Jesus. We haven't studied the scriptures faithfully, we have not listened to the voice of God when he has spoken to us in various ways. We are never going to graduate with full knowledge and insight about our faith. Because the evil ruler of the current world order is coming. That

is going to stop all our studying and procrastination. Time has run out. It ran out for Jesus and his disciples as it runs out for us. The coming of the pandemic was in a very real sense our time running out for all of us. Decisions have to be made not in the future, but when the crisis hits.

And then there is the challenge. Do we make the decision in favour of God?

He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me. Get up, let us go.

The evil of the current kosmos has no power over Jesus. But that is not enough. Jesus has to demonstrate that he loves the Father and follows the commandment of the Father. This he does. He goes to the cross and lifts us all up with him. He demonstrates that he loves the Father.

When we face our particular crisis we are, as Christians, also asked to demonstrate that we love the Father and do his will. We have to show that to the world.

“Get up and go” is the command of Jesus.

Prayers (Grace Cathedral, San Francisco)

This is another day, O Lord.
I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be.
If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely.
If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.
If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently.
And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly.
Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus.
Amen.

When evil darkens our world, give us light.
When despair numbs our souls, give us hope.
When we stumble and fall, lift us up.
When doubts assail us, give us faith.
When nothing seems sure, give us trust.
When ideals fade, give us vision.
When we lose our way, be our guide!
That we may find serenity in Your presence,
and purpose in doing Your will.
Amen.

The leadership principle

Matthew 20:17-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them.

...

So Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority; but it shall not be so with you. Among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever would be first, must be the willing slave of all – like the Son of Man; he did not come to be served, but to serve, and to surrender his life as a ransom for many.

(Compare: Mark 10:25-28; Luke 22:25-27.)

It is commonly assumed that leadership is a good thing. The necessity for various forms of leadership is constantly extolled. You can buy books in the business sections of bookstores on how to be a great leader and win economic battles and so on.

The news media are full of stories about whether the current President is leading with the full authority that is needed. Others argue that our government is being authoritarian. Everybody has an opinion on leadership.

For Christians, the idea that leadership is **a good thing** in itself, must be somewhat foreign.

It is true that the church has always recognised that rulers and governments and leaders are necessary, and has advocated obedience to them within limits. But the message is clear that there is no place for 'greatness' or 'leadership' within Christ's Church, only for service .

It is a hoary myth that Jesus never criticised the political leaders of his day. To say "rulers of the nations lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority" is devastating criticism of pomp and abuse of authority. And Luke's text (22:25) is even more scathing: the rulers "lord it over their subjects; and those in authority are called their country's 'Benefactors'"! How descriptive of the dictators and authoritarians throughout history whose acts are justified as being in the interests of the state or people.

"But it shall not be so with you" is Jesus' word. And if we follow the word of Jesus we must "be the willing slave of all". For in the divine order, greatness is complete service, leadership is slavery to all.

And Jesus' word is that to serve, to be the willing slave of all is to be like the Son of Man, for he did not come to be served, but to serve.

And the message to us is that if we would be Christian, we must serve.

And the message to the nation is that if it would be in any sense Christian, it must serve and be the willing slave of all.

And the message to all organs of the state, businesses and organisations and their leaders is that if they would lead, they must serve.

And this message is something that they must be told, and we must learn.

Prayer (Xavier University, Ohio)

Leadership is hard to define.

Lord, let us be the ones to define it with justice.

Leadership is like a handful of water.

Lord, let us be the people to share it with those who thirst.

Leadership is not about watching and correcting.

Lord, let us remember it is about listening and connecting.

Leadership is not about telling people what to do.

Lord, let us find out what people want.

Leadership is less about the love of power,
and more about the power of love.

Lord, as we continue to undertake the role of leader let us be
affirmed by the servant leadership we witness in your son Jesus.

Let us walk in the path He has set and let those who will, follow.

Let our greatest passion be compassion.

Our greatest strength love.

Our greatest victory the reward of peace.

In leading let us never fail to follow.

In loving let us never fail.

What about the children?

It is slowly dawning on us that the world will never be the same again. “No more hugging and kissing” said President Ramaphosa in his address to the nation last night. As I am in my seventies I suppose some asceticism regarding hugging and kissing can be endured. But what about the children? Do we realise how different life will be for young children, adolescents and young adults? So many things that we took for granted in our own lives will simply not be possible for our young people.

Young children need social interaction to develop as human beings. They need love and attention from adults. They need to hear the real voices of the adults around them for their inborn language abilities to be awoken (and unfortunately research has shown that listening to voices on the radio or television does nothing to help young children speak at all). Young children need to play. They develop much of their sense of self and community by playing with other children. How are we going to emulate this play and communication in a world of social distancing? Parents will have to become as little children themselves and play and interact with their young children more.

One can make the aside here that, though acknowledging the wonders and benefits of the electronic forms of communication – what would we have done without our cell phones and WhatsApp – research has consistently shown that the social media are not at all good at developing genuine human emotional and social development.

Adolescents have to develop the psychological strength to separate their own identity from that of their parents. Opportunities for this were fairly easy – perhaps too easy – in the old world. Social distancing makes even simple ‘going out’, let alone practice in kissing and hugging, a hazardous challenge. How do we make it possible to allow for the growth of our young people when it is likely that for several years young people will be to varying degrees locked up with their parents or grandparents? Will this lead to rebellion and anger? This is going to be an enormous challenge to both parents and young people. It is a challenge anticipated by St Paul in two of his letters:

Ephesians 6:4

And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the Lord’s rearing and admonition.

Colossians 3:20

Children, obey your parents regarding all things, for this delights the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so that they might not be dispirited.

Lastly, we have a problem with the likelihood that our local communities will become more closed because of the fear of infection from people we don’t know and trust, fear of the stranger or the person from elsewhere. The need for our children and young people to experience the diversity of people is threatened. How are we as the caregivers and protectors of children going to enable them to grow and expand and reach out to others?

These challenges await us. Christians and churches have a duty to work on support for our children and young people in the times ahead.

Prayer

Lord, we bring before you our children and young people and their parents.

We pray that you will strengthen them to face the problems before us.

We pray that our actions will be loving and resolute and that we will not antagonise those we love.

We ask for wisdom and endurance and the love that enables us to see through our children's eyes.

O Lord, we are all your children, be with us as we go forward.

How do we meet and recall at a distance?

I Corinthians 11

For from the Lord I received what I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, And, having given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is [being broken] for your sake; do this for my remembrance." Likewise, after supping, the cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink, for my remembrance." For as often as you eat the loaf and drink the cup, you announce the Lord's death until he come.

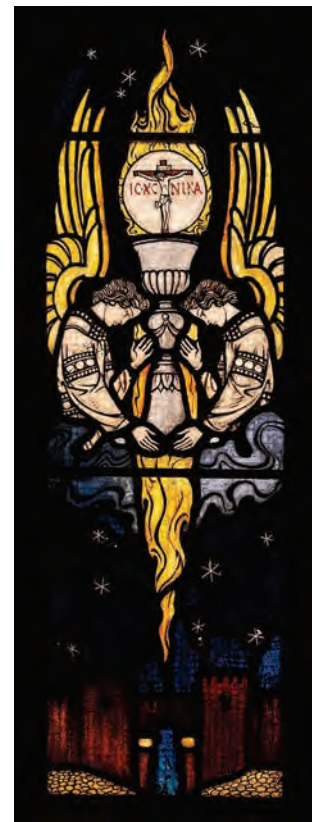
Jesus at the last supper instructed his disciples to 'Do this for my remembrance [anamnesis]', and over the centuries his followers have done so, affirming his continued real presence with them in his gathered and worshipping body, the church, and thereby also proclaiming his victorious death.

Right behind, and hidden by, the altar of St John the Divine Church in Durban, is a stained glass window which shows the elements of the Eucharist – the bread and a chalice of wine descending in the hands of two angels to the new Jerusalem. The bread, in the shape of a bread wafer, bears a cross and the Greek letters IC XC NIKA. The IC and XC are the first and last letters of the Greek words for Jesus and Christ and NIKA means Conquers – Jesus Christ conquers.

Right now, Christian communities are deprived of that Eucharistic gathering and it is likely that this may continue for some time. Even when we are able to gather again in church buildings it is likely that many things will be very different. No singing next to other people, no handshakes and hugs at the peace. And probably communion only with the bread, as sharing the same cup may spread infection [but at least the church resolved that difficulty long ago and it has long been considered theologically acceptable to receive only the bread].

Are there ways of getting around this difficulty when people cannot move around except for very specific work, food or medicine purchasing, or exercise purposes? Probably not easily.

It is not that the church has not faced this problem before, particularly in times of persecution. Within a little over a hundred years of the church's foundation, a Christian writer, Justin Martyr, described how when the Eucharistic service ended, the deacons would distribute to those members who were absent, presumably for reasons of ill-health or being in prison or not being allowed by husbands or masters to attend. Later writings confirm this. For some time it was also the practice for people to keep the consecrated elements in their homes (one must remember that, until persecution and



illegality ended, Christians worshipped in homes). We must also trust that even if we cannot gather in the Eucharistic assembly, it is impossible that we are somehow pushed out of the presence of the living Lord. He has his ways round all lockdowns whether physical, legal or spiritual.

In the interim the church will minister through online services to those who have the means to access electronic communication. Other methods will have to be explored, including roving deacons and lay-ministers. And there are forms of so-called agape meals than can be held in people's own homes. Originally the early church remembrance of the last supper would have been a real bring-and share meal but gradually the formal Eucharist was separated out from the shared agape meal for practical, administrative reasons and withered away. But the agape meal in a home can be reconstituted in these difficult times.

Lastly, there can be a so-called spiritual communion where we join, at a distance, with the celebrations of the Eucharist worldwide.

We will continue to be fed the bread of life.

Prayers [Anglican prayers for spiritual communion]

Come into my heart, Lord Jesus

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.
May your body and blood be my food and drink.
May your passion and death be my strength and life.
Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.
May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.
Let me not run from the love which you offer
but hold me safe from the forces of evil.
On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.
Keep calling to me until that day comes
when, with your saints, I may praise you for ever.
Amen

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, refresh me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within your wounds hide me.
Let me never be separated from you.
From the malicious enemy defend me.
In the hour of my death call me
and bid me come to you
that with your saints I may praise you
for ever and ever. Amen

Getting back to the beatitudes

A lot of people are complaining. They/We complain about virtually everything. We see it increasingly in the news reports and messages on our social media. It is not that we do not have very good justification to complain and to be angry and outraged at times. Who can blame us when we look at the state of the world: the inequality, exploitation, corruption, the political factionalism, the lies and misinformation, the greed, laziness and incompetence, the simple lack of care and consideration? But grumbling and being negative seems to become our default position. It is not that we should be shallowly optimistic, but we are very low on hope.

We seem far away from listening to the words of Jesus in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) in which those who hear are offered a state of being blessed, happy, fortunate, blissful:

How blissful the destitute, abject in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens;
How blissful those who mourn, for they shall be aided;
How blissful the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth;
How blissful those who hunger and thirst for what is right, for they shall feast;
How blissful the merciful, for they shall receive mercy;
How blissful the pure in heart, for they shall see God;
How blissful the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God;
How blissful those who have been persecuted for the sake of what is right, for theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens;
How blissful you when they reproach you, and persecute you and falsely accuse you of every evil for my sake: Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in the heavens is great; for thus they persecuted the prophets before you.

If we are people of the Good News why are we not more blissful?

We are told that if we are of a humble, grateful spirit, the kingdom of God is ours. Being constantly anxious and resentful, not being at peace with who we are, is going to destroy the hope of blessedness.

Many of the beatitudes speak of the quality of our relationships with other people – if we are gentle, merciful, peaceable, and truthful we are so in relation to other people. Blessedness is always in the company of others, interacting with others.

Blessedness is an accompaniment of knowing God and seeing all things in God and God in all things. It is seeing things as God sees them.

When we listen to the beatitudes we usually feel very unworthy. Are these not counsels of perfection that only saints can aspire to? Surely not. These words were clearly core message when Jesus started his ministry in Galilee.

Yes, we confess our failures, our backsliding, our unwillingness to have a complete identity of will with the will of God, our lack of inner peace because we have resisted God's reintegration of our own inner order.

But we do not have to do this by ourselves. Blissfulness, after all, is only fully real when it is shared.

There are people out there who are humbly working for good. Find those people.

There are people out there who hunger and thirst for what is right. Align yourself with those people.

There are people out there who are merciful. Join them.

There are people out there who are peacemakers. Stand by them.

There are people out there who are pure in heart. Find those people.

Join them in blissfulness.

Prayers (Ignatius Loyola)

Dearest Lord,
teach me to be generous;
teach me to serve You as You deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for reward
save that of knowing I am doing Your Will.

O Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness
and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence,
Your love, and Your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust
in Your protecting love
and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us,
for, living close to You,
we shall see Your hand,
Your purpose, Your will through all things.
Amen.

Apostle to the apostles - Mary Magdalene

Who was the first person to see the risen Christ? A woman called Mary from the town of Magdala. Who was the first apostle sent to bring the good news of the resurrection to the disciples? Mary of Magdala. She was the apostle to the future apostles.

In 2016 Pope Francis raised the status of her July 22 memorial day to an official feast day. He recognized her role as the first to witness Christ's resurrection and as the first "true and authentic evangeliser". This shows the equality of Mary Magdalene to the apostles, status that had never been officially given before. He also called on all Christians to "reflect more deeply on the dignity of women". It is right that this woman should have the same liturgical feast day status as that given to the other apostles and that the special mission of Mary Magdalene be recognized.

The beautiful window in St John the Divine church in Durban shows Mary Magdalene holding a jar of perfume and below her another jar and tears of repentance. But these very symbols may in fact illustrate the problems with how the scriptures are sometimes misread.

For centuries Mary Magdalene has been confused with two other women in the gospel accounts – a sinner who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:37-38) and Mary from Bethany who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair (John 11:2). This led to Mary Magdalene being pictured as a repentant prostitute, popularised in nonsense pulp fiction such as *The Da Vinci Code*. Turning Mary into a prostitute meant that she couldn't be recognized as having been a leader in the church.

The real Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name 12 times in the gospels, more than most of the Twelve and more than any woman other than Jesus' mother and other relatives.

The gospels depict her as one of a group of women who provided material resources to help Jesus and his disciples as they travelled and ministered in Galilee. They also travelled with Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem.

Take Luke 8:1-3, which says:

Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.



So from this we can gather that Mary Magdalene had been healed by Jesus and that she had some wealth. She was an independent woman. She is not identified by a father or a husband. She had been changed by her encounter with Jesus and followed him. She used her resources to enable Jesus' itinerant ministry.

She clearly became one of the more prominent disciples and she stood by Jesus right to the end, standing by the cross with his mother and Mary Clopas. She attended his hideous execution and the burial, unlike the Twelve who had fled. And it is she, who goes first to the tomb on the Sunday morning to complete the funerary rites. The account in John's gospel (20:11-18) of the meeting of Mary and the Lord is one of the most moving in all scripture.

And it is to her that the risen Lord gives the first apostolic commission (John 20:17-18):

Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene fulfilled her apostolic mission. Mark 16:10-11 says that:

She went and announced it to those who had been with him as they were mourning and weeping; And they, on hearing that he lives and was seen by her, did not believe.

She announced the good news of the resurrection of the Lord, and they, after they too have met the risen Lord, will also become apostles of the good news.

Mary Magdalene is an example to us all.

Prayer (Adapted from Catholic Health Association of the US)

Lord Jesus,
May we who are healed by you the true physician, follow you like Mary.
May we give of our resources to the ministry of your body, the church.
May we give faithful witness, even when we are not believed.
May you call us by name, as you did Mary.

Mary,
Last at the cross of Jesus, first at his tomb, Pray for us.
First to see Christ risen, Pray for us.
Constant woman, Pray for us.
Apostle of apostles, Pray for us.

We are not orphans

John 14:15-24

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I shall entreat the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, that he may be with you throughout the age, the Spirit of truth, which the kosmos cannot receive because it neither sees nor knows it; you know it because it abides with you and will be within you. I shall not leave you orphans; I am coming to you. Just a little while and the kosmos no longer sees me, but you see me; because I live, you too will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, that one is the one who loves me, and whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him.

Judas – not Iscariot – says to him, “Lord, what has happened then, that you are about to manifest yourself to us and not to the kosmos?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “If someone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and will make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine but rather that of the Father who has sent me. These things I have spoken to you while remaining with you; But the advocate, the Spirit, the Holy One, which the Father will send in my name, he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.

Part of the above passage was the lectionary reading for yesterday. It looks forward to Jesus' Ascension, to be celebrated on Thursday. As with much of John's gospel, each sentence is pregnant with an overabundance of meaning.

In this text Jesus is both warning the disciples of his departure as a visible presence and promising his continuing manifestation in their lives and in the guidance of the coming Holy Spirit – who will be their Advocate.

Jesus is departing in two senses. He is to die on the cross. The living carpenter from Nazareth will be gone. But also, after he is revealed on the third day as the eternally alive, resurrected one, he will be returning to the Father. Even though the disciples will be exultantly joyous when they meet him, they will still feel like orphans when he ascends to the Father.

Jesus gives five promises.

I shall not leave you orphans.

I am coming to you.

Because I live, you will live.

I will manifest myself to you.

The Holy Spirit will teach you everything.

Jesus, who cares for his disciples understands how they will feel when the trauma of Good Friday is over. They will feel like desolate orphans. On his second departure at the Ascension they will feel orphaned again, not desolate this time, but certainly bewildered. But Jesus will not leave them orphaned.

Jesus promises that “you are in me, and I am in you”. This is beyond understanding, but somehow the Father and the Son will come to human beings and they “will make our home” with us. Somehow, with the incarnation of the Son of God, as the Book of Revelation says (21:3), “the home of God is among mortals”.

The resurrection is the ultimate vindication by the Creator of all that is good, it is the vindication of Jesus as the Messiah, and the guarantee that Jesus’ promises will be fulfilled. Because Jesus lives, we no longer have to be afraid or worried about death. He lives.

Jesus says he will manifest himself to us. What does this mean? The other disciple named Judas asks the question, “What does it mean that you will show yourself to us but not to the kosmos?” Yes, that kosmos (the world of human life and organisation) will keep going with all its alienation from the divine, its injustices and evils and lack of love. But hidden from it, what no amount of state or other surveillance will detect, is the presence of the Christ. The kosmos simply cannot see it! The hiddenness of God is changed only for his own, those who love Jesus and keep his word. His will make known his will and action in their lives.

Lastly, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate (our defender against the lies and assaults of evil – and it is useful here to remember that the name of the evil one in the New Testament – diabolus – literally means ‘the slanderer’.) We will be taught everything by that Spirit. And we will be reminded of everything that we were told by Jesus in his earthly ministry.

We are not orphans, God is with us, closer to us than our breath, we are defended, and we are being led into a path of glorious learning.

Prayer (Collect for Sixth Sunday after Easter)

O God, who reveals himself in love:
pour into our hearts such love towards you,
that we, loving you in all things and above all things,
may obtain your promises,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Seeing at a distance

On a Sunday morning, in a time more than eight weeks ago, when much of Durban was still asleep, or already at their services of worship of Mammon at the malls and shopping centres, a small group of people would gather in a somewhat old fashioned (Romanesque revival) building, and share in a Eucharistic meal. And in that visible and physical eating of bread and drinking of wine, we claimed to be in the very presence of our Lord and God. Now on a Sunday we attend at a distance, online. I have captured the Gospel reading on my cell phone. The priest has preached a lonely sermon, videoed by his daughter. What kind of eyes do we need now to see the Lord, looking at YouTube on a screen?

Yes, what kind of eyes do we need to see him?

We are not talking about ordinary sight. Having ordinary sight didn't help many in Judaea and Galilee when Jesus walked there. Though we might say, "If only I had lived when Jesus was on earth. Wouldn't it have been wonderful? To see the Lord face to face." But it might not have been wonderful at all. We might not have recognised him – many people did not. They were "blind". We might even have been offended by him.

Yet at the same time, Jesus in his mercy and outreach to us, did make use of the things of the earth and ordinary sight to make known his love. And of course the great example of that is his taking the familiar elements of the Passover meal – bread and wine, already imbued with deep significance as means to recall the liberation from Egypt – as symbols of his human body about to be broken on the cross in a greater and universal liberation of all. And he gives us those elements as a way of making visible across time and space his presence in our midst.

Now, we are in lockdown. We have to be realistic in accepting that some form of social distancing is going to endure for many months and that our whole way of living is going to have to change for the foreseeable future. We are now distant from the breaking of the bread and the giving of the wine. This is hard for me and I imagine for most fellow congregants. We can no longer see, touch, taste. Those helps are gone.

So we take a deep breath. This is a time for deeper faith and endurance. Our customary "eyesight" will have to change. We will no longer be able to see "close-up". We will have to see with eyes that can see the bigger picture, can see the Holy Spirit at work in all things.

We have ourselves to be the bread and wine, the grain and the grapes of Christ's body scattered out in this world of isolation.

But we are united, both now in the Spirit and physically one day in the future.

Prayer

(Anglican Prayer Book)

As the grain once scattered in the fields
and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside
are now reunited on this table in bread and wine,
so, Lord, may your whole Church soon be gathered together
from the corners of the earth
into your kingdom.
Amen.

Preparing for the Ascension

The feast of the Ascension is nearly upon us – it's tomorrow. Even in lockdown time passes fast and the celebration of Easter ends tonight. Having wrestled and meditated on all the implications of the Last Supper, Good Friday and Easter Day we now have to pound our brains with thoughts about Christ's Ascension and then we will race on to Pentecost. All without the protective environment of regular church services!

I have always found it hard to visualise the Ascension. Most of the artwork we see of it makes Jesus appear to be levitating, beamed up like in Star Trek. It doesn't work for me and I am sure for most others who know that God is not in some physical heaven a few kilometres up. And surely the Ascension is more than the beginning of a long wait for Jesus to come back in some dramatically visible way.

Surely the Ascension must tell us something about God, for the whole point about the events recorded in the Jewish and Christian scriptures is that God wanted to communicate something to us human beings. And, although much of that revelation is about what human beings are like – not great much of the time – and what they should do about it – lots of hard to follow laws and practices – most of it is about God. Given that the living God is the greatest 'being' that the human mind can conceive of and also beyond anything that the human mind can conceive of, the sacred scriptures are quite lengthy and the path of humankind's education in the nature of the God equally lengthy and at times tortuous.

In the Old Testament it took quite a time to consolidate the learning that God is not many but one, not capricious but just and holy and utterly above and different from all human representations of him. This message is perfectly summed up by the vision that Isaiah the priest has of the LORD in the Jerusalem temple (Isaiah 6:1-8) in which, appropriate to the surroundings, God becomes visible in his throne above the altar, surrounded by six winged heavenly beings – seraphim – not your Christmassy decoration angels or cherubs but fierce awesome guardian spirits – some sense of which we may see in the monstrous images that used to adorn the palace entrances in Assyria and Babylonia. What we are meant to share with Isaiah is the sense of awful holiness, the holiness that means that no one may see the face of God and live. These spiritual powers utter a three fold cry: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts." The foundations of the temple shake with this voice, not of the LORD but of his doorkeepers! Now this utter holiness evokes in Isaiah a terrifying sense of his utter difference from God in his sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people. It requires an initiative from the divine to purge this guilt and enable Isaiah to say "Thuma mina".

The next stage of God's self revelation is almost utterly contradictory – a paradox – something that is self-contradictory but true. The God who has spent more than a thousand years hammering into his special people his unapproachable difference and holiness, appears in the form of a Palestinian peasant carpenter who instructs us to call God "Dad" (for that is what "Abba" means). And the New Testament witnesses point to this man and say, "Behold the lamb of God" and "My Lord and My God" and "He is the

image of the invisible God". Apart from being paradoxical it becomes apparent that this strange God has a sense of ironic humour, also noticeable in His Son – as we saw in the story of the two disciples walking to Emmaus.

And then the story becomes even more complicated when the risen Jesus ascends away from our sight in the most gentle way, after promising that we will not be left as orphans but will receive a gift that will transform everything that we do until the end of time. We will become part of the inner life of God.

So there you have it. A God who is the holy burning other, totally alien to everything human, and the Man next to us in Jesus, and that inner voice that is not our minds' speaking but the gentle and comforting Spirit that leads us today.

It is all very confusing but immensely exciting. When we come down from the mountain of the Ascension we have a world to win.

Prayer

O God of utter holiness,
We cannot stand before you.
Yet you sent your Son Jesus to walk with us and raise us up.
Guide us as we prepare to celebrate his Ascension,
when he departed from us to be in all places and all times.
Though he is now hidden from our earthly sight enable us to live in Him,
through the gift and power and grace of the Holy Spirit,
in whose voice we cry
'Holy, Holy. Holy, Lord God of hosts
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Amen.

Unlockdown anxiety

A lot of people I know are going through unlockdown anxiety. Indeed most of the South African media are in the thralls of it. We are being bombarded on all sides by arguments and propaganda about whether we should or shouldn't end the lockdown. So we get anxious.

Most of the arguments I hear come from relatively rich, educated people who are not old. The voiceless, those who don't write *Daily Maverick* articles or send in comments on them are, well, voiceless. So the seriously advantaged claim to speak on their behalf, usually along the lines that we must restart the economy, though there are some dissidents who say that ending the lockdown prematurely will allow a viral explosion which will cost the economy more in the long run, let alone more lives lost. Most of these arguments are pretty futile because we simply do not know the future, given the novelty of the Corona virus. There are so many factors at play that the best of statistical modellers are working in the dark.

So at heart what you think should be done becomes an almost temperamental choice between the economy versus lives. I confess to a bias here. I am highly sceptical of business people who suddenly portray a concern about people needing to be back in their jobs en masse, given the same constituency's obvious desire over the years to make the workforce as lean as possible to increase profits.

We do well to remember, of course, that it is not going to be our real choice because politicians and lobbyists at a much higher level are going to decide what happens. We just have to live with the consequences.

What we must not do is to become so disabled by anxiety that we start talking and behaving as if we are suicidal. It is a bit like those people who have vertigo – a great anxious fear of heights – who think they would be impelled to throw themselves off a cliff if they got too near the edge, as a way of getting it over with and ending the anxiety and fear. It is an illusion of course.

The reality is that neither lockdown nor ending the lockdown changes the situational demands on us all, old and young. We have to change our behaviour so that we do the best we can not to threaten the health and lives of others, even if we are reckless about our own lives. We cannot do that if we are disabled by anxiety. Unfortunately the Corona virus is a social disease – it is passed on by human beings being close to one another. To remain a good human being requires us to be highly disciplined in our distancing from others and at the same time, retain caring communication as much as possible with our fellow isolates in our world. Insofar as we have voices, we need to persuade others to act responsibly too, at in the home, neighbourhood and wider community. We have to plan to ensure that the huge inequalities in our land, seen particularly in our schools, are ended. Because it is among the poor that the virus will eventually strike the hardest.

1 Peter 5: 7-8 puts what is needed so well:

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert.”

Peter was echoing his Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, who instructed his followers not to be anxious.

Matthew 6:25-27

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

Matthew 6:34

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

We want this pandemic to be over – but it is not. We have to stay alert, yes, but anxious, no. We have God with us and we will continue, as Paul puts it in Philippians 4:6-7, not to be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let our requests be made known to God.

Prayer (Adapted from Collect in the Anglican Prayer Book)

Heavenly Father
you are the source of life and health:
we give you thanks and praise for those who have recovered from
and those who been protected from the virus scourge.
Be with those in their sickness and comfort the dying.
Guide us all as we endure this plague to make right decisions.
Keep us in health of body and spirit
ever rejoicing in your loving care;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Brave doubt – Thomas

We are accustomed to call anybody who is sceptical or doubting of anything of which they do not have direct experience a ‘doubting Thomas’, after the disciple Thomas the Twin who famously would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless he could put his fingers in the nail marks and his hand into his side.

Many of us have a lot of respect for Thomas and his honest doubt. There is a doubt that is a form of holding to truth and another form which is really indifference to the truth (rampant in much contemporary discourse among the educated classes). Most of us know what honest doubt is. Most Christians I know have had to wrestle with all sorts of doubts. Given the extreme demands which the faith makes on our lives, how could it be otherwise?



Another of the beautiful windows in St John the Divine church in Durban is of the apostle Thomas. His emblems, are the builder's square which refers to a church he built in the East and the spear, the instrument of his death. Tradition has it that Thomas travelled outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel, travelling as far as the West Coast of India. He reached Muziris in what is now the modern Indian state of Kerala in AD 52 and was martyred in Myalpur, near Madras on the East coast of India in AD 72. He is often regarded as the patron saint of India.

As with most saints, there are legends attached to Thomas. One of them is that when Thomas went on his mission to the India and the East Indies, a king gave him money to build a palace. Instead Thomas gave it to the poor. Thrown into a dungeon, the king's brother had a vision in which he saw a magnificent palace of gold and silver which Thomas had built for him in heaven, so Thomas was released. Another legend says that Thomas doubted the ascension of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven, when shown her empty grave. She dropped her girdle of flowers down to him to assure him it was true – hence the Fleur de Lys symbols on his clothing, the symbol of the Blessed Virgin.

What we really do know about Thomas is that he was brave and committed to Jesus. In John 11:1-16, when Jesus hears of Lazarus' illness and sets out to go to Judaea, the disciples try to discourage him because when last in Judaea, some people had tried to stone Jesus. They don't want to risk it, but Thomas says: "Let

us also go, that we may die with him.” We also know that, in spite of disbelieving in the resurrection, he stays with his fellows, and thus is present at the next appearance of Jesus when he utters the words which sum up the Christian faith – Jesus is “My Lord and my God.”

So honest doubt is one of the strands in the marvellous fabric of the Christian faith. God is the God of truth and his disciples must always honour truth and seek it out.

In the history of the Anglican Diocese of Natal we have a most moving example of that honouring of truth. The first Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, was sent out to mission to the people of Natal. While translating into isiZulu the story of Noah’s flood with his assistant William Ngidi, Ngidi asked him “Is this all true? Do you really believe that all this happened thus, – and all the beasts, and birds, and creeping things, upon the earth, large and small, from hot countries and cold, came in by pairs, and entered into the ark with Noah? And did Noah gather food for them *all*, for the beasts and birds of prey, as well as the rest?” Colenso’s response? “My heart answered in the words of the Prophet, ‘Shall a man speak lies in the name of the Lord?’ (Zechariah 13:3). I dared not do so. My own knowledge of some branches of science ... Knowing this, I felt that I dared not, as a servant of the God of Truth, urge my brother man to believe that, which I did not myself believe, which I knew to be untrue, as a matter-of-fact, historical narrative. ... I was thus driven, – against my will at first, I may truly say, – to search more deeply into these questions. ...” And search he did and changed our understanding of the scriptures for the better and went on further in his search for truth to expose and fight against the evils of British imperialism that led to the dreadful war against the Zulu kingdom and what followed.

We are in the modern era, probably one of the most credulous and superstitious ages in the history of humanity in which, by comparison, the so-called dark ages were positively rational. We are besieged and contaminated by fake news on a minute-by-minute basis. Modern politics is the very stuff of misinformation.

So as we follow in the train of the risen one, our glorious victor over the world, sin and death, following behind Peter and Paul and the disciples, it is good to know that we are also walking beside Saint Thomas, the honest doubter and truth seeker.

Prayers (Collect)

Almighty and ever living God,
who for the more confirmation of the faith
did allow your holy Apostle Thomas
to be doubtful of your Son’s resurrection:
Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt,
to believe in your Son Jesus Christ,
that our faith may never be reprov’d.
Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

Be patient of all that is unsolved in your heart . . .
Try to love the questions themselves . . .
Do not now seek the answers,
which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day into the answers.

In the watchtower

Habakkuk 2:1-4

I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower,
and look forth and see what He will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.
And the LORD answered me "Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it.
For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie.
If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.
Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.

The world is in deep trouble. South Africa is in deep trouble. Our best minds are trying to make models of what lies ahead, but virtually everything we see is murky and uncertain. And no god from the skies is striking down the virus.

Habakkuk, a minor and seldom read prophet, had a similar problem (1:1-3).

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So our disastrous situation is not new. We want well-being and prosperity and human harmony, we crave it, we work for it, sometimes we have it within our grasp for tantalisingly short periods, yet it eludes us. We live in a very precarious world and, of course, we are also contributors to that precariousness through our prejudices, our selfishness, our greed, and our uncaring – alongside the malevolence of the more openly wicked, exploitative and corrupt. We contribute to it by not looking ahead, by not planning ahead, including not planning ahead for future generations. As an aside, we can see that the coming of the pandemic has perhaps been the best warning possible of the far worse disaster to be visited on our children and grandchildren when human-provoked climate change smashes our world.

Habakkuk wanted to hear God's answer. But the place he had to be to hear that answer was on the watchtower, looking out, to be able to see disaster coming and warn the people in time.

The prophets were the watchtower people of the Old Testament. In the new dispensation it is a special task of Christians to man the watchtowers – to keep sharp, to stay awake. While the world slumbers, or sleeps in its comas of materialism and despair, we stay awake. We are to be on the watchtower.

In the current situation it is mainly scientists who have yelled alerts from the watchtowers. It is not as if there were not warnings that global interconnectedness meant that some new epidemic could easily sweep around the world. But no government in the world was willing to stop listening to short term demands and really prepare for a pandemic in the future. Scientists themselves in their hubris created an attitude that modern science and technology could do anything, beat any disease. We have all been humbled. But we do give thanks to the physicians, the nurses, the epidemiologists and statistical modellers who are trying to keep us alive.

We have to stay sharp. And our church congregations and institutions will have to be reconfigured so that we are more on guard on the watchtower.

God continues to ask us to climb into the watchtower, to endure the various equivalents of staying awake all night in the cold and wind. There we wait for his coming, for his message to our time and place. We also will recognise that we have some companions with us (not necessarily all Christians), playing their part to warn the world.

It will be tough be we are asked to be tough. We are asked to have faith, heroic faith. And Habbakuk 3:17-18 offers one of the finest descriptions of heroic faith in world literature:

Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
and the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Never surrender. Keep the faith. Stay awake.

Prayer

Lord God, Alpha and Omega, may we hear your voice.
Be with us as we try to be alert,
open to your prompting and warnings,
willing to speak your truth in love to all.

Forgive us for our lack of awareness in the past.
Forgive our nations and leaders for their lack of foresight.
Be with us as we come through this pandemic.
Be with us as we try to right the way the world has worked.

We trust in you, Lord God, our salvation.

Being chosen

Ephesians 1:1-15

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as **he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world** to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved One. In him we have the fee for liberation through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Why us? Why did we have to be the generation which is hit by this pandemic? And why are we expected to be the resolute and brave ones, living out this disaster? Did God choose us to be so?

This raises the question of why God appears to choose. Why does God choose?

Why did he choose Israel – the ancient Hebrew riff-raff on the margins of the settled areas of the Ancient Middle East – rather than, say, the established Egypt with its rich store of religious wisdom? Or why did God not rather choose everybody, every nation? In the modern world with globalisation and the idea of equal rights for all, the choice of Israel all seems slightly unfair, like favouring one of your children over against the others. In South Africa we are perhaps particularly sensitive about any one nation or ethnic group thinking it is chosen, special – we think of apartheid and its abuse of power in the interests of one group based on nationalistic ideas about God choosing a special people. And we in the Anglican Church have generally been wary of the idea of God electing or predestining some people to be saved and others not.

But, when we look at the story of God's interaction with humanity as recorded in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, we also see that those who are chosen are those who open themselves to be chosen. The might of the Egyptian and other empires was not willing to open even a chink to let the Lord God in or to enter into covenant with them. The Canaanites were too busy enjoying their orgies in good times and sacrificing their

infant children in bad times to hear the voice of the Holy One. In an account in Mark's gospel we see that when the early disciples were sent out to give the good news message, they were told to simply to move on if the message was not welcomed.

At this point we have to think about ourselves as Church in the modern world. In many countries, once again the followers of the true and living God are a minority, in an increasingly secular and materialistic world. It is little different from the early Christians in the world of the Roman empire, the empire whose soldiers crucified Jesus. Now too the general population is kept busy by what was described as "bread and circus" – easy wealth for the richer people built on the exploitation of people in the empire and entertainment in the theatres and gladiator rings to keep the common people occupied and docile. In Durban on a Sunday (before the lockdown) the wealth and the worship of the god of wealth (Mammon) could be seen when you went past the malls or the casino on the beach – more cars outside than those outside all the combined city churches. And ordinary folk (who can be corrupted more cheaply) can watch reality show exclusion games on their television screens. So, looking at us worshippers today, we are as insignificant as the Hebrew nomads from which Abraham came or the disciples who went out on a mission in twos, without backpacks or wheeled suitcases, trusting that God would provide, but otherwise resourceless.

Yet we, somehow, have been chosen. Paul says "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world."

So yes, here we are in the pandemic world, and we have been chosen and we have a tough task ahead of us. And when we get through the virus disaster? What is it all for, when that particular struggle is over?

Well, it is for all of us, all humanity.

God chooses us, the little flock, the remnant, but he chooses us for all humanity. Indeed he chose all of us long ago, indeed before there was even an ago.

Because in the words of Paul, writing to a little minority community in Ephesus nearly 2000 years ago, God actually chose all of humanity and all of the universe. We were all chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world. That is a stunning conception. Before there was a world or time, before there was a before or any-thing – God chose us.

And in Christ he made known to his disciples his wisdom and mysterious will "to unite all things in him in heaven and earth". So to us is given the secret that everything in heaven and earth will be united one day in God. So in that sense God never did choose only a little nation or group, he chose us all.

What he did choose was some to share that secret with and to ask them to be his co-workers and confidants as he made unification happen in time and history. And that is our great privilege – to have been called to join that group.

Prayers

[Ignatius Loyola]

Eternal Word, only begotten Son of God,
Teach me true generosity.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve.
To give without counting the cost,
To fight heedless of wounds,
To labour without seeking rest,
To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward
Save the knowledge that I have done your will.

[Adapted from Ignatius Loyola]

What will I be especially grateful for in this day?
The gift of another day?
The love and support I will receive?
The courage I will show?
An event that will take place today?

Where will I feel true joy today?
What will trouble me today?
What will challenge me today?
Where and when will I pause today?
Will I notice God's presence in any of this?

Forced choices

I listened to the President's address on Sunday night and one of my thoughts was that now more of the burden of decision making is being passed onto us as we move into Lockdown Level 3. It is we who now have to decide how much risk we take for ourselves and how much risk we create for other people. It is we who now have to decide whether to send our children back to school or to go to work or to demand our employees come back to work.

There is no way of escaping this burden of choice – whatever we do, or do not do, will have some kind of consequence. In that sense the full lockdown was an easier situation to be in because we just had to abide by the rules. Now we have to make decisions which may be right or wrong and we do not know yet whether they are right or wrong or partly right and partly wrong. What a situation to be in! We simply do not know whose interests are going to be best served by what the country does as a whole or what we do as individuals.

We are going to have to make decisions and we cannot avoid it. (I for example am classed as being vulnerable because of my age, so do I stay in personal lockdown for the rest of the year, or not? Do I risk my life or not? What if I see my grandchildren and then, if they infect me, make them feel guilty for the rest of their lives?)

But it is important that our decision making is not disabled or compromised by anxiety, fear or ignorance. Clearly, whatever our particular decisions are, we have to behave as responsibly as possible, adhering to all the guidelines we have been given to avoid and conquer the virus. But there are many decisions where we have no certainty as to the outcomes. We do not know whether the good outcomes will be outweighed or marred by some bad outcomes – for example, children going back to school. This is obviously desirable for the continuation of their education but some will get infected, maybe asymptotically, and infect their parents or grandparents who may die.

There is an odd saying that comes from Martin Luther that can help us here: “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” He was saying, accept that you are a sinner, admit that the decisions you have to make may be wrong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.

Luther was not, of course, encouraging us to sin. He wanted people to recognise that we will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice and equality comfortably reside, and sometimes we have to choose between greater and lesser evils. He wants us to own that we are in a sinful world and that some of our actions will be sinful. We have to own this state. We must not be defeated by these situations. We must not be paralysed by these horrible choices. Own that your actions will, to some degree be harmful and sinful. Own that our sins will be real, in order for grace to be real. We need to be equally bold in admitting that we really do need Jesus.

Let our trust in Christ be stronger than the sins we commit. Christ is stronger than our sin, and that is a cause to rejoice in victory.

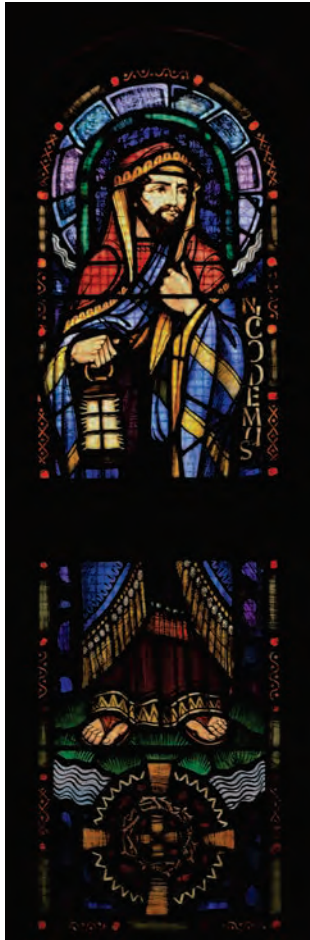
So in the next weeks, as the lockdown eases, make the decisions you have to make, boldly and confidently. Try and make them advised by the best information you can get. But do not fear, continue to rejoice in Christ who is the victor over your sin, everybody's sin, death, and the world.

Prayer

Almighty God, Lord of Lords, have mercy upon us.
Be with your servants in this time of trial.
Arm us with the sword of your truth.
Grant us the wisdom to make careful decisions.
Protect us from the dark things of this world.
Help us to overcome the things of disease and death.

O Lord, in my hour of need, be with me.
May I be a light to those in suffering and distress.
May I always remember my obligations to the poor.
Grant this through Christ our Lord.

Secret friends



One of the more enigmatic characters in John's Gospel is Nicodemus – a Pharisee and a member of the highest Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, the very Council that eventually decided that Jesus should be dealt with (John 11:45-5).

Nicodemus had got to know about Jesus and John's Gospel (3:1-21) describes how Nicodemus secretly visited Jesus at night to discuss his teachings – “Rabbi, we realise that you are a teacher who comes from God. Obviously no one could show the signs that you show unless God were with him.”

The visit clearly had an impact because the next time Nicodemus is mentioned (John 7:50-51), he is defending Jesus in the Sanhedrin and argues that it unjust to condemn him without hearing what he has to say and finding out what he has done.

Finally, when Jesus has indeed been dealt with by the Jerusalem authorities and handed over to the Romans to be tried and executed, he appears alongside Joseph of Arimathea to assist in the burial of Jesus and provide the customary burial spices.

So here we have a man who is fundamentally decent and understands what is right, and will speak out against injustice, but is also timid, not wanting to be publicly aligned with this radical religious figure.

It is likely that Jesus had a number of such hidden followers, people who were persuaded by his teaching and healing ministry but found it very difficult to publicly make the break from the old and commit to Jesus.

The account of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is extraordinary in its depth. Jesus talks about Nicodemus needing to “be born again”. Without this radical spiritual transformation “no one can see the kingdom of God.” This transformation is precisely what Nicodemus finds it so difficult to accept.

In our contemporary world there are so many basically decent people whose attitude to human beings may have been deeply influenced by the Christian world view, who cannot quite bring themselves to commit to this new birth in the spirit. Yet, Jesus affirms that the spirit of God is still at its renewing work. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Things are happening in people's souls even though it may for now be hidden. And Jesus then says: “whoever lives by the truth comes into the light”.

Nicodemus, this secret follower, is given the gift of those wonderful words that explain so much:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Nicodemus has always been a popular figure in the deep south of the United States of America where the emancipated slaves saw him as providing a model of rebirth into freedom. In 1967, Martin Luther King invoked Nicodemus when talking of the need for the United States to be “born again” in order to effectively address social and economic inequality.

Prayer [Kathleen and James Hart Brumm]

God of Abraham and Nicodemus,
we pray for all those who long for a new beginning:
 those who are imprisoned,
 those who are estranged,
 those who have left loved ones behind,
 and those who are ill or infirm, especially during the pandemic.
Give them all new life by the power of your Spirit.
Help us to see how we can be present with them
as your hands and feet.
Birth us all anew, O God;
hear us and help us on our journey.

God of Abram and Nicodemus,
 we pray for your holy Church.
Give us the courage to leave everything behind and follow you.
Give us the faith to act on what we do not understand.
Bless us to be a blessing to everyone in your Name.
Birth us all anew, O God;
hear us and help us on our journey.

Birth us all anew, O God.
Hear us and help us on our journey.
Help us to grow up again,
 to accept not only earthly things but heavenly things,
 to lift up your Son and be lifted up ourselves,
 to let your Spirit move us beyond our understanding.

Busywork – Martha and Mary

Now that the lockdown has lasted for nearly ten weeks it may be a time to take stock of what we have actually been doing during this period of retreat from the everyday world.

For the more introverted and less social of us, lockdown may have made little difference. The outgoing and gregarious among us may have felt restricted and bored. But what seems to have been near universal is a sense that being busy expanded into the time seemingly left open for us to do new things. All those good intentions of reading more, doing something artistic or creative – painting, knitting, meditating – seem to have evaporated for many. Of course, being at home meant more cooking, probably for women, having to meet the needs of husbands and children who would normally be at work or school or college.



Two of the followers and supporters of Jesus were Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus. The 'Martha and Mary' story is well known (John 10:38-42). Jesus and the Twelve and probably people like Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother arrive at Martha's house and are given hospitality. Martha rushes around seeing to the needs of everybody. (I don't know about you, but when our household has guests, there is frantic tidying up and ensuring there is enough food and drink ready). Mary hangs around Jesus and the Twelve, listening to every word that is spoken. Martha is distracted by all that needs to be done and gets really cross with Mary and asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her:

"Lord, does it not matter to you that my sister left me all alone to serve? Tell her, therefore, that she should assist me." And in reply the Lord said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and disturbed about many things, But there is need of one thing: for Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

I have always had sympathy for Martha and in the stained glass window in St John the Divine, Durban, Mary does look rather prissily pious. No wonder Martha was irritated by her.

But there is a great lesson in the story. Our very busyness sometimes cuts us off from what is really important, from what is of greater value. Sometimes even our good works on behalf of others may cut us off from our families, our friends and even from ourselves. The danger of over-busyness is that we may be too distracted to hear the "the still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-13) that we really need to listen to.

Of course, we do need both the Marthas and Marys of this world and within our own psyches. It is not for nothing that the Latin phrase “ora et labora” (pray and labour) was considered characteristic of the great monastic orders, who had a balanced rule of work and prayer. There is a wonderful story about one of the early desert fathers, Abba Silvanus:

A brother went to see Abba Silvanus on the mountain of Sinai. When he saw the brothers working hard, he said to the old man, “Do not labour for the food that perishes. Mary has chosen the good portion.”

The old man said to a disciple, “Zacharias, give the brother a book, and put him in a cell without anything else.”

So when the ninth hour came, this brother watched the door, expecting someone would be sent to call him to the meal. When no one called him, he got up, went to find the old man, and said to him, “Have the brothers not eaten today?”

The old man replied that they had.

Then he said, “Why did you not call me?”

The old man said to him, “Because you are a spiritual man and do not need that kind of food. We, being carnal, want to eat, and that is why we work. But you have chosen the good portion and read the whole day long, and you do not want to eat carnal food.”

When he heard these words, the brother made a prostration, saying, “Forgive me, Abba.”

The old man said to him, “Mary needs Martha. It is really thanks to Martha that Mary is praised.”

A Martha and Mary Prayer [Fran Pratt]

God of grace and peace, give us perspective on our national and global problems
in the light of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.
Give us grace and peace.

Grant that we may have the heart of Martha, understanding our responsibility
and calling to peacemaking;
Willing to work hard to set things right.

Grant that we may have the heart of Mary, understanding that the presence of
Jesus in our midst is the most important thing to seek;
Willing to seek first your kingdom.

Grant that we may have patience with the mess we are in,
understanding that transformation is a process,
Willing to take the first steps.

Jesus, we invite you among us now
That we may sit at your feet.

We say to the worried and distracted,
The Kingdom of God is at hand.
We say to the spiritually hungry,
The Kingdom of God is near.

May we know the treasure of the presence of Christ,
The peace of the presence of God;
God among us,
God with us.

And may we set our distractions aside, making space to hear your voice, and only
then setting about our work,
To be the hands and feet of Christ in a worried world.

Amen

When things unravel

This week one is very conscious of the kind of solidarity experienced during the first weeks of the lockdown beginning to unravel. How do we understand and deal with this?

When we were first confronted with lockdown we came together, willingly or unwillingly, because of a common threat to us all. The lockdown was accepted, again willingly or unwillingly, because it was seen as actually doing something to halt the invasion of the virus. We accepted the knock-on effects of it – yes, there would be bad economic consequences, but lives were more important than the economy. Some good people worked heroically to bring food aid to the unemployed, those who had lost their jobs in the lockdown as well as existing victims of structural unemployment. People began to dream and fantasize about how things would never be the same again and that after the pandemic was over, we should not allow the inequality and poverty to remain.

What then has changed since then? As they say in military science, no plan survives the first contact with the enemy. We became aware that most countries were not going to defeat the virus, just slow its advance enough to enable health systems to be got ready for the long haul before a vaccine is developed to make us all immune. Our real health crisis is yet to come. That is when a certain fatalism began to creep in and exacerbated the over-precious irritability of the middle classes with the lockdown restrictions.

At the same time, the sadly usual behaviour of politicians and owners of wealth and business began to reassert itself on behalf of whatever vested interests they represented. The social media, already a deluge of misinformation and fake news, was now targeted with endless propaganda, much of it very, very slick, on behalf of those who profit from human exploitation, addiction and misery. Their hypocrisy in supposedly speaking out of their concern for the poor was nauseating. Increasingly the lockdown was denounced and we were encouraged to get back to the “normal”. Intellectuals began to turn on each other. The failure of government to get its communication fully coherent and its long standing inability to care for the people in the SASSA queues, made things worse. We are now really in the fog of war.

In some ways, all of this was predictable. The difficulties and the unravelling of certainty had to come and the truth of the matter is that no one really knows the right thing to do. We will only know that after the event. So what do we do in this murky time?

One obvious thing for Christians to do is to keep their heads. We should not join in these essentially factional debates, driven as they often are by self-interest. Yes, we should diligently keep up to date with the factual information and expose falsity, but we cannot pretend, as Christians, to know the technical answers.

We must focus our eyes on the larger battle, the far deeper warfare, the one we pray about every time we say the Lord's Prayer “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

In all our actions and non-actions in the days ahead we need to constantly ask, "Who is actually going to benefit from what you or I do?" And the example of our Saviour suggests that doing the easy or more comfortable thing is not necessarily the best thing to do.

We should not be too dismayed when things do start to unravel in the everyday world. The Church of God has been through worse. Nothing can unravel the cords that link us to the Risen One. Nothing can undo those knots that tie us to the faith that God's Kingdom is already triumphant and we have work to do to make that visible. If we put love first, we will come through.

Prayer (Catholic Health Association)

Loving God,

You have always shown us the way from darkness into the light.
For those struggling now to see the light,
we ask that you shine it a bit brighter in our world.
Grant us all the grace to see a way forward through the present darkness.
We pray to the Lord.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Throughout history you have raised up leaders to care for your people.
May those who are called upon to lead now in this time of despair
be given the grace to do so with conviction and compassion.
We pray to the Lord.

Lord, hear our prayer.

You are truly a God of abundance.
Open our eyes so that we may see how our ministries can use the abundance
with which we have been blessed to help those in need.
Grant us the grace to move with humility and prudence in all that we do.
We pray to the Lord.

Lord, hear our prayer.

You are also a God of wonders.
We have often struggled to imagine the breadth and depth of what is possible
with you at our side.
Grant us all – those directly affected and those holding them in prayer –
the grace of creativity in our response to this event.
We pray to the Lord.

Lord, hear our prayer.

The Psalmist sings, "Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord."
Let it also be our song this day.
May we, and those we pray for, truly hope in the Lord.
And may that hope give us all the strength and heart we need
to move from darkness into light.

Amen.

In a time of chaos – the water controller

Mark 4:35-41

And on that day, when evening had come, Jesus says to them, “Let us cross over to the far shore.” And dismissing the crowd they take him, as he was in the boat, and other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves broke into the boat, so that now the boat was filling. And he was sleeping on the pillow in the stern. And they rouse him and say to him, “Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are perishing?” And, being woken, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent, quell yourself!” And the wind fell and a great calm came about. And he said to them, “Why are you so afraid? How is it you do not have faith?” And they were afraid, enormously afraid, and said to one another, “Who then is this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The world is in a time of chaos and we are in and heading for more – whatever image you want to use – rough seas, stormy weather, a tsunami of difficulties; made all the worse by our not quite knowing what to do – not me, not you, not our leaders either.

Mark’s Gospel has a vivid account of a storm that engulfed the boat carrying Jesus after he had to virtually flee from the crowd intent on making him Messiah king by force (John 6:15). Jesus was probably exhausted and we are told that he fell asleep in the stern of the boat, his head on a cushion.

At this point we need to go on a digression about the attitude of the people of Israel to the sea. They were scared stiff of it. The sea was to them a symbol of chaos and destruction. In the first Genesis account God’s creative activity is precisely seen in his power over watery chaos – “The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the spirit of God was moving over the water” (Genesis 1:2). This creation event has its endpoint echo in the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible where “the sea was no more”! So for the Israelites the sea was the image that for them represented all that is destructive of life, all that brings chaos and disorder to the world, all that hurts and destroys human life and breaks the bonds that hold people and society together.

We fear chaos and disorder and the pandemic has truly disturbed us, precisely because it is not under our control and our whole physical and social environment is now potentially deadly.

When we read the Gospels it is important that we do not misunderstand what they are saying. It is a common fallacy to think that the Gospels are plain simple descriptions of the life and teaching of the carpenter from Nazareth and that it is only in the letters of Paul and the other apostles that we have theology, interpretations and doctrine about who Jesus is.

The stories in the Gospel were collected and remembered in the young churches for many decades before they were written down and the reason that particular events were remembered and recorded was precisely because they said something significant about Jesus, the Son of God. So the story of the calming of the storm is not just an exciting account of a miracle, one of the more exciting parts of the biography of Jesus. It is a story that tells us something about how Jesus – and the disciples– responded to the pressures of their time, it is a story that tell us something about the ultimately divine nature of Jesus and links him to the very being of God, the creator of order out of chaos, of being out of non-being, of light out of darkness, of community out of disorder.

So what then can we learn from this story?

We need to retire to places of rest and reflection

If Jesus felt the need to escape from the press of the crowd, to move out from the crush of daily need and work to a place where he could pray and reflect, surely we do too. Our modern world, particularly because of the dominance of the idols of commercialism, finds it very difficult to be still, to find a place for the sacred, the sanctuary. That is one of the disciplines that modern churchgoers usually avoid. So we need those times – even if it is just a matter of reciting the Lord's prayer morning, noon and night.

We need to have faith and trust, particularly in times of chaos

The disciples felt that Jesus was asleep, unconcerned with the watery chaos that was about to engulf them. We are fearful that Jesus is asleep in our world of death by Corona virus 19. Most of us are now beginning to know people who have been infected. Today I heard that two relatives have the disease. We fear that Jesus is asleep while crime, corruption, bad drivers or our own inability to control our own disordered personal lives continue unabated.

The story tells us that God does not sleep. In the Greek Orthodox church there is a particular design of a religious painting called the 'Non-sleeping eye of God' which has Jesus asleep on the cushion in the boat but with God's eye wide open above.

The Gospel story tells us that God is awake, very awake, and that all calm will one day be restored. The theological message of the miracle story is that in the man Jesus, we see the very creative power of the God creator of the universe. In Jesus we see the true meaning of reality, and that meaning is good, for it is about creation, about good, and about an enduring new heaven and earth to which we are all summoned.

Prayer

Isaiah 51: 15-16

'But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The LORD of hosts is his name.
And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people.'

Lord be with us in this time of uncertainty and chaos.
Still our fears with your presence.
Help us to understand that you never sleep.
Help us to trust that your creative power holds our universe together.
Remind us that we are your people
that whatever our earthly fate, we are in your divine hands.
May we always have joy in the assurance of your love.
Though the sky grows darker we have faith and hope.

Amen.

Restoration

In the last chapter of John's gospel, an appendix to the book proper, is the remarkable account of the risen Jesus restoring Peter. We remember that, though Peter was no doubt as ecstatic as the other disciples to meet their risen master, he carried a burden. He had denied knowing Jesus three times in the high priest's courtyard on the night of Jesus' arrest. As Matthew's gospel says, Peter then "went out and began to weep bitterly." There was no way for Peter to undo his betrayal.

It is significant therefore that the resurrection is not merely a victory but also the restoration of all that has been lost. And so the huge weight of guilt that Peter carried is done away with and Peter is restored and reinstated as the rock on which Christ will build his church. And it is done through a symbolic dialogue in which the threefold denial is undone by a threefold affirmation of loyalty and love and commitment:

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Peter's irreversible sin has been undone. The resurrection is the start of a process of reconciliation, a healing of alienation, a new beginning. Nothing is now hopeless.

It is not for nothing that in most baptismal rites there is a threefold renunciation of evil and threefold affirmation of the Christian faith. We enter into hope.

That sense of hope, even in the most deadly and disastrous situations, is the possession of God's people from now on. No sin, no failure, no betrayal, no lapsing, no falling short is stronger than the resurrected God. And that God restores us, renews us ready to be what we were meant to be. And the power to drive us to be what we are meant to be comes at the feast of Pentecost when a restored Peter and the other disciples meet and are infused with the dynamic force of the Spirit. So that we, as it says in the baptismal service, are ready:

To shine a light in the world
to the glory of God the father.

Prayer

O Creator God, who wants us to shine as your image
You have restored us and renewed us through your Son
As you restored Peter to minister to your church
May we show in our lives what you have done for us,
 through your death on the Cross,
 your resurrection from the tomb,
 and your sending of the Spirit.

May we look with forgiveness and mercy on all who have sinned
May we accept them into the fellowship of love and hope
May we all walk free in the presence of your glorious life.
May we delight in the joy of being your image.

Amen.

Pentecost

Today, Christians who belong to churches with a cycle of liturgical commemorations, have come to the end of the signal events in the Jesus of Nazareth story:

- We had Advent with stories of the preludes to the coming of Jesus.
- We had Christmas with the birth of Jesus.
- We had the Transfiguration where three disciples see the carpenter from Nazareth bathed in a new light – both literal and in their understanding that this might be the prophesied Christ (the Greek word for the Hebrew “Messiah” the ‘anointed king’ who would be physically descended from the line of David, rule the re-united tribes of Israel and reign over the whole world in a time known as the World to Come).
- We struggled through Lent and remembered a march with palm fronds through a city street acclaiming the humble man on the donkey as the true ruler.
- We mourned at the foot of the cross and shared the surprise of Mary as she meets the resurrected one in a garden.
- We hear that Jesus has ascended.
- And now we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in power.

All done. All complete.

Complicated, but very neat.

And we can say the creed to round it off in the proper theological language.

But is that not all **too** easy?

The Church has, even as early as in the New Testament letters and gospels, sorted things out for us, made sense of the story. Given us many **answers**. And we thank the church for doing that work.

But what are the **questions**? The danger of giving us answers is that we may lose out on the understanding of the **questions** (and all the complex parts of those questions) and the beneficial effort and exercise that is demanded if we are to answer the questions ourselves.

So I want to ask you to step back from the answers, so beautifully enshrined in the church’s liturgical cycle, in its catechism and creeds, and in stained glass windows and put yourselves back into the position of those first disciples. Let us see what it was to be confronted with the raw reality before the theologians had time to make sense of it all and package it for us in New Testament and prayer book and priest and deacon in their vestments.

Let us go back to Peter, one time fisherman and disciple of the itinerant holy man from Nazareth, who was both courageous and cowardly, striking at those who came to arrest Jesus at Gethsemane and fearful when asked whether he was a disciple. He has recently met Jesus of Nazareth who is not dead – although he was dead– but is truly alive and has

appeared in this physical world again and has reinstated Peter and erased Peter's threefold betrayal (John 21:15-17).

Now, on the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, as the group of disciples pour out of a room ecstatic with the infilling of the very Spirit of God, it is Peter who has to make sense of what has happened to the surrounding crowd, some of whom think these disciples of a man crucified seven weeks earlier are simply drunk – at 9 o'clock in the morning! (Acts 2:1-39).

In the first place, Peter explains these events by using the scriptures of the Jewish people. It is important to remember that there was no New Testament then. When passages in our New Testament refer to "the scriptures" they are referring to what in our Bible is the Old Testament. What he and the other disciples have experienced in the last seven weeks has led him and them to read these scriptures afresh.

One needs to say that the reason Peter had to make sense of all this was that Peter and the other disciples had been through a series of shocking and traumatic experiences.

They had followed this man for three years with **great expectations**, listening to him, partially understanding him, but also grossly misunderstanding him, particularly in their thinking that he was to be a victorious Messiah king, come to kick the Romans out and restore fame and power to Judah and their thinking so was reinforced by the triumphant demonstration on Palm Sunday. Then it is all turned to dust. At a last supper he had emphasised that they were to be servants of all, he had been arrested, executed after a farce of a trial in which the religious authorities and Roman power colluded. Jesus was dead and buried. Gone. He clearly wasn't the Messiah. He had failed. No Jew expected a crucified Messiah.

The disciples were complete shattered and demoralised. As Luke's gospel so well describes their thoughts: "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but **we had hoped** that he was **the one who was going to redeem Israel.**" (Luke 24:19-21).

They had hoped but all hopes were now destroyed.

Then he appeared to them in resurrected bodily form: not a ghost, not a dream, not a vision, for real (John 20:19-23):

On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together. They had locked the doors because they were afraid of the Judaeans. Jesus came in and stood among them. He said, "May peace be with you!" Then he showed them his hands and his side.

Peter on Pentecost morning

Now, going back to Peter on Pentecost morning. He and the disciples have had to undergo a striking transformation, in thought and behaviour, since they met the Risen One.

Some of that change they have gained from re-looking at the Hebrew scriptures. And what is the gist of the story they have gained from these scriptures?

First, that the universe (both visible and invisible) is God's creation and that it is good. God loves this universe and God's plan will take place within this universe. And at the very beginning God's Spirit was instrumental in making the creation happen: "The Spirit of God was moving over the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

Second, that the people of Israel had a very special place in the plan of God for all people on earth, not just the Jews. Two of the greatest events associated with God's plan and care for his special people were God's liberating them from Egypt in the Exodus and his restoring them from exile in Babylon.

Third, the people of Israel had made something of a mess of the task they were given (a specific instance of all humanity's sinful failure to be what it should, that we are all tragically flawed) and that Jewish law had not corrected the problem.

Fourth, as the wise men and prophets has written, God was planning something new to sort out the problem of human rebellion and sin.

Fifth, that the agent of this new beginning would be a Messiah, a kingly figure who as God's agent would ensure that the reign of God on earth would be implemented.

Sixth, that the coming of the Messiah might be associated with the resurrection of the righteous dead (and one must point out that resurrection of the dead back into this world is not the same as the common but often vague human belief that there is some kind of life or continued existence after death) to take part in God's kingdom on earth, the kingdom we pray for every time we say the Lord's prayer.

Back to Peter again. What does he have to explain? What has he learnt? Can he answer two crucial questions?

A first question: How can this failure be the Messiah?

Peter says to the assembled crowd (Acts 2: 22-36):

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ... This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. ... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Jesus is revealed as the Messiah because he was **directly vindicated as the Messiah by God – in the Father raising him from the dead**. He is Israel's true representative and in him the age to come has begun.

Indeed the resurrection has shown that God's plan for his Messiah was somewhat different from that of people's imaginings.

And now we know why all those stories about failures who eventually triumph, about battles hopelessly lost that are foretastes of victory, resonate so strongly with us.

More than that, the Messiah is in fact LORD, a term which for the Jews was given only to God and is in contradiction to the title being given to Roman Emperors. As Jesus is now the world's true Lord, it follows that others are not, including Caesar, and thus belief in the resurrection of Jesus is politically subversive. "God has made him both Lord and Christ." So we challenge Caesar's claim to world rulership. [This is beautifully illustrated in the account of the martyrdom in AD 155 of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, which ends with a formal statement of the date of his execution and the names of the officials responsible in order of seniority but ends "but the ruling monarch was Jesus Christ, who reigns for ever and ever."]

As it says of him in Philippians 2:6-11:

Who, being in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the form 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.

A second question: Why does the kingdom not appear to have come yet, for the Messiah is not visibly in charge as ruler of the earth and its nations?

This question requires a more complex response.

In Acts 1:6 the disciples ask it of the risen Messiah: "So when the apostles came together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

But, it was clearly not now. Peter, Paul, and many of the other disciples were martyred, executed by the Roman state led by Emperors who claimed to be gods.

God's Messiah is not visibly in charge of the world today. Violence, persecution, corruption and all such evils continue unabated.

Yet for the disciples the world is now utterly different. They know that Jesus is Lord. People can be transformed here and now.

Christians indeed must live as if Jesus is reigning Lord – for indeed he is reigning Lord.

Though we will die, as Peter and Paul and the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection did, they did so looking forward to the future resurrection of the faithful at the end time.

God has not revealed to us when this intermediate state will end, this period between Jesus vindication and the end of time with his coming again in glory.

Indeed there are several warnings in both the words of Jesus and New Testament writers that this is not something we will get to know.

But in this interim we are the resurrection people. We have been formed by what happened at Easter and the rise of the Church of Christ.

We live in God's good creation which looks forward to a new life.

We live with those who suffer and are in pain and who die, waiting for the final defeat of sin and death.

We are confident in God's continuing and future action because of what we have seen and believed in God's raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him.

And what gives us the impetus, the drive the power to live so and to go out and proclaim Jesus as the world's rightful Lord who brings forgiveness to all?

That power was promised to us by Jesus and released into the life of the Church at Pentecost – the Holy Spirit.

As in John 20:19-22:

Jesus came in and stood among them.

He said, "May peace be with you!"

Then he showed them his hands and his side.

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "May peace be with you! The Father has sent me. So now I am sending you."

He then breathed on them. He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Prayer [St Symeon]

Come, true light.
Come, life eternal.
Come, hidden mystery.
Come, treasure without name.

Come, reality beyond all words.
Come, person beyond all understanding.
Come, rejoicing without end.
Come, light that knows no evening.

Come, unfailing expectation of the saved.
Come, raising of the fallen.
Come, resurrection of the dead.
Come, all-powerful, for unceasingly you create, refashion and change all things
by your will alone.

Come, for your name fills our hearts with longing, and is ever on our lips.
Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me.
Come, my breath and my life.
Come, the consolation of my humble soul.

Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight.

Dreamers

Yesterday was Pentecost and in the description of the event in Acts 2:14-17 we are told to expect dreams:

Peter, standing up along with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Judean men, and all of you staying in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and lend your ears to my words, For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, as it is the third hour of the day; Rather, this is what was declared through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall happen, says God, that I will pour forth from my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall dream dreams.'

The coming of the Spirit will provoke insight into the future ("your daughters shall prophesy") and the stirring of the imagination in dreams ("your young men shall dream dreams").

Now dreams are something about which there really is a divide between modern town dwellers and more traditional people. Traditional people, along with most people who have ever lived on this earth, believe that true knowledge comes through dreams – true, insightful, important, life-deciding knowledge. Most modern towns people have been seriously brainwashed into not listening to their dreams. In spite of efforts by psychologists and suchlike to suggest that they were important, they were not really listened to because at heart they didn't believe that dreams went beyond our own desires and delusions. So they devalued them too.

Would it not be wonderful if out of this pandemic we all, but particularly young people, were able to dream more productively, to imagine a better future, a future closer to God's kingdom. One of the tasks of God's people is precisely to dream – to have a vision of good things that can be done in the world, things that would bring us closer to true justice in a society in which the welfare of all is a priority – and to prophesy – as many young people are doing about climate change.

Both the Old and New Testaments are full of accounts of the powerful impact of dreams. Two pivotal dreams were Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:10-22) and Peter's dream (Acts 11:1-18).

In Jacob's dream the promise of God to Abraham is repeated. Now as we all know Jacob was a bit of a rascal, a trickster and a cheat. But he was a trickster who wanted the important thing, to carry on the line of Abraham and be the leader of God's future people. So God sort of had to deal with the raw material that he got, which in another dreamlike episode, got God into quite a sweat because he had to "wrestle" with Jacob (Genesis 32:22-32). But it is Jacob who gets the dream and the promise. Here is a story of really important dreams, angels in dreams, a ladder, sacred stones at holy places and olive oil, all together. Very vivid, earthy, and yet a communication from God!

Peter's dream was also pretty lurid – a great tablecloth descending out of the sky with all sort of unclean, non-kosher animals on it and Peter is instructed by God to eat them, much to his disgust. This vision enables Peter to understand the events that follow – that God wants the Gentiles to be accepted into the Church. And for most of us, being Gentiles, all else in the story of the Church up to this day follows as a result.

I would like to say something in passing about worries that taking dreams seriously would give us wrong, all too human, pictures of God. When I was a young man a book was published by a very serious bishop of the Church of England, John Robinson, called "Honest to God". He was really serious about "de-anthropomorphising God". He was worried because the English people, lapsed Christian lot that most of them were, could no longer believe in a God who looked like an old man, sitting on a cloud up there. And he posed lots of questions that made one's head hurt because, naturally, if one really thought about it, our finite creature brains literally cannot conceive of the God who is not of time or space or existence. It is not that this is a new idea. The serious philosophers of the Church have always known this and so did the writer of Exodus with his account of Moses before the burning bush where God reveals his name that is no name but an enigmatic question: "I am who I am". So yes, we know this. But human minds do need graphic dreams, and visions of ladders and special holy places, and beautiful art and places of special natural beauty, as long as we do not confuse them with divine reality, as idol worshippers do.

May the Holy Spirit continue to feed our imaginations and may we, in our dreams, meet God unexpectedly.

Prayer

Lord, I thank you for the grace to dream.
Protect me from bad dreams and nightmares.
Help me to understand and interpret my dreams well.
May my dreams help me to understand your will for me.
May my dreams help me to see what I can accomplish in the power of your Spirit

Amen.

No water and no President

Today I watched with a certain hideous fascination, the Minister of Basic Education reporting that the return of children to schools had to be delayed because, in spite of months of preparation time, only a minority of schools had been given water supplies and tanks for hand washing.

No water! – water the staff, the very substance of life. Without it we cannot live. Without it we suffer disease. Understandably, the Bible uses the idea of water a lot. Jesus said “Whoever is thirsty should come to me and drink.” (John 7:37); “I was ..., thirsty and you gave me a drink.” (Matthew 25:35); “The angel showed me the river of the water of life, sparkling like crystal, and coming from the throne of God and the Lamb.”(Revelation 22:1). In the idea of water we see life, goodness and purity. It is not for nothing that water is used for baptism, in which the old and dying is washed away and we come into the new fullness of life.

It is also not for nothing that giving water to the thirsty, to the poor, the imprisoned, is seen as an act of love for the Lord. And it is also not for nothing that good government and development enables all to have access to water. We have to ask the necessary question why some should still not have access to water whilst other have personal private swimming pools full of it, and drink expensive bottled water whilst others go thirsty.

What is clear is that human sinfulness, not just incompetence or lack of resources, led to the situation where there is no water in schools. It was also in part our own sinfulness, because what have we done to demand water for all? Can we all be awakened? At bottom, all our houses and clothes and cars and televisions and smart phones mean nothing without the water of life being available to all.

At the same time, debates rage in the press and social media about whether the State President of South Africa is doing well or not, on top of things, fully in command or at risk of being recalled. Lots and lots of people are putting their factional political and economic interests and gripes and whinges before the common good. It is bad news that we have to keep asking what has happened behind the scenes in the corridors of politics and governance of our country: is this all about democracy or is it about a brutal and greedy struggle for power by people and factions at the top? These are questions that we have to ask of the mkhulus as well as of ourselves. Are we as a country exhibiting the kind of mind that was in Christ – a mind that seeks to serve rather than be served, to minister to rather than be ministered to? Remember Jesus’s sad words at the last supper when some of the disciples started asking who was to be the most important leader amongst them. Jesus said (Luke 22:25-27):

“The kings of the pagans have power over their people, and the rulers are called ‘Friends of the people’. But this is not the way it is with you; rather, the greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant. Who is greater, the one who sits down to eat or the one who serves him? The one who sits down, of course. But I am among you as one who serves.”

Though obviously we must support good politicians and state leaders as best we can, perhaps we need to detach ourselves from psychologically depending on some political person to save us and the country in this time of the pandemic.

We need to be reminded that the first Christians never had a President. As earthly, and all too earthly, South Africans, we may have temporary political leaders, but our real 'President', our real leader, is Jesus the Messiah, the Lord. And we must obey **his** commands.

The most perfect expression of this truth was contained in a letter written in AD 155 by a Christian who had witnessed the martyrdom of his Bishop, Polycarp of the city of Smyrna. After his graphic account of the death of this old man who had been a disciple of the Apostle John, he ended off this letter with a conventional date – but with a twist.

It was the 23rd of February, when our blessed Polycarp died his martyr's death two hours before midday on the Greater Sabbath. The official responsible for his arrest was Herod, the High Priest was Phillip of Trales; and the proconsul was Statius Quadratus – but the ruling monarch [*and here he deliberately leaves out the name of the Emperor of the time*] was Jesus Christ, who reigns for ever and ever. To him be ascribed all glory, majesty, and an eternal throne from generation to generation.

Prayer

We give thanks for the water that is needed for all that lives.
Remind us of our dependence on the gift of water.
We pray for our waters and for the life of the world around us.
Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for the leaders of our country and nations,
corporations, and communities around the world,
that they may exercise wise and just stewardship of water supplies,
so that all people may have clean water to drink and to protect them from
disease.
Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

The grumblers

Exodus 16:2-13

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

The press and social media are full of grumbling and whingeing at the moment, ostensibly about the lockdown. Grumbling is all too human. We all do it. We did it when we were small and drove our parents mad. We did it, or are doing it as adolescents and driving our parents, our friends and ourselves mad. We do it as mature adults (whether at work or at home) and we do it when we are old. Life can be uncomfortable, unfair and hard work. Sometimes we just feel otherwise. Bad people grumble. But so do good people, and sometimes even more stridently. At the moment, with the lockdown, it has become the natural pastime of the better-off classes. Some of the grumbling is, of course, disguised as the necessary robust critique of the powers that be and the state of South African society.

The New Testament has a number of stories about grumblers. One of them, Matthew 20:1-16, the parable about the Labourers in the Vineyard, is about the workers who get the same pay at the end of the day however late they started work, much to the upset of the workers who started early.

As good people or bad we need, as grumblers, to hear the good news. We need to hear the gospel for the grumblers.

So what is the grumble about in the parable of the labourers? It is not, actually, a parable about unusual or unfair labour practices, though we may well be able to learn something about just labour laws and generosity to the poor from it. What it is actually about is the grumbles of good people. In the New Testament it is about two different (but strangely similar) grumbles.

The first grumble comes from good people (notably the Pharisees) who thought it most unfair that they, who did so much to keep God's law and all its burdens, who lived good upright lives, who didn't steal, lie, commit adultery, or collaborate with the Romans, were being overtaken by people who had lived disgraceful lives, the "tax collectors and the harlots" who were getting into the kingdom of God before them (as it says in Matthew 21:32)!

These good people may well have repented, they may well have opened their hearts to the good news. But they really resented these 'Johnny come lately' people. These hadn't paid their dues. They had no struggle record. They should go to the back of the queue.

The second grumble comes from Jews as the chosen people of God, who had been through centuries of struggle, hard discipline and oppression by foreigners, who had kept the faith in the one true God, and were now seeing gentiles (pagans, idol worshippers, the immoral, the uncircumcised) being accepted into the Kingdom.

Yes, these chosen people too may have heard the message of the Gospel. But again, they were resentful of these new Gentile converts. Where had they been during all the period when the Jews had kept the fire of faith burning? Why did they not have to keep the full Law? Why did they not have to reach the same standard as us? Why did they not work as hard as us?

We have to acknowledge that, because most people do have an almost innate sense of what is fair and what unfair, that the grumblers have a point, as seen in Matthew 16:11

And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

What is going on here?

What Jesus is saying is that we are not to be given entrance into the Kingdom because we **deserve** it, or because we have earned it, but because we **need** it.

Think of the implications of this for our whole society.

The best explanation I can think of here is that of a family. Members of a family could all be treated justly (as indeed they should). Good children would be rewarded, naughty ones punished. But what an emaciated family that would be if there was **only** justice, **only** fairness. What each member of the family really needs is love, total, undeserved, gratuitous love. We all need it.

It is that love that God, in his generosity, offers to all of us, the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the intelligent and the dim, the industrious and the timeservers. And that love can transform us.

You see, the fairness that we think we should get, apart from its actual inadequacy, is not always that just. And this is where we can now appreciate that this parable is also a story about an unfair labour situation or wealth inequality or education inequality.

The picture in the parable of all those labourers standing idle, unemployed, raises all sorts of questions. Why are there so many unemployed labourers? Why do they not have vineyards of their own, like the householder? If the late employed labourers were to be only paid a portion of the daily wage, would their children eat? A truly just society would address the needs of the poor and the marginalised.

For justice to be truly of God, truly fair, it needs to be done on the basis of need, not merit.

So God's generosity, his graceful giving to all, which we are to emulate, is also, ironically enough, the route to greater justice and fairness.

We are all unequal, as individual beings in networks of family and friends and work. We are all unequal as citizens whatever our nominal equality as voters. Wealth, power, influence, location, education and celebrity (and luck) make for inequality.

Only God treats us all equally, his grace and love being given to all. For us, God's love is the only standard of fairness

That is Good News for us today.

Prayer

May I be a labourer in your vineyard, O, Lord.

May I and others have work to do, work that is for the good of all.

Help me to bear the burdens of unfairness and inequality in this world
and to strive for fairness and justice in society.

Strengthen me to bind the wounds of those hurt by poverty and inequality and
powerlessness.

But above all, Lord, enable me to give love to others and respond to their needs.

May we all share in the work of your Kingdom.

Be with us, God the Father;

Be with us, God the Son

And God the Holy Spirit,

Most blessed Three in One.

Talents

Having spoken about labourers in the vineyard yesterday, it is perhaps logical to look next at the issue of talents.

Originally a talent was a weight of about 36 kilograms and the value of this weight in silver was approximately equal to the value of twenty years of work of an ordinary person (perhaps in our money about 3 to 5 million rands). We now use the word in common English to mean something different – all because of a parable in Matthew's Gospel.

In Matthew 25:14-30 we hear the story of the rich man who divides eight talents between three servants when he goes away on a journey. On his return he commends the two who invested the money wisely and profitably. He condemns the servant who was given the smallest amount (one talent) and simply kept the money safe and made no profit, not even a little bit of interest. And the moral of the tale is that "For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

The Christian church today usually interprets this parable as saying that we are all given "talents" – natural personal abilities or gifts, intelligence, a good voice, artistic flair, or even inherited wealth or educational advantage, some great and some small. We will be judged on whether we have made effective use of whatever talent or talents we have in the service of God and humanity. So God is interested in the passion with which we use our natural gifts and advantages.

[Some scholars believe this interpretation was not original and that Jesus may in fact have directed this parable at the Scribes who, entrusted with God's Word, had not shared it with all. Others believe it was actually meant to be a criticism of the rich who make a profit from the work of others – the parable is, after all, a pretty good analysis of how the already rich get richer. I incline towards this view. I always felt sorry for the poor slave who was terrified of a master who was "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering from where you did not scatter" and probably also too timorous to approach a banker to get a high rate of interest. In addition, the concept of talent can be morally ambiguous. Surely, those KwaZulu Department of Education officials who insisted that hundreds of thousands of rands worth of face masks for pupils should not be delivered directly to schools but to district offices where they vanished, showed a remarkable talent, fully expressed, for corruption and crookedness?]

But accepting the common interpretation, what we have here is, given the diversity of talent, a diversity of expectation. For those who have much talent, much is expected. But, and it is an important **but**, those who have little talent are **not** exempt and must do as much as they can with what they have.

Another take on this is to express a warning to people who literally throw away their talent. Understandably, as we live, we do drop aspects of ourselves that we do not

further develop. The gifted painter is unlikely to be able to become a master musician. The champion athlete is not likely to become a great scholar. Such choices are real. But there are other decisions that have the same effect that arise not from rational choice, but from fear of not fitting in or being liked. The teenage girl who dumbs herself down so as not to appear a nerd and unattractive to the boys she wants to hang out with. The young person who is persuaded to take up a career that “makes money” rather than what their talents suggest. In my work as an adult educator I was amazed at the number of middle-aged people I worked with who wanted to change career in their fifties, recognising that they had chosen the wrong path and thereby frustrated the true expression of their God-given talents. And sometimes it is exactly within the Church community that such people can re-find and re-express their true talents.

As Christian people we also have to reject the current craze for talent and other media shows that are not about encouraging talent, but are brutal gladiatorial games in which the object is the exclude, to vote **off**, to shame, “the weakest link”, the “least popular” as an entertainment. The Ancient Roman gladiatorial games were ended by Christians and barbarians. Now they have reemerged, albeit in a less bloody form.

We must not bury our talents or those of others. And in the Church of God we have a great opportunity to resurrect people’s buried talents and develop new ones. In our own parish the lockdown has seen amazing talents emerge to assist in the online streaming of church services and messages. In the larger society we have to mourn the destruction of talents through inadequate education and poverty. That has to change into a celebration of talents.

Prayer

Lord, I ask you to help me identify the talents that I have been endowed with.

May I use them to do the work that I should be doing, being of service to your creation.

May all my abilities and skills , my knowledge and learned expertise, be guided by you into the best paths

May I never misuse my talents and gifts to the harm of others or your creation.

All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, the true image of God.

Gifts

Moving from talents to gifts is a small step. They can be considered similar, though we think of talents as a kind of inborn ability which we are generally aware of, whereas gifts are things that emerge rather suddenly and unexpectedly. In contemporary Christian discourse, gifts are usually spoken of as 'spiritual' as distinct from talents which are more 'natural'.

We know that Jesus promised gifts: Matthew 7:11

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

We are also told in Ephesians 4:8 that the gifts come from the ascended Christ.

When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

There are two New Testament Greek words used to refer to these gifts. The first is *charismata* from which our words charisma, charismatic and charm all derive and which is itself derived from the Greek word *charis* meaning 'grace'. The second is *pneumatica* (meaning 'things of the spirit').

It is Paul who tells us in more detail about the special grace gifts given to God's people. What he means by "gifts" is well expressed in Romans 12:6-8

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.

We can list all the gifts that Paul mentions in a number of passages: Prophecy, Wisdom, Knowledge, Faith, Service, Encouragement, Giving, Helping, Leading, Mercy, Healing, Miraculous powers, Ability to distinguish between spirits (psychic and supernatural forces), Speaking in a variety of tongues, and Ability to interpret tongues.

Indeed it can be argued that there are as many gifts as there are needs in the body of Christ. They are the God-given graces, the *charismata* that are to be used for the benefit of others, which individual Christians need to fulfil the mission of the church.

These gifts are **irrevocable** gifts of God (Romans 11:29), **come from the Holy Spirit** (Corinthians 12:1), are of great **variety** (Romans 11:28-30), serve a **unified purpose** for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-6), and are **given to all** (1 Corinthians 12:11).

But perhaps the most important points that Paul makes about these gifts are in Chapters 12 to 14 of his First Letter to the Corinthians. They are meant to create unity, not divisiveness and must be based on love. It appears that there was some disorder

and disunity in the Church at Corinth. Paul's criticism of the Corinth church was that some members were using their social position or their spiritual gifts to try to create division within the Church. His perspective is that gifts of the Spirit should be used for the common good and for building up the Body of Christ.

There was self-indulgent disorder in the worship. It seems to have been over ecstatic and that it was not building up the congregation. Paul does not forbid exuberant prophesying and speaking in tongues but says (v. 40) "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." These passages help us to understand that some highly religious people, gifted by God, can yet abuse these gifts and hurt the church.

All these gifts are to be used for the benefit of others, and in a sense they are granted to the church as a whole more than they are given to individuals. There is diversity in their distribution – an individual will not possess all of the gifts. The purpose of the spiritual gifts is to instruct, encourage, build up and comfort the church. And as Paul puts it, beyond all the various gifts, we should "Now desire the greater gifts." And that greater gift is love (1 Corinthians 13: 1-3, 8):

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

...

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

It was pointed out by the missionary Roland Allen that Paul believed that every congregation of the church had been given the gifts to flourish and to be self-propagating, regardless of the different local conditions. That was why, after founding a new church in a new place and teaching them for a few years, he would move on, confident that they had God's gifts to continue to grow in love and faith.

In the context of the pandemic this is good news. We have the promise of all the grace gifts we need to survive and triumph. Whatever the difficulties, we shall overcome.

Prayer (adapted from Novena to the Holy Spirit)

O Lord Jesus Christ, before ascending into heaven,
you promised to send the Holy Spirit upon your apostles and disciples:
grant that we may receive the gifts of the same spirit
to continue in us the work of your grace and love.

Grant us the gift of wisdom,
that we may not be confused by the perishable things of this world
and aspire only after the things that are of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of understanding to enlighten our minds
with the light of your divine truth.

Bless us with the gift of prudent counsel
that we may always select the best path
to please God and advance your church.

Armour us with the gift of endurance,
that we may bear our cross with you,
and that we may overcome with courage
all the obstacles that oppose your truth and love.

Grant us the gift of knowledge
that we may know God and know ourselves
and have the same mind that was in Christ,

Bless us with the supreme gift of love
that we may cast off all fear
and be filled with loving care to our neighbours
forgiveness of our enemies
and joy in your presence.

Amen.

Evangelists

St John's Church has four windows representing the gospel writers – the evangelists.



Their symbols, Man, Lion, Bull and Eagle are drawn from Ezekiel's visions of God recorded in Ezekiel 1. He saw:

the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ... As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man in front; the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle at the back.

There is a similar description in Revelation 4:6b-12:

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

Matthew, also called Levi, son of Alpheus, was a Galilean who became one of the early followers of Jesus and was one of the Twelve. He was a tax collector for the Romans in Capernaum when Jesus called him to be a disciple. Matthew 9: 9-12 records that:

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Later Church fathers claimed that Matthew preached the Gospel to the Jewish community in Judaea, before going to other countries. He is thought to have been killed with an axe. He is shown here with a Gospel book, a collector's bag of money, and the emblem of his Gospel is "the Divine Man" because his gospel teaches us about the human nature of Christ.

Mark (John Mark) was a cousin of Barnabas and may have been one of the "Seventy Disciples" who were sent out by Jesus to spread the message of the gospel in Judaea (Luke 10:1ff.). However, when Jesus explained that his flesh was "real food" and his blood was "real drink", many disciples left him (John 6:44-6:66), presumably including Mark. He was later restored to faith by the apostle Peter; he then became Peter's interpreter. They arrived in Rome and Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark based upon Peter's recollections. About AD 43 he left for Africa and founded the church there. He became the first bishop of Alexandria and he is honoured as the founder of Christianity in Africa – today, both the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria claim to be successors of this original community. Aspects of the Coptic liturgy can be traced back to Mark himself. His symbol is the Lion because he teaches about the royal dignity of Christ. He also holds a Gospel book.

Luke came from Antioch in Syria. He was a doctor, hence the staff with a snake coiled around it, symbol of a doctor. He became a follower of Paul and travelled with him on missionary journeys. He wrote the Gospel and Acts so he holds a Gospel book too. His symbol is the Ox because he dealt with the sacrificial aspects of Christ's life. Luke is the patron saint of physicians, surgeons and painters. Legend has it that he painted a portrait of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

John is also called the Evangelist or the Theologian ("the Divine"). Christian tradition holds that he was active in Asia Minor and outlived the remaining apostles and that he was the only one not to die a martyr's death. He is represented holding a book with the letter Alpha and Omega (the A to Z), one of the titles of God in the Book of Revelation. John's emblem, an eagle, stands at his feet, and it is said that he, like the eagle, soared higher into heaven than anyone else. Below that is a chalice with a serpent/dragon coming out of it which refers to a legend that during a time of persecution John was forced to drink from a poisoned chalice. He made the sign of the cross over it and the poison emerged in the form of a serpent.

Prayers (Collects of the Evangelists)

Matthew

O Almighty God, who by your blessed Son did call Matthew from the receipt of custom to be an Apostle and Evangelist: Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires and inordinate love of riches, and to follow the same your Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Mark

O Almighty God, who hast instructed your holy Church with the heavenly doctrine of your Evangelist Saint Mark: Give us grace, that, being not like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine, we may be established in the truth of your holy Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Luke

Almighty God, who called Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please you that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

John

Merciful Lord, we beseech you to cast your bright beams of light upon your Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of your blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John may so walk in the light of your truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The divine community

Over the past few weeks we have proclaimed: Jesus lives!

Jesus died but the power of God raised him from the dead. He showed himself to his disciples as a bodily presence.

He went from them in a final appearance that we call the Ascension, by which we mean that Jesus finally left them in his individual physical presence and was taken up into the heaven of God the Father.

In that new absence they would have waited, bereft this second time after the crucifixion, waiting this time for the promised Comforter, the Holy Spirit, which erupted with dynamic force into their minds and voices and community at Pentecost.

And what comes after?

Two things:

Firstly, we fulfil the commission given, in Matthew's account, at the last appearance/ascension:

Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

Secondly, in our worship, in our thinking and in our lives, we try to make sense of all this. We do that in our church liturgy, in our doctrine and theology, and in the way we now live our lives.

Both these things are difficult.

Obedying the first, the great commission is not yet done. We still have to do it. Although there is continued growth in the world church, particularly in the South, growing secularisation and materialism has harmed the church in the North. We have work to do, a world to win.

The second task is also difficult, for it is a presumptuous thing to try and understand God, and even good believers have often made bad mistakes which the church calls heresies. The church has often made equally bad mistakes trying to get rid of the mistaken ideas, which is why we have had splits within Christendom, inquisitions, and a multitude of separate denominations.

But, generally, the church has learned from its mistakes and came to a number of general conclusions about how we should speak of God.

And one of those conclusions was that it is a helpful idea to speak of the true and living God as being three in one. We call this the doctrine of the Trinity – Tri (three) Unity.

Why did the Church come to this conclusion?

Firstly, the Christian Church adheres to the witness of the Old Testament scriptures, which was the early church's "Bible". There is one true God. No other god may be worshipped. Indeed the people of the Old Testament came to understand that not only should one not worship other gods, but that in actuality there were no other gods to worship, there was only one God. We can say in passing that the followers of the Arabian prophet Mohammed essentially follow this Old Testament teaching too.

But, secondly, the first Christians had had an overwhelming revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth who spoke of God as his Father and then, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, they had another experience of a spiritual force that continued to link them to Jesus and the Father. This force had been described by Jesus as the Holy Spirit.

So there was a thinking problem for the Church. God is one, but he has revealed himself to us in a threefold way, as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. This was soon reflected in the worship of the young church. After much intellectual wrestling (and many dead ends and mistaken ideas which did not pass the test of matching what was described in the writings of the Old and New Testaments), the Church came up with the teaching of the Trinity.

[Sometimes people outside the church complain that they want things to be simple. Give us good gentle Jesus teaching on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and leave out all this complicated theology! But of course this doesn't really work. What Jesus is reported saying on the shores of the Sea of Galilee is often not particularly gentle and raises all the serious problems which reason speaking to faith tries to solve. And if we really think about it, most things in life are not simple and we encounter strange contradictions and mind twisters every day, notably in the way in which we can both love and hate people close to us at the same time!]

But it is indeed true that having a doctrine like the Trinity is not like having a proof that one can demonstrate on a school blackboard or in a scientific experiment. Indeed, such a doctrine is often called a paradox – something that we know to be true but is in itself somewhat contradictory. How can something be both one and three? So we hold these two things in tension – the stern words in the Old Testament that God is one and only he is to be worshipped (how stern can be seen in Deuteronomy chapter 13, verses 6 to 10 where the Israelites are instructed to kill any Israelites, even their closest family members, who try to lead them to the worship of other gods) and the graceful words in the New Testament which reveal to us some kind of interaction within God himself between Father, Son and Spirit and which manifests itself outwardly in the history of our salvation through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the coming of his Spirit into the new Church.

That is why we hold this paradoxical belief that God is both one and three because the evidence of worshipping faith tells us that it is so. And on this Sunday, Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the mystery of God, who is somehow a community of love. That is immensely exciting – that God is in very nature a community of love. It is from this God that our community of the church comes, a community which must, by its actions and its faithful proclamation of the teaching of Jesus, transform the world.

As our worship is an expression of what we believe about God, so too must our worship and belief be expressed in our lives and work. In our worship we strive to become like that which we worship. And our worship is not just an individual matter, it is a group which worships, and it is this group which tends to become like what it worships – our God, who is in himself a community.

The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle. It is the foundation of our life as a loving community. In our faith in the Trinity we express our understanding of what is ultimately real and which should be reflected in human society. In God there is complete and ultimate creative self-expression which does not cause division but perfect harmony. As we are made in the image of God, we are made to be in community. The formula for our Christian life is seeking, finding and doing the Father's will in the Father's creation with the companionship of the Son by the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. In that life we are alive in the Trinity.

I would like to end with a lovely passage from a woman who wrote down her visions of God some 600 years ago – Julian of Norwich. To me they express in devout words, the way that we can see the unity and threeness of God, we can see that in the unity of God there is a boundless interplay of love and creativity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is this love that is so creative that it flows out of God into the creation of a universe and of us and into our lives.

Julian of Norwich:

And he showed me a Little Thing, the size of a hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What may this be?' And it the answer was: 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen into nothingness; it was so small. And I was answered in my understanding: 'It lasts, and ever shall last because God loves it. And so everything owes its being to the love of God.'

In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third, that God keeps it. But what is to me who is truly the Maker, the Keeper, and the Lover I cannot tell; for till I am essentially united to God, I may never have full rest nor true bliss: that is to say, till I be so joined to Him, that there is nothing that is made that comes between my God and me.

Getting to the Gospels

It is Pentecost time, and we think of those first disciples, God-filled with the Holy Spirit, going out to spread the Good News and to build the Church of Christ. We can imagine the enthusiasm, the joy, the energy. And we read about some of it in the Acts of the Apostles. But we seldom stop to think about what it was actually like in those first decades of the early church. What did they do, how did they preach, how did they instruct new converts? These questions can help us start to look at our church liturgy and at the four gospels (traditionally written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

When the apostles first went out on their mission to the world they would have initially visited the local synagogue – they were, after all, Jews and they went first to fellow Jews. They would, as visitors, have been invited to address the assembly and they would have told a story about Jesus of Nazareth, sent by the Father, teaching and performing healing wonders, arrested, crucified and then vindicated as the promised Messiah (the anointed one – the Christ) by God raising him from the dead, and who was now recognized as Lord. The word the New Testament has for this proclamation is “*kerygma*” (see Colossians 1:18 - 2:5 and 15:1-58). It is the initial and essential preaching of the Gospel message that in summary includes:

The promised age, foretold by the prophets, has come.

This has taken place through the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The risen Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as the Messiah and head of the new Israel.

The Holy Spirit has come upon the church as the sign of Christ’s present power and glory.

The Messianic Age will reach its consummation in the return of Christ.

An appeal is made for repentance with the offer of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation.

That preaching message is nowadays summed up in the Apostles’ Creed and in a more philosophical way, in the Nicene Creed.

Naturally there would be heated debate in the synagogue about this new message. Was it really backed up by the prophetic message? Did gentiles have to follow the Jewish Law? And so the scriptures (our Old Testament) was looked at very thoroughly for evidence. This is why, in our church liturgy there is always some reading of the Old Testament.

Some synagogues accepted the message, others did not, and so, the apostles then took to the streets and private homes to spread the good news. For example, in the city of Ephesus, Paul preached in the synagogue for three months before being thrown out with those who accepted Christ, after which he taught both Jews and Gentiles in a public lecture hall for another two years.

Now what happened after you had heard this *kerygma*, been prepared for baptism and joined the Church, this new Way? What were you taught? What did you learn about Jesus and his actual teaching? What was this teaching, the Greek word for which was “*didache*”?

It is thought that quite early on, the disciples of Jesus had memorised and compiled a collection of the sayings of Jesus – that is, his actual words spoken when he taught – and including most of his parable stories. We no longer possess this document but it is clear, by looking at the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that they used such a collection of sayings.

At the same time, as the church expanded, there was a need for an account of Jesus’ ministry and in particular that last week in Jerusalem which ended with the crucifixion. Originally, of course this story could be told by one of the Twelve, but as the Church grew and spread, written accounts were needed. Mark’s Gospel is probably the first such account we have.

Matthew and Luke then made use of Mark’s account and inserted, at what they thought the appropriate places in the timeline, the sayings of Jesus. This explains many of the similarities between the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. All were written in the Greek of the day, but have slightly different readers in mind. Matthew is the one most concerned about the issues of Jewish Christians, Mark and Luke with Gentile needs. John’s Gospel is more thematic and was structured using a format of seven signs and seven “I am” discourses. It presents information about the events and teaching in a very different way. Its first readers were probably Jewish Christians who had been expelled from the synagogues.

So the Gospels were devised originally as teaching tools for the already converted, for those new Christians who had responded to the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and now needed to be taught what he said and commanded and to understand more about the meaning of baptism and the Eucharist.

How seriously this teaching was taken can be seen in a set of twenty lectures spread over forty days made by the Bishop of Jerusalem, Cyril, in AD 350 to people being prepared for baptism.

Prayer

Faithful Father, we thank you that you have sent the Spirit who will teach us all things.

We give thanks that you are faithful to fulfil all your promises.

May we be instructed in the way of life and guide us into your will.

May we teach others with the wisdom and love that we receive from you.

Remind us that our teaching is an act of worship to you.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Teachers

Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher though he didn't go to training college, university or seminary to get a teaching qualification. He was called "Rabbi" – Master/Teacher – by his disciples and this title is used fifteen times in the Gospels. So the teachers in the South African school system who were expected to go back to work yesterday have more than a patron saint looking after them – they have the great master teacher.

One of the things that became apparent with the lockdown, not only here but also in the other countries of the world, was that teachers have long been under-appreciated for what they do. It was particularly so when parents were expected to supervise their children's education (whether supported by online lessons or not) and realised what demanding work this was. Teachers are an immensely formative influence, not only on what knowledge stuff children end up with in their heads, but on their development as human beings and how they interact with others. In more ways than one, we put our children's lives in their hands, day in and day out, year after year.

And now, with the pandemic, there is a double jeopardy – we put our children's very lives in the hands of the teachers, but teachers now put their lives into the hands of the children they teach. The responsibility on everybody is so heavy.

In other countries we have had accounts of people clapping and cheering as nurses come off shift. Now we have another group of front line workers who put their own lives at risk and they need to be cheered as well. Many teachers have been perplexed as to what should be done – flee (don't go back to school), fight (for better planning and resources before opening) or freeze (just stick it out as best one can). And of course the political and economic factors pushing the re-opening of schools even before the crest of the pandemic hits, raises many problematic issues. Teachers need our support and care and prayers. But at the personal level we can but cheer for them (and I am so proud that my eldest daughter became a teacher in her forties after a career in banking and is now on the frontline, preparing for the arrival of the children in her class).

We all know that the pandemic has exposed even more, the disastrous state of our education system where nearly 80% of ten year old children cannot actually read a simple text in their own language. We know of all those schools with overcrowded classrooms looked after by disheartened and demoralised teachers and without proper toilets or running water. This is a scandal and a sin that must change. We should no longer tolerate incompetent and often corrupt bureaucrats ruining the education system.

Jesus's great commission to his disciples (Matthew 28:20) includes "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you". And what does Jesus command? One can scan through the Gospels and add up about 48 commandment-like verses but, as we know, they are all summed up in the commandment to love God and neighbour. But some of the subsidiary ones are important guidelines to what loving the neighbour means – such as "going the second kilometre", "doing to others what you would wish

they would do to you”, being “wise as serpents and gentle as doves” and “do not despise children”.

We commend to the Master teacher the lives of all the teachers and of all the children in their care. May we commit ourselves to doing something about the revitalisation of education in our country.

Prayer (Natalie Regoli)

Faithful Father, thank you that you are faithful to fulfill all your promises.
You are the ultimate teacher.
You teach and instruct me in the way of life and guide me into your will.
May I teach others with the wisdom and love that I receive from you.
Remind me that my teaching is an act of worship to you.

Lord, bless me and keep me, make your face shine upon me.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Post-traumatic stress

Today I read an account from an English National Health Service psychological counsellor of two phenomena that are increasing in severity and likely to continue to do so. The first is the build up of a load of stress from having to adapt to the pandemic. The second is the stress that will remain with us after the particular and general traumas are over.

We have all had to adapt to massive physical, psychological, social and spiritual changes. Although the lockdown and the easing of lockdown stresses may not be as overtly damaging as a war, a criminal assault or a dreadful car accident might be to us, they are real and insidious. What makes it worse is that we have no previous experience of anything like this. We were never trained for this. And even worse is that it hits at the heart of our human nature which is to be social. We have literally been distanced from the rest of humanity. So our bodies and minds experience stress. We no longer have access to those daily social contacts that assure us that we are part of a community, a society. And the reverse is also true – families where there is discord may come under horrendous interpersonal overload, all locked up together.

We must also acknowledge that we have seen nothing yet. I still do not know anyone personally who has died of Covid-19. When the death toll starts to rise dramatically in the next few months, dying, death and grieving will take on new and heartbreaking forms. We will not be able to be with the dying and will not be able to have the full communal mourning the bereaved need.

After each trauma, or when the pandemic ends or is somewhat curbed, we will carry with us what is known as post-traumatic stress. All the anxiety which we couldn't express, all the fear we couldn't show in front of our children or our parents, all that is still buried in our minds and often manifests itself in weird ways. We are all of us, without exception, going to be wounded by the pandemic.

What can we do?

The first thing we can do is to have compassion on ourselves. Compassion actually requires bravery. We have to own our own hurt. It is like Christian ideas about sin. We have to own up to our sins if we are seeking forgiveness and healing. So we have to own our fears, our loneliness, our hurts. Only if our minds can admit that we are stressed can we deal with the damage. Not that we can end these stresses – we cannot. But we can deal with them and not allow them to fester. After all, we are under the protection of the victor against death and sin, the great physician. We are part of the divine community. We are never truly alone.

The second thing is that as Christians we can love our neighbour. People become heroes when, whatever their own wounds, they care for others. There is so much we can do. We do have the benefit of telephones and the social media – not that we must think these are in any way a substitute for real face-to-face human communication. Do we make use

of them to contact our friends, neighbours and past acquaintances? This is the time to call all those who meant something to you in the past. Contact the nurses and schoolteachers you know or who are in your congregation and thank them for what they are doing. We can share more of our material resources with those who are without much income at this time. And we can pray for others – and ourselves.

Prayer

Heavenly Father
you are the source of life and health:
we give you thanks and praise for your Spirit leading your servants
to work for the good of all in this time of disaster.
Be with them and with us, as we await deliverance from this pandemic.
Keep us in health of body and mind,
ever rejoicing in your loving care;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The older elders

Being at a significantly higher risk of dying of Covid-19 because of one's age, concentrates the mind. Receiving all sorts of propaganda about why the lockdowns must end and economies must operate as normal – even if it means the “older older” must be sacrificed (as Sweden's Prime Minister so charmingly put it) – also makes one look with a more sceptical eye at the morality, or lack of it, that drives these messages.

When the Corona virus first struck, most countries adopted strict lockdown measures. The countries which either did not (such as Sweden) or did so too late (such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America), have suffered appallingly high death rates, especially among the middle-aged and the old. Elsewhere, and notably in South Africa, politicians, no doubt influenced by what the broad public wanted, actually put the vulnerable first and made efforts to cushion the economic effects of the lockdowns. However, now there is a gradual backsliding as the forces of big business ramp up the rhetoric to get the tills full again, the alcohol flowing and the cigarettes puffing, all of this, of course, in the interests of “our” supposed “liberty”.

It is supposed that in really well-off modern countries, older people are a nice thing to have but not essential to the economy. Older people increasingly do not live with their children or are placed in old-age homes. In a neo-liberal economy they are just a cost.

This is not the situation in poor countries and decidedly not so in South Africa. Here, where the after effects of apartheid's destruction of family life are still deadly, older people play an essential role in keeping society together. It is grandmothers and grandfathers who have to support young people materially, emotionally and spiritually in a very difficult environment. In addition, the pitifully small old-age pension is often all that is available to keep a family alive. Recent research in Gauteng, our most developed province, found that a very large proportion of people over 60 identified themselves as the head of household (82%), 65% had at least one dependent child, and 56% were primary carers of dependent children. Because many elderly people are living in households with children, it is impossible to isolate them.

Let us go back a bit.

Older people, and particularly older women – widows, were always a vulnerable group in Biblical times. The very word for widow in Hebrew means “one unable to speak [for herself]”. Hence the constant refrain in the prophetic texts that widows needed to be protected (Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7). The book of Job indeed uses the exploitation of widows to exemplify human sin (Job 22:5-9). The book of Deuteronomy instructs that widows, orphans and strangers should receive part of the tithes (Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:12-13).

In John's gospel, the dying Jesus' commendation of his widowed mother to the care of the beloved disciple is the fulfilment of the Biblical widow's hope in God for help. Jesus' mother's widowhood becomes transformed into a symbol of community and loving care.

So it is not strange that the young church took seriously the plight of the aged. One of the first actions of the early Church was to ensure the fair distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1-7). The New Testament makes reference to special provision for widows in the Christian communities. By about AD 250 the congregation in Rome was caring for fifteen hundred widows and poor persons. But the early church also took seriously the gifts of the “older older”. These recipients of church care were not passive, but through some kind of order of widows (see 1 Timothy 5:1-22), they contributed to the well-being and spiritual growth of the whole church, including the running of hospices and hospitals.

The challenge and the example is there. Who will continue to stand up for the vulnerable and the elderly? Who will work to meet the needs of the elderly, help them to overcome the social isolation in this time, and support and affirm their immense contribution to the life of this world?

Prayer

O Father of orphans and protector of widows,
be with the every older person at this time
and banish fears and loneliness and stress.
May the old feel your gentle closeness,
May their courage and endurance be rewarded,
May their care for children and grandchildren be praised.
May we strive continually to honour our mothers and fathers.
Lord of love and mercy, forgive our poor faith.
May we be with you, as you are with us always and forever.
Amen.

Revelation – innocent suffering

One of the most misused books in the Bible is the Book of Revelation. One constantly hears about this sect or so-called prophet claiming that the book predicts when the end of the world will happen, or that the Corona virus pandemic was one of the predicted plagues foretold, or a public figure they dislike is the anti-Christ. So a lot of Christians avoid reading this book and its admittedly somewhat luridly described visions. Yet Revelation is an enduring message of warning and hope for Christians living in difficult times.

Revelation shows us how the prophetic “tough love” tradition continues after the coming of Jesus and must lead us to reject any idea that God’s people should not comment fearlessly on political, economic and political matters. “Tough love” is of course a modern term, coined to describe the committed but unsentimental love that parents have had to display with children hooked on drugs. It is “tough” because the addicted child will perceive it as hard and unfeeling, rather than the comfortable soft sentiment it desires which will let it go its own self-destructive way. “Tough” also because the parents have to hide the hidden torment they endure in the practice of this love.

The Book of Revelation records a series of visions given to a Christian called John. He had been arrested for his beliefs at a time of terrible persecution by the Roman government and sent to work in a slave mine on the island of Patmos. The visions answered the questions of the persecuted church: “Why are good, innocent people being killed and enslaved? Why has the Lord Jesus not immediately returned and ended this evil society?”

These questions are alive for us today as they were then. Think of the genocide in Rwanda, the millions killed in the Congo conflict, the hundreds of thousands who are dying from the virus today in the United States and Brazil because of political stupidity. As it is movingly put in Revelation 6:9-11 with its vision of the innocent victims lying before the heavenly altar and asking how long it will be before justice is done:

I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed because they had proclaimed God’s word and had been faithful in their witnessing. They shouted in a loud voice, “Almighty Lord, holy and true! How long will it be until you judge the people on earth and punish them for killing us?” Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer, until the complete number of their fellow-servants and brothers had been killed, as they had been.

Revelation 18:1-24 is both a victory song and a lament over the foreseen destruction of the capital of the Roman empire, disguised in the secret code of the book as “Babylon”. This the prophet foresees as the inevitable result. Today he could equally well have been an economist, sociologist or political analyst. Essentially he said what all prophets have said: if you go on behaving in this sort of way, this is the inevitable consequence of your actions. Indeed, in a very real sense, it was the Biblical prophets who first made

clear what we now take for granted in the sciences and other fields of human knowledge – things have causes: cause and effect is how our universe operates.

The Revelation visions also demonstrate to us today that the Christian Church must always try to understand the political and economic dynamics of the societies within which their people live and speak prophetically to those societies.

John's visions showed that the Roman society, built on injustice, greed, exploitation, murder and immorality, must fall. His analysis of the Roman economy is sharp and detailed. Although the description borrows much from the traditional Old Testament imagery of the destruction of the capital cities of the great empires that had destroyed the Hebrew kingdoms and exiled its peoples, it demonstrates an acute analysis of the unjust and exploitative foundations of the Roman empire.

The description of Rome's fall reads like a business inventory. Rome grew rich from the sale and export and import of goods:

- gold and other metals and precious stones
- textiles and clothes
- timber and furniture and luxury objects
- spices
- perfumes
- livestock
- grains and other foodstuffs
- wine
- and
- "slaves, and even human lives"

in an interlocking system with overseas businessmen served by global sea trade "She is the city where all who have ships sailing the seas became rich on her wealth".

John understands that the real way in which the state and economy work is masked and made opaque by what today we would call the media that are in the control of the powerful. Rome is a city known for its glamour and grandeur.

Your businessmen were the most powerful in all the world, and with your false magic you deceived all the peoples of the world.

Yet underneath the cosmetic gloss, the false glamour, the public spectacle, Rome is rotten to the core. Underneath is a heart of darkness.

One might digress a little on the phrase, "heart of darkness", the title of Joseph Conrad's famous novel on the horror and abomination in the Belgian Congo of the time.

Frequently applied unthinkingly to recent disasters and genocides in Africa, it is worth noting that the real 'heart of darkness' in Conrad's novel is not the Congo at all, but the tidy respectable commercial centre of Brussels, built on the profits from colonial exploitation, slavery and oppression.

Modern, democratic, post-apartheid South Africa too has its various hearts of darkness below the commercial media gloss. If we do not purge this darkness there will be

inevitable and dreadful consequences. To take one simple example: South Africa continues to have the worst, indeed the most obscene case, of the unequal distribution of wealth in the world.

Imagine South Africa's population as 5 people. The five are now going to share out a cake representing the country's wealth, which has been conveniently cut into five slices. But what happens? Oh dear!

The first person (the white and black business and management elite) grabs three slices and then cuts another slice into three bits and eats one of those too.

The next person (a salaried middle class person) takes one slice. Well, that is sort of fair.

The next person (an employed worker) takes most of the remaining two thirds of a slice.

The last two people (the poor) in the queue find a few crumbs and that is all there is for them.

What then can this mean for us today in South Africa? After the end of apartheid many of the more prophetic in our churches went on a sort of holiday. Well, the holiday is over. With the pandemic exposing the real horror of so many people being poor, malnourished, uneducated and marginalised, the scandal is even greater. Outraged as we are by ordinary crime, is this perhaps not the greater crime and one that breeds the street crime that is so feared?

What are we, as Christians, going to do about it?

Prayer

(Author unknown)

God, you have given all peoples one common origin.
It is your will that they be gathered together
as one family in yourself.
Fill the hearts of humankind with the fire of your love
and with the desire to ensure justice for all.
By sharing the good things you give us,
may we secure an equality for all
our brothers and sisters throughout the world.
May there be an end to division, strife, and war.
May there be a dawning of a truly human society
built on love and peace.
We ask this in your name.

Michael

One of the glories of the stained glass windows in the St John the Divine church in Glenwood, Durban is the set of four archangels – Uriel, Michael, Raphael and Gabriel – placed high in the sanctuary beneath the half-dome, two on either side of Mary, Christ and John the Baptist.



Apart from being incredibly beautiful, they are full of theological meaning. These are not cherubs off some Christmas card, but stern and powerful and awesome supernatural presences who, though they may appear in human-like form, are clearly neither male nor female. They are not human. But they look at us with understanding and love.

Michael's resplendent wings rise from his shoulders. He holds in his right hand a sword with which he attacks Satan (Revelation 12:7-9), and in his left hand he holds the scales with which he weighs a saved soul against its sins (a little demon).

Angels are a rather contentious subject in church belief in modern secular societies. Because of the way modern western science developed, the picture of the universe we are presented with, in spite of its astounding size, age and the beauty of its countless suns and billions of galaxies, is a very mechanical one and filled now is with ecological despair.

That modern mythology we are told to believe in is very different from the view of the universe in ancient times and in the religions of the world, which have fairly universally accepted that the universe is in some sense, magnificently and vibrantly alive and populated with a hierarchy of powers, including angels.

This host of spirits, angels and elemental powers – some gentle, some glorious, some terrible and some in rebellion against God – guided the evolution of the universe and, on earth, its human nations and their social, political, and religious structures of authority and power. It was precisely God the Father's elevation of Jesus "far above every Rule and Authority and Power and Lordship" with "all things ordered under his feet" (Ephesians 1: 20- 22) that liberated humans from subservience to any hostile powers, though we would still have to wrestle against these "cosmic rulers of darkness" (Ephesians 6:12). In the end, the entirety of the universe will be united with God (1 Corinthians 15:25-28).

Well, those archangels represented in St John's church are part of God's heavenly host, stupendous forces in the universe on the side of good, messengers to human beings, and agents and co-workers with them.

Michael, archangel, is the prince-angel of Israel (Daniel 10:13, 12:1), protector and military leader. Michael in the Hebrew language means "Who is like God?" In the Book of Revelation, Michael leads God's armies against the forces of the fallen angel, Satan. During the war in heaven, he defeats Satan, who is thrown down. Satan no longer has any place in our picture of the divine realm.

St Michael has been depicted from earliest Christian times as a commander of the hosts of heaven, the protector of Israel who became the protector of the Church. He will sound the last trumpet at the general resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52) and he will weigh the souls of the dead and weigh them in balance.

It feels rather good that Michael is on our side in the fight against evil.

Prayer

(Prayer to St Michael in Roman Ritual 1902)

Saint Michael the Archangel,
illustrious leader of the heavenly army,
defend us in the battle against principalities and powers,
against the rulers of the world of darkness
and the spirit of wickedness in high places.

Come to the rescue of mankind,
whom God has made in His own image and likeness,
and purchased from Satan's tyranny at so great a price.
Holy Church venerates you as her patron and guardian.
The Lord has entrusted to you the task of leading the souls
of the redeemed to heavenly blessedness.
Entreat the Lord of peace to cast Satan down under our feet,
so as to keep him from further holding humanity captive
and doing harm to the Church.
Carry our prayers up to God's throne, that the mercy of the Lord
may quickly come and lay hold of the beast, the serpent of old,
Satan and his demons, casting him in chains into the abyss,
so that he can no longer seduce the nations. Amen

Eighty days of lockdown

Eighty days is a long time to be in lockdown. Eighty days ago one of our daughters wrote down her thoughts of what this would mean:

I feel sadness mixed with possible joy at the same time.

Covid-19!

The questions I have are:

Why have you arrived now at this time in history?

Are you here to destroy humankind as we know it?

Are you here to teach us all a lesson on how to treat our home – planet earth?

What have we humans done to deserve this?

I feel that this is some sort of message from the creator.

These are great questions and they come with strange contradictory emotions – fear, anxiety, sadness at what will happen because we know people are going to die and yet a sense of openness to renewal, joyful possibilities for reflection and growth. At eighty days it may be a useful time to reflect again on the meaning of all that has occurred.

Trying to see a pattern, a meaning in things, is an inescapable part of being human. Indeed one could argue it is one of those things that makes us human. But, like many other things human, it is filled with risk. We can also see patterns that are not there or we see patterns that are misleading. The last month or so we have seen how confused the world is about the impact of the pandemic and what to do about it: End the lockdown! Businesses must start again! We cannot open the schools when the number of infections is still rising! We need herd immunity! Look what happened in Sweden when they tried that! Stopping people buying alcohol is against our liberty! Look how the assault cases flooded the hospitals once alcohol could be bought again! And so it goes on. Even the scientists, whose analysis of the Covid-19 statistics was meant to guide us, disagree amongst themselves.

That is why my daughter's questions are so helpful. They take us to the deep questions about our place in the creation.

Why have you arrived now at this time in history?

The answer to that is that human beings have been so successful that we so heavily populate the earth and trade and move around in it, that any virus can easily spread. And the societies that we have developed in the last half century have been so obsessed with short term material gains, that they have wrecked the natural ecological balance of the earth. The pandemic is a prelude to the disasters that climate change caused by humans will bring.

Are you here to destroy humankind as we know it?

A virus has no intentions. It just is. Indeed scientists debate whether viruses are even alive. But the impact of the virus could help destroy us. This is where the pandemic is both curse and blessing. Because of its lethal potential, it wakes us up both to danger and the possibility of living in a different way – a more joyful way of being in greater harmony with the rest of creation, a way of life in which human society is more caring and less unequal in who has the means to lead a full life.

Are you here to teach us all a lesson on how to treat our home – planet earth?

Again, a virus has no educational or disciplinary intentions. It just replicates. But we, as human have to ask, is it a sign? The majority of humanity has always believed that there is some kind of moral order in the universe. It is a perspective that has been eroded in modern secular societies. The Biblical perspective inherited by the Christian church has continued to trust that there is indeed an order in the universe and that it infuses all creation. There are consequences for human hubris. Sinful actions destroy and a lack of care for the environment will have consequences – very bad ones. The creation will fight back to restore balance. Can we learn this lesson soon enough?

What have we humans done to deserve this?

The prophets' messages was so clear – 'If you continue to behave thus (and they would specify what was sinful and politically stupid) then this will happen (and they would specify what would happen, usually destruction by an invader)'. Collectively we humans created a situation ripe for a pandemic and ignored making preparations for such a danger (running down the health systems, failing to build up stocks of masks and other equipment, failing to protect the environment, etc.). Why? Because we put short term material gains and profits first. Because we did not consider the future of our descendants. Individuals may of course feel unjustly treated. What about the ecologically conscious, simple life style, good person who really doesn't deserve this? Sorry, but we are all in this together. It is one of those cases of us all being on the same boat.

I feel that this is some sort of message from the creator.

In the pattern you and I see, it is indeed a message from the creator. It is a sign. "Sleeper awake!" As humans we are part of creation. We are creatures. We are not gods. Unless we abandon our hubris – our overweening pride in our dominance of earth – and become as little children, open to the wonder of the creation, we will not make it. Unless we open our eyes to our togetherness with all humanity we will not make it.

The good news is that in Christ we have already made it, whatever the temporary difficulties of the struggle. The Creator, the Father of all (Colossians 1: 13-17):

Who delivered us from the power of the darkness and translated us into the Kingdom of his love's Son, in whom we have the price of liberation, the forgiveness of sins, who is the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, because in him were created all things in the heavens and on earth, the visible as well as the invisible (whether Thrones or Lordships or Archons or Powers); all things were created through him and for him; and he is before all things, and all things hold together in him.

All things hold together in him.

We will move forward to day eighty-one of lockdown in that hope.

Prayer (Bruce and Carolyn Gillette)

Loving God, we remember that Jesus taught us to pray saying, "Our Father..."

You created us, you made this world, and you called your creation very good. Yet often we forget that you are our loving Parent who continues to bless your world.

Jesus told us that you are "...in heaven..."

Yet we fail to live in awe of you. We take you for granted, and we don't see the awesome beauty of the world you have made.

We pray, "Hallowed be your name..."

We confess that our reverence for you does not always lead us to care reverently for your earth, sky and sea.

We pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

We confess that we often put our own interests first – exploiting your creation, and living for our own convenience and self-interest.

We pray, "Give us today our daily bread."

We confess that we consume more than our share of the world's resources, while billions go hungry every day and your whole creation suffers.

We pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

We confess that we see these words only in spiritual terms, while the Bible is filled with teachings about economic justice and creation care.

We pray, "Save us from the time of trial."

Help us to resist the temptations of spending more, using more, acquiring more, and wasting more.

We pray, "Deliver us from evil..."

Free us from greed and self-centeredness that separate us from you and others.

We pray, "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever."

Help us to know that in caring for your wonderful world, we are working for your kingdom, being good stewards of your creative power, and giving you glory.

We pray, "Amen."

We end our prayers with "Amen," a word that means "let it be so." We know we can be faithful disciples by your grace. Amen!

Dealing with evil forces

With the threat of a death-dealing virus surrounding us, many Christians of all denominations sometimes wonder whether the pandemic is an evil force rather than simply a natural disaster. Evil's presence in our current world is of course a fact of life. Every day we read accounts in the press and watch on our television screens the most unspeakable acts of evil and cruelty, so awful that we may want to ascribe them to satanic or demonic influences. The gospel miracle stories assure us that Jesus took account of this kind of evil and had authority to repel it.

The descriptions of his ministry in Galilee reveal Jesus' true authority over nature, disease and evil forces. There are several accounts of him exorcising – that is, chasing out – an evil force from a person. The name often given to these forces is demons, from the Greek word *daimonoi*, which originally simply referred to spirits with powers over certain areas of natural or human life, but in the Christian scriptures, are invariably evil spiritual forces. There is a line in the Lord's prayer in which we ask for protection against these forces (Matthew 6:13):

And do not bring us to trial, but rescue us from him who is wicked.

That is a more accurate translation of the line than the customary "deliver us from evil".

A very clear example of such an exorcism is seen in Luke 8:26-39 where he heals a man possessed by many such unclean spirits or demons. In the vivid story, these spiritual forces beg Jesus not to send them to the Abyss – the place of death and chaos – but instead into a herd of pigs which then rush into the sea and drown.

The human need that Jesus responds to in this story is obvious. Here is a person in the grip of evil's power. The man's condition is serious. First, he is possessed by several demons. Luke makes this explicit: "for many demons had entered him". Second, he lives in unspeakable isolated misery, having lived naked in a cemetery for a long time. Third, the human community have been unable to help him or control his (self-)destructive behaviour: "For many a time it had seized him; he was kept under guard, and bound with chains and fetters, but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert." This force is so powerful that other people have been unable to control the man. So they have left him in the place of the tombs. Everything about this man shows how the presence of evil in his life has left him deserted, alone and a threat to others.

How does Jesus respond? What happens in this showdown with evil?

Jesus acted immediately and decisively. He commanded the unclean force to come out of the man. The response of the man is dramatic: Jesus' presence and command provokes a reaction by the evil forces inside him. They recognize Jesus' authority and ability to exercise judgment over them and confess that Jesus is the Son of God. The demons indeed show how impotent evil ultimately is when confronted with Jesus' authority.

Several details are important here:

- Jesus' request for the name of the demon brings the response "Legion", a reference to a unit made up of thousands of soldiers. This indicates the depth and multiplicity of this possession by evil forces.
- The demons desire to be left alone, to avoid torment and to go somewhere, though not to the ultimate depths of the Abyss, the place of the dead and chaos.
- The ability of Jesus to transform evil to good by breaking people's ties with evil. The miracle shows how Jesus can erase the power and effects of evil in a person. The picture of the man, clothed and seated before Jesus at the end of the account, contrasts sharply with the earlier picture of him naked and raving among the tombs.
- The sub-story of the demons going into a herd of pigs has perplexed commentators and it is hard to disentangle the factual from the symbolic. Eating pork is of course prohibited in the Jewish law – they are an "unclean" animal and hence might have been considered an appropriate place for the demons to go. The sea into which the pigs fall was seen by Israelites – not a seafaring people at all – as a dangerous and chaotic, if not evil place, so this becomes yet another illustration of evil's destructiveness.
- Though the local people are awed by what has happened, they want Jesus to go! Did they fear that he would do the same to more of their herds and they were more concerned over the preservation of their vested interests than the casting out of demons from the obsessed? They feared economic loss rather more than they feared the demoniac (as suggested in Mark's account of the same event). For some people it is very difficult to let God and his power get close to them. These people recognized that Jesus had power. It aroused fear in them, and they chose to have nothing to do with it.
- The newly healed man wants to go with Jesus, but instead Jesus tells him to remain behind and testify to what God had done for him, a missionary in residence. He obeys and tells the whole city what Jesus had done for him. This man, now of sound mind, makes no distinction between Jesus' actions and the workings of God's power.

In our own environment, in the year of our Lord 2020, what do we make of demons and exorcism?

In Christian writings a demon is described as an unclean spirit, sometimes a fallen angel, the spirit of a deceased human, or a spirit of unknown type which may cause demonic possession. When a person is infested with such an unclean spirit, exorcism is the remedy.

We may of course identify exorcism as something that only happens in lurid horror films portraying Catholic priests exorcising levitating and vomiting young women, or amongst small wacky Christian cults.

In reality exorcism is something much more mundane than that and also more common than we may realise. Remember that every baptism in effect contains an exorcism and probably every Catholic and Anglican diocese has at least one bishop-appointed exorcist upon whom parishioners can call in a paranormal emergency.

Possession in the sense found in the Gospel reading must be distinguished from the “ordinary” falling under evil influence when we give in to everyday temptations. Truly “extraordinary” demonic activity takes over control of a person to some degree. Typical forms of possession range from terrible obsessions and suicidal thoughts and dreams, through to external physical pain or the infestation of a house or things.

We need to recognise that those possessed are victims, though they may have voluntarily opened themselves, for example, by dabbling in the occult or through engaging with *inyangas* or *sangomas* who have gone bad and in the most extreme form, by joining satanic groups.

Nowadays we may have to recognise that a lot more people are dabbling in the occult and opening themselves to evil. We also have to accept that probably the majority of people in South Africa have a belief in the power of bad *muthi*. And when they do get entangled in evil as the result, the Church has a responsibility to untangle them.

Of course demonic possession is not recognized by modern medicine or psychiatry. There are many human conditions thought to be demonic possession but classed by psychiatry as psychological ailments, particularly dissociative identity disorder (in common language multiple or split personality). But to the victims it is irrelevant whether we call it demonic possession or a split off of part of their personality – a darker one that has a destructive life of its own. We as Christians have the responsibility and the authority to liberate the afflicted persons from this oppression.

The Church is engaged in this ministry, though quietly and modestly. For example Roman Catholic exorcists are forbidden to talk about their activities. But some Anglican clergy are also busy behind the scenes addressing paranormal referrals from parishioners, members of the police, the medical profession and other agencies. Their work mostly consists of offering prayer and counselling, though formal exorcisms are done when required. They also operate under a strict set of guidelines. Only when other “natural” explanations, including malicious pranks, are exhausted, do they undertake an exorcism.

Perhaps a more important part of most exorcists’ work is trying to remove the dead from places no-one wants them to be and if possible relocate them to somewhere more appropriate – like paradise. The places where a death occurs and places associated with the dead can be important anchor points for our ideas and our emotions after someone has died. And often things are very untidy. As a result, channels can open up between the separate worlds of the living and the dead: channels which can admit evil spirits as well as the restless dead. When an exorcist is called in, very often it is because someone who is dead has turned up where they shouldn’t be. The exorcist’s job involves putting things back into their rightful place.

They achieve this through prayers and blessings, the power of the crucifix they are likely to wear, and the holy water they are likely to bring with them. These help release

a troubled spirit trapped in a particular place, perhaps because they died violently, or they have a message for the living, or they cannot break off their attachment to life and the living for some reason. In this time of pandemic, where a family may not be allowed to be with a person dying, this may become more common.

Those of you who are interested in what this is like in reality, might enjoy the brilliant set of crime novels by Phil Rickman set in England and Wales, whose heroine is a female Anglican priest and exorcist – Merrily Watkins.

Is it something we should worry about? To quote from one exorcist: “In 50 years, I’ve only seen it for real three or four times and, usually, it’s mental illness. Anyone who claims they are possessed very rarely is. You don’t get possessed just walking to the supermarket. You have to have dabbled strongly with the occult and called evil in.”

And we always have a defender: Christ who had authority over demons and is victorious over the devil and all his works, who is victor over evil, whatever form it takes.

Even though we live in an often violent and malevolent world, in which so many seem possessed by evil, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I find the most appropriate prayer the one attributed to St Patrick, written at a time when there was a very real belief in the reality of evil, of demons and evil charms and bad muthi.

St Patrick's breastplate – a prayer of protection

I bind myself to-day to a strong strength, to a calling on the Trinity.
I believe in a Threeness with confession of a Oneness in the Creator of the World.

I bind myself to-day to the strength of Christ's birth and His baptism;
to the strength of His crucifixion with His burial;
to the strength of His resurrection with His ascension;

I arise to-day:
might of Heaven
brightness of Sun
whiteness of Snow
splendour of Fire
speed of Light
swiftness of Wind
depth of Sea
stability of Earth
firmness of Rock.

I bind to myself to-day God's strength to pilot me;
God's power to uphold me;
God's wisdom to guide me;
God's eye to look before me;
God's ear to hear me;
God's word to speak for me;
God's hand to guard me;
God's path to lie before me;
God's shield to protect me;
God's host to save me;

Against snares of demons;
against the temptations of sins;
against the lusts of nature;
against all my ill-wishers near me and far from me;
alone and in a crowd.

So I have called on all these strengths to come between me and every fierce and
merciless strength that may come between my body and my soul;

Against incantations of false prophets;
against black laws of heathens;
against false laws of heretics;
against craft of idolatry;
against spells of wizards and druids;
against every knowledge that defiles the souls of men.

Christ for my protection to-day against poison, against burning, against
drowning, against wounding; that a multitude of rewards may come to me.
Christ with me, Christ before me;
Christ behind me, Christ in me;
Christ under me, Christ over me;
Christ to the right of me, Christ to the left of me;
Christ in lying down, Christ in sitting, Christ in rising up;

Christ in the heart of everyone that thinks of me;
Christ in the mouth of everyone that speaks to me;
Christ in every eye that sees me;
Christ in every ear that hears me.

I bind to myself to-day a strong strength, to a calling upon the Trinity;
I believe in a Threeness with confession of a Oneness in the Creator of the World.

As a blessing

May the risen and ascended Christ,
mightier than the hordes of Hell,
more glorious than the heavenly hosts,
be with you in all your ways.
Amen.

May the cross of the Son of God
protect you by day and by night,
at morning and at evening,
at all times and in all places.
Amen.

May Christ Jesus guard and deliver you
from the snares of the devil,
from the assaults of evil spirits,
from the wrath of the wicked,
from all base passions
and from the fear of the known and unknown.
Amen.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be upon you and remain with you always.
Amen.

For individuals to say before sleep

May the cross of the Son of God,
which is mightier than all the hosts of Satan,
and more glorious than all the hosts of heaven,
abide with me in my going out and my coming in.
By day and by night, at morning and at evening,
at all times and in all places may it protect and defend me.
From the wrath of evildoers, from the assaults of evil spirits,
from foes visible and invisible, from the snares of the devil,
from all passions that beguile the soul and body:
may it guard, protect and deliver me.
Amen.

John the Baptist - He must increase but I must decrease

In the stained glass windows in the sanctuary at the front of St John the Divine in Durban we see the resurrected Christ reigning in glory. To his right, Mary the Mother of God, and to his left John the Baptist, recognisably so because of his rough camel hair tunic.



In many of the great masterpieces of Christian art, we see a similar positioning in the scenes showing the death of Jesus on the cross. There stands Mary his Mother, and John the Forerunner, the wild prophet who pointed to the coming Messiah, literally pointing to the dying man on the cross. Now of course, John the Baptist was not at the crucifixion, he was long dead, an executed political prisoner. But John the Baptist has the highest honour in the Christian Church because he was the prophet who pointed to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” who would be slaughtered by the powers of the world on the cross (John 1:28-30).

In John 3:25-30 we have an account of how some of John's disciples go to him and complain that Jesus "to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." It is as if they think that there is a limited quantity of everything and that if Jesus now has renown, there will be less for them and John. It is the same attitude that has led to every act of envy and injustice on earth: I can only have full freedom if others are slaves. If we share wealth I won't have enough. There is only so much land, gold, fame or celebrity existing in the world. Your success is my loss.

John the Baptist refuses to play this game.

He answers them that if Jesus is drawing people, it is God's gift.

"No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven."

He denies special status:

"I am not the Christ."

Earlier John had been asked similar questions by Jerusalem temple officials (John 1:19-23):

"Who are you?" And he avowed, and did not deny, and confessed that: "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

John has a task and he does it. He and Jesus are not in competition but his career is precisely to herald Jesus. He wants no special status.

And he makes the profound point that true love and joy are not limited in quantity. Wanting joy for others does not mean that there is none for oneself. And he shows this in his analogy of the best man at a wedding. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full." John the Baptist is full of joy at Jesus' success. He is quite prepared, in earthly terms, for that reality that "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Thus John declares his position on the success of Jesus; he himself does not see the situation in terms of limited good, nor will he engage in envy. Though a public figure, he willingly allows his honour and prestige to diminish without envy and hostile reaction.

The last we really hear of John is a rather sad account of John in prison, wondering whether Jesus is the Messiah. It may have been, given the Baptist's fiery hellfire and damnation approach to injustice and sin, that he couldn't understand why Jesus was not bringing a day of divine wrath and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire and maybe establishing a new political regime that would also release John from Herod's dungeon.

Jesus responds by saying (Matthew 11:4-6):

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.”

And he affirms John’s position as both a prophet and more than a prophet. He was the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus (Matthew 11:11):

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

What does this mean? Yes. If we are looking at things in terms of earthly evaluations, John is one of the greatest – a prophet. But in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom where there are no valuations of one against the other, there are no great ones – for we are all equally loved by God and share equally in the joy.

Prayer (Collect)

Almighty God,
by whose providence your servant John the Baptist
was wonderfully born,
and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Lord
by the preaching of repentance:
lead us to repent according to his preaching
and, after his example,
constantly to speak the truth, boldly to rebuke injustice and vice,
and patiently to suffer for the truth’s sake;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Youth

Forty-four years ago, television had only recently been allowed into South Africa. It was only broadcast for three hours a day with Afrikaans and English on alternate days. I didn't have a television set. A friend rushed round to tell me that he had just seen young people demonstrating in Soweto shot – on the television news – right in front of him. The world changed that day for us in South Africa. Things were never going to be the same. The struggle for liberation from apartheid had re-ignited and would never be put out, and news both national and national would now have an immediacy that we would never escape.

The children in those protests in Soweto whom the bullets missed will now be in their sixties. It is now their children and grandchildren who are the 'youth' to whom Soweto Day/Youth Day on 16 June is dedicated. Across the world the young people who joined in anti-apartheid marches in Europe and the Americas calling for sanctions against the apartheid regime are now seeing their children and grandchildren marching against police brutality in the United States and pushing for action to deal with climate change. The struggles continue. And as in all struggles and all wars, it is young people who carry most of the burden.

And in South Africa what a burden it is at this time. Youth in general carry the weight of poverty. They are the beneficiaries of the most ineffective education system in Africa. Yes, those youth of all 'races' who go to private and ex-Model C schools do alright and get to go to prestigious universities like the University of Cape Town. They are a small, cosseted and over-indulged minority. Most of our youth have the awful knowledge that because of the way our economy is structured, many will look forward to years of unemployment. They live in areas neglected by the state. They have few good role models. The youth of 1976 at least had people they revered on Robben Island – Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and many others and Christians later had Desmond Tutu and others. What role models do we have now – corrupt officialdom, lying politicians engaged in endless factional disputes, businessmen flaunting their wealth, wicked 'start-my-own church' pastors looting their congregations and abusing young girls, and a "celebrity" culture in the media that praises mediocrity and amorality?

If the youth are to carry the necessary struggles forward, they will need heroic courage and determination. They will need a vision of the future that is realisable. They will need knowledge and skills to implement that vision. They will have to have the mind that avoids self pity for themselves and shows tolerance for those they will have to work alongside. They will have to, and this is hard for youth, anticipate a really long-haul struggle. (Remember, Mandela was in jail for more than a quarter century.) They will have to get used to betrayals and apathy and false promises from others. They will need to get used to having few role-model leaders or losing them to death.

It sounds tough and it is. It is youth who should be the priority of the Christian Church. Much more must be done to strengthen and support the youth in congregations. Older people too must be willing to walk alongside the youth.

Forty-four years ago the sacrifice made by young people became a symbol of hope for South Africa. It was a sacrifice not made in vain. That particular revolt was suppressed but it should be no surprise to the Christian mind that what seems like failure and loss is in fact a victory – as the death and resurrection of Jesus showed us. Yes, we count the difficulties and losses, but here the words spoken at the funeral of Martin Luther King are particularly appropriate. When all seemed lost with the assassination of that great man, this is what James Bevel said:

“There’s a false rumour around that our leader’s dead. Our leader is not dead. Martin Luther King is not our leader. Our leader is the man who led Moses out of Israel. Our leader is the man who went with Daniel into the lions’ den. Our leader is the man who walked out of the grave on Easter morning. Our leader never sleeps nor slumbers. He cannot be put in jail. He has never lost a war yet. Our leader is still on the case. Our leader is not dead. One of his prophets died. We will not stop because of that.”

Our youth do have a leader, a role model, and a future. Jesus is still on the case.

Prayers (Martin Luther King)

Thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being, we humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved our neighbours as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give, in order to receive. We love our friends and hate our enemies. We go the first mile but dare not travel the second. We forgive but dare not forget. And so as we look within ourselves, we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against you. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know your will. Give us the courage to do your will. Give us the devotion to love your will. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

God, help us as individuals and as a world to hear it now before it is too late: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and God's justice and all these other things shall be added unto you.” Amen.

God grant that as we go out and face life with all of its decisions, as we face the bitter cup which we will inevitably face from day to day, God grant that we will learn this one thing and that is, to make the transition from “this cup” to “nevertheless.”
Amen.

Abnormal normality

Last night I listened to the forty minute long address from the State President as he updated us on the Corona virus lockdown and warned us about the other pandemic, that of violence against women. What he said was sober and realistic but also frightening and worrying.

As we have known now for some time, the virus cannot be defeated simply by lockdown. To do that requires massive resources of testing, contact tracing, quarantining of all those who may have been infected, and absolute adherence to social distancing. Even New Zealand, which has a small population, and which declared itself virus-free last week, has now, through an administrative bungle, allowed infected people back into the country. There was never any hope that South Africa could match what New Zealand and South Korea did. The lockdown was simply a delaying mechanism to slow down the virus so that we could get our health systems and social distancing in order.

The President sombrely warned us that the worst was yet to come and that the speed with which infections spread had gone up since the easing of the regulations to Alert level 3. This situation will go on for months, even years. And the responsibility for protecting ourselves and others is now very much in our own hands. Difficult times ahead, times which may in some respects be like normal – you can go and get your hair cut and have a meal in a restaurant – but are still profoundly abnormal.

The other pandemic is an equally important issue. Violence against women and children is embedded in South Africa's abnormal normal culture. Since the lockdown was eased, this violence has escalated again, lubricated by the availability of alcohol. Ramaphosa spoke out sternly against the violence and urges us all to join in the struggle against it. Certainly the church must speak out and educate in this regard. At heart, all South Africans require a fundamental re-orientation to the bedrock Christian position that all are equal before God. Status, whether of sex, colour of skin, ethnic origin, age or class is not to be respected in the church. As the Letter of James says (2:8-9):

“Now, if you fulfill what, according to scripture, is a royal law – ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ — you are doing well; but once you allow invidious distinctions you are sinning, you have broken God's Law.”

Treating any human being as being less worthy of full respect, is a sin. A culture that does not value all lives equally, is deeply flawed. A culture that does not value women as highly as men, is opening itself to all sorts of evils. We can all contribute to changing this culture in what we say, do and in what we tell our children and how we bring them up.

Prayer (Philippine Commission on Women)

We pray for all women and girls who suffer from domestic violence, rape, incest, sexual harassment, trafficking, prostitution and other forms of violence; may they have the courage to break their silence, find protection, healing and justice.

We pray for the perpetrators of violence against women; that they may learn to respect women and girls and stop the violence.

Oh loving Father and Mother, send us your Spirit, so that everything that we do will be done with love and respect for our fellow humans, regardless of age, sex, class, ethnicity and ability.

Oh powerful God, develop in us a high regard for the thoughts, feelings and experiences of everyone, and bestow on us the capacity to promote, protect and fulfill the rights of women and girls.

Almighty Creator,
grant us the strength to stand up against all forms of violence happening to women and girls,
the sharpness to recognize a silenced victim of such violence,
the courage to speak up against violence,
the resourcefulness to help a victim of violence,
and the resolve to never commit any form of violence against women.
For all of these, we ask for your guidance
Amen.

Into the teens and beyond

When a calamity has gone on for thirteen weeks, you know it is serious. Current best estimates are that the bare elements of lockdown – no close contact with other human beings, face masks and sanitiser – may well be with us for more than a hundred weeks. There will be a second wave (and even a third) of the virus. Our strength of discipline and character is really going to be tested. We have to come out of our pandemic infancy and enter our teens and become grown up very quickly if we are going to survive as better people than when we started.

I have been trying to think of role models for us at this time. This is not easy because the last pandemic (the Spanish Flu) was more than a century ago. But examples there are. We know that during the early years of the Christian church, the faithful were renowned for their care of the sick and dying. Indeed, in cities of the Roman empire where there were many Christians, the death toll was much reduced because Christians looked after the sick. They had no special cure – it was simply that their looking after all the sick that increased the survival rate.

A later example, in England in 1665, was the village of Eyam, where the inhabitants under the leadership of their parish priest, decided to quarantine the whole village rather than allow the plague to spread further. A third of them died but they saved the whole region.



Services were held in Eyam in the open and families stood apart from each other to avoid the spread of infection

Other parallels for times of calamity are those when the church was persecuted and all activities had to be done in secret with no public gatherings. A current example is the case of the Christian Church in China where as many as 30 million Christians worship in house churches, although there are another 30 million in state-approved churches. But times of persecution have real life villains. In our situation there are no obvious villains. The virus that has come to devastate our world has no evil intent, it is simply there, and its spread is the result of human bungling and lack of care for the environment.

So there are no St Georges to inspire us to fight against the dragon, only flawed, ordinary human beings doing the best they can. The role models for our next hundred weeks are the nurses and doctors who work with the infected, the anonymous workers who keep us alive by producing and distributing food, clearing away our rubbish, and keeping the lights on and the water flowing in the pipes. They are the ordinary family heads, men and women, gogos and young people leading orphaned families, who will have to hold things together and encourage the discipline and endurance to keep people alive and whole. They will be the unknown warriors who help us triumph over adversity and keep us sane and hopeful. And maybe they will help us laugh at ourselves, going out in our face masks, carrying our bottles of sanitizer, as if we are in some science fiction novel about a global pandemic.

Prayer

Father of all creation:

Keep in your care all those who fight for us in this pandemic.

Strengthen them and comfort them and their families.

Inspire us also to struggle and endure through this long journey.

Grant us the grace to love and care for our families and friends.

Enable us to grow as your faithful servants during this time.

All this we ask through our victorious Lord.

Amen.

Archangels

According to a common tradition angels are one of the many kinds of consciousness in the universe and are the governing intelligences of nature. Indeed, one of the few commonalities in the world's religions is their belief in angels. Angels are seen as linkages between our earthly world and the wider cosmos. They do not have material bodies, nor are they male or female, but can temporarily assume bodily appearance for the sake of communication. Their relationship with human beings includes inspiring, message-bearing, protecting and guiding. These spiritual forces are said to be musical in nature.

The four archangels depicted at St John the Divine's church in Durban are Uriel, Michael, Raphael and Gabriel.



Uriel, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel

Uriel means “God is my light” (2 Esdras 4:1-2, 5:14) and is lord of the sun which the archangel holds in both hands. This is the angel and prince of presence, angel of the face, angel of sanctification, angel of glory, interpreter of judgements and prophecies and a keeper of beauty and light. The leader of the army of angels is associated with the sacrament of confirmation. St Uriel is much venerated in Ethiopia.

The Anglican intercessional prayer to Saint Uriel the Archangel is as follows;

O holy Saint Uriel, intercede for us that our hearts may burn with the fire of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Assist us in co-operating with the graces of our confirmation that the gifts of the Holy Spirit may bear much fruit in our souls.

Obtain for us the grace to use the sword of truth to pare away all that is not in conformity to the most adorable will of God in our lives, that we may fully participate in the army of the Church.

Amen

Michael, archangel, is the prince-angel of Israel (Daniel 9:21-23; !0:13, 21; 12:1), protector and military leader. Michael in the Hebrew language means “Who is like God?” In one hand is the sword used against Satan (Revelation 12:7-9), and in the other hand are the scales with which a saved soul is weighed against its sins (represented by a little devil). In the New Testament, Michael leads God's armies against Satan's forces in the Book of Revelation, where during the war in heaven, Satan is defeated. St. Michael has been depicted from earliest Christian times as a commander of the hosts of heaven, the protector of Israel who became the protector of the Church. The last trumpet at the general resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52) will be sounded by St Michael who will weigh the souls of the dead in balance.

The Feast Day is 29 September or 8 November (East).

St. Michael the Archangel, illustrious leader of the heavenly army, defend us in the battle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of darkness and the spirit of wickedness in high places.

Raphael means “It is God who heals” or “God, Please heal” (Tobit 3:17; 5:4-5;12:14-15). Raphael is depicted carrying a fish Tobias caught in the river Tigris (and with which Raphael healed Tobias' blind father Tobit) and holding a traveller's staff in the other hand. Raphael governs the spirits of human beings, heals diseases and wounds, and presents their prayers before God, is a patron of medical workers and the angel of science and knowledge. This archangel is said to have a great sense of humour.

Most glorious Prince, Archangel Raphael, be mindful of us and pray for us, here and in every place, to the Son of God. O God, who gave your servant Tobias the holy archangel Raphael for a companion on his journey, grant that during our earthly pilgrimage we may always be protected by his watchful care and strengthened by his help. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Gabriel means “God is my strength” or “Might of God.” Gabriel is the prince of Paradise, a carer of the sick and the herald of the mysteries of God (Daniel 8:15-16; 9:21-22), especially the Incarnation of the Son of God and all other mysteries related to it. The angel of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:11-38) is a guardian of Israel and is depicted holding a lily, symbol of Mary and a stole inscribed with an abbreviation of the words of the Annunciation “Ave, Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum” (Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.)

Blessed Saint Gabriel, Archangel We ask you to intercede for us at the throne of divine mercy: As you announced the mystery of the Incarnation to Mary, so through your prayers may we receive strength of faith and courage of spirit, and thus find favour with God and redemption through Christ Our Lord. May we sing the praise of God our Saviour with the angels and saints in heaven forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer

Father of all creation:

We pray with all the powers of your creation, visible and invisible, that your will be done.

May we with them praise you and give you thanks for the creation.

We ask that we be guided to work in harmony with your universe,

And seek always to conserve the goodness of this planet.

May all good powers protect us from all evil.,

Open our hearts and minds to be joined in the unity of love,

through Jesus Christ our Lord and the strength of your Holy Spirit.

Amen

Bishop Colenso – Sobantu

Yesterday, Saturday 20 June, was the day the Anglican lectionary asks us to remember and celebrate the life of Bishop John William Colenso, the first Bishop of Natal. The Christian Church has been good in remembering its saints for it is, after all, a church of the living, the yet to be born, and the dead. And it is good that this noble man, excommunicated by the Anglican Church in South Africa at the time, be now honoured for his faithfulness to the truth, to justice and to the people he had come out from England to serve.

John Colenso was born in Cornwall in 1814 and after a time as a mathematics tutor when he wrote two very successful school mathematics textbooks, he was ordained and recruited by the Bishop of Cape Town to be the first Bishop of Natal. Colenso was a man of enormous intellectual insight and energy. Working with a convert, William Ngidi at Ekukhanyeni near Pietermaritzburg, he produced the first isiZulu grammar and English/Zulu dictionary and translated the New Testament into isiZulu. The thought-provoking questions put to him by students at his mission station encouraged him to re-examine the way the early books of the Old Testament were to be understood. He also wrote a controversial commentary on Paul's letter to Romans. Publication of his research shocked the established church in England, though now his findings are accepted by most Biblical scholars and are standard fare taught to students in seminaries. The high church and extremely "High Tory" politically conservative Bishop of Cape Town had him tried for heresy but was unable to remove Colenso from his position as Colenso had, legally speaking, been appointed by the Queen of England and Head of the Church of England.

Colenso was left with those congregations loyal to him and the Bishop of Cape Town appointed a new Bishop. So there were two Bishops in Pietermaritzburg.

Colenso is best known for his enormous efforts, involving great sacrifice for his own family, to defend the cause of the indigenous people from injustice. First he tried to help Langalibalele and the Hlubi and Ngwe peoples who had been falsely accused of rebellion. He tried to counter the misleading information, the fake news, being sent to the English government. Finally, he totally opposed the invasion of the Zulu kingdom in the interests of English imperialism and the local English settlers. Even when news came of the defeat of the British army at Isandlwana he was resolute in his preaching that the attack on the Zulu kingdom had been unjustified, reckless and unjust. The rest of his life, and that of his daughters was a rearguard and failed attempt to defend the rights of the defeated people.

In recent years there have been sincere attempts within the Anglican church to rectify the grave injustice done to Colenso. The excommunication has been posthumously lifted and he is now recognised as a great figure of the Church in South Africa.

There are many ironies in history. And we should learn from those ironies. People who were once commemorated with statues are now being vilified as slave owners. When it comes to the churches, the ironies are extreme. The churches initially loyal to Colenso – now the Church of England in South Africa – became increasingly theologically and politically conservative. When the ideologue of systematic apartheid, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd was assassinated, all the mainline denominations were rejected when it came to finding an English speaking minister to help at his funeral and the Bishop from the Church of England in South Africa was chosen because they were now seen as pro-apartheid. Conversely, the Church of the Province, Bishop Gray's heritage, had changed to become principled in its opposition to apartheid. It is well to remember these ironies. Institutions can change, for better or worse and we are well advised not to be sentimental and retain support for religious or political institutions and movements that change for the worse.

What happened to the congregations in Durban and Pietermaritzburg is also interesting. Initially, the Durban congregations of St Paul's and St Thomas' stuck with Colenso. But St Cyprian's, then in the centre of Durban, sided with Gray and set out to start new congregations in the Musgrave and Glenwood areas – hence St John the Divine and a long disappeared St Augustine's on Musgrave Road. Eventually St Thomas' and St Paul's rejoined the main Anglican Church. In Pietermaritzburg it was many years before St Peter's, originally Colenso's cathedral and where he is buried before the high altar, rejoined and is now the site of the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity.

This is our history, our inheritance too. And in Colenso we have a proud example of absolute respect for the truth, the courage to endure against false accusations and fake news, and to always stand with those who are being treated unjustly. And we are forewarned, as Jesus does in Matthew 10:35, that there are costs to being truthful and just:

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

We thank God for the heroes of the faith such as Colenso who stood for the truth. May they strengthen our resolve.

Prayer (The Colenso collect)

God of justice and love,
who called your servant John Colenso
to be a bishop, teacher, missionary and advocate of justice:
enable us to use our gifts to spread the gospel
and promote justice and respect for all people;
through Jesus Christ our Lord
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.
Amen.

The enigmatic God

An “enigma” is a difficult word meaning something – usually a message or a person – that is strange or mysterious and difficult to understand. For the writers of the Old Testament their God, the LORD, was something of an enigma. It should be no different for us.

Take the story of Moses and the burning bush in the book of Exodus. Whether it was a real burning bush or a vision of one, we can picture the desert scene with this lonely exile who had fled from Egypt. He receives this sight in which he is called by a divine presence to go back to Egypt and liberate the Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian masters and bring them back to the desert. It was a startling call. It went against Moses’s instinct for self-preservation. The Hebrews might not exactly welcome him (he had after all, been part of the ruling class in Egypt), and whilst life in Egypt was harsh for slaves, the desert was also harsh, even if it was on the road to some promised land.

Moses, quite understandably, wants a bit of reassurance, and asks God what his name is, because, surely, this will be the first thing the Hebrew slaves will ask.

And here, perhaps, one needs to say something about names. Firstly, at the time of Moses, when people believed that there were many gods, each god had a name and the name of the god told one something about the identity and characteristics of that god. But more importantly, religion was often mixed up with beliefs about magic. Knowing the name of a person or a god gave one some power over them. In other words, names were filled with power and vitality. The force of many passages in the Bible can only be understood in the light of this belief. In most modern urban societies now, names no longer have this importance (although in traditional societies, including some in KwaZulu-Natal, names are taken very seriously). Because of this, it may be harder for us to understand the strange and enigmatic reply that the LORD gives to Moses:

“I AM WHO I AM” Tell them “I AM has sent me to you”.

What does this mean? Many things and many interpretations, but summed up in the following:

I cause to be what I cause to be (and therefore God has an exclusive claim to creation and sovereignty)

I will be with you (and therefore a God whose very being is turned towards his people)

And yet, a God who, though he will be at the service of his chosen people, will retain his freedom to be present as he will be present.

And maybe, also, a sense of humour, my name is none of your business.

Moses will never own this God, but if he listens to what this voice is saying, he will go back to Egypt and liberate his people and bring them into a new relationship with the world. Hence the people of God will only be able to answer the question, "Who is God? What is his name?" by observing his tracks, so to speak, in history and in his interactions with people in history. This they found when God brought them out of Egypt. As Moses found in another, later vision on Mount Sinai when he received the Law, one can only see God's back. He is always ahead of us.

God's answer then is that he is not to be named and controlled and listed as yet another name among many gods. God is who he chooses to be, in his freedom and power. But we can track him because we are also given three indicators as to who God is and how he behaves:

He is the God who is known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He observes the suffering and injustice done to the slaves.

He will act to see that justice is done in the world.

Can we ask for more? No. Though the list of people to whom God is known now extends down to our present day, we hope our names are on that list.

Prayer (Pascal's confession)

Fire.

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,

Not of the philosophers and scholars.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

God of Jesus Christ

"Your God shall be my God."

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything apart from God.

He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Greatness of the human soul.

"Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you."

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have separated myself from him

"My God, will you leave me?"

Let me not be separated from him eternally.

"This is the eternal life, that they might know you,

the only true God, and the Jesus Christ whom you have sent,"

Jesus Christ.

Temptations

As we all prepare, in spite of the ongoing pandemic, to return to some kind of “normality” we are going to be again confronted with the all-too-normal temptations that come from living in a human world. Already we have seen the rapid increase in road accidents and assaults caused by alcohol abuse and the beating and murder of women. So we have to be prepared for those temptations that can and will afflict us.

Now we do have an exemplar in dealing with temptation, Jesus. The account of Jesus, pondering his future out there alone for forty days in the wilderness, is particularly interesting because he must have told his disciples about it. They were not there to observe it. Jesus must have considered it important that his followers should come to know that even he was tempted and that they should, and could, follow his example in rejecting those temptations. So, we are asked to learn from the story of the three temptations of Jesus: the temptation of materialism, the temptation of power and wealth, and the temptation of misusing the spiritual.

In the first temptation Jesus is tempted to turn stone into bread. This temptation may be more complicated than we think. At a very simple level it is the putting of our more basic instincts first. If you are hungry – grab. If you want sex– seduce or rape. If you want it, get it, steal it. Short cuts are OK. So we can picture Jesus fasting in the wilderness, being hungry and resisting the use of his miraculous powers to ease that hunger. But this, whilst obvious, is a really a bit banal. It hardly seems like a serious temptation to the Jesus we know. But what if Jesus, wanting to draw all people to himself, is tempted to use his powers to attract them, not by the promise-threat of “take up your cross and follow me” but by miracle and prosperity? Wouldn't we all follow Jesus if the result was material wealth? Wow, he would be popular. It is a temptation that it is hard for us to really comprehend these days because our society has almost totally surrendered to materialism and consumerism, to the idea that “greed is good”, that we “didn't join the struggle to remain poor” and that our very identities are created by our consuming the brands and products projected daily on our television screen, the internet and advertising hoardings. Jesus' response is to use words from the book of Deuteronomy, that we shall not live by bread alone, but by the words of God – it is that which gives us life and meaning.

We can resist this temptation in many ways, at the basic level by denying our selfish urges that demand immediate satisfaction, and, in a more sustained way, by seeing through the materialistic message of our society and striving for true identity and meaning, both for ourselves and those we love, and for our society.

The second temptation, that of power and wealth, is something we may not see as being our problem – that it is something politicians and the super rich have to deal with. In a certain superficial sense that is true. Jesus by comparison, given his immense spiritual and intellectual powers, truly had the option of an alternative career. He could have made a deal with the powers that be – the Judaeen temple aristocracy, the Herodean rulers, the Roman overlords. He could have chosen to be one of them and to become a

great ruler – and no doubt he could have done this for the best of reasons (the sort of reasons all politicians have when they start their careers) and died rich, famous, and corrupt as a celebrity of the world of that time. Corruption has a certain inevitability about it – if you want to get ahead in that way, you have to make a deal, not with the LORD but with the devil (here seen as the personification of the corrupt political and economic systems of the world that alienate people from God). But we should not turn this temptation into a meditation on whether it is possible for a politician to be saved. We have to exercise our minds as to whether **we** can be saved. What deals have we made to have power in our offices, our families, our schools, our churches, our factories, our businesses? How often do we abuse power and wealth and use it for our own ends? How often do we use the status we have, built on power and wealth (however relative that wealth may be), to make life hard for others? How comfortable have we become with our particular station in society that is built on historical or present unfairness? Jesus' answer is clear: "You shall worship [put first] the LORD your God and him only shall you serve."

The third temptation is about the abuse of spiritual or religious power. Jesus could inspire and bring awe and fear if he used these powers against his enemies. It is a temptation which will once again come to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Should he allow himself to be arrested, he who could appeal to his Father "for more than twelve legions of angels" (Matthew 26: 53)? Again, we need to avoid thinking of this solely in melodramatic terms. We can't perform miracles, true, and we may not have what we could describe as superior spiritual powers – but we too can abuse religion. Again, we should not think only of the dreadful abuses by those con-men prosperity cult pastors who set up their own money-making spiritual casinos. What about us when we use religion as a means of cheap grace which really demands nothing of us – no changed life, no loving actions in the world? We can use it as a means of superiority over others, as a sign of status, that we are better than others. The picture we present to others of the Christian faith may alienate them from coming closer to the true and living God.

We have all been in a kind of Corona virus retreat, a time in isolation. Have we become stronger to resist temptation in this time? Have we reaffirmed our baptism in which we renounced the corrupt world order? Are we ready to go out into that world again as true and fit soldiers of Christ?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, who told us to pray that we may not enter into temptation
Be with us in the trials of our living in this world.
Forgive us our sins and our failed repentances, time and time again.
We wish to amend and be faithful to you.
Help us to be more conscious of what our real temptations are.
We place our confidence in you and your threefold victory over temptation.
May we not trust in our own promises and resolutions but in your strength.
For in you, we can do all things.
Amen.

A dangerous time

When I went for a run today, the streets seemed to have fully normal traffic. There were lots of people around. The only thing different was that less than half the people were wearing masks. Things seem to be more relaxed. And that is why we are in a time of great danger.

The initial lockdown was meant to slow the initial spread of the virus, carried in with rich South Africans coming back from doing business or holidaying in Europe. It enabled the initial spread from a few well-to-do suburbs to the rest of the urban areas and townships to be delayed. Above all it gave time to gear up the health system to be ready for the real unleashing of the pandemic.

Then the lockdown was eased, ostensibly to enable the economy and schooling to revive. It is a matter for debate as to whose real interests the easing of lockdown was for. When, years into the future, we look back at this time, we will know. I suspect it was largely in the interests of the elite – those people who are able to send half a million children to expensive private schools which are well able to handle social distancing and e-learning, those people who run businesses that generate the sorts of profits that can finance the school fees of more than R200 000 charged by the top 20 private schools.

It is now a dangerous time because, unlike when we first went into lockdown, your own chances of being infected are now real. All of us are now aware of people we know or are related to, becoming victims. The virus is literally now in our area. And because of the easing of the lockdown, we are potentially in contact with large networks of people. For example, if you have a child returning to school, that child is now immediately linked through the other children in the class to probably at least 5 000 people.

The irony is that at the level of ourselves as individuals, we should now be even more stringent in our preventative behaviour than we were in the first lockdown. Because things are going to get far far worse. Businesses and schools will start closing down again (as was happening in the Durban area today). The sick will start to fill up the hospitals and there will be many sick in their homes.

This is the time for real self discipline. We have to have the common sense to protect ourselves and other people and the faith to endure for some time yet. But we are not alone. As the writer of Hebrews 12:1 puts it:

Therefore, we also, having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, having with such ease put off every encumbrance and the sin besetting us, let us run the contest set before us.

We have heroes all around us. We are called upon to be disciplined as they are, and as James 1:2-5 puts it, to endure:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

Jesus himself, warning of troubled times ahead, said (Luke 21:19):

By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Prayer

The Song of the Three Youths is an addition to the book of Daniel. They were condemned to death in a fiery furnace but were joined by a mysterious figure who saved them. This is the hymn of praise they sang when they realized their deliverance.

Glorify the Lord, all you works of the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.
In the firmament of his power, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, you angels and all powers of the Lord,
O heavens and all waters above the heavens,
Sun and moon and stars of the sky, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, every shower of rain and fall of dew,
all winds and fire and heat.
Winter and summer, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, O chill and cold,
drops of dew and flakes of snow.
Frost and cold, ice and sleet, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, O nights and days,
O shining light and enfolding dark.
Storm clouds and thunderbolts, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Let the earth glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.
Glorify the Lord, O mountains and hills,
and all that grows upon the earth,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, O springs of water, seas, and streams,
O whales and all that move in the waters,
All birds of the air, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, O beasts of the wild,
and all you flocks and herds,
O men and women everywhere, glorify the Lord
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Let the people of God glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.
Glorify the Lord, O priests and servants of the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.

Glorify the Lord, O spirits and souls of the righteous,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.
You that are holy and humble of heart, glorify the Lord,
praise him and highly exalt him for ever.



Covenant

Yesterday was the Emergency Budget Speech by the Minister of Finance, Tito Mboweni. In it, as expected, we were told what financial difficulty the country was in (not all of it the fault of the pandemic), and how government and citizens would have to tighten their belts. Tough stuff, but necessary, though economists and politicians will argue about the details.

What a budget speech does is remind us that we, citizens, have an agreement or covenant with the state and its current government. One needs to note that in the modern world the terms of the implicit agreement are dictated by bureaucrats in a legal language which most of us do not understand, but which we suspect are not very fair (like many of the contracts we sign). The agreement is that the state, led by the government of the day, will protect us from various forms of harm and provide a range of services – health, education, infrastructure to enable livelihoods to be made, etc. On our part we have to be well-behaved and not give the government too much trouble – and we have to pay in a lot of money. This money is in the form of taxes: personal, on the sale of goods (VAT), and from businesses. That is the deal. That is the covenant. In what way do we as citizens accept and benefit from this covenant? We all have our own opinions on this, but one thing we do know, both of the parties regularly cheat.

Christians, alongside Jewish believers, believe (or are supposed to believe) that we are in a covenant with God. Are we in a watertight contractual agreement with God? Pretty confident? Not sure? Don't think so?

We know what being confident in that covenant means. Take the martyr Polycarp who at his trial in AD155 was asked to renounce his faith. He replied: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour? Let me tell you plainly now that I am a Christian." Polycarp knew he was in a covenant relationship with God that was unshakeable.

The Old Testament talks a lot about covenants. In Genesis 17:1-7 we have the great everlasting covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants in a multitude of nations. God binds himself in a covenant, he holds himself bound in faithfulness to it, whatever trouble we get ourselves into. As it says in Exodus 2:24

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It is a covenant relationship reaffirmed every time we hear the Eucharistic prayer, which reminds us that God the Father through his Son has claimed us as his own people and that the Last Supper was the inauguration of a new and everlasting covenant (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this for my remembrance.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This is the covenant we are bound into through the death and resurrection of Jesus and one that is ever renewed through God's outpouring of love to us.

Look at the promises that come with this new covenant as seen in the passage in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The prophet Ezekiel (36:24-28) sees this new covenant as removing our failures and sinfulness and giving us a new living dynamic.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

That is the covenant that God is in with us. Where it differs from all other covenants, including our one with the South African state, is that God will never break, or come short of what he has promised. That is Good News.

Prayer (The Methodist Covenant Prayer)

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

The teaching about church practice

The novelist Arundhati Roy recently said, in relation to the pandemic, that after it passes, “Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.” Yes, we do need to imagine a world that is different, decidedly different from what we have got so used to. And we probably also need to re-imagine what our church should be like in the future, one in which the institutional church will be much poorer.

One of the things that the pandemic state of abnormality has given me is more time to read and the book I am currently studying is the *Didascalia apostolorum* (The teaching of the apostles) written, probably by a bishop in Northern Syria, about the year 230 AD. It is a book to guide the practice of the young church and church organization at a time when the church was persecuted and operated in a semi-secret way. The book is not about the doctrines of the church but about its practice – how it should behave in the everyday. It covers such topics as prayer, care of widows and orphans, the qualifications for bishops and deacons, liturgy, penance, and the education of children.

What I find so fascinating in the context of the pandemic is reading this description of church practice where the church is on the front line of care for the poor and sick, something that in our times has been largely sub-contracted to the state.

The description of the local church organization is largely that of a bishop or supervisor with a number of deacons and lay people, some of whom, particularly widows are in a specific order. There is also a group of elders (presbyters) as a sort of bishop’s council.

The leadership of the church was clearly highly honoured, the bishop as a teacher and father after God. The deacons, male and female, are described thus: “the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the deaconess shall be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Spirit”. Elders (presbyters) are likened to the twelve apostles. But what is most remarkable, orphans and widows are equally prominent: “the orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar.”

It was clearly central to the church of that time that the vulnerable, people like orphans, widows, and the sick were really cared for. And it is the deacons that did a lot of the work. The number of deacons was in proportion to the size of the congregation so that they may have personal, direct knowledge of those they served.

The “ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important. For our Lord and Saviour also was ministered unto by women ministers, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women beside. And you also have need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things; for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness. ... It is required of you deacons therefore that you visit all who are in need, and inform the bishop of those who are in distress.”

And, of course Christians who have been imprisoned for the faith had to be supported: “You shall not turn away your eyes from a Christian who for the name of God and for his faith and love is condemned to the games, or to the beasts, or to the mines; but of your labour and of the sweat of your face do you send to him for nourishment, and for a payment to the soldiers that guard him, that he may have relief and that care may be taken of him, so that your blessed brother be not utterly afflicted.”

It is a picture of a church thoroughly engaged at a most practical level in caring for people, spiritually and materially, but in a well-ordered way. It is a vision of church practice we may be forced to joyfully re-embrace.

What I also found fascinating was the seriousness with which the early church took the evils and injustices of their world. It was committed never to be a participant in such injustices or in any way to benefit from them. Currently we are hearing the news of loud calls for a removal of statues of slave owners and slave traders, however charitable they may have been to some in their home towns. Well, the *Didascalia* is unbelievably stern about the church never accepting donations, even donations for support of widows and orphans, from such reprehensible people. It provides a substantial list of these:

rich persons who keep men shut up in prison, or ill-treat their slaves, or behave with cruelty in their cities, or oppress the poor;
the lewd, and those who abuse their bodies;
evildoers;
forgers;
dishonest advocates, or false accusers or hypocritical lawyers;
painters of pagan or lewd pictures;
makers of idols;
workers of gold and silver and bronze who are thieves;
dishonest tax-gatherers;
spectators of gladiatorial shows;
those who alter weights or measure deceitfully;
inn-keepers who mingle water with their wine;
soldiers who act lawlessly;
murderers;
spies who procure condemnations;
any Roman officials, who are defiled with wars and have shed innocent blood without trial;
perverters of judgement who, in order to rob them, deal unjustly and deceitfully with the peasantry and with all the poor;
those who practise usury,
and extortioners.

With minor changes all these reprehensible people are still with us in our human world. In summary, the church must never benefit in any way from evil doing, exploitation or corruption. It must rather be poor. To accept money from the proceeds of iniquity would stop the church's intercession to God being heard. The church can pray for the wicked but never receive nourishment from them.

Prayer (at the end of the *Didascalia*)

Now to Him who is able to open the ears of your hearts to receive the words of the Lord through the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and slept, that He might announce to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob and to all His saints the end of the world and the resurrection that is to be for the dead; and rose from the dead, that He might show and give to us, that we might know Him, a pledge of the resurrection; and was taken up to heaven by the power of God His Father and of the Holy Spirit, and sat on the right hand of the throne of God Almighty upon the Cherubim; to Him who comes with power and glory to judge the dead and the living: to Him be dominion and glory and majesty and kingdom, and to His Father and to the Holy Spirit: who was, and is, and abides, both now and to all generations and ages.

Confidence in forgiveness

During the lockdown, many people have found time to reflect on their lives and on the way they have behaved in relation to other people. It is hard, doing such reflection, not to mourn the bad things we did and the good opportunities we turned away from – all those things we say in the confession about our faults, “in thought, word, and deed and in what we have left undone.” The questions that arise are simple: “Am I confident that God has forgiven me?” “Do I think that God has forgiven others (those who hurt me or let me down)?” “Have I forgiven them?” Really? With absolute certainty? And if I do have some such confidence, has this confidence changed my life? Have I really accepted the liberation that receiving and giving forgiveness brings?

Here are some texts to meditate upon.

We all know the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers who sold him into slavery. He, like us, was asked to forgive those closest to him (often the people who hurt us most), something we all find hard to do.

Genesis 50:17

So his brothers approached Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, “Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.” Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.’ Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

From prophets such as Hosea we see the extravagant love God has for the people of Israel – he is her ‘husband’ – and he welcomes the people of Israel back from their sinful idolatrous ways into a new peaceful and environmentally friendly way of life.

Hosea 2:16-20

On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband’, and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

We also see in the actions of Jesus that forgiveness which heals, is likely to break the rules and norms of everyday society. Forgiveness turns “normal” reality upside down – it changes our relationship to the human world.

John 5:2-18

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, ‘It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’ But he answered them, ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Take up your mat and walk.”’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, “Take it up and walk”?’ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.’ The man went away and told the Judaeans that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Judaeans started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working.’ For this reason the Judaeans were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Indeed, it is clear that forgiveness of both ourselves and others requires us to go beyond the normal, the expected, and be extravagantly merciful, loving and forgiving, as God is.

Luke 6:32-38

‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

Jesus is the forgiveness of God in action. The New Covenant is a covenant of forgiveness – for sins both intentional and unintentional. As we look back on our own pasts and our present, we do not have to carry those overloaded backpacks of regrets and shames. We really do not. The straps were cut long ago. Why do we insist on still carrying them? Let them go and walk with a new levity that frees us to love and serve the Lord and his people.

Prayers

(St Augustine)

O Lord,
The house of my soul is narrow;
enlarge it that you may enter in.
It is ruinous, O repair it!
It displeases Your sight.
I confess it, I know.
But who shall cleanse it,
to whom shall I cry but to you?
Cleanse me from my secret faults, O Lord,
and spare Your servant from strange sins.

(St Ambrose)

God, my good and loving Lord, I acknowledge all the sins which I have committed every day in my life, whether in thought, word or deed.
I ask for forgiveness from the depths of my heart for offending You and others and repent of my old ways.
Help me by Your grace to change, to sin no more and to walk in the way of righteousness and to praise and glorify Your Name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Money

I don't know about you but when somebody in my family says: "Now let's talk about the money." I go into a decline. For I know it is going to be about how our expenditure is exceeding our income and I am already far too conscious of that iron law so well expressed in the words (suitably South Africanised) of novelist Charles Dickens, "Annual income forty rand, annual expenditure thirty-nine rand and 95 cents, result happiness. Annual income forty rand, annual expenditure forty rand and 5 cents, result misery." I also do not levitate with excitement at that time of the year when one knows that Stewardship Sunday draws near and one knows that we clergy are going to have to touch you for more money and make you feel guilty.

Well. Here it goes. Let's talk about money! So wallow in your guilt or tune out if you can – I am going to talk about money!

To start with, we need to understand what money is.

Money is a symbolic object that stands for, represents, things that are valued: those things can be food (say bread), the source of food (say cows), implements and machines (from spades to BMWs) and services and labour (provided by such as doctors, car repair mechanics and nurses). Though in far off times (and still in gold Kruger Rands) money in itself might have had real value as a metal, nowadays money as an object is practically worthless (like in money notes). It is what it **represents** that has value.

Money was invented as a convenient means of exchange as civilization got more complex and bartering things became impractical. You cannot put a cow in the collection plate or pay you income tax in home baked bread rolls. For quite a long period of history money remained that – a convenient way of exchanging real things of obvious value.

That is all very rational and legitimate. But in the modern world things become a bit more complicated.

First, we see that the value of money can change very radically, not because of some rational explanation (say the price of wheat goes up in a famine) but because so many things in what we call a consumer society are based on brand value. There is no substantial difference between a good quality large handbag you buy at the local mall and an equally useful Louis Vuitton bag that costs 10 000% more. That extra value comes from the buyer's perception that she will be seen as rich and classy if she has the Louis Vuitton bag. So money comes to be seen as a way of purchasing status and the esteem of others.

Second, we see that money can be used to make money, as seen in the profitable trading of money, or to lose it (and the costs to society that usually result) as seen in the world financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 which was caused by greedy and irresponsible and stupid bankers and stock market gamblers and for which the whole world is still paying

twelve years later. Nothing is actually produced. But some people get richer and the poor get poorer.

Now both the Old Testament and New Testaments have quite a lot to say about money and the dangers thereof.

Charging interest on lent money was completely forbidden:

Exodus 22:25

“If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.

Leviticus 25:37

You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.

Deuteronomy 23:18-20

Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest.

So that’s clear then! But even Jesus recognizes that interest and profit is part of the human world, as seen in Matthew 25:14-130 and Luke 19:12-27.

The love of money wealth was condemned, as were the crimes it led to:

Ecclesiastes 5:10

Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.

Micah 3:11

Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they look for the Lord’s support and say, “Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.”

Matthew 6:24

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

The very early church believed in radical sharing. Acts 4:34 reports that “there were no needy persons among them.” But they did use money for the verse continues: “For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales.” Later St Paul went on a fundraising campaign for the very needy community of Christians in Jerusalem:

1 Corinthians 16:2

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

We are now in a difficult situation. In Old Testament times people were tithed but we must remember that much of that tithe was in effect paid to the government and established religious authorities of kingdoms for the various, rather limited, services they supplied (mainly protection and justice). Nowadays we seldom pay in to our churches anything like the 10% of the traditional tithe (and that may be reasonable as our taxes have gone up much more than 10%). Because we live in a secular state where there is no societal pressure for everybody to be active churchgoers, church attendance has long been in decline in many areas. Most mainline denominations are certainly much poorer than they used to be. That reality has long demanded a new way at looking at how we fund the work of the leadership of the church.

Now the pandemic and lockdown has doubled the pressure. Many congregations are going to find that, when the lockdown ends, they are bankrupt. The principled stance churches have taken not to endanger lives by physically reopening has made things worse financially, as has the drop in income or unemployment of many parishioners. So we are in hard times.

So talking of money again – keeping stipendiary clergy, parish secretaries, janitors alive, paying electricity and water bills, diocesan assessments, and suchlike still has to be done. They need that money during the lockdown. But in the longer term the future is going to demand more of you than your money. In the post-pandemic future we will need a thorough reorganisation of the way we do ministry and worship. That future is waiting for us all in a poorer but much more exciting church.

Prayer (Sr Georgette Lehmuth [adapted])

Give thanks to the Lord who is good.

God's love is everlasting.

For all good gifts, great and small, beautiful and awesome, seen and unseen,

We thank you, Lord God.

For all life and all creation, for the grace and the abundance of generosity,

We thank you, Lord God.

For the opportunity to witness, proclaim, invite and engage others in the mission of Jesus,

We thank you, Lord God.

For people of all generations, from our elders to our youth and children,

whose hearts yearn to make the world a better place,

and whose eyes see everyone as brother and sister,

We thank you, Lord God.

For those who are not afraid to see new visions

and dream new dreams with us,

We thank you, Lord God.

For the gift of being part of the transformative miracle

that flows from God's own generous love,
We thank you, Lord God.
For your Holy Spirit, who guides our steps and brings us gifts of faith and love,
We praise you, Lord God.
For your Son Jesus Christ, for entrusting His mission to us in hope and joy,
We thank and praise you.
Eternal God, for all your goodness to us.
Indeed, we give thanks to the Lord, who is good.
God's love is everlasting.
Amen.

The greatest commandment

We are all familiar, maybe too familiar, with the pronouncement of Jesus of Nazareth about what is the greatest commandment. What we tend to be less familiar with is the context within which that statement was made. There is a common picture of Jesus doing his teaching outside in the open air, on hillsides or from fishing boats, telling homely parables and caring for the sick and mentally ill. What we often miss is that Jesus was constantly under intense intellectual scrutiny and had to regularly debate with his Pharisee and Sadducee critics and enquirers. And Jesus had to watch every word he said because his enemies were looking for any words that could be considered blasphemous to the religious authorities or subversive to the Roman overlords. So what he said was always very precise and indeed carefully worded as can be seen in the sayings collected together in Matthew's gospel chapters 21 to 23. In these chapters we have stories, parables and statements that are responses to a string of questions put to Jesus by his enemies and doubters: the Sadducees, who represented Jews who accommodated to Roman rule and kept the outward form and rituals of priestly tradition; the Pharisees who were deeply religious but very legalistic puritans; and the scribes who were the bureaucrats of Jewish law.

Seen in this context the passages are an exciting tussle of will. Here comes another trick question! Will Jesus get it wrong – and be arrested because he has opposed the Romans, or disgrace himself because he has shown ignorance of the religious Law, or lose the trust of the common people because he sides with the oppressive burdens laid on them by collaborationist tax collectors or fanatical legalists? The battle goes on and on. And in his answers Jesus shows his acute intelligence. He can see through the tricks, the religious and legal ambushes hidden within the seemingly innocuous questions. Not only does he escape the net, but his answers contain profound truths that transcend the context in which they were uttered and become guidelines for us all through the next two thousand years of history.

The particular context of Jesus' saying about the greatest commandment is that Jesus has just finished a round with the Sadducees and silenced them. They are literally speechless. He has escaped their ambush but has shown through his answer that he believes that the dead will be raised at the end of things. Now the Pharisees have their turn. They might well be pleased at the answer Jesus gave the Sadducees, for the latter denied any real life after death. So when they come to question Jesus we must not necessarily see it as purely hostile. In many ways Jesus was close to the Pharisees, certainly as far as much of what we would today call religious belief was concerned. It was in his rejection of their oppressive conception of and imposition of the full Jewish law, that he differed from them.

But this does raise the question of what is the real question behind the question put to him by a person who is both a Pharisee by religion and a scribe (an official of the Old testament law) by occupation: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

Is the scribe asking whether Jesus accepts the Law? Is he asking him whether he accepts all of the laws, every single one? Is he really asking Jesus whether he puts concern for

ordinary human beings (and the stories must have widely spread about Jesus healing the sick on the Sabbath and suchlike) above that of the Law?

We listen again to Jesus' answer:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. and a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandment depend all the law and the prophets.

So what does it mean?

If we look at the passage in the Old Testament law (in Deuteronomy 6:5), which Jesus may well have been quoting or referring to, it says that we must love God with all our **heart** (that is, with the will that we have) and with all our **soul** (that is, our whole being) and **might** (that is, with all the life and force we have that animates our being). Matthew's account, written in Greek, suggests that we must love God with all the parts and levels of our being – with our human emotions and will (our heart), with our full psychological being (our soul) and with our minds (our rational mind or spirit). In short we must love God with every part of our being – from the most physical to the most mental and spiritual, and with the utmost power. The commandment is to the all of us, to the human being as a totality, as a soul (a living animated being as distinct from a material thing), with a heart (a will, a character, a way of behaving) and which has a life force or spirit (the motive power of the soul/person). Jesus's statement is not extraordinary. It is after all a rephrasing of Old Testament words.

But Jesus does not end there. What he says next about a second commandment puts Jesus' understanding of the Law into perspective. Jesus is not singling out one law from many and deselecting the others as insignificant. What he is saying is that the great commandment is a condensation of all the Laws, all the things that we have to obey and that the outcome of obeying that Law is not obeying more laws or obeying for the sake of obeying, but something else, something very different, and that something else is love.

And this love – of neighbour – is simple and concrete. It must be like the love we have for ourselves. Instead of putting ourselves first and seeing things only from our point of view with our own best interests at heart we must put our neighbour into our shoes and see things through his or her eyes and put his or her interests first.

We must love God and our neighbour.

The Sadducees and Pharisees thought they loved God but they did not love their neighbour. For Jesus was their neighbour and they failed their test. They framed their neighbour and got him executed by the Romans.

We have our neighbours. And those neighbours and strangers (who are our neighbours too, are also Jesus – for that is what the terrifying parable of the Last Judgement, the separating of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 says). We too fail this test on a daily basis. And the way our society is organised also fails this test on a daily basis.

Which is why God the Son had to die on the Cross and endure and carry our sins.

But Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead and that is why we live in the power of the commandment of love. The only Law, which is all the Law we need, is to love God and neighbour. And God has made it that, for us, that love for God and neighbour is indivisible and indistinguishable.

Prayer (St Richard)

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

Sin and sight

As the Corona virus continues down its path of destruction and we hear more and more of people we know being infected, we become more conscious than usual that we are in what Psalm 23 calls the “valley of the shadow of death”. Yes, sin and death are a reality in our own lives and in our own world. This is not entirely new. It was not so long ago when the AIDS pandemic was at its worst that annual deaths amongst people aged between 15 and 45 more than doubled in our country.

Now, for all peoples, the mystery of sin and death is a perplexing story. Explaining these is the root of many myths and religious beliefs. Essentially there are two main explanations in the world’s great religions. In the one tradition, sin and death are caused by some act of disobedience to God that leads to punishment of the offender. The punishment may extend beyond the offender to their descendants. This was the explanation given in the early religion of Israel and in Islam. The other, more Eastern explanation was that human beings had lost their original unity with the divine and had to go through a nearly endless cycle of lives until they could re-find that unity. Your state of life in each rebirth was caused by your sins and good deeds in the last life or lives. Now the appealing part of all these beliefs is that they make some kind of rough sense of human suffering – you get what you deserve. It is, of course, a bit tough on the descendants of a wicked great grandparent, but in those early days the family and clan, extended over time, was the important thing, not the individual. Unfortunately, these explanations raise more problems than they solve.

It was the prophets of Israel who first identified problems. The prophet Ezekiel taught that one was not punished for the sins of one’s ancestors. He rejected the old proverb, “The parents ate the sour grapes, but the children got the sour taste.” Jesus similarly rejected what some Pharisees said to a blind man he healed: “You were born in utter sin.”

No, said Ezekiel, “the person who sins is the one who will die.” (You can read all this in Ezekiel chapter 18.) And passages in the book of Isaiah (such as Chapter 53) indicate that the prophets were beginning to realise that it was indeed all very complicated and that maybe the answer was not found in looking at sin and death but rather at love and grace. There were other problems in the Eastern religions that claimed that each person’s state of life was dependent on their behaviour in past lives. In practice this meant that there was no need to be concerned about the victims of injustice and oppression and cruelty and poverty in the world because they were all getting what they individually deserved.

The scene is set to look at the remarkable incident recorded in John’s gospel Chapter 9 about the healing of a blind man in which sayings of Jesus about himself and Christians being the light of the world, are recorded.

Here is a blind man, blind from birth.

“Whose sin caused this?” ask the disciples. One notes that in their minds, suffering is the result of sin. Was it the parents’ sin or his own that caused his blindness?

Jesus’s answer is very typical in that he rejects the initial presuppositions of the question. “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, ...” Indeed, maybe his suffering has nothing to do with sin at all.

Jesus then states that the situation of this man is an opportunity for the way in which God works to be revealed:

“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that through him the way in which God works might be shown.”

So Jesus does three things:

- He rejects the simple identification of suffering with punishment for sin.
- He rejects the idea that suffering is somehow God’s will, that we deserve it, that it must just be accepted.
- He says that suffering is an opportunity for God’s works of love and grace to be shown.

So in this story we receive some **good news**:

- We are not solely determined by our past. Whatever our, or our ancestor’s, sins, who we are **now** provides an opportunity for God’s saving work to be shown.
- We are not solely determined by the world we live in and our state in it. Whatever our station in life, there are opportunities here and now for God’s saving work to be shown.
- We do not have to accept the world or society, ‘as it is’, given, unchangeable. Jesus healed the blind man on the sabbath day, breaking the rules of that society.

But Jesus then also gives some **warnings**:

- We must do God’s work while we can. “Night comes when no one can work.” It is too late to fight against ethnic or class hatreds when the foreigners or people different from us have already been slaughtered. It is too late to teach children about AIDS prevention when they have died from tuberculosis and pneumonia after their immune systems have been destroyed by HIV/AIDS. It is too late to be sorry when lack of social distancing and not wearing masks spreads the Corona virus. It is too late to speak up against unemployment and inequality when people are dead from starvation or malnutrition.
- Deliberate blindness, the refusal to see the truth about our world, is a truly dreadful sin. Jesus says: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

So we must seize the opportunities to show through our actions that God's work is being done. It is what we do in our lives that shows that Jesus is the light of the world.

It is on the dawning of that light that our once blind but opening eyes should be focussed.

And in the words of the ancient baptismal formulae found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.

Prayer (Howard Thurman)

Open unto me, light for my darkness
Open unto me, courage for my fear
Open unto me, hope for my despair
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow
Open unto me, strength for my weakness
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness
Open unto me, love for my hates
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself
Lord, Lord, open unto me.

Saint Andrew

Another of the St John the Divine windows is of St Andrew, holding a net with caught fish and below him, a St Andrew's cross with a fish centred over it.

The name "Andrew" (Greek: manly, brave) was a common one among the Jews and other Hellenized people of Judaea and Galilee. He came from the town of Bethsaida near the lake of Galilee. The New Testament states that Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter. Their father was John (or Jonah). Andrew was the very first disciple chosen by Jesus.

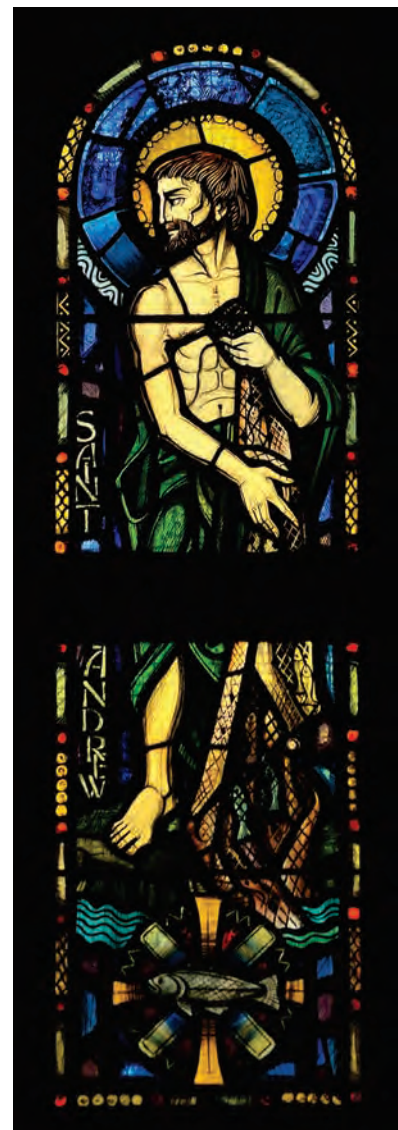
Both he and his brother Peter were fishermen by trade, hence the tradition that Jesus called them to be his disciples by saying that he would make them "fishers of human beings". At the beginning of Jesus' public life, they were said to have occupied the same house at Capernaum.

In the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 4:18–22) and in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:16–20) Simon Peter and Andrew were both called together to become disciples of Jesus. These narratives record that Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, observed Simon and Andrew fishing, and called them to discipleship.

In the parallel incident in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 5:1–11) Jesus used a boat belonging to Simon (whose mother-in-law he had recently cured) as a platform for preaching to a crowd on the shore and then as a means of achieving a huge catch of fish on a night which had hitherto proved fruitless. It was then that Simon as well as his partners John and James left their boats to follow Jesus.

The Gospel of John (John 1:35–42) states that Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, whose witness to Jesus first led him, and another disciple of John the Baptist, to follow Jesus. Andrew at once acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, and then introduced him to his brother, Simon. This is why the Eastern Orthodox Church calls Andrew "the first chosen".

In the gospels Andrew is often present at important occasions. Andrew told Jesus about the boy with the loaves and fishes (John 6:8), and when Philip wanted to tell Jesus about certain Greeks who wanted to speak to him, he told Andrew first (John 12:20–22). Andrew was one of the four disciples who came to Jesus on the Mount of Olives to ask about the signs of Jesus' return at the "end of the age" (Mark 13:3–4).



Various ancient church sources claim that Andrew preached in Scythia (now modern Rumania, Crimea, Western Ukraine and land to the north of the Black Sea), further north into Kiev (now Russia). Hence, he became a patron saint of Romania, Ukraine, and Russia. He also evangelised in Thrace (now Western Turkey, Northern Greece and Bulgaria) and in the city of Byzantium (later Constantinople). Hence he is one of the patron saints of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. He was also in Achaea (part of Greece).

Andrew is said to have been martyred by crucifixion in the city of Patras (Patræ) in Achaea, in AD 60 on 30 November. A later tradition developed that Andrew had been crucified on an X-shaped cross, now commonly known as a Saint Andrew's Cross. He is the patron saint of Scotland and its flag shows a cross of this type.

He is also the patron saint of fishmongers, fishermen, women wanting to be mothers, singers, spinsters, maidens, sore throats and gout.

St Andrew is a reminder that we have families, brothers and sisters and we, like Andrew, should bring them along, as Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus. And, in this time of distancing, maybe we need to reconnect to our relatives who may have grown distant from us, for whatever reason.

Prayer (Collect)

Almighty God, who did give such grace to your holy Apostle Saint Andrew,
that he readily obeyed the calling of your Son Jesus Christ,
and followed him without delay:
Grant to us all, that we, being called by your holy word,
may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil the holy commandments;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The tsunami nears

The headline on the daily newspaper I read today was “Massive surge in cases – hospital beds at the limit as Covid-19 numbers increase”. The first paragraph of the news report begins:

Don't go anywhere and don't let anyone visit you. Order your goods online. It may be like a prison sentence but it is one that will save your life. That's the essence of a chilling message from a Pietermaritzburg doctor ... who warned that Covid-19 cases have come with an “unbelievable speed and ferocity”.

The knowledge that this was coming has been with us for some time. But now we can 'see' the tsunami wave of infections that will soon engulf our communities. Unfortunately there has also been blindness to what was coming. Preventative measures have slackened. There has been an understandable but still selfish revolt against some irrational restrictions. There has been a *not* understandable and indeed, suicidal ignoring of the rational restrictions such as the proper wearing of masks. We are going to pay in many lives for the premature reopening of the economy and schools. And now there is not much you can do about it, other than to try and keep your immediate family as safe as you can. We can but, in the words of a famous Anglo-Saxon battle poem, agree that:

Resolution must be the stronger, heart the keener,
mind must be the greater, while our strength lessens.

The well-off among us must continue to do what we can to help those who have no, or little income. [Undoubtedly what is needed at the macro-level is a basic income grant for every person in the country, but the nation does not yet have the political and humanitarian will for that.] We will continue as the Church which is the body of the one who is stronger than death. And in that body are old and young people who are ensuring that, though we are physically distant we are near in a spiritual community. We will crest the wave of this coming tsunami of destruction and be ready for the time of reconstruction.

Prayer

O God, our Father, through the grace of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ:
Protect us and our families at this time of great distress.
Give us the strength to rise above all hardships and trials.
Keep alive in us the love we have for each other.
May we join in sharing our union with your Son Jesus with the whole world.
Amen.

Thank you

This week I have had contact with or heard about just a few of the people for whom one wants to give thanks.

On Monday I was in a Zoom meeting with people working to protect the rights of people who in the past were labour tenants and who, in spite of redress legislation, are still getting a raw deal – some sixteen years after apartheid officially ended. I want to thank those people in the project.

Then I got a report on the need to re-look at and re-establish the ministry of deacons in the church of today. I want to give thanks for that work – for we do need that diaconal ministry in a land so beset with inequality and poverty and lack of wellness of soul and body.

Yesterday there was a report of a young man in our congregation who has done incredibly well in his work in supporting his fellow Information Technology students. I want to give thanks for all those who persevere in gaining knowledge and helping others to do so, often under difficult circumstances.

This morning I looked at a project description of an initiative by a small group of people driven to ensure that regional farming surpluses are effectively distributed via non-governmental organisations and churches to ease the plight of the poor during the pandemic (and at the same time, because they have a long term perspective, reduce the need for plastic packages and litter). And I want to salute their actions.

Then this evening I dropped off floodlights at the church building where a small group (all correctly socially distancing) were videoing songs for a child-centred online service on Sunday – working to keep us together and whole as a church community. And I want to thank them.

A little later the priest comes into the dark church and rings the bells and WhatsApps an audio-clip of a short prayer in which thanks are given and intercessions made for all those on the frontline during this time of the virus. Even an atheist friend of mine is comforted by the sound of those bells giving voice to the church singing its thanks to the creator.

In times such as these it is difficult not to dwell on the suffering and the hardship and the seemingly endless fight at our human level against wickedness and stupidity. The media and social media and what we hear from others and the texts we read online constantly remind us of that. But we, the faithful, are above all a community that gives thanks. Our central rite, the Eucharist, is a thanksgiving. We give thanks to the Father for the Son in the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for existing. Human beings are that part of the universe that has the consciousness to know that we exist, that we have being and life and an earth to live on – and we can give thanks on behalf of humanity for that. Yes, we are not all of humanity, but we can give thanks on behalf of all, for we, the faithful, are the priests of creation, saying “Yes, thank you”, to the I AM, the holy one.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for having created us and given us to each other in the human family.

Thank you for being with us in all our joys and sorrows,
for your comfort in our sadness,
your companionship in our isolation.

Thank you for yesterday, today, tomorrow and for the whole of our lives.

Thank you for friends, for health and for grace.

May we live this and every day, conscious of all that has been given to us.
Amen.

What is a homily?

A homily is a religious address which is intended primarily for spiritual edification rather than doctrinal instruction. By edification is meant something meant to improve or enlighten, to be morally or spiritually uplifting. The word homily is derived from the Greek word *homilia*, which means 'interaction between people'.

Since early times in the church a homily has usually meant an informal commentary, without formal introduction, division, or conclusion, on some part of the scriptures. Its aim is to explain the literal and evolve the spiritual meaning of the text. Homilies that pay most attention to the literal meaning of the text are called expository – that is, they explain or describe the text. Homilies that pay more attention to the spiritual meaning of the text, its application for today, are called moral or hortatory – that is, they encourage us to do something. Homilies try to connect the scriptures to the lives of the listeners. It is the oldest form of Christian preaching.

In practice a homily is usually a commentary delivered by a priest or deacon after the reading of scripture. The subject of the homily is the scripture that has been proclaimed during the religious service. It is a discussion of the chosen passage from the Bible.

By contrast a sermon is a more formal, complex, structured discourse or lecture (with introduction, parts and a conclusion) on a religious or moral topic. A sermon may be in reference to a scripture that has been proclaimed during a religious service, but it may also simply be on a moral, dogmatic, historical, or liturgical subject. The word sermon is derived from the Latin word *sermonem* which means 'discussion', 'speech' or 'discourse'.

Soon after the Church of England broke away from Rome, the reformers saw the need for local congregations to be taught Christian theology and practice. Since clergy often lacked the education and experience needed to write sermons and were often unfamiliar with reformist doctrine, scholars and bishops wrote out a collection of thirty sermons and homilies for them, which were appointed to be read each Sunday and holy day. The reading of this collection, called ***Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches*** is still mandated under Article 35 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, but has long since fallen out of practice. One of these, a diatribe against 'Papist idolatry', is more than 120 pages long! Others are shorter, a couple of pages, and quite practical. Take the first paragraph of ***An homily for repairing and keeping clean, and comely adorning of Churches***:

It is a common custom used of all men, when they intend to have their friends or neighbours to come to their houses to eat or drink with them, or to have any solemn assembly to treat and talk of any matter, they will have their houses, which they keep in continual reparations, to be clean and fine, lest they should be counted sluttish, or little to regard their friends and neighbours. How much more then ought the house of GOD, which we commonly call the Church, to be sufficiently repaired in all places, and to be honourably adorned and garnished, and to be kept clean and sweet, to the comfort of the people that shall resort there unto.

Homilies have of course still kept coming, often in the form of little, 'thought for the day' publications. With the internet, we now have access to a variety of such daily homilies or meditations, perhaps one of the best known of which is that of Richard Rohr, a Franciscan from the United States of America.

The origin of these Lockdown Homilies was quite simple. After we held our last service at St John the Divine in Glenwood, Durban on 26 March it was thought that a daily homily would help remind the members of our parish that we, though in physical isolation, were bound together in the body of Christ and would support each other. The daily homilies would continue for the twenty-one days of lockdown!

Now, in the hundredth day of lockdown, albeit somewhat eased (though that creates its own downside), this is Lockdown Homily 100. They will continue as long as you the recipients consider them useful. So let me know if you do.

Prayer (adapted from Charles Henderson)

Father of Light and Wisdom,
thank you for giving us minds that can know and hearts that can love.

Help us to keep learning every day of our lives
that we may know more about your creation and your will for it.
Help us to use knowledge rightly and to know how to find you
and love you in all the experiences of our lives.

Encourage us when life is difficult and our minds are confused
and save us from distractions and going down wrong paths.
Grant us the grace to accept your love for us
and cooperate with your purpose to have your will done on earth.
Amen.

Job's comforters

I found that the pandemic was truly here yesterday when a family member was diagnosed positive. One wants to make sense of this. Why is there this disaster and suffering? And how do we answer questions from people confused and puzzled about where God is in all this?

The Book of Job in the Old Testament is a book that directly faces this problem. It looks at whether one can vindicate the justice of God in the light of the suffering of good people. The book itself is a beautiful poem (except for a prose prologue and epilogue) about a good and upright man who loses everything – family, wealth and his own health. The impact of that loss is depicted in stunning images.

The legendary story outlined at the beginning is that “the Satan” – the Accuser, a sort of prosecutor in God’s court – questions whether people will be righteous for no reward and says he will test this by removing all prosperity and comfort from Job, a pious and righteous servant of God.

So Job loses everything, all his family are killed or die from disease, his wealth is smashed, and he is pitiful with ailments (19:13-15):

“He has put my family far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me. My relatives and my close
friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

Most of the book is an examination, and dismissal, of the easy answers that would explain (away) Job’s misery. The easy solutions are made by four of Job’s friends who come supposedly to comfort Job, but actually make things worse – hence the term ‘Job’s comforters’. They make Job’s humiliation an argument against him. Firstly they argue that Job has sinned and is being punished for it. Job insists he is innocent. Then they suggest that somehow Job deserved the punishment which will be a sort of disciplinary correction. Again Job insists that this is wrong, “make me understand how I have gone wrong” (6:24) and (7:20):

“Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?”

Then the ‘comforters’ say that it is because of some sort of ancestral sin of humanity. Job’s response is that this is still unfair. The good are destroyed as well as the wicked. Why create human beings at all if they are treated unfairly? Then the comforters say that Job is too ignorant to understand why he is being punished, so he must just agree with his punishment and appeal for mercy. Job again replies that he is blameless (12:4):

“I am a laughing-stock to my friends;
I, who called upon God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, I am a laughing-stock.”

The last argument of the comforters is that he must just accept that all human being, all mortals, are unrighteous before God, and that Job by affirming his own innocence is adding rebellion to sin, he is justifying himself rather than God. Yet again Job responds that he has lived as a righteous man (30:24-25):

“Surely one does not turn against the needy,
when in disaster they cry for help.
Did I not weep for those whose day was hard?
Was not my soul grieved for the poor?”

The climax of the poem is when God appears to Job in a vision which is a wonderful picture of God’s working in the whole universe. The Lord challenges Job (40:7-8):

“Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you declare to me.
Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?”

Job’s final response is (42:3):

“Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”

The Book of Job is astounding in its piercing honesty. In the end it does not offer some answer, easy or otherwise, that explains evil and suffering. It expresses all the complaints humanity have laid from time immemorial against God for allowing suffering. It expresses human anger that the wicked and unjust are not punished.

In this time of the virus disaster, we too must be wary of offering too easy answers as to why this has happened. Yes there are explanations about human folly and exploitation having helped precipitate the pandemic. Yes, and human sin and stupidity has made things so much worse, notably in the United States and England. But we really have no explanation that helps us understand why somebody we know is going to suffer and perhaps die for no fault of their own. Sometimes many of the well-intentioned things that the Church says to people sound very much like what Job’s comforters said.

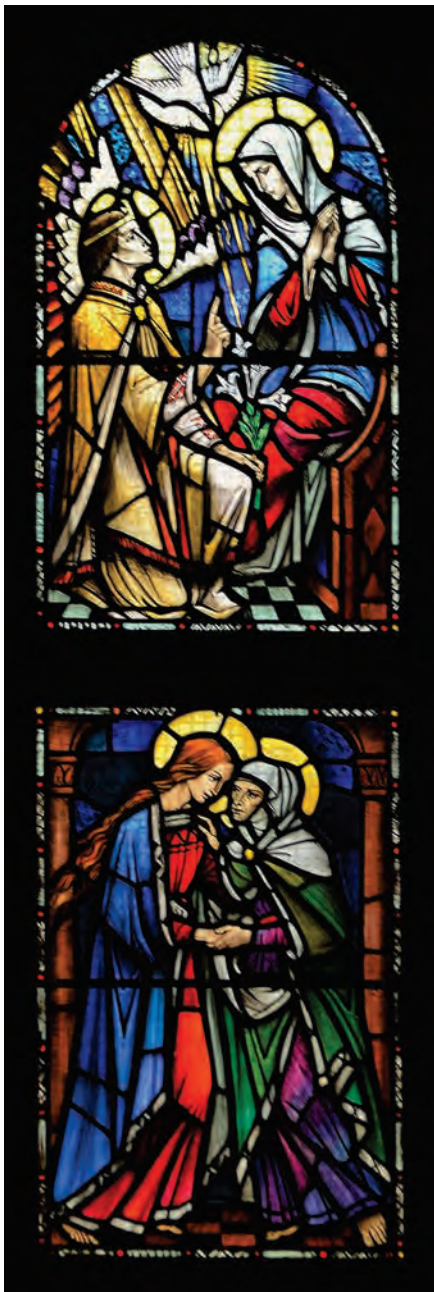
So maybe in this current situation all that we can do is sit with the many new Jobs and be silent. And we hope that as Christians we all have true comfort in the God who was with us on earth and knew suffering and death. We do not understand what is happening, but we know that in Jesus “things too wonderful” for us became known.

Prayer (World Council of Churches)

God of life,
you have promised to be with us every day,
also in difficult days, like in times like these.
Give us
clarity in our minds,
strength in our work and discernment,
rest as we sleep,
peace in our minds.
Be with those
who need help
more than we do ourselves
help us to see what we can offer
from your love.
We pray to God who some call Mystery,
beyond all definition, that
When in the midst of uncertainty
– may we know faith.
When in the midst of anxiety
– may we know serenity.
When in the midst of stress
– may we know trust.
When in the midst of bewilderment
– may we know assurance.
When in the midst of confusion
– may we know confidence.
When in the midst of the pandemic
– may we know peace.
When in the midst of whatever
– may we know love.
Amen.

New beginnings

In these disastrous times it is good, at least occasionally, to immerse ourselves in the beautiful and the good. The Lady Chapel at St John the Divine in Durban is such an environment with its three beautiful windows portraying Mary, the mother of Jesus. Lady chapels in churches are usually expressly designed as places for quiet prayer and for meditation on the motherly aspects of the divine. I will look at two of them here, both comprising two separate scenes.



The first window is based on the stories in Luke 1:26-56 and show the Annunciation and Mary's meeting with Elizabeth (the Visitation).

The top panel shows the archangel Gabriel appearing to Mary and announcing that she is going to bear the child Jesus. Mary's cloak is blue, the colour usually associated with her. Gabriel holds the Fleur de Lys (Flower of the Lily) which as a symbol, became associated with the annunciation, particularly in France. The three flowers of the design reflect an association with the Holy Trinity. Above, a dove descends showing that this conception is of the Holy Spirit. Mary is understandably apprehensive, but Gabriel gives reassurance, announces the coming birth and Mary accepts her mission to be the mother of the Saviour.

The lower panel, shows the symbolic link between Jesus and John the Baptist, the moment when Mary meets a relative, Elizabeth, pregnant with the child who will become John the Baptist. When Mary greets Elizabeth the child in Elizabeth's womb moves as a sign that he recognises the presence of Jesus. In the story this is seen as a sign that Mary is literally carrying Jesus to other people.

The greetings of Gabriel and Elizabeth to Mary (Gabriel: 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' and Elizabeth: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.') become the original basis for the well-known prayer, the Angelus: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.'

The other window is based on passages from Matthew and Luke.



Matthew 2:1-12 is a story of the visit to the infant Jesus by “magi” from the East. These were presumably astrologers of the Zoroastrian priestly caste from Persia who, as in many royal courts of the ancient world and even into the near modern ones, were the “scientific advisors” and “predictors of the future”. They had observed a star, or conjunction of stars, which indicated to them a significant royal birth in Judaea. One can even consider them as ambassadors tasked with checking out what was going to happen in the politics of the region. In the story they give homage and gifts to the infant and protect his whereabouts from King Herod. The pictures in the window portray them as kings rather than astrologers.

This is the first showing, or epiphany, of Jesus to the wider gentile world.

There is a lovely legend that the apostle Thomas, who went to India, met them and baptised them.

The lower panel shows another occasion of Jesus going out to a wider world. Luke 2:41-52 is a wonderful picture of a real, human, teenage boy who goes out, doesn’t tell his parents where he is going, and not only does not come back home, he doesn’t come back at all and his parents have to go and search for him. It happens during the a typical pilgrimage/holiday trip to Jerusalem for the Passover.

But Jesus is not out hanging around out with the other kids. He is precociously searching for knowledge among the teachers in the Jerusalem temple, debating with and astounding them.

So this story tells us something – Jesus grew up just like us and that he was, from an early age, conscious of having some kind of vocation, and that gearing up for that mission was really important to him.

Although these stories may seem simple they express profound theological truths. Things happen, God’s kingdom comes, when people say Yes to God, as Mary does, whatever the cost. Jesus’ coming is for all people, Jew and Gentile, local and foreign, even when they are very different from us. All cultures have, eventually, to give homage to Jesus. And vocation requires effort and the gaining of knowledge, as Jesus the teenager exhibited – even if he did exasperate and inconvenience his parents.

Prayer

What better prayer for the beginning of another week of struggle than Mary's manifesto, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.
For he has looked upon his bondmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is from age to age
to those who fear him.
He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,
according to his promise to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Theotokos



The central stained glass window in St John the Divine's lady chapel shows Mary's whole figure surrounded by a mandorla, an almond-shaped aureole or halo of light, which in Christian art is only used for a person of the Trinity or Mary. The mandorla is a sign that Mary is important, something that has tended to be forgotten in Protestant churches

In Eastern Christianity, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is called *Theotokos*. This Greek word literally means "she who gave birth to one who is God", more or less equivalent to the Western Church's title "Mother of God".

At first it seems a shocking title. How can an earthly woman, part of creation, be the mother of God? Considered literally it cannot be true, one might say. But then saying that a carpenter from Nazareth is God seems odd too. So we find that language sometimes cannot clearly express what we mean.

The title *Theotokos* is an ancient one and was used within little more than a hundred and fifty or so years of Mary's earthly life, first in the liturgical and devotional practice of the Church, and later in doctrinal formulations. It was officially endorsed at the third ecumenical council of the whole church.

In the first five centuries of the Church there was much debate and wrestling with how we use human language to describe the indescribable and paradoxical. Much of the debate was in relation to how we can speak of Jesus as both divine and human. The Church knew from its experience that Jesus was Lord and God. But what words should be used to say this that were accurate and not misleading? Some of the answers to that we say every Sunday in the wording of the Nicene Creed.



It is at this point that one begins to understand why we must be able to call Mary not just Mary, young woman from Galilee, but also Theotokos.

If Jesus is truly both fully human and fully divine, and indeed those two are fully united in him, then it follows that Mary gave birth to a divine child. Saying that Mary is the God bearer in fact then becomes a statement about the son she bore, that he was Lord and God. And it further affirms, against all those who despise the earthly matter of creation, that God was willing to enter into his own creation and in that utter and glorious paradox, become human, to be 'God with us'.

It is perhaps understandable that Mary has continued to receive the high reverence of the Church, though not worship which is only for God. It is also understandable that prayers have been directed towards her to intercede for us, she who once cared for a helpless infant, whom we now worship.

Prayers

From the Coptic Church (the oldest preserved extant hymn known to us that refers to Mary as Theotokos)

Beneath your compassion,
We take refuge, O Theotokos:
do not despise our petitions in time of trouble:
but rescue us from dangers,
only pure, only blessed one.

From the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great

All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace,
The assembly of Angels and the race of humans.
O Sanctified Temple and Rational Paradise! O Glory of Virgins!
From you, God was incarnate and became a child, our God before the ages.
He made your body into a throne, and your womb He made more spacious than
the heavens.
All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace! Glory to you!

Predestination

In this time of disaster and the depressed thoughts that often accompany it, many people start thinking that maybe this was all predestined and that who will be infected and who die was decided by God or fate long before.

It is not an idea that I am comfortable with, nor indeed do most Christians that I know accept it. Many of us are familiar with a particularly harsh form of predestination teaching associated with Calvinism. In a somewhat vulgarised form it states that whether you are destined to heaven or damned to hell was decided all in advance by God. It somewhat offends against the Christian idea of human free-will!

But there is quite a lot of the language of predestination in the New Testament and we need to understand that it is in fact not about God throwing the dice about our individual eternal futures but in fact a glorious and liberating piece of good news for humanity as a whole.

This can be seen in the Paul's marvellous introduction to his letter to the Christians at Ephesus – Chapter 1 verses 3 to 14. Here we can see that the predestination is not some eternal cosmic straightjacket but a promise of liberation by God to humankind.

Paul says that God “chose us in the Christ before the foundation of the cosmos” (v. 4). What this astounding verse is saying is that it was the design of God, before the creation and ordering of the whole universe, that all human beings would be incorporated in the Messiah, the Son of God. “In love he predestined us for adoption as his own children through Jesus Christ, according to his will's delight” (vs 5-6).

So the predestination is not some individual moral exam result given to us before we have written any exam. It is the assurance that from the foundation of the universe God planned to “bring everything together in Christ, things in heaven and on earth.” It is this promise, this inheritance, that is predestined – “we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things” (v. 11).

So No. Whether the virus will pass you by or slay you is not predestined. Whatever happens to you is based on the way things work in the physical universe and the conditions under which you live in the society into which you were born. What **is** predestined is something different, bigger and moreover, glorious. Something that makes our individual fates in 2020 perhaps less important in the bigger picture. God has predestined us and all humanity to be in Christ, in the Son of God, who even before the foundation of the universe, gave his life, his very being, for it in love (Revelation 13:8).

Prayer (Anglican Prayer Book)

Almighty God and merciful Father
We give you hearty thanks
for all your goodness and loving kindness to us and to all people.
We bless you for our creation and preservation
and for all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your love in redeeming the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace and for the hope of glory.
Give us a due sense of your mercy
that our hearts may be thankful
and that we may praise you not only with our lips but in our lives
by giving up ourselves to your service
and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Stages of loss

It is a time of disaster and with disaster, comes loss and all the feelings and thoughts that result from loss. Some of our losses may be of people we love, people who succumb to the disease and are very sick or die. Others will lose jobs and income. Or it may be simply the sense of being cut off from others and being lonely. We may start losing a sense of who we are in the world – our sense of meaning may be weakening.

All of this is predictable. There is not much we can do about it. We are human with human emotions and desires. These things will come. Many years ago psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote a book on dying and grief that suggested that there were several ways in which we respond to loss: **denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance**. These categories have proved quite helpful in understanding our emotions in periods of loss and one of her co-researchers, David Kessler applied it to how one might see it in the responses to pandemic lockdowns:

“There’s denial, which we saw a lot of early on: ‘This virus won’t affect us.’ There’s anger: ‘You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities.’ There’s bargaining: ‘Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?’ There’s sadness: ‘I don’t know when this will end.’ And finally there’s acceptance. ‘This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed.’ Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. ‘I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually.’”

What is important, either for a person experiencing these feelings, or comforting somebody else who has them, is to own them, to acknowledge them as real. Getting over **denial**, both of the loss and our feelings about the loss, is vital if we are to move forward.

Getting **angry** with God is also a perfectly normal reaction. Witness the Book of Job with his expressions of anger that things have turned out so unjustly in our world. The prophet Jeremiah provides heartbreaking passages as he expresses his anger at what serving God has cost him. Take Jeremiah 4:19:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.

and he complains that God has abandoned him (15:18):

*Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail.*

Depression is often the flip side of anger. If we are not strong enough or brave enough to vent our anger against something outside of ourselves, we can all too easily turn that anger against ourselves and press down on our emotions and feelings until we become numb. Many of the Psalms express this sense of dejection, of being pushed down to the ground so that we can never rise. It is an utterly understandable feeling people have who have lost jobs or who cannot maintain an income to keep the family going, and, what is worse, know that there is not much they can do about it.

Feeling that we must **bargain** with God is also a very real urge. After all, all the religions of the world have elements of bargaining with God through sacrifices and gifts to try and gain divine favour and avoid judgement on our sins. Accepting that we don't have to bargain with God, that at the heart of the matter God has already done in Jesus his Son all that is necessary, also takes courage and a willingness to let go of many things. One is reminded of Paul, converted on the Damascus Road into recognizing that Jesus was the answer to all his life-long futile attempts to bargain with God.

Recognizing where we are, **accepting** what we are – real people, suffering loss and grief and at times despair, must become the ground we stand on. It is from there that we can accept the God on the Cross, who suffers with us and will raise all of us up with him.

Prayer (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

All men go to God in their distress,
seek help and pray for bread and happiness,
deliverance from pain, guilt and death,
All men do, Christians and others

All men go to God in His distress
find Him poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
watch Him tormented by sin, weakness and death.
Christians stand by God in His hour of grieving

God goes to all men in their distress,
satisfies body and soul with His bread,
dies, crucified for all, Christians and others,
and both alike forgiving.

Emptying and exultation

The early church, the church born of the Resurrection, that vindication of Jesus by God the Father, came to understand two seemingly contradictory things. It recognized that we are all outcasts, all slaves in some way to sin, embedded in a dark world. Yet it bubbled over with gratitude and joy and a sense of liberation because that no longer mattered – God had at great cost, sent himself to us in his Son. The Son had come into the darkness, been obedient unto death, been exalted, and being exalted, had drawn us up with him.

The darkness of the world remains with us. Today I watched a television report showing Covid-19 related graves being dug in Gauteng. The report said a million were going to be dug. A later report corrected that to an initial 24 thousand – but that is in itself a horrifyingly large number. And it horrified me, seeing those graves being dug with a mechanical digger rather than reading statistics about infections and deaths on a graph. It is hard, however resilient we are, to bear such sights and realities. Bodies of people who have been loved are going to be emptied into those graves.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2:5-8 is the well known passage about how Jesus Christ "emptied himself" in utter humility in the form of a servant and was obedient "unto death, even death on a cross". It is a sombre description of this *kenosis* (emptying) of the Son of God:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Now it is instructive to look at the Paul's words (vs 2-4) preceding this passage:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others

This counterpoint to the *kenosis* is this almost irresistible sense of joyful togetherness. Look at the words: encouragement, participation, affection, sympathy, joy, of the same mind, love, accord, humility, the interests of others.

How do we get from the *kenosis*, the descent into the darkness of the world of humans, into this state of joy in the early church?

The answer is, of course, that God vindicated the slain Jesus of Nazareth. The servant is exalted to the highest. That *kenosis*, that self-giving of all of himself by Jesus was the very work of God. And so (vs 9-11):

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which 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 confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Jesus' self-emptying and self-sacrifice, which gained liberation for us, he also demonstrated for us proper selflessness and humility. Here we have the truest expression of the character of God himself, which through Christ and the Spirit will be recreated in his people.

We are instructed to have the same mind, the same orientation, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. We must do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than ourselves. We look not only to our own interests but also, and especially, after the interests of others. And we are given the power to do so by the Son of God's incarnation, life of humility and exaltation. We have the promise that God will work in and through us because of the one named Jesus. Those who are "in Christ" must also "think" like him.

So no matter what happens in this often dark world, however many graves are being dug, we can share in the joy of the exalted Lord and having the same mind, the same orientation, undergo our own *kenosis* as we seek to live and work to his praise and glory.

Prayer (Sr Marie Curley)

Jesus, I come to You today empty.
I don't feel I have anything to bring to You except my poor self.
And today, that doesn't feel as if it's enough.
I feel helpless and vulnerable, lost and desolate.
This sharp-edged emptiness reminds me
how dependent I truly am on You,
that I am not self-sufficient,
that I need to learn to trust You always more.
You experienced this emptiness while You were here on earth.
You let go of not just the fullness of divinity but even of the human respect You
deserved,
in order to be with us, to teach us, to serve us, and to save us.
You emptied Yourself for me, so that I can offer my emptiness to You to be filled.
Divine Master, fill me with what I need most:
Your love and Your grace.
Hold me close to Your Merciful Heart
until the day that I am made whole in You,
immersed in the loving embrace of the Most Holy Trinity. Amen.

The need for good sense

Proverbs 16:22:

Good sense is a fountain of life to those who have it,
but folly is the training of fools.

You are probably as hard pressed as I am to keep up to date with what one should, or should not do, to avoid becoming infected and also about whose opinion on whether the lockdown should end, schools reopen, etc. should be endorsed or rejected. These are not trivial matters – they concern life and death choices for individuals, families and the nation. We cannot therefore avoid making sense of the deluge of information and misinformation.

It is also hard not to become angry when one reads reports of how leaders of huge powerful countries can repeatedly lie and behave like morons. Nothing new there. The scriptures are full of prophetic denunciations of “false prophets” and “false teachers”. And Paul has several fierce goes at the stupidity of Christians in the churches he founded who have been led astray by misinformation. Take Galatians 3:1-20:

“O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? ... Surely you can't be so idiotic as to think that a person begins his spiritual life in Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances. ... Oh, I know how keen these men are to win you over, but cannot you see that it is for their own ends? ... As it is, I honestly do not know how to deal with you.”

So we are duly warned, by Jesus himself (Matthew 7:15-20; 24:4-5) and the New Testament writers (e.g. 2 Peter 2:1-3) against false prophets and false teachers.

But how do we deal with it today? Our whole culture is greatly captivated by false information and conspiracy theories which are constantly spread around via FaceBook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Even our parish WhatsApp group had such a deceptive posting this week. People are exposed to them whether we like it or not.

There are of course good rules on checking the factuality of information. We should do so. But it is still difficult to argue with people who believe a conspiracy theory or some denial of a scientifically proven phenomenon. As the Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton wrote:

“If a man says that men have a conspiracy against him, you cannot dispute it except by saying that all the men deny that they are conspirators; which is exactly what conspirators would do.”

Moreover, the conspiracy theorist will often have a better command of the facts than you.

Chesterton made the very valuable point that the real problem is not a failure of reason in the falsehood propagator but rather that his or her basic approach and assumptions are wrong or detached from reality:

"The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

What is needed in our times is a lot of what used to be called 'common sense' – everyday good sense. And unfortunately there has been a serious lack of common sense in the handling of the pandemic in many countries, including our own. How for example, could planning for the opening of schools not have factored in the reality that we had about the worst functioning school system in Africa and the biggest inequality gradient amongst schools as well? Where was the common sense? Similarly we have listened to the scientists and economists telling us what to do, and changing their minds, and arguing against each other. Yet something more is needed, something the scientists' theories and models cannot provide, but is no less rational: good sense. For common sense is not just rational but has a moral element to it – it is the good sense of good people.

As the crisis worsens in South Africa and the infections and deaths increase we know that many people will be so desperate that they will grasp for false comfort and explanations. We as Christians have to hold firm and remain aligned to the God of Truth – and use our common sense.

Prayer

Father Almighty, who gave me the common sense
to do common sense things:
Grant me the insight to see things as they are
and not as I want them to be
or as I hope for them to be.
May I see your working in the world.
May the light you have given me be a light for others.
May I be awake and sensitive to the complexity of decisions
I and others must make at this time.
Help me to act wisely and in accordance with your will
through the victory of your Son
and the guidance of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Soil, seeds and fruit

We are all familiar, perhaps too familiar, with the parable of the sower. The sower goes out, scatters the seed on the field. But not all the sown seed falls on good soil and grows to fruition. Perhaps because we are used to the story, it seems such an obvious parable. We know what it means. So we think the Twelve disciples somewhat dense to have required Jesus to go over it again with them privately and explain it to them.

Maybe we too need to look at it again, and more carefully. Even in its most simple form it has much to teach us. But like all the parables it has enormous depth of meaning. And that meaning applies both to hearers of the word and the sowers.

In the parable there are three things that destroy the growth of the crop:

- Some seed did not fall on the soil but on a hard path where birds saw the seeds and gobbled them up.
- Some fell on rocky ground and their roots could not grow and sustain them when the day got hot.
- Others fell amongst thorny weeds which throttled their growth.

Now when Jesus explains the parable to his disciples its meaning actually seems a bit more complex.

And this complexity was very important to the young church in its early days of mission. The young church was, after all, the sower of the good news to the world. And inside that young church were the new converts, who had received the word and responded. How were they doing? How were the disciples to understand their own successes and failures in reaching out in their evangelism? What were they doing right or wrong?

The seed falling on the path

Take the seed falling on the path. Jesus says that this applies to a person who hears the preached word but “does not understand”. It is this lack of understanding that enables the wicked, the evil one, to whisk away the seed, the message.

It is this hearing but “**does not understand it**” that actually prevents people from responding to the message. Is this their fault or that of the sowers? What is it that stops people from hearing the word? Why are minds so closed? What in our society is so hostile to the Good News that it doesn't really want to hear it? And have we failed in our communication? Is the way that we talk about God and the way in which we live our message somehow not getting through or even giving an off-putting message? Jesus did give an explanation for this lack of understanding by quoting from the prophet Isaiah in Matthew 13:15:

“For this people's heart has grown crass, and they have listened with their ears grudgingly, and they have closed their eyes, so that it may never happen that they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with the heart”

In our society many lack understanding. We have to be realistic about this. Our message may not always be heard – but we do have a responsibility to make it as clear and straightforward as possible.

The seed on the stony ground

The seed falling on stony ground applies to a person who hears the good news “and immediately accepts it with joy” but has no staying power. Several things destroy the initial enthusiastic commitment: the person “**does not hold the root within himself**”; any difficulties or persecution makes him or her immediately weaken.

So there may be quick uptake but there is equally rapid loss by people not staying on course. Is it that our society has an attention deficit disorder, or a wanting to rush from one new fad or experience after another? Is it the good feeling that we get when converted or “born-again” that wears off once we are out in the world having to work hard at our faith and maybe even to suffer ridicule or discrimination for it? Have we as a church abandoned the instilling of a real Christian discipline into our new believers or young people being confirmed? Do we really prepare or teach enough for taking on the world? Do we give enough support, for example, to young adults going into the world of work or unemployment? And what do we do in our own Christian life to discipline ourselves and be lifelong learners?

The seed in the choking thorns

The seed falling amongst the choking thorns applies to the person who lets the anxieties and cares of everyday life and the attractions of wealth throttle their following of the Way of Christ.

Think of all the things that can choke our commitment: the busywork of taking care of everyday matters, our work loads and interpersonal anxieties, our quests to get on in the world and get wealthier. This is something most of us fail to fight. We do not give ourselves enough time to stand still, to put down spiritual roots, and grow. Even in our care and attention to our local churches perhaps we are too concerned with busywork, the demands of the immediate but trivial – the tyranny of the urgent – rather than the imitation of Christ.

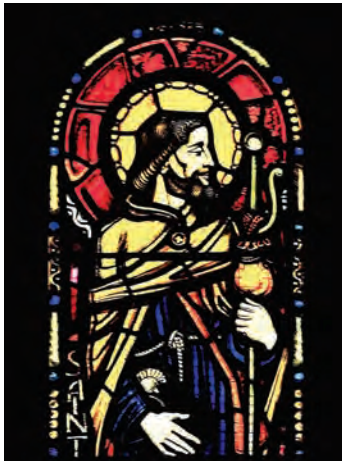
Now in July 2020, in lockdown, a strange time in which we have been given a psychic shock to make us reconsider our lives, perhaps we have to ask ourselves what we are doing to develop our understanding, to strengthen ourselves for the long haul, to deepen our spiritual roots, and to grow so that we may yield a good harvest. And hear the words of the master sower to us (Matthew 13:16-17):

“But blissful are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For, amen, I tell you that many prophets and upright men yearned to see the things you see, and did not see, and to hear the things you hear, and did not hear.”

Prayer

Lord open my ears and eyes and touch my heart.
Touch me so that I may feel you in faith
 though my emotions run dry
 and my will is often weak and tired.
May you clear my eyes of blindness
 so that I can see you at work in the world
 and in the lives of my fellow faithful.
Grant me the bliss to know you and do your will.
Strengthen me to walk in your Way.
Amen.

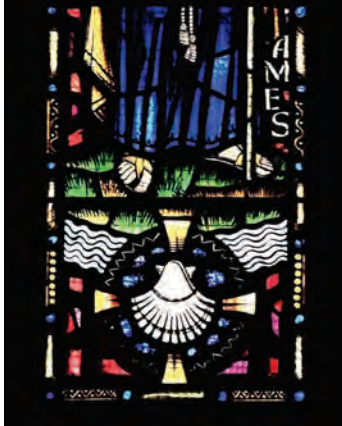
James times two



The first window on the left wall of the nave at St John the Divine is of Saint James, also called St James the Greater.

He and his brother John were fishermen and with Peter they left all to follow Jesus. They were among the first disciples of Jesus and are often mentioned in the Gospels.

James and John were nicknamed “sons of thunder” by Jesus, perhaps because of their fiery nature or their zeal (Mark 3:17). Together with Peter they were leading figures in the Twelve and witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter, the Transfiguration, and Jesus’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.



The special position that James and John occupied clearly went to their heads, or to that of their mother, when they requested a special place at Jesus’ right and left hands, in his future Messianic reign (Mark 9:33-35, 10:35-41, Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 9:46, 22:23-28). Apart from outraging the other disciples, this led to Jesus’ teaching about who is really great in the Kingdom. Their subsequent lives illustrated that they had taken this reprimand to heart.

He is the only one of the Twelve whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament. James was arrested and beheaded by the order of King Herod Agrippa 1 of Judaea.

James must not be confused with the James the Less, another one of the Twelve, or with the other James who later became the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem and who was one of the four brothers or step brothers or cousins of Jesus. This latter James had not been a follower of Jesus but the resurrected Lord appeared to him (I Corinthians 15:7). After the apostle James the Great was killed he became the chief spokesperson for the Church in Jerusalem and made the final recommendation, after discussions with Peter and Paul, on what minimum requirements Gentile Christians had to obey (Acts 15:19-20). He was very popular with the Christians in Jerusalem and Judaea and was called “James the Just”. He was stoned to death by the Jerusalem authorities.

This James may have been the author of the Letter of James, probably the earliest New Testament document that we have. The letter is essentially a guide to practical Jewish wisdom. It comes from the earliest Christian community in Judaea before a real distinction began to be made between Christianity and the Jewish faith. The only attack is on the exploiting classes. Social justice, prayer, alms-giving and sick visiting are the actions encouraged. Jesus’ teaching, particularly as found in the Sermon on the Mount, lies behind everything James writes.

In the stained glass window, St James the Great wears a traveller's cloak and his robe bears a scallop shell, an object worn by a pilgrim and the same symbol for pilgrimage is below his feet. He carries a characteristic pilgrim's staff. Now this symbolism linked to James is because of a dubious legend that firstly, James had been on a sea voyage to Spain to evangelise there and, secondly, that after his martyrdom his bones had been miraculously transported there, where they lie in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (Sant Iago – Iago is Galician for James), which in medieval times was a centre for pilgrimages from all over Europe. In the last thirty years, the pilgrimage tradition has been revived with over 350 000 pilgrims each year walking thousands of kilometres along the routes from other European countries. Unfortunately the pandemic has effectively closed this pilgrimage down in 2020.

Prayer (Collect)

Grant, O merciful God,
that as your holy Apostle Saint James,
leaving his father and all that he had,
without delay was obedient to the calling of your Son Jesus Christ and followed him;
so we, forsaking all worldly affections,
may be evermore ready to follow your holy commandments;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Prophecy in a situation

Job 3:23

“What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me.”

Last night we heard the State President tell us that what had been predicted was now happening. The growth of infections was unstoppable. All our strength and endurance would be tested in the days to come as our medical facilities are overwhelmed to breaking point. And, yes, the irresponsibility of many had made things worse.

In these times it may be helpful to reflect on how the faithful of God have understood such dire situations in the past. Here one is inevitably drawn to the prophetic writings in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. So for the next couple of weeks I am going to base these homilies on those two sources – sources that both warn and encourage.

The first thing to note is that prophecy is always prophecy in a particular situation – a time and place in history.

The Old Testament prophets were inspired by God to speak to a situation and a time in the life of the nation. This explains why the books of the individual prophets introduce the prophet by name, date and place of activity. The message of the prophet can only be fully understood in the context of the time and place in which it was given. This also explains why the message of the prophet is so concerned with the politics of the nation (that is, how the nation is run or governed) and with international politics (that is, with the nation's dealings with other countries and particularly with the great superpowers of the day). It had nothing to do with telling the future or the fortune of individual people though there were false prophets who did so.

To understand the Biblical prophet's involvement in politics we need to understand some of the changes that took place in the government and way of life of the Israelites after they conquered the land of Canaan.

Problems of land, law and government

Many of the political problems of the Israelites arose from the difficulties of adapting a nomadic tribal society to settled agricultural life in the land of Canaan. In a tribal society every Israelite family had the right to use the land and there was no division between the rich and the poor. When they settled in Canaan, various laws had to be instituted to protect the rights of all Israelites to land and to protect against its loss to the family and tribe. This was necessary because the Canaanites had very different ideas about the land. Land could be bought and sold and was owned by the rich (who alone had rights as citizens) and was worked by the poor people and slaves. In addition, the Canaanites, like most other settled people of the time, had kings.

Passages in the Bible that give some idea of the Israelites' attitudes towards land can be found in the story of Ruth (especially Ruth 4:9), and Jeremiah 32:6. You can also read the story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-20) which shows how religiously important land rights were. Even a king had no power to take possession of a person's land.

When Israel decided to have kings, which they needed to organize a permanent army to protect them against their enemies such as the Philistines, there was a heavy cost to be paid in taxes and land. Even though the first kings of Israel were ordinary people without great wealth, later kings soon helped to destroy land rights and equality among the people of Israel. Kings, like any form of government, are not tax free. You can read what this meant in 1 Samuel 8:4-20.

The ruin of Israel

The king and the rich were tempted to grab more and more land (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:1-2). They began to break up the old covenant community of free people under God. Poor farmers got into debt, lost their land, became tenants and hired workers and finally slaves. This whole process was helped by dishonest merchants who cheated the poor, by corrupt courts and greedy civil servants.

Justice and righteousness

The prophets spoke out against this ruin of Israel, this oppression of the poor. When most of the prophets wrote, it was against the background not so much of an isolated individual act of injustice, like the Naboth's Vineyard incident, but of a whole society divided into rich and corrupt rulers and landowners in the cities and an oppressed and starving poor in the countryside.

It is not that the prophets simply wanted a return to old nomadic tribal days. They knew that to be unrealistic. What God demanded was **justice** (a right order in the world and society) and **righteousness** (right behaviour in relation to this just order).

You can read Isaiah 5:7-8 and Amos 5:21-24 to get sense of this passion for justice.

The poor and oppressed had a special place in God's concern. God had brought Israel out of Egypt and given them a land so that they would be a free people in a free land who would serve God and their fellow men. Injustice and oppression destroyed this community. Many of the prophets foretold doom and sang funeral songs over Israel. They saw clearly that the injustice of rulers and the rich had started something that would inevitably lead to Israel's own destruction.

Today

No, the time of the prophets is not exactly like ours today, but there are worrying similarities. Think how the traditional peoples of South Africa were treated in respect of land, how divisions between rich and poor have grown, and how governments and their officials have behaved. Think of the awful fact that nearly a million black people were forcibly removed from their homes to other areas in this province from 1960 to 1985 because of government policies. Think of how we have treated the natural environment.

Prayer (Justice prayers – Xavier University)

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of your world as your love would have it:
a world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;
a world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;
a world where different peoples and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;
a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.
Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Isaiah 6:8

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

Disaster is coming – what the prophets said

One of the dangers of our reverence for the Bible scriptures is that we often hear single verses told to us or used out of their original context. This is not to say that very short passages cannot move our hearts, comfort us, and be God's word to us. They can, but we still have to be wary of not actually fully hearing the original divine message. Take the verse that ended yesterday's homily:

Isaiah 6:8

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then said I, "Here am I; send me."

An inspiring call to us to dedicate ourselves to God's work! Yes. It does that task brilliantly. It was also used, and I think appropriately, by the State President some time ago as a call to encourage citizens to work for the good of South Africa – "Thuma mina. Send me."

But there is a sting in the tail. That verse is the prophet Isaiah's response to an awesome vision of the divine in the temple in Jerusalem and some kind of cleansing of Isaiah's sinfulness. But the next verses are devastating:

The Lord said, "Go and say to this people:

'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed."

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:

"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.

In other words Isaiah's prophetic ministry is going to be an utter failure because the people are not going to listen to the warnings from the Lord and the disaster is going to come. They are not going to hear and change. We really need to read the whole chapter to get the whole story – and yes, there is a slight promise in the last sentence.

[And incidentally, this same passage was quoted by Jesus, in his explaining the parable of the sower, as an indication that many would not listen to his parables and teaching (Matthew 13:14-15).]

The prophets were a tough lot. They were given an almost unbearable message and they spoke it bravely with no hope of reward or success. But they can be with us in our own situations if we are to look unflinchingly into dark days ahead. And then we too can, knowing the truth and the difficulty, and with open eyes, say, "Thuma mina."

Prayer (Adapted from a prayer of Pope Francis)

Heavenly Father, whose Son Jesus Christ rose from the dead
and commissioned us to go and make disciples of all nations:
May the power of your Holy Spirit make us courageous and zealous
in bearing witness to the Gospel,
bringing your truth to every situation,
and life and light to the world.
Help us make it possible for all peoples to experience the saving love
and mercy of Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

The prophets before the exile – prepare for the day of the Lord

The people of Israel had an important task in the world – that of being the chosen people of God, a light to the nations. Yet people often fail in their calling and this was the case with the Israelites. The leaders of the divided kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, led their people to ruin and disaster. The high calling meant great responsibility, as the prophet Amos pointed out (Amos 3:2):

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities.

In this situation God called a number of great prophets, often called the pre-exilic prophets, to warn and guide his people. This they did for more than a hundred years until both kingdoms were destroyed and a remnant of the people were forced into exile in Babylonia. The prophetic message of God's judgement on sin and disloyalty and yet also of his love, remains as true today as it did then.

This first group of writing prophets worked during the periods of the Assyrian empire (during which time the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed) and the Babylonian empire (during which time Judah was conquered and many of its people exiled to Babylonia). These prophets are sometimes called the prophets of doom because many of them warned the people of Israel of the inevitable doom that awaited them because of sin and rebellion against God and their general political stupidity, both internal and in international affairs.

In the time of the Assyrian empire

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah prophesied during the time the Assyrian empire became the dominant world power. They all show an acute understanding of what was going on in international politics.

In the early part of this period there was no nation strong enough to threaten the Israelites. It was a time of peace and wealth for both Israel and Judah but also of great oppression of the poor. The prophets Amos and Hosea condemned the injustice and false worship in the northern kingdom. They warned of trouble to come. Then to their north, the Assyrians became more powerful under new kings and Israel was destroyed in 721 B.C.

Judah submitted to the Assyrians, but several times rebelled against their control after making alliances with the Egyptians. Each time, the Assyrians regained control and punished the people of Judah. Egypt could give no help. Isaiah the prophet urged the kings and people to put their faith in God and not trust in foreign alliances. Both he and the prophet Micah also attacked injustice and false worship.

Amos

Amos, a herdsman from the village of Tekoa in Judah, prophesied at Bethel, the religious centre of the northern kingdom in about 750 B.C. He began with a series of judgements upon various nations and then turned his attack upon sinful Israel. Israel's punishment would be all the greater because she was the chosen nation. Amos is savage in his attack on the idle rich who live on the proceeds of exploitation and corruption. He was not a professional prophet and was deported back to Judah by the High Priest of Bethel.

The message of Amos was that God demanded justice. Because he is just, his people must be just. They were not. The wealthy lived in luxury gained by oppressing and cheating the poor. Amos exposed all kinds of injustice. He rejected the people's claims that God was pleased with their worship and sacrifices. The future, he warned them, the Day of the Lord, to which they looked forward to as a great day of triumph over their enemies, would be a day of disaster, defeat by an enemy and exile.

Read Amos 3:1-2; 5:18-24.

Hosea

A prophet of the northern kingdom, he was probably active from about 745 to the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. He foretold the inevitable destruction that Israel had brought upon itself. It had forsaken the Lord for the Canaanite fertility gods, had a violent history of assassination of kings, and made foolish treaties with foreign nations. Ritual and sacrifice would not save Israel, only repentance, mercy and love. Hosea speaks of the undying love of God for Israel; he cares for his people like a father for his child or a husband for his wife.

Part of the book of Hosea is about a real experience he had, or an acted parable, with a faithless wife. God only punished as a last desperate measure to teach Israel. He had always been willing to forgive if only Israel had shown any sign of repentance.

Read Hosea 2.

Isaiah

Isaiah, whose prophecies are found in chapters 1 to 39 of the Book of Isaiah, was an upper-class citizen of Jerusalem. He was called in a vision in which he saw God as the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah saw the people were not holy, and therefore were unfit for God's work in the world. But he said that he was willing to be God's agent, which he was as spiritual guide to the kings of Israel during a series of crises over a long period from 742 to 700, or even perhaps 688 B.C. However, his advice was frequently rejected.

He attacked injustice and false worship. He warned of the threat from Assyria, which he saw as God's tool to punish Israel's sin. Isaiah said Judah must have absolute faith in God and not trust in foolish alliances and military strength. If the leaders of Israel failed to trust God they would be replaced. God would choose and appoint a new deliverer and leader descended from David who would rule in justice. This anointed one would embody within himself God's own presence.

Isaiah taught that the city of Jerusalem would not be destroyed, even though the people of Judah would be severely punished for their sins. A remnant of survivors would share in God's plans for the future. Nothing would remain of the enemy nations.

Read Isaiah 1:1-20; 9.

Micah

Micah repeated Amos' call for justice and righteousness. He lived at the same time as Isaiah, though probably in the countryside of Judah, and preached from sometime before 721 to 701 B.C. He spoke out against those who oppressed and corrupted the people. He denounced the popular belief that since Israel was God's people, she was safe and that Jerusalem would never be destroyed. Therefore, because of their sins, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah would be destroyed. But God is merciful and repentance could lead to renewal and peace. His book contains the famous summary of Old Testament religion : "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Read Micah 3.

In the time of the Babylonian empire

To be continued tomorrow.

Prayer

Heavenly Father of your people,

We thank you for the lives of your prophets which showed us:

your relationship with Israel,

your grace and love towards your people.

We thank you that even in your justice you showed mercy.

May you bring us into the wilderness so that we may hear your tender words to us.

May you cure us of our self-indulgence to lead lives that are truly just.

We ask this through your Servant, the Messiah of Israel,

Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

The prophets before the exile – when Judah is smashed

After the shock of the fall of the northern kingdom, Judah continued to suffer the same flaws as the earlier prophets had exposed. A mere hundred and forty years later, Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians.

In the time of the Babylonian empire

Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Obadiah saw the rise of the Babylonian empire and its defeat of Judah and the taking of Judah's leaders into exile.

The Assyrian empire overreached itself and weakened, while Babylonia began to grow in strength. Judah became very xenophobic because neighbouring countries attacked her in her weakened state and she also continued to enter into foolish alliances. There was a brief period of religious reform, begun in 621 B.C. by King Josiah, made possible by the weakening of Assyria. But a new world power was on the march and in 598 B.C. Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. After a rebellion, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and exiled its leaders to Babylonia. Jeremiah was the great prophet of this period. Zephaniah agreed with him that the Babylonians were coming to destroy sinful Judah, but most of the other prophets condemned Judah's enemies.

Zephaniah

This prophet from Jerusalem probably worked just before the reforms of King Josiah in 621 B.C. He condemned false idolatrous worship and the general corruption of the officials of Judah. Like Amos he warned of a disastrous Day of the Lord in which not even Jerusalem would be safe. He summoned Judah to decision and repentance while they still had a chance. He did see hope for a righteous remnant. He prophesied the fall of Assyria and the destruction of various enemies of Judah.

Read Zephaniah 2:13-3:7

Nahum

His short book is a savage song of joy which prophesies the fall of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, which fell in 612 B.C. Its great poetry pictures God's punishment of Assyria's national pride and cruelty.

Read Nahum 3:1-7.

Habakkuk

Some time before 605 B.C., Habakkuk tried to understand why sinful rulers and the heathen Babylonian empire with all its violence and wickedness were so successful. Why did God allow it if he was just and the all powerful Lord of nature and history? Why

did the wicked Babylonians “swallow those more righteous than they”? Habakkuk did not get a clear answer, though he was told that the Babylonian empire contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Faith was required – “the righteous live by their faith” in God.

Read Habakkuk 1:12-17; 3:17-19.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was called as a young man and preached from 626 B.C. till after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. He lived during the closing years of the kingdom of Judah and was frequently persecuted by the authorities because of his constant declaration that Judah was doomed because it kept on rebelling against God’s leadership. He warned against making treaties with other nations - it was useless to resist the Babylonians, since God was using them as instruments to punish his people. He also condemned false religion giving false hope to the deluded people. He said little about Josiah’s reform in 621 B.C., probably because he realized that something greater – a true change of heart – was needed. The people’s sense of security in Jerusalem, temple and cult was an illusion. Only obedience to God would bring safety.

Jeremiah was a sensitive and lonely man who suffered greatly from the burden of his harsh message and the way he and his message were rejected by rulers, people and false prophets. His story was recorded by his secretary, Baruch. Jeremiah did promise that God would make a New Covenant with his people in which they would truly know him. This would come after their purification in exile.

Jeremiah urged the exiles in Babylonia to settle down and be patient. He gave them no false hopes of an early return.

Read Jeremiah 22:8-17; 31:27-34.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was an influential priest exiled to Babylonia in 598 B.C. He was active from 593 to 571 B.C. He was a brilliant educated man with a wide knowledge, particularly of history. His prophecies often tell of strange bizarre visions or are acted-out parables. He bitterly denounced Israel’s sins and predicted the fall of Jerusalem.

In all his prophecies he stressed the glory and honour of God. He said that each individual is responsible for his own sin. God punishes only those nations who deserve to be punished. Ezekiel even suggested that God loves even the sinner and does not punish sins that have been repented. Ezekiel recognised that the Lord was not bound to Jerusalem or any other place and if the glory of God was to be seen anywhere, it was with the faithful in exile in Babylon. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. he prophesied hope, comparing Israel to a valley of dry bones that would be brought to life as a restored nation under a just and merciful king and with a new temple.

Read Ezekiel 33:1-20; 36:22-32.

Obadiah

This short book expresses hatred of the Edomites who had joined Babylonia in invading Judah and taken advantage of her misfortune after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Edom would be repaid by some disaster.

Read Obadiah 15-187.

Prayer

O Lord of your people Israel,
we thank you for the message of your prophets.
We grieve for our sins and those of our nation,
 for our idolatry of that which should not be worshipped or followed,
 for our failure to do justice and fairness,
 for our greed and the wanting of things that leads to corruption
 for our political and spiritual foolishness.

Have mercy upon us.

Restore our sense of what is right for people and nations.

And we give our humble gratitude
that you have loved us with an everlasting love
and have continued your faithfulness to us,
through Jesus Christ your Son and your Holy Spirit
who spoke through the prophets.

Amen.

The prophets during the exile – by the waters of Babylon

Defeat is always a shock, whether to individuals or to a nation. Many people are very shocked now when, after all the effort of a hard lockdown and the difficulties and misery it caused, there seems no end to the growth of the pandemic. And we feel frustrated and angry that getting the health system geared up, distributing food parcels, and getting the schools going again seems something our country is incapable of getting right.

For the people of Judah the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C by the Babylonians led to a great crisis in Israel's faith. The Israelites had lost all that had been promised by God and what they had believed to be safe – the promised land, the temple, the city of Jerusalem on Mount Zion, the Davidic monarchy. The Covenant with God had not protected them and it could seem that a heathen god had defeated the God of Israel.

In spite of the warnings of the prophets the Israelites were psychologically and spiritually unprepared for their defeat. They were utterly depressed and deeply angry with their enemies as can be seen in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

The task of the prophets of the period of the exile was to explain the meaning of what had happened to them. They, together with a group of writers, historians and preservers of Israel's traditions said that Israel deserved to be destroyed because of breaking the commandments and covenant, taking part in false worship, and rejecting the prophets God sent to warn them. The writing that came out from these faithful people, as seen in the histories in the two books of the Kings, is unique in its piercing honesty about the failings of the people of Israel. No other nation's history has ever been so self-critical.

There was also a message of hope to these down-and-out exiles. Ezekiel, in spite of his savage scorn for the wickedness and stupidity of Judah's leaders, gave a message of hope as well.

But the most profound message in the prophetic writings is found in Isaiah Chapters 40 to 55. This 'second Isaiah', about whom we know nothing other than that he was a follower of the tradition of the first Isaiah, saw that there was only one God and creator of the universe. God was Lord of all history (even Lord of the now ascending Persian empire which would become an instrument of God's will (Isaiah 44:21-28)). God would restore them (Isaiah 54:4-8). God was preparing a new King, a new Exodus, in the future of Israel.

In this 'second Isaiah' are also found the wonderful poems about the suffering servant of the Lord and promises of a Messiah. It is these poems that the early church understood as a prophecy about Jesus, who became the suffering representative of, and Saviour of Israel, on the cross. The four songs are: Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-7; and 52:13-53:12. Other passages were also seen as prefigurations of Christ (such as Isaiah 40:1-4). Jesus himself quoted the 4th servant song as referring to himself (Luke 22:37).

So even in the midst of defeat and demoralization came a message of hope in the vindication of the servant of God.

Prayer (Lori Ashmore)

Lord hear our prayer

Open our eyes to see the ways we can accompany the suffering with compassion and care as we carry out the healing ministry of Jesus, we pray to the Lord.

Lord hear our prayer

Give us courage as we act to alleviate the suffering of those in our world in the ways that we are able, we pray to the Lord.

Lord hear our prayer

Help us know the hope that restores our spirit and invigorates our will to serve in the midst of sorrow and grief, we pray to the Lord.

Lord hear our prayer

God of Hope, Christ the suffering servant, when all is lost in the darkness of suffering, you are there. You took all human suffering upon yourself on the cross and showed to us the victory that is the resurrection. We look to you as we serve our ministry and accompany those who suffer, providing a heart that listens and hands that comfort. Lead us not to fear but prayer, hope and action.

Amen.

Prophecy after the exile

The second main group of writing prophets come from the period of the Persian empire. They worked from the time of the ending of the Exile in Babylonia until prophecy in Israel seemed to end, some time before the Greeks under Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian Empire.

Their message was not one of doom like that of the pre-exilic prophets, but rather one of encouragement to people whose hopes were very low, and who were disappointed about Israel's lack of success and importance. Some of the prophets played an important part in restoring the temple and its worship.

In the time of the Persian empire

After the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C, he gave permission for the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

The return to Jerusalem and the building up of the broken community was a difficult task. The return was not accompanied by miraculous events and the prophecies of Second Isaiah about it were not fulfilled. It took 23 years before the temple was rebuilt and the people had to be encouraged truly to be the people of God. Nehemiah and Ezra, loyal Jews who held positions in the Persian administration, played a key role in rebuilding the community. The great task of the prophets in this difficult time, when hopes were so low and disappointment strong, was to see that the period was one of salvation in which the Lord was doing something new.

'Third Isaiah'

Isaiah chapters 55 to 66 contains writings that probably come from a disciple or disciples of Second Isaiah. These prophecies deal with the difficult conditions and disappointments of the returned exiles. He condemned the failure of the ruling classes to do their duty (56:9-12), false worship and the lack of compassion and justice. He saw the Judaeans of the time as being people of little faith. He promised that God would glorify Jerusalem. His message can be summed up as that of 61:1, "to preach good news to the poor".

Read Isaiah 58:1-12; 61; 62.

Haggai

Haggai prophesied in 520 B.C. at a time when there were rebellions in the Persian empire under King Darius. Haggai urged the Jews to take advantage of these troubles to complete the rebuilding of the temple. The nation had not regained her prosperity and well-being because it had neglected this great task of building the temple. Though this rebuilding should be done by the Jews alone, Haggai did hope for a day when all nations would come and worship God in Jerusalem. He singled out the governor, a Jew of Davidic descent called Zerubbabel, as a Messiah. He had led the temple building.

Read Haggai 1:3-12.

Zechariah

He prophesied from 520 to 518 B.C. and like Haggai, encouraged the completion of the temple. However, he also speaks about the need for justice as the pre-exilic prophets had done (7:4-10). Zechariah saw visions which required interpretation. He also saw Zerubbabel as a Messiah and said that the High Priest Joshua would be co-leader. Chapters 9 to 14 are probably by later writers.

Read Zechariah 8:1-17.

Malachi

Malachi, who worked about 460 B.C., attacked abuses in the community in the form of a debate with the people of Judah in which he answers their questions. These showed that they were not always sincere in their worship of God, partly because they were disappointed that Judah remained a poor little province in the Persian empire. He protested at the rubbishy sacrifices they made and the non-payment of tithes. He opposed divorce and mixed marriages that might threaten the purity of the Jewish faith. His book contains the promise that Elijah the prophet would return before the Day of the Lord (4:5).

Read Malachi 2:10-16; 3:1-5.

Joel

In about 400 B.C. Judah was attacked by a plague of locusts. Joel saw this as a sign and call to national mourning. It was a warning of the coming Day of the Lord in which Israel's shame would end and God would judge the nations that had scattered the Israelites over the world.

Read Joel 2:12-13; 2:28-32.

Jonah

The Book of Jonah is not really a prophecy but rather a story or parable about a prophet. It teaches in the most beautiful way that God cares for all human beings, even for the cruellest enemies of Israel such as the Assyrians of Nineveh. The prophets failed in their duty if they failed to work for the good of all people. There was no way they could escape this duty. There is no prophetic self-righteousness in this story. It is rather self-critical and turns the reader's gaze away from the prophet to the God who sends.

Read Jonah 4

Prayer (Jonah's prayer)

"In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.

You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.

I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'

The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, Lord my God,
brought my life up from the pit.

"When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

"Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.
But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

Prophecy and the future

The prophets were expecting something. They hoped (and feared) for the future and it is important for us to know the meaning of their hope – for we Christians living today do so in what was, to the prophets, the future.

In understanding their hopes for the future it is necessary to summarise what it is that characterises the message of the prophets. This can be done in the following statements:

- God acts in history
- God is holy and just
- God recalls his people to their foundations
- God is not contained in his temple or nation
- God has put a heavy burden of responsibility on the prophets

God acts in history

Read Isaiah 10:5-19

God spoke to the prophets in a historical situation. God revealed himself – in his glory, as judge and saviour – in history. The prophets tell us that God is in control of the universe and of human history on earth. God even used his enemies and heathen nations to do his will though as Isaiah points out, they thought they were doing their own will and would suffer God's judgement in turn. Hence it is useless to rely on alliances and military power to stop what God wanted done.

God is holy and just

Read Amos 2:6-8; 9:1-10

The holy and just God demands that his people be the same. Hence history is a great moral struggle between good and evil, between God and the unjust.

In their loyalty to this God the prophets fearlessly attacked the sins of all, however mighty they were. The ruin of a nation was a sign of the people's separation from God, It was obedience to God and his commandments that produced a sound society.

God recalls his people to their foundations

Read Micah 6:2-4

Even when the prophets spoke of God doing something new, they saw that this new thing reflected God's saving acts in the past, such as the Exodus. The prophets recalled the people to the kind of relationship they had with God in the days of the Exodus, the making of the Covenant at Sinai, and the days of young faithfulness in the desert.

God is not contained in his temple or nation

Read Micah 6:6-8

The prophets testify to God's freedom. He is not 'owned' by the Israelites or contained within their temple or religious ways or always on their side. God is not controlled by the religious rites of Israel, any more than he is today by those who claim that God is on their side. This point is made very clear in Ezekiel's magnificent vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple and Jerusalem because of their sinful state and going to be with the exiles in heathen Babylonia (Ezekiel 11 and 12).

God has put a heavy burden of responsibility on the prophets

Read Amos 7:1-6

The prophets suffered for their message. Even the harsh Amos cried out to God in pain when he saw the threatened judgement on the northern state of Israel. The prophets themselves become signs of God's judgement on Israel. They are made to experience what the judgement will be like sooner than the rest of Israel so as to act as an example. Ezekiel talks of the task of the prophet as being to build up the holes in the wall protecting Israel so that it may survive God's attack on the Day of the Lord (Ezekiel 13:5). Thus the prophet was to act as an intercessor for the nation (compare what Psalm 106:23 says about Moses as intercessor and filler of holes in walls).

Prophecy unfulfilled and fulfilled

Many prophetic warnings came true in history. But some warnings and promises were not fulfilled. This did not seem to worry the true prophets or those who collected their sayings. It must be remembered that God is master and not servant of his words. He also changes his mind (Amos 7:6; Jonah 3:10-4:2).

However, not in the sense of specific predictions, but as a whole, the prophetic writings give us a sense of ever increasing expectation and hope of fulfilment. The prophets had always pointed towards the Day of the Lord when the people of Israel would meet God face to face in judgement (as in Amos 4:12; 5:18-20) or salvation (as in Isaiah 61:1-2). For the prophets, Israel's life and death depended on the meeting with the Lord who was to come. Jewish prophecy ended pointing beyond itself. It was able to do this not just because it foretold the future, but because the prophets saw into the heart of God's nature and awaited a true meeting with this God.

Read: John 3: 26-30

Christians have identified the man Jesus of Nazareth with the loving being and purpose of God that the prophets had been so close to. Therefore the statement in the Nicene creed is a fitting assessment of the prophets:

"We believe in the Holy Spirit ... He has spoken through the prophets".

Prayer

O Lord God

We pray the prayer of Elijah the prophet.

“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,
let it be known this day that you are God in Israel,
that I am your servant,
and that I have done all these things at your bidding.
Answer me, O Lord, answer me,
so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God,
and that you have turned their hearts back.”

Bartholomew

The first window on the left side of the ambulatory at St John the Divine is of Saint Bartholomew (also known as Nathanael, his personal name).

Bartholomew was one of the first disciples of Jesus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). He was brought to Jesus by his friend Philip (John 1:43-51) and it is significant that he is always mentioned next to Philip in the lists of the Twelve given in the first three Gospels

In the Gospel of John, Nathanael is introduced as a friend of Philip.



The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you all, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

So Nathanael, a good and honest man, is described as initially being sceptical about whether the Messiah could come from a small village like Nazareth, but he agrees to check out this new teacher.

Nathanael is mentioned as present with other Apostles after the Resurrection in the scene described in John 21: 1-14.

Not much is really known about Bartholomew thereafter, except in legendary accounts of his missionary work in India, Mesopotamia, Armenia and even Ethiopia. According to legends he was skinned alive or beheaded in Armenia or India so is often depicted

holding his flayed skin or the curved flensing knife with which he was tortured. The book he holds represents the Gospel.

It is interesting that the first disciples called by Jesus are all portrayed as reaching out immediately to family or friends. It is also important to recognize that Jesus also called good people, however sceptical they were.

Prayer (Collect)

O Almighty and everlasting God, who gave to your Apostle Bartholomew
grace truly to believe and to preach your Word:
Grant, we beseech you, to your Church, to love that Word which he believed,
and both to preach and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Waiting for decisions

One of the things that the lockdown has forced us to confront is our lack of control of many of the things that we do or let happen to us. In times of 'normality' we take many decisions each day, however trivial they may be. Should I go to the shop? Should we go to a restaurant on Friday evening or order take-aways? Should we invite the grandchildren to come and visit at the weekend? With lockdown even trivial decisions are taken away from us, either by government instruction or by sensible self-preservation actions. Our sense of being agents of our own lives is being seriously curtailed.

Of course it is true that we did not, if we think about it carefully, have lots and lots of major decision making freedom in our pre-Covid-19 everyday lives. Most of us are shackled by work and family responsibilities. Many of us will be lifelong slaves of mortgage payments. We do vote at elections – which most of us couldn't before 1994 and many people died and suffered in the struggle to enable us to put a cross on a piece of paper – but what happens after the elections, the good the mediocre and the awful, is really out of our hands. We watch national politics from afar on our television screens and read about it in the press exposés. Is it really us – the demos (the people) in democracy – who make governing decisions?

Certainly in this pandemic we wait for decisions to come down from on high. And we are unsure whether those decisions were made rationally or because of pressures from special interests. And the rants on Twitter and the jokes on Facebook about such decisions simply make things even muddier. I have a daughter, recently recovered from Covid-19, who is a schoolteacher, and it is unclear whether she and her children have to be back at school tomorrow or in the near future. Even the people who do seem to have the power to make decisions seem pretty indecisive.

The temptations that come with waiting for others to make decisions for us include behaving recklessly, resentment, boredom with our daily routines, and apathy. We all want to get back that little freedom to decide and to behave more normally and spontaneously. We miss hugs too.

So we are waiting. Perhaps we are waiting like Jonah in the story, sitting under a tree outside the city of Nineveh, wishing it would be destroyed and angry that God hadn't done so. "He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.". God's answer was simple: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:1-11)

We can, alternatively, wait in faith and hope – and deciding to do so is the very important decision we can make now.

As it is put in 2 Peter 13-15:

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Prayer

Father of all, we come to you with a sense of powerlessness.
We are tired of this hard and tiring waiting.
We are frustrated and irritated with ourselves and the nation and the world.
Grant us a quieter heart and mind.
Give us the patience and strength to wait well.
Give us the grace and peace to accept what we cannot do or decide.
Strengthen us when we can act to help others in this time of disaster.
Help us to live by your grace each day of this waiting.
May we glorify you as we wait expectantly.
In Jesus' Name,
Amen!

Consequences

Many of us are now beginning to hear direct stories of the impact of the pandemic on our lives.

In the early days of lockdown it was mainly, in descending order of severity, the inconvenience, some panic anxiety, missing our friends and relatives, and the loss of income. The latter was the most severe consequence and the subsequent debate about easing the lockdown was all about whether the economy had to be restarted even if the loss of lives was greater.

Now the stories are even more directly our own. We know people who have been infected, been seriously ill in hospital and in some cases, died. We know of people who have been driven to hospital unable to breathe and the Covid-19 wards are already full. We have seen the fatigue which people recovering from the infection have to endure. We have teacher friends who are perplexed on what is the right thing to do. Equally authoritative experts tell them totally different things – “Go back to school, it is OK!”; “Don’t go back, the children will mix at school and spread it even more!” And new information hits our television and cell phones each day with new and confusing messages. We are indeed in that science fiction pandemic movie where literally nobody really knows what is best and everything people try gets them into another crisis.

The reality is that this is indeed the consequence of a totally new and vicious virus. In spite of all the prophetic warnings from, yes, science fiction writers, and disease control scientists, no government on earth took the threat seriously enough to put adequate preparations in place. In South Africa we are now paying an exceedingly high price for the mismanagement and corruption that has characterised government and the private sector for far too long. We, or rather the poor, are going to pay a deadly price for the inequality in South Africa (10% of the population owns 86% of its wealth) and the lack of something like a Basic Income Grant.

So what can we do? Yes we have to accept that these consequences are real and there is not much, at this stage that we can do about them. But at a personal and local level we can do the following:

- Everybody should have at least rudimentary knowledge of what to do if a person in their household gets sick. Each church congregation should see that this information is communicated to all members.
- Everybody with the means should try and ensure that nobody goes hungry in their local area and this means donations to soup kitchens, NGOs delivering food parcels, and such like. And we also need to monitor how state food parcels are being delivered and to whom, so that corruption is exposed and stopped.
- If schools close (or if they open fully yet many parents keep their children at home) we can try and offer support to parents who may themselves find it hard to become home teachers of their own children.

- We can endeavour not to be divided by contradictory opinions of what to do. We must stay together in this dark time.

The virus tsunami is now truly upon us. We have the fifth highest number of infections in the world. May the Lord be with us.

Prayer

Lord of all, be with us in this dark time.

Help us to accept the consequences of being human beings and alive at this time.

Help us to accept the consequences of how we as a people have behaved in the past, and do not count our actions and inactions then against us at this terrible time.

Be with us as we try and make sense of who to listen to and what to do.

Forgive us the mistakes we will make.

Be with us as we endure the difficulties, the fear and the anxiety.

Help us to comfort and help as best we can those who have fallen sick.

Be with our children during this time of lockdown and distanced from their friends.

Galvanize us to help the poor and hungry.

Give us the vision to see a future in which we truly pray:

“Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen

Yesterday was the feast of Mary Magdalene. Here is a prayer sent to me:

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles, fill us with the fervour to announce with you the Good News of the Love that is stronger than death.

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to Possibility, teach us to look beneath the surface of our lives to discover the fullness that lies at the depths.

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to Wonder, open the eyes of our hearts so that we may find the Holy One who hides within the ordinary.

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to Attention, teach us to have ears to hear the voice of the One that calls us by name.

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to Expectation, teach us to wait through the darkness for the light that shines on the path of transformation.

Mary Magdalene, Apostle to Contemplatives, lead us to rest in the embrace of the Love that lives within the silence of our hearts.

Mary Magdalene, Bearer of Wisdom, guide us on the path of union through self-emptying abundant love.

Mary Magdalene, you who were first sent, open for us a whole new way of being.

Send us forth now to share your story and ours, to declare the great wonder of the Mystery of Love.

Singing in the dark

On one of the pandemic online discussion groups I belong to there has recently been some talk about the music people in lockdown are listening to – and it is usually what they listened to at a more youthful stage in their lives. Confession here: I was teenager and young adult in the 1960s, and as far as popular music goes, nothing coming after that was nearly as good.

What is it about song and music that it calls to us in difficult times? Is it an echo of a distant time when we communicated in a more holistic, musical and rhythmic way? Is it because we humans need to have a form of expression that arises above the everyday, that enables us to express our gratitude for being alive, but also the pain of being alive in this world?

Two recent experiences with song and music of a popular nature have moved me.

The first was a video of nurses coming on duty at the Covid-19 emergency International Conference Centre field hospital in Cape Town. They came in as a group singing a well know chorus *Siyakudumisa* (We are praising You) as they entered into that place of healing at great danger to themselves. Some songs bring you near to tears as this did to me. Here were human beings at their best. To me it was as if this praise song somehow has cleaned off some of the grime covering the image of God in humanity and let it shine clear for all to see.

The second was a similar video of nurses at another hospital getting into their personal protection clothing before entering the wards (https://youtu.be/PtfG0Xoxk_Y). The music they danced to as they put on their physical battle armour was the immensely popular rendition of another Christian chorus, *Jerusalema*. This version, by singer Nomcebo Zikode from Hammarsdale in KwaZulu-Natal, has been viewed over 47 million times on YouTube. Admittedly it is also a catchy dance tune! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCZVL_8D048). But the words of the chorus are simple and profound and have had an impact on many listeners and viewers. Take this response I found on a YouTube comments page: “While listening to this song, I close my eyes and imagine our beautiful mother Earth having all its children reunited... no wars, no arms, no blood, no racism, no pandemics, no poverty... Just simple being human. Thank you, *Jerusalema*, for that wonderful feeling.” Yes, music can help us rise.

Song can do strange things. Here is a chorus about us having no kingdom on earth, but the sense of transcending this place of death and suffering has the opposite effect to what one might suppose, it exhilarates, and makes us want to love people and this earth all the more as God loves us and his creation

Many years ago I was at a conference and a colleague, not a practising Christian at all, told me that he had recently heard a song that sent shivers down his spine. It was *The Pearl* by Country and Western singer Emmylou Harris and it sent shivers down mine too (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyBQtflf3Gs>). It is a seemingly despairing

song of soldiers in a seemingly endless war against the forces of darkness, they have no hope, no expectations of success, just the raw hunger of some sort of faith – “if there’s no heaven what’s this hunger for?” And yet the hymn ends with the exclamation – Allelujah.

Out of the depths we call upon the Lord.

And we will continue singing.

Prayer songs

Jerusalema

Jerusalema ikhaya lami
Ngilondoloze
Uhambe nami
Zungangishiyi lana

Ndawo yami ayikho lana
Mbuso wami awukho lana
Ngilondoloze
Zuhambe nami

Ngilondoloze
Ngilondoloze
Ngilondoloze
Zungangishiyi lana

Jerusalem is my home
Guard me
Walk with me
Don’t leave me here

My place is not here
My kingdom is not here
Guard me
Walk with me

Guard me
Guard me
Guard me
Don’t leave me here

The Pearl

O the dragons are gonna fly tonight
They're circling low and inside tonight
It's another round in the losing fight
Out along the great divide tonight

We are aging soldiers in an ancient war
Seeking out some half remembered shore
We drink our fill and still we thirst for more
Asking if there's no heaven what is this hunger for?

Our path is worn our feet are poorly shod
We lift up our prayer against the odds
And fear the silence is the voice of God

And we cry Allelujah, Allelujah
We cry Allelujah

Sorrow is constant and the joys are brief
The seasons come and bring no sweet relief
Time is a brutal but a careless thief
Who takes our lot but leaves behind the grief

It is the heart that kills us in the end
Just one more old broken bone that cannot mend
As it was now and ever shall be amen

And we cry Allelujah, Allelujah
We cry Allelujah

So there'll be no guiding light for you and me
We are not sailors lost out on the sea
We were always headed toward eternity
Hoping for a glimpse of Galilee

Like falling stars from the universe, we are hurled
Down through the long loneliness of the world
Until we behold the pain become the pearl

Cryin' Allelujah, Allelujah
We cry Allelujah

And we cry Allelujah, Allelujah
We cry Allelujah

Educating Christians

Now that the children of South Africa are out of school for another month, many parents' thoughts will be turning to how they will support their children's at-home learning during this time. Will the children lose all sense of routine and lapse into a kind of learning apathy? This is a time when those children who have the advantage of well educated parents and an ample supply of books at home can soar ahead – after all people become really fluent readers and develop their vocabulary mainly through private reading, not from what they get in school. The tragedy is that this is not the case for a huge majority of schoolchildren in South Africa, where research has shown that nearly 80% of children in grade 4 cannot read a simple text at that level in their home language. Maybe, alongside food parcels, we also need to be distributing children's books.

Sometimes these deficits can be blamed on our low expectations of our children, their teachers and their schools, given that there is no reason why, in a well-functioning education system, nearly all children in grade 4 should not be fluent readers.

One can also apply the same critique to Christian instruction. How deficient are most Christians today in their understanding of the essential teachings of their faith?

It is here, if you will indulge the digression, that I want to tell you about Egeria. Egeria was a well-off woman from Gaul (modern France) who went alone on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem about AD 381, really not so long after Christianity was legalised in the Roman Empire. She wrote a tell-all account of her travels for her "sisters" back home. It is the very first account we have of a pilgrimage. Given that Egeria was really only interested in religious sites and services, her travelogue was an incredibly detailed account of every church she visited and what they did in it.

What is particular interesting is Egeria's description of the instruction of new Christians in the church in Jerusalem.

First, the Bishop asks their neighbours about them. If anyone is guilty of any of the serious human vices they are sent away until they amend their ways. Both men and women are asked the same questions.

Then the intense instruction starts before they are baptized. During the Lenten period they arrive at church at 6 am in the morning, are exorcised, and then, men and women are seated in a circle around the bishop's chair. The bishop then teaches them for three hours. And this happens every day throughout Lent. To quote from *Egeria's Travels*:

during the forty days he goes through the Whole Bible, beginning with Genesis, and first relating the literal meaning of each passage, then interpreting its spiritual meaning. He also teaches them at this time all about the resurrection and the faith. And this is called catechesis. After five Weeks' teaching they receive the Creed, whose content he explains article by article in the same way as he explained the

Scriptures, first literally and then spiritually. Thus all the people in these parts are able to follow the Scriptures when they are read in church, since there has been teaching on all the Scriptures from six to nine in the morning all through Lent, three hours' catechesis a day.

So after this three hours of teaching a day for seven weeks, about which "they ask questions on each point" they go before the bishop with their sponsors and repeat the Creed to the Bishop. After their baptism at Easter, they are then given another eight days of instruction on the meaning of baptism and the Eucharist.

This is heavy stuff. No wonder they were able to go out and convert and transform the world of that time. They knew their faith and they dedicated much time to learning about it. They knew their scriptures (and because they looked at both literal and spiritual meanings were not prey to Biblical literalism – so-called fundamentalism is a modern invention). And those already baptised often listened in on these classes as a kind of refresher course.

Would that we in the current age and in the time of the world pandemic had a set of the faithful so well intellectually and spiritually prepared. We need to get back there.

Prayers (Anglican Prayer Book)

Father of the beloved Son
who has committed to your holy Church
the care and nurture of children:
enlighten with your wisdom
those who teach and those who learn
that rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth
they may worship and serve you throughout their lives;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jude the obscure



Jude was one of the Twelve and has been variously called Judas Thaddeus, Jude Thaddeus, Jude of James and Lebbaeus. He is clearly distinguished from Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus prior to his crucifixion. There is the problem, he had the same name, Judas, as the betrayer. Indeed in John's gospel this is deliberately pointed out (John 14:22):

Judas, not the Iscariot, said to Jesus ...

It has been suggested that the reason many English translations of the New Testament use the name Jude instead of Judas is that they didn't want him confused with Judas Iscariot. [I can assure you that the Greek text calls him Judas.]

So one can see why Judas/Jude might somewhat disappear into obscurity in the memory of the Church. Yet Saint Jude is venerated as the patron "saint of lost causes" or the "saint for the hopeless and the despaired".

This practice may well come from a belief that few Christians invoked him for misplaced fear of venerating Christ's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, because of their similar names. The ignored Saint Jude thus supposedly became quite eager to assist anyone who sought his help, to the point of interceding in the most dire of circumstances. Saint Bridget of Sweden and Saint Bernard had visions from God asking each to accept Jude as the "saint of the impossible". The church also wanted to encourage veneration of this "forgotten" apostle.

He is supposed to have preached the Gospel in Judea, Samaria, Idumaea, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Libya. He is also thought to have gone on many missionary journeys with St Simon the Zealot so his emblem is a ship (which also represents the church – the ark). A tradition has it that he was martyred in Syria together with St Simon. He is shown holding a staff or club (with which he was killed).

He is the patron saint of Armenian Christians and their tradition is that he and Bartholomew were the first to bring Christianity to that area and it is the place of his martyrdom.

So there we have it – the obscure saint who is the saint of the impossible – the hopeless cases and the lost causes. He sounds like the saint we need on our side in the current pandemic, we the ordinary obscure people who are not always recognised for who we are, we who are anxious, and in many cases in impossible situations of unemployment and other forms of powerlessness. We too, like Jude, are called by the God who was present among us incognito in Jesus of Nazareth.

Prayers (Collect)

Almighty God,
who has built your church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Jesus Christ being the head cornerstone:
Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may
be made a holy temple acceptable to you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

A common Roman Catholic prayer to St Jude is:

O most holy apostle, Saint Jude, faithful servant and friend of Jesus,
the Church honours and invokes you universally,
as the patron of hopeless cases, and of things almost despaired of.
Pray for me, who am afflicted.
Make use, I implore you, of that particular privilege accorded to you,
to bring visible and speedy help where help was almost despaired of.
Come to my assistance in this great need,
that I may receive the consolation and succour of Heaven
in all my necessities, tribulations, and sufferings,
particularly in this time of the pandemic,
and that I may praise God with you and all the elect throughout eternity.
I promise you, O blessed Jude,
to be ever mindful of this great favour,
to always honour you as my special and powerful patron,
and to gratefully encourage devotion to you.
Amen.

Collects

I am sure many of you, I certainly have, missed being in a church building yesterday and being able, with a congregation of real live people, to say the prayers together and listen to the readings and sermon in a unified group. When the pandemic is overcome what joy it will be to again congregate in the way we used to. Pre-pandemic we didn't realise what we had or value it enough.

Yesterday our parish participated, online, in a remarkable service put together by our parish priest and a dedicated team of modern information technology-sussed people. It was a wonderful service, both liturgically and in the sense of a service to the people isolated from each other by the virus. But the online nature of the service means that one's attention is drawn to the very shape of the liturgy, its key parts and the nature of the prayers being scrolled down on the computer, tablet or phone screen. One of those prayers is a special kind of formal prayer, called a "collect" that is used in the liturgies of most mainline church denominations – Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox and Presbyterian.

The word "collect" comes from a Latin word "collécta" meaning "to gather" with the meaning of the gathering together, collecting together, the prayers of the individual members of the congregation into one. In many churches there is a collect for each Sunday and it is used for the rest of the week, in many cases setting the theme for the readings, the sermon and the prayers of intercession for that Sunday.

I am going to use the Anglican collect used yesterday as the example of a collect:

**Lord of heaven and earth,
you sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and power of your Church:
sow in our hearts the seeds of grace
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen**

Originally, most collects were one single, but long, sentence and followed a prescribed five part pattern

Invocation

The invocation or address indicates the person of Trinity addressed, usually God the Father, rarely God the Son.

So, using that collect, we address God:

Lord of heaven and earth,

We are speaking to God, we want to get his attention.

Acknowledgment

The acknowledgment is a description of a divine attribute that relates to the petition. It identifies **who** this God is. It is us making sure that we have got the right god, and that in particular, we are looking at the particular nature of God (in technical theological language, the 'properties' or 'attributes' of God) that enable us to dare call upon him.

you sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and power of your Church:

This modern collect version uses the word "you", when previously it would have been "who". The "who" is better because it describes the God we are calling upon, in this case the God who sent the Holy Spirit upon the Church for a purpose. Using the word "you" rather unfortunately suggests that we are reminding God or telling him what his attributes are.

Petition

The petition, the asking part of the collect, asks for one thing and one thing only at a time (don't push your luck and ask for too much!)

sow in our hearts the seeds of grace

Already in the acknowledgment we have an indication of the properties of this God and hence the petition is aligned with that, is a logical consequence of that property. So in this collect it is a clear consequence of sending the Holy Spirit upon the Church that it would receive grace.

Aspiration

Then we ask why we want this one thing, what is our aspiration, what is the desired result. We petitioned in order **that** In some collects, aspiration is for several things, or several desired good results.

that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit

That is what we want to do. Do acts of love in God's name that are the true fruits of the Holy Spirit being in our lives

Pleading

Lastly we plead that our petition may be granted through the mediation of Jesus Christ who is a member of the Holy Trinity. This pleading reminds us that God does this through his expression of himself in Jesus the Messiah, so:

**through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.**

Response

Then, because this is the collective prayer of the faithful, we respond as a people – Let it be so!

Amen.

The collects are a marvellous resource for our own prayer life and should be used to concentrate our minds, 'collect' our thoughts together, when we address the Lord of heaven and earth as we bring the petitions of his faithful people to him.

Prayer (Collect)

Lord of heaven and earth,
you sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and power of your Church:
sow in our hearts the seeds of grace
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one
God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Words about and words with

In his online sermon on Sunday our Rector made note of the important differentiation between the words of Job's comforters *about* God and Job's words *with* God (the latter to which God replied). The comforters, who gave little comfort, were indeed doing their level best to understand God and put their understanding into words about God. What they said has been repeated and imitated by multitudes of theologians and pastors trying to explain the ways of God to human beings. We hear similar explanations from a host of television preachers today – trying to explain why God has let the evils of the pandemic happen. And as with Job's comforters, if we are honest, their answers do not satisfy, though they may help explain some things a bit.

In the story in the Book of Job it is only when Job speaks directly with God that he is answered. And that answer is not an "explanation" at all – Job sees God the Creator and that vision is enough. The words about God didn't work, the interaction directly between Job and God did.

In our present plight we are all rather at a loss for words. What can our words say? We can indeed try to comfort the anxious, sick and dying with our words, but the words in themselves may be inadequate. It is only our presence that may help and how do we provide that in a time of social distancing and quarantine? Is it then that rational theology cannot help us? If words cannot say what we want to say, should we not therefore remain silent?

It is instructive therefore that the most theological passage in the New Testament, the prologue to the Gospel of John, is about "the Word". And in those words, originally in Greek, the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth is explained as him being "the Word of God":

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

So, after all, we do have to take words, the way we express ourselves and our understandings, rather seriously.

The beginning of John's Gospel basically says that God expresses himself. This expression, which John calls his Word, is what creates the universe of life. God's self expression is both God and in another sense, differentiated from God – it is God speaking to himself. Later theologians battled with these ideas and proposed the doctrine of the Trinity – of three differentiations within God as the best and most accurate way of being true to the evidence presented in the scriptures. These were not unnecessary exercises by intellectuals, but the best and only way of being true to what the witness of the life of Jesus meant in the context of the whole Biblical revelation.

So, we are assured that, in a moment we cannot conceive of, our minds cannot think of, when there was no time and space, the everlasting self-expression of God caused the

universe to come into being. What is more, in due course, within time, within that universe, this self-expression of God, this rational, intelligent Word, this communication, this meaning – “became a human being and lived among us”. That Word truly showed us who God is, and was the life that was the light of humankind that shines in the darkness and is never put out.

So we are in a strange place. Our feeble words about God don't explain him or the real meaning of everything that is happening now in this material creation. Yet the very being of God is about expression, communication, understanding. And that Word, that expression of God is one that incarnates itself in, is embodied in, the creation and our lives. Somehow the Word is truly with us. And if we know that, if we experience that, like Job, we are alright and all manner of things will be well.

Prayer

Creator of all
Who is the Word and light of life
We ask for your Word to be with us,
that our understanding may be opened,
the feebleness of our human words forgiven,
our failures to talk with you overlooked.

Be with us particularly at this time,
when your people are confused,
bewildered by conflicting voices,
worried about our fates.

May we open our eyes to the glory of your Word,
Who became one of us and shared our lot,
And shines an eternal light that defeats all darkness.

Amen.

Wilberforce

There has been much in the news about the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States of America and this theme has resonated in other countries of the world which have histories of enslavement and discrimination. Today the Anglican Church commemorates the life and work of William Wilberforce which finally led to the legal abolition of slavery in the United Kingdom and then in the whole of the Western world and finally the whole world.

Slavery has of course existed in many cultures since the start of human civilizations. Though now universally outlawed, as recently as 2019 it was estimated that there were still about a million people worldwide subject to some form of slavery. Real slavery, so called chattel slavery, is a system where some people are literally owned by others. But near slavery, where people have to work for others against their will, is much more common.

In the last one and a half millennia, it is Africa that has suffered the most from slavery, internal, among African kingdoms, then when Arab imperialism conquered North Africa and raided East Africa, and finally when European powers initiated the cross-Atlantic slave trade to the Americas. Estimates are that Muslim slave traders took about 17 million slaves from Africa, European slavers about 11 million. Many people were enslaved inside Africa, as recently as the 1890s there were two million slaves in the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now Northern Nigeria. Some slaves were actually brought to Africa – about a million Christian slaves captured in Europe by North African Muslim pirates over several centuries.

Many countries, European and African, are now apologising for their role in the slave trade, which bled Africa of its human resources.

William Wilberforce, who died in 1833, was an independent member of the British parliament who had been converted to evangelical Christianity in his mid-twenties. He always voted according to conscience, not party. A conservative man, he was convinced of the importance of religion, right living and education, at a time when religious enthusiasm was treated with ridicule in polite society. Wilberforce's faith led him to campaign to abolish the slave trade, which was bringing in about 80% of Britain's foreign income at the time. His campaign was the world's first grassroots human rights campaign, in which men and women from different classes and backgrounds acted to end a great injustice. Wilberforce worked with people who had direct knowledge of the slave trade (such as John Newton), with freed slaves in England (such as Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano, who had published influential books on slavery and the slave trade) and with the Quakers and fellow Church of England social reformers.

Wilberforce struggled for over twenty years to end the British trade in people. It was a triangular trade, the ships took British-made goods to buy the African slaves, transported the slaves to the West Indies and the Americas, sold them and bought tobacco, sugar and cotton to be sold back in England at a huge profit. The first target

was to end the slave trade, achieved in 1807 and then its total abolition in 1834, shortly after Wilberforce died. Slaves were freed in the West Indies, South Africa, Mauritius, British Honduras and Canada.

Slavery was a great evil to Wilberforce because he believed all people were made in the image of God and that Jesus Christ came into the world for all. He was horrified by what he and his colleagues saw as a depraved and un-Christian trade, and the greed and avarice of the slave owners and traders. Wilberforce was one of the founders of the Church Mission Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He often gave more to charity than his own income.

Some quotes from William Wilberforce:

'The distemper of which, as a community, we are sick, should be considered rather as a moral than a political malady.'

'I would suggest that faith is everyone's business. The advance or decline of faith is so intimately connected to the welfare of a society that it should be of particular interest to a politician.'

'What a difference it would be if our system of morality were based on the Bible instead of the standards devised by cultural Christians.'

'It makes no sense to take the name of Christian and not cling to Christ. Jesus is not some magic charm to wear like a piece of jewellery we think will give us good luck. He is the Lord.'

Prayer

(Amazing Grace by John Newton, a former slave ship captain and co-worker with Wilberforce)

Amazing grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come,
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.

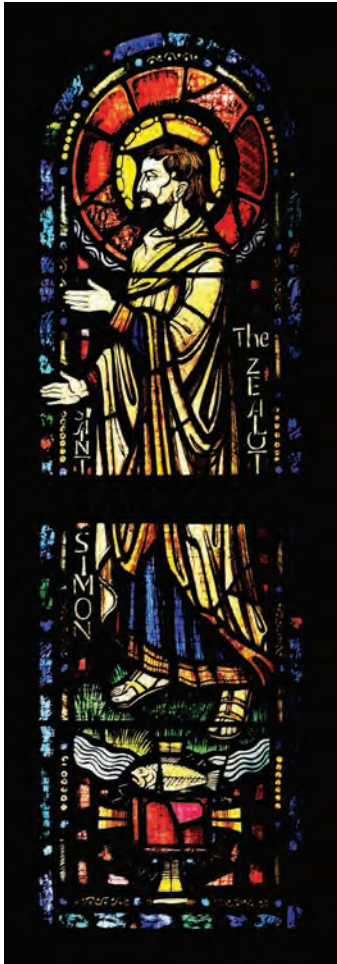
The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

Simon the Zealot

The remaining window to describe in St John the Divine church in Durban is that of the apostle, Simon the Zealot.



Little is known about Simon the Zealot, as little as is known about the true meaning of his title “the Zealot”.

All we hear about him is that he was chosen as an apostle. His name appears among the lists of the disciples in the first three gospels and in the Book of Acts.

Luke and the Book of Acts call him “the Zealot”, Matthew and Mark call him the “the kanaanite” which has a similar Hebrew meaning to the Greek “zealot”.

Some say “the Zealot” refers to his zeal for the Jewish law, others that it refers to his membership of the Jewish party of Zealots or extremists who were not merely zealous for the Law but also violently opposed to the Roman occupiers.

He is thought to have made many missionary journeys with St Jude and to have been martyred with him. The most widespread tradition is that after evangelizing in Egypt, Simon joined Jude in Persia and Armenia or Beirut, Lebanon, where both were martyred in 65 AD.

His emblem is a book and a fish because by zealously spreading the Gospel, he became a great fisher of men (Hence the symbol of the fish on a Bible at the bottom of the window). His feast day is 28 October.

The calling of Simon, whose name in modern terminology would probably be “Simon the Terrorist” shows that Jesus calls all people, whatever their background or political dispositions.

This is seen particularly clearly in the two polar opposites of Matthew and Simon the Zealot. Matthew was an agent for the Roman colonists, collecting taxes for them. Simon Zealot was from a group who made terrorist attacks on the Romans, hoping to start an uprising that would drive them from the land. Incompatible backgrounds, yet Jesus brings them together to form two of the foundational pillars of his Church.

Jesus of Nazareth calls all of us to come forward to be his disciples whatever our backgrounds or beliefs. If there is goodness in our past ideas and practices, they will be enlarged and made better, if bad, they will be purified into good and the dross purged away. No one is beyond the pale when it comes to the call. Through the one from Nazareth we are all accepted and will be commissioned.

Collect

O Almighty God,
who built the Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets,
 Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone:
Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine,
 that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Apocalypse now

I am sure that many of you have been told by friends, or seen social media reports saying, that they think the pandemic is a sign of the end times – that the apocalypse is, or is about to be upon us. It was the same in 1918 with the worldwide influenza pandemic and as it was in the times of the Black Death – the bubonic plague. And it would seem that we have the *Book of Revelation* or, as it should more correctly be called, the *Apocalypse*, to blame. The visions described in this, the last book of our Christian Bible, are of such a nature that they do rather lend themselves to misinterpretation, particularly in the modern world where religious fundamentalism tends to read the scriptures literally and unimaginatively.

But at least the query about whether the end of things is upon does lead to paying some attention to this remarkable book of prophecy about, amongst many other things, the end of everything.

I am going to simplify my starting point by stating two presuppositions (which I base on my reading of the scholarship), namely that the book is possibly by John the Apostle or by another John in his circle and that it was written soon after the death of Peter and Paul in Rome in AD 64. Those two leaders had been martyred alongside thousands of other innocent victims in the purge of Christians by the Emperor Nero. Four years later Nero committed suicide and civil disorder raged in Rome.

John, who had ministered mainly in the region around Ephesus in Asia Minor, had been in Rome during this persecution. However, he was not executed there but exiled to the island of Patmos and may have been a slave labourer in the mines. He probably survived because he was legally under the jurisdiction of the province where Ephesus was, and not Rome. He was eventually released. The book he wrote, inspired by scripture, the Spirit and his terrifying visions, was informed by his experience of the horrifying events in Rome. It was written in response to the Christian suffering at the hands of the Roman imperial state in a violent persecution that had already taken place. The book's purpose then, was as a prophetic warning to the churches he loved in Asia Minor of what *could* lie ahead for them in the foreseeable future.

In understanding the book it is also important to recognize what **type** of literature it is. It is not meant to be a plain account of events nor even a set of prophetic utterances. It is what is called an "apocalypse" – a secret revelation. From about 200 B.C. to A.D. 150 there were a number of Jewish and Christian writings, all written in the same apocalyptic style. They all encourage the faithful to resist evil forces, they show that their sufferings are foreseen and provided for in the ultimate purpose of God, and that the faithful would finally be vindicated. They all portray a present crisis in the world against a background of world history and the present struggle of the faithful as part of the age-long struggle between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness. This struggle will end only in the coming of the Messianic kingdom. They all use symbolic imagery in which what happens of earth has a counterpart in a heavenly drama.

To recontextualise how we read the Apocalypse and apply it to our own time: the revelation is actually about a crisis in the present (or the near past) and it asks us to understand what has happened as part of a much bigger picture, much of it hidden behind the scenes (in particular of national and international politics) and to faithfully endure and to know that God's vindication will come.

Read thus, the Apocalypse is not a bewildering confusion but an incredibly exciting and helpful book that sets two great tasks for us in the present time. We are to understand the bigger picture of what is going on in the whole world (and that is scary in the extreme), and to faithfully endure as God's people knowing that the Creator who vindicated the crucified one will vindicate us.

So we can then understand the prophetic call to us at the beginning of the Apocalypse:

The apocalypse of Jesus Christ, given him by God, to show his servants what is bound to happen soon. He made it known by sending his messenger angel to his servant John, who hereby bears witness to all that he saw – the purpose declared by God and attested by Jesus Christ.

Blessed is the reader, and blessed are the congregation who listen to the words of this prophecy and heed what is written in it. For the crisis is near.

To be continued

Prayer

Lord of all, who is with his people in all times of crisis:
Grant us the gift of enduring faith,
that we may trust your guidance,
even though we do not know what to feel, do or to expect,
in a situation that we were never prepared for,
that we may have the assurance in our hearts that you are truly Lord of all,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Apocalypse – are you ready?

The author of the Apocalypse had the burden of warning the churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire – in what was then called the province of Asia – that it was likely that persecution was coming. He had himself had personal experience of the slaughter of Christians in Rome under the Emperor Nero – he had seen it with his own eyes and in terrible visions. Now he wanted these churches to get prepared for what might come. The persecution might spread from Rome to the whole Roman empire, as indeed later it did.

We have had our own experience of the warnings that preceded the coming of the Covid-19 virus and the advice that was given about what to do when it came. Some of us would have had grandparents or parents who experienced the preparations for the Second World War and the reports of what had happened in its first surges. Imagine getting news of something far worse coming – the extermination by the Roman state of all who remained faithful to Jesus the Christ.

The apocalypse as book is comprised of two main parts.

The first (chapters 2 and 3) is John's message to the churches in Asia in which he analyses their strengths and weaknesses and urges them to get ready for the coming crisis. It is the "get prepared" part of this revelation.

The second part is a record of his visions and experience arising out of the bloodbath in Rome. It is both a record of what has already happened in Rome and a view of what might still come to Asia. In it the prophet describes the history of what has happened, not in factual prose but in dramatic visions, and shows in other visions what is still unfolding and its meaning. That meaning is essentially the past, present and future of the cosmic battle between good and evil and its eventual resolution in the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

In looking at the preparation messages to seven named churches we must not expect to see in them lurid visions. In many ways what is described is very matter of fact. John, who had worked with these seven churches (the number seven is really a symbolic number signifying completeness – there were in fact other churches in the province), describes the local situation of each of them with a clarity that exposes the nature of their life as communities and all the social, economic and religious pressures imposed upon them by a pagan Roman-governed society. By pointing out their weaknesses and strengths, they get the chance to be fully ready when the crisis comes. Jesus Christ is among these churches and he is conducting this inquiry and they are being prepared by Him for what is to come.

What were the messages to them? They can be conveniently summarised as:

Ephesus (2:1-7) – the church that has forsaken its first love

Smyrna (2:8-11) - the church that has suffered local persecution

Pergamum (2:12-17) – the church that needs to repent

Thyatira (2:18-29) – the church that has tolerated false teaching

Sardis (3:1-6) – the church that never finishes the job

Philadelphia (3:7-13) – the church that has endured patiently

Laodicea (3:14-22) – the church that is neither hot nor cold

To each church a warning is given. But a promise is also given to each church, and they are some of the most wonderful promises in the scriptures.

Ephesus is commended for its hard work, its endurance, its sound teaching but it has somehow lost the first love it had for the Lord, a love that they will need if they are to overcome in the future. We all know that sense of our love for God not being what it should be and how that works itself out in a congregation that has lost that dynamic love and maybe relies on rules and a harsh attitude to others.

The promise is “To the conqueror I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Garden of God.”

Smyrna is recognised as being afflicted, destitute and rejected and thrown out of the Jewish synagogue. It is also subject to local persecution. But the Lord acclaims them as being truly rich.

The promise is: “Be faithful unto death and I will grant you the victory crown of life.”

Pergamum, a centre of Roman state power, had already experienced the martyrdom of one of its members. But it had tolerated compromises with pagan society and needed to repent.

The promise is: “To the conqueror I will give a share of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and a new name inscribed on the stone, which no one will know except the one who receives it.” The white stone would be a kind of entrance ticket to God’s eternal feast.

Thyatira is commended for its love, faith, ministry and endurance but has tolerated false teaching from a person claiming to be a prophet – who probably argued that they could compromise with pagan society. We can think of all the false prophets and prosperity church cults in contemporary South Africa to get a sense of the problem here.

The promise to those who have not given in is “I will give him the Morning Star” [Jesus is identified with this Morning Star – Venus, seen before dawn].

Sardis is chastised for never completing anything. Although it is thought of as a lively assembly, it is in fact dead. But some have remained faithful.

The promise is “The conqueror shall be robed in white garments, and I most certainly will not strike out his name from the book of life, and I will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.”

Philadelphia has not denied the name of Jesus and has endured.

The promise is: “I will make the conqueror a pillar in the temple of God, and he shall surely not go out of it any longer, and I will inscribe upon him my God’s name and the name of my God’s city – the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven from my God – as well as my new name.”

Laodicea has a terrible condemnation – “I know your works— that you are neither hot nor cold. I would that you were cold or hot. Thus, since you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you from my mouth.” Though they think they are rich, they are in fact poor and naked. They have to be in earnest and repent.

The promise is: “Look: I stand at the door and knock; should anyone hear my voice and open the door, I will enter in to him, and I will dine with him and he with me. To the conqueror I will grant a seat beside me on my throne, just as I also conquered and sat with my Father on his throne.”

Reading these seven messages should be at least an annual duty of every Christian and every congregation.

Are we ready for the crisis.?

Prayer

Father of all and inspirer of the prophets and apostles:
We give thanks for the messages to your ancient churches.
May we take the messages to heart and examine our own lives.
May we be prepared for all that is before us and be loyal to you.
Through your grace may we receive the wonderful promises you have made.
May we eat from the tree of life,
May we wear a conqueror’s crown,
May we possess a new white stone of identity,
May our name be in the Book of life,
May we be a pillar in your church,
May you knock on our door and enter in and eat with us,
May we receive the Morning Star,
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
For ever and ever.

Amen.

Apocalypse – the Lord rules

The first three chapters in the Apocalypse were a preparation for the visions to come, getting the mind of the reader ready for what was to come, warning the churches and assessing their strengths and weaknesses and making a promise to those who would conquer. We now know that the church faced a coming crisis. The visions proper in John's Apocalypse are in chapters 4 to 22 and in them is revealed the true nature of that crisis.

Many people have been led to believe that the Revelation or Apocalypse of John is a doleful and pessimistic book. In fact it abounds with good news, and in spite of the horrible events it records – some of which had recently happened in Rome – and its depiction of God's anger with evil, it is full of affirmations of what we as human beings can do in the unfolding events to help the triumph of good. It also ends in a marriage feast like all good comedies, and unity and love have the last word. Moreover, many parts of the book and visions provide a luminous image of the heavenly glory that is mirrored and anticipated in the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church. We are asked to participate in and witness faithfully to this heavenly liturgy in which the Creator and Redeemer is glorified. Indeed worship is the central activity of the book. It is either true worship, directed to God and the Lamb, or it is idolatrous, given to Babylon (the Roman Empire) or the Beast (Satanic forces of evil).

In Chapter 4, John has a vision of God enthroned and worshipped by all the forces of the universe. It is as if a reporter prophet has been admitted to the throne room of a king and is privy to the discussions, the secret planning about the war against evil. There are lots of other images in the visions of where God is – in a synagogue with a scroll, in a temple with an altar and incense, in a lawcourt in which the prosecutor, the accuser, has been evicted. Indeed the imagination is somewhat bewildered as the images flow into each other.

It is an awesome vision but we are not to be paralysed by fear for around God's throne there is a rainbow, reminding all of the rainbow in the story of Noah, that God will never destroy his people and that in spite of the coming disaster, God is a God of mercy.

In Chapter 5, John sees a sealed scroll of events past, present and future and he begins to weep bitterly because no person was fit to open it. This scroll contains God's redemptive plan for the creation and somehow it has to be opened for the plan to be set in operation – because God wants human beings to be active agents of his will for the creation. Until the scroll is opened, God's purposes remain not merely unknown but unaccomplished. No wonder the prophet weeps. He weeps with disappointment because God's action to bring an end to suffering and to establish justice seems to be indefinitely postponed.

But then he is told by one of the heavenly elders (5:5-9):

“Do not weep; look: The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so as to open the book and its seven seals.” And in the midst of the throne and the four animals, and in the midst of the elders, I saw a Lamb, like one that had been slaughtered, ... And he came and took it from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. And when he had taken the book the four animals and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, holding each a lyre, and gold libation-dishes full of incenses, which are the prayers of the holy ones. And they sing a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to receive the book and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered and by your blood you made a purchase for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made them into a kingdom and into priests for our God, and they will reign upon the earth.”

So the scroll can be opened. It is unsealed by Jesus the Lamb of God. His sacrificial death means that God’s redemptive plan is implemented. There are other extremely important things in this passage. The Jewish religion had expectations of a Messiah who would establish the reign of God. All the hopes of the Old Testament are now fulfilled. John looks, but sees no raging Lion but instead, a slaughtered Lamb. Here John provides the entire Christian key to the Old Testament. Whatever is spoken of in the Old Testament about the victory of the Messiah and the defeat of evil must now be seen as pointing to the way of the Cross. And the people who follow the man on the cross will be drawn from all peoples on earth and they will be the priests of the creation.

Then there is victory song of the whole creation welcoming this new covenant.

We are ready now to see what has happened on earth to this new people.

(To be continued)

Prayer (Liturgy of St James in the Gerard Moultrie translation)

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the pow'rs of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away

At his feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim, with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!

Apocalypse – why do the innocent suffer?

Much of the Apocalypse is not a prediction of the future but an account of the recent past, which for many of the participants might as well have been the end of the world. John had direct experience of the events in the relatively recent events in Rome – the massacre of multitudes of Christians on the order of Emperor Nero, the fire that burnt much of Rome, and the civil unrest, civil war and the sack of Rome in the period after Nero's suicide. John describes himself as "your brother and partner in the ordeal" (1:8).

A central theme of the Apocalypse is the cry of the martyrs. Why have they suffered? Why have the innocent suffered?

So by Chapter 6 we are ready now to see what has happened on earth.

In dramatic pictorial language the seals of the scroll are broken one by one and we see the disorder and death that have afflicted Rome: the so called four horsemen of the apocalypse delivering military invasion, rebellion, famine, and death.

But it is the fifth seal opened that is crucial (6:9-10):

And when he opened the fifth seal I saw below the sacrificial altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the sake of God's word, and for the sake of the witness that they had borne. And they were crying out in a loud voice, saying, "How long, O master, the holy and the true, will you not judge and exact justice for our blood from those who dwell upon the earth?"

As we read the Apocalypse we need to constantly remind ourselves about who the central figure is in this book. It is the slain and risen Lamb, the Paschal or Passover Lamb that is given to us in the holy Eucharist, instituted by Jesus at the last meal he celebrated with the disciples before his atoning death.

Here the martyrs lie, killed because they gave testimony, the same testimony that had brought Jesus to the Cross. Their cries echo the cries of all people in history who have died or been persecuted because they gave witness to the truth.

It sounds to our ears as if the martyrs want revenge, but what they are appealing for is justice that is seen to be done. They have gone to their death with faith in God's word, the example of Jesus before them, but unless there is divine vindication, that faith is an illusion. John is writing for Christians who may soon be faced with the same choice. Was the martyrs' faith valid? We must also remember that Jesus faced the same decision in the Garden of Gethsemane. So the question "How long?" is awfully real.

The answer that is given is twofold (6:11):

They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

The white robe is a symbol of victory, purity and bliss These are the tokens of a new heavenly existence. The martyrs must be patient. But the second answer is more important in relation to those listening to John. John has warned the seven churches that they face an imminent call to be witnesses also, to be martyrs in whose death Jesus Christ wins again the victory of the Cross. It is by the continued martyrdom of the Church that the final victory is to be won.

It is this theme that will work its way through the remaining pages of the book in which we see the consequences of witness and worship that is true (directed to the Creator and the Lamb) or idolatrous (directed to Babylon, or the Beast and its supporters).

Meanwhile, the sixth seal, is opened and the beginning of a series of demolitions of the world's complacency and self-comfort begins. It starts with a cosmic earthquake (6:12-17) not to be taken literally as an earthquake forecast but rather as an indication that God's justice will shake the foundations of the present world political order that is alienated from God (compare Hebrews 12:25-27).

It is in our own context that we can symbolically see earthly disasters like Covid-19 as one of the shakings of human complacency and the false belief that we do not need human and ecological justice in the world.

(To be continued)

Prayer

(Adapted from Prayer for Victims and Perpetrators of Injustice – Catholic online)

Father of all,
We pray for all those who have fallen victim to hatred and inhumanity,
for those left desolate in the mourning for loss.
We pray also for the perpetrators, for those whose hearts are cold,
Lord, may they turn to the light.

We pray for children who are being born into this world of conflict and violence,
for women and mothers who suffer needlessly,

for all those who have been forced into unemployment,
who long to return to work,
for all those who struggle to support their families,

for the children who cry in their beds at night and wonder if they are to blame,
for the mothers and fathers who must try to explain the unexplainable,
for all the children who have died before their time,
for the innocents who have been denied their rights and use of their gifts.

We pray for your new heaven and a new earth,
in which your justice and love will reign,
and your Holy Spirit guide this world,
through Jesus Christ, who reigned victorious on the Cross.
Amen.

Apocalypse – liturgy and violence

Much bad theology has been built upon the middle chapters of the Apocalypse because of over-literal interpretations of random verses from the book. Partly because of this, the mainline churches have tended to abandon it to the cults and the conspiracy theorists. This is sad because the Apocalypse is a construction built of profound insights into the purpose of God, expressed not as a narrative but in symbols and images. It is Spirit-inspired poetry written by a man who had experienced the real-life hell of persecution in Rome and was now reliving it and repeatedly trying to make sense of the persecution in signs and portents, battles, liturgies and visions of angelic wrath.

In the middle chapters we are forced to look at the consequences of witness and worship that is true and directed to the Creator and the Lamb, or worship that is idolatrous and directed to Babylon, or the Beast and its supporters. We also have to accept that what is being described is of things happening at two levels at once – on earth and in heaven (not the modern popular idea of heaven as some sort of fluffy Garden of Eden paradise but simply the invisible realm behind visible reality). So John exposes us to images showing the repeated conflicts between the Lamb and the Beast, the Bride-Woman and the Scarlet Woman, Jerusalem and Babylon. In this conflict, taking place on both earth and heaven, bearing witness is affirming the true God as against the idolatrous figures. And these messages are given to John's hearers to encourage them in choosing between the Lamb and the Beast, where choosing the Lamb will most likely lead to being killed.

We also need to recognise that the Apocalypse is thoroughly influenced by the worship of Christians of that time. In between the descriptions of natural and unnatural disasters on earth, are the scenes set in heaven that reflect the liturgy and content of the Eucharist.

John provides comfort, the dead martyrs are with God (7:15-17):

“For this reason they are before God's throne, and worship him day and night in his sanctuary, and the one sitting on the throne will spread a tabernacle over them. No longer will they hunger, nor any longer thirst, neither surely shall the sun beat down upon them, nor any scorching heat, Because the Lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them the way to springs of life's waters, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Modern people tend to think of John's visions as being about the total destruction of humanity. But though there is a relentless series of plagues and woes, the reason they continue is because humanity does not come to its senses (9:20-21):

“And the remainder of humanity, those who were not killed by these calamities, still did not turn their hearts away from the works of their hands, so as not to prostrate themselves before demonic beings and before the gold and silver and bronze and stone and wooden idols, which can neither see nor hear nor walk, And neither did

they turn their hearts away from their murders or from their sorceries or from their whorings or from their thefts.”

Evil has led to a fundamental suppression and perversion of the truth. Satan, the Dragon, the deceiver and accuser of the world, has persuaded humanity to exchange the truth of God for a lie, for a monster, to make itself at home in the corruption of Babylon (Rome), and to concoct a travesty of the Church in false religion. They are so alienated, that faced by the forgiveness and love from the sacrificed Lamb of God, they can only see a figure of terrible divine vengeance destroying those who destroy the earth.

That is why there is a depiction of worship as double-edged, it is blessing to the people of God, but a judgement on the enemies of the truth (8:3-5):

“And another angel came and stood on the sacrificial altar holding a gold censer, and many incenses were given to him, so that he might offer them with the prayers of the holy ones upon the gold sacrificial altar before the throne. And from the angel’s hand the smoke of the incenses rose up before God along with the prayers of the holy ones. And the angel took the censer and filled it from the fire of the sacrificial altar and cast it onto the earth, and there came peals of thunder and noises and lightning flashes and an earthquake.”

Eucharistic worship is also the vengeance of the Lamb. What happened on the Cross, represented in the celebration of the Eucharist, put the whole world under judgment, all humanity, including those who now are signed by the Cross. Indeed it can be seen that in a very real sense that is where the ‘judgement at end of the world’ happens, there on Good Friday at the crucifixion. That was the end of everything.

And now the Apocalypse starts to show where the victory starts, though there is still much suffering, for in Chapter 11 we are told of two martyred witnesses, fulfilling the role of a Moses and Elijah and possibly referring to Peter and Paul: “And, whenever they shall complete their testimony, the beast that rises up out of the abyss will wage war on them, and will conquer them, and will kill them.”

Enter the woman (12:1-2):

“And a great sign was seen in heaven: a woman robed with the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, And she was pregnant, and she cries out, enduring birth-pangs, and in an agony to give birth.”

The new world is coming.

(To be continued)

Prayer

Lord of all,
who through your Son called us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth:
Give us the strength and endurance to be your witnesses,
That we may stand always for the truth,
and stand with those who suffer for the truth.
We give thanks for all your witnesses
who have spoken truth to us,
and stirred us to follow your Son
and be guided by your Spirit.
May all those who suffer for the truth at this time be protected.
Through the might of you Son and the enlightenment of your Holy Spirt.
Amen.

Apocalypse – woman versus dragon

The magnificent vision of the woman and the dragon (12:1-17) is passed on to us in the languages of images and myth. Each image is complex and multiple in meaning. But what does it mean to us? Is it too lurid and hectic? Who is the woman? Who is the child? What is the dragon? What happens? Where does it happen? One route to answering these questions is to go off and read all the other books of the New Testament and put them together in a straightforward plain narrative. But this amazing passage sums that all up in a few images that one can never forget.

“And a great sign was seen in heaven: a woman robed with the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, And she was pregnant, and she cries out, enduring birth-pangs, and in an agony to give birth. And another sign was seen in heaven, and look: a great flame-hued dragon who had seven heads and ten horns and on his heads seven diadems, And his tail drags along one third of the stars of heaven, and he cast them onto the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth so that, when she should give birth, he might devour her child. And she bore a son, a male child, who is about to shepherd all the gentiles with a rod of iron, and her child was seized away to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, there where she has a place prepared by God, so that they might nourish her for twelve hundred and sixty days.

And war broke out in heaven: that of Michael and his angels waging a war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, And did not prevail, nor was any place still found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was cast down, the ancient serpent, the one that is called Slanderer and Accuser, the one that leads the whole inhabited world astray – it was cast down into the earth and its angels were cast down with it.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, “Now has come about the salvation and the power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah, because the prosecutor of our brothers, the one prosecuting them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their own soul all the way to death. For this reason be glad, O heavens and those dwelling therein; alas for the earth and the sea, because the Slanderer has descended into you with a great rage, knowing that he has little time. ... And the dragon was enraged over the woman, and went off to wage a war with the rest of her seed, who keep God’s commandments and hold to the witness of Jesus.”

The woman is both the Church and Mary, the one who gives birth to the child, Jesus. The ‘child’ is snatched away to God and his throne at the Ascension. The Church gives birth to us, the suffering people of God. The woman is in continuity with the original people of God but stands also for the renewed people of God, the Church. The twelve stars above her head apply to both the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel (original people of God), and the twelve apostles (renewed people of God).

The dragon is evil personified, Satan, the Accuser, the prosecutor, the Slanderer of the Old Testament, the serpent, the bringer of chaos. The seven heads allude to the seven hills of Rome and the ten horns are various Roman emperors. Yes, John had it in for the Roman empire which had become Satanic.

All this is happening at ground level so to speak.

But in heaven (again remember, not our 'paradise heaven' but the invisible part of the creation) there is a war on. The dragon is cast out of heaven. We can try and put this in blander modern language. The coming of Jesus means that no more can our understanding of God be distorted. We now see God as he is through Jesus of Nazareth. God is not a vengeful tyrant or responsible for evil. False images of God have been thrown out of heaven. Humanity is forgiven, there is no longer anybody in heaven prosecuting us.

The dragon has been cast down from heaven, conquered, by two things: the death of Jesus on the Cross (the blood of the Lamb) and by the martyrs' witness (by "the word of their testimony, and they did not love their own soul all the way to death"). And here we have a recollection of the words of Jesus (Mark 8:34; Luke 5:11). The victory in heaven is the result of the death of Jesus on earth.

But at this point we can also remember John's very practical warnings that persecution may spread from Rome to Asia Minor:

"And the dragon was enraged over the woman, and went off to wage a war with the rest of her seed, who keep God's commandments and hold to the witness of Jesus."

Chapters 13 to 17 describe in lurid images the war between the woman robed with the sun and the dragon's beast. The beast monster, on which sits a different, unholy female, a symbol of Rome, is aided by a second beast, the beast's sidekick which represents all the power of propaganda, false religion, corrupt media and fake news that is used against God's purpose. And this Satanic control of a civilization, to which most people are subservient, is epitomised by a mark on them of the all encompassing economic power of Rome – the number 666. The number has a simple explanation. In Hebrew, numbers are represented by letters of the alphabet. The name Nero Caesar in Hebrew (Nron Qsr) adds up to 666. "Here is the wisdom: and let whoever has a reasoning mind calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. And its number is six hundred and sixty-six."

In Chapter 17 we are see the ghastly vision of the woman seated on the scarlet beast:

"I saw the woman make herself drunk on the blood of God's people and on the blood of the witnesses of Jesus."

In this awful parody of the drinking of the Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic wine we see the corruption of evil at its starkest.

It is time for the judgement on Babylon, of the great whore of Babylon.

To be continued

Prayer (adapted from *Crown of twelve stars of our Lady of mercy* Chaplet prayer)

Let us praise and give thanks to the most holy Trinity,
who has given to us the woman clothed with the sun,
with the moon under her feet,
and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

God the Father of mercies,
You sent your Son into the world
As rescuer of the human race;
May we seek to spread to all peoples
the true liberty of your children.

We ask this through
our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Apocalypse – the fall of Babylon

The book of the Apocalypse is meaningless without the assumption that God hates and punishes sin, and regards all sin as aspects of idolatry. John mocks the “kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong” who are compelled to hide “from the wrath of the Lamb” (6:15-17). Justice is inexorable and plague follows plague, as justice action is taken until “the wrath of God is ended” (15:1).

It is a mistake to think that the disasters described by the writer of the Apocalypse are simply imagined or reworked from similar visions in the Book of Daniel or other Jewish apocalyptic writings. Shortly after Emperor Nero’s suicide, Rome descended into civil war and the city was sacked. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote a description of what happened that is, if anything, more lurid than John’s:

The city exhibited one entire scene of ferocity and abomination. ... Rivers of blood and heaps of bodies at the same time; and by the side of them harlots, and women that differed not from harlots - all that unbridled passion can suggest in the wantonness of peace - all the enormities that are committed when a city is sacked by its relentless foes - so that you could positively suppose that Rome was at one and the same time frantic with rage and dissolved in sensuality. ... Lamentation was heard from every quarter, and Rome was filled with cries of despair and the horrors of a city taken by storm.

The Christians were not naive, ignorant or otherworldly. They understood their world, they knew how it worked, and how it was founded on greed, exploitation, profiteering, imperialism and false beliefs. The whole economy of Rome was built on sinful actions and therefore was rightly named by Christians after the city of Babylon, that destroyer of Jerusalem and God’s people. Through its persecution of the Christians, Roman power had revealed itself as controlled by the bestial, daemonic foes of God (16:8; 17:16; 18:8; 19:20; 20:9-15; 21:8). No wonder the Christians waited for its downfall.

One needs to read the whole of Chapter 18 to get a sense of the Christian understanding of the sin that was embodied in the Roman Empire and of the sharpness of the Church’s analysis of the economy and politics of Rome, its trade in the “bodies and souls of human beings”. It should be impossible for anyone to read Revelation 18:9-24 and not see that the early Christians were making clear statements about the political and economic practices of Rome.

What is crystal clear is that the message of the apocalypse is that no civilization built on injustice and greed and idolatrous materialism in all its forms, will survive. In due course “those who destroy the earth” (11:18) will be destroyed. One cannot but think here of the threat of ecological damage and man-made climate change. We have all, and perhaps in particular in South Africa which is deeply infected with corruption and utter contempt for the poor, to take this warning to heart.

But it is not all gloom at human failure. The voice that announces the fall of Babylon comes from an angel “and the earth became bright with his splendour” (18:1). The angel is an angel of the gospel. It does not come to gloat over the fallen city but to announce the triumph of God’s purposes and the liberation of God’s people. The light is coming.

What follows is the preparations for a marriage and a new heaven and the new earth. There are some prior and important excursions (in Chapters 19 to 20) into the destruction of the destroyers which include the pushing down into the abyss from whence they came of the evil forces and then the promise of a millennium before the final destruction of death.

The coming of the end is near – and that end is the gloriously new.

(To be continued)

Prayer

Father, whose Son defeated the daemonic powers on his Cross,
We pray that you will destroy the power of the destroyers of earth.
We thank you for the creation and all the gifts of human creativity,
may these gifts be protected and nurtured for the good of all.
Grant that we may align ourselves with those who stand against the destroyers,
May we voice the truth in support of those against corruption,
and may we also help the victims of those who exploit and damage.
May we take assurance in your victory over evil and death,
through your Son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,
For ever and ever.
Amen.

Apocalypse – invitation to wonderful things

True worship comes to fulfilment in the “supper for the marriage of the Lamb.” The Apocalypse is about true worship of the true God, a mystical marriage with Him and his people, a marriage between a new heaven and a new earth.

The marriage is made visible in the witness of Christians and in the Church’s worship, that is, its sacramental life, especially in the Eucharist. Apart from this truth, this life, there is error, folly, despair, horror, and destruction – the history of fallen mankind, which wages war against the Lamb of God, the Lamb who was “slain before the foundation of the world” to save that cosmos (13:8).

Many of us will remember the days when we studied Shakespeare at school, reading through tragedies like *Macbeth* and comedies like *All’s well that ends well*. We will have heard of, even if we have not read, Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, which starts in Hell and ends in Paradise. Well the Apocalypse is going to show us a good end.

We discover that the prophet from Patmos also includes elements of comedy. John, like most of the Old Testament prophets, has been placed in rather strange situations and had to tell some extremely bizarre and unlikely stories. He has told us about dragons and beasts, locusts, flying angels, eating bitter and sweet scrolls and of a woman robed by the sun. There is some incongruity between the grand story he tells and the simple human being who gets very confused and nearly ends up being so awed by angels that he wants to worship them and has to be warned off by them, not once, but twice!

“See here, no! I am a fellow servant along with you and with your brothers who hold to the witness of Jesus; make obeisance to God. For the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (19:10)

And he says to me, “See here, no! I am a fellow servant along with you and with your brothers the prophets and with those who keep the words of this book; make obeisance to God.” (22:9)

You see, where the Apocalypse ends, is a place of bubbling, levitating, confusing ecstasy. One wants to sing to the images that John’s vision provides for us:

- the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride (21:1-2)
- God now dwelling with humanity (21:3)
- the end of all death, grief, crying, pain and night (21:4)
- the making of all things new (21:5)
- the end of religion and temples, for God and the Lamb are themselves the Temple, they are directly present (20:22)
- the bringing of the glory and honours of the gentiles into the city (21:24-26)
- a city whose gates are always open to all to come in (21:25)
- the flowing of the river of the water of life (22:1)
- trees of life, for the healing of the nations (22:2)

One asks, is not the Apocalypse meant to be about the end of the world? Well only in one sense, that of the end of the old, but it is actually about a new beginning and one that takes earth utterly seriously. Everything that we value about earth is back, renewed. Even if we think that all has been destroyed, somehow humanity is back and all that is good and glorious about human civilisation is revitalised.

So we end with the marriage in which the creation is united to its God and feasting at his table. The future, the bride, has been unveiled, which is what the term “apokalypsis” means – “unveiling”.

Meanwhile, we the servants of God in the midst of a viral pandemic and living in a corrupt society can ponder the message of the Apocalypse. Though for many it has long been a closed book with a bad press, if we open it we can say: “I see wonderful things”.

And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.”
And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wishes take freely of the water of life.

Prayer (Revelation 19:6-7)

Alleluia, because our Lord God the Almighty has reigned!
Let us rejoice and exult, and we shall give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come.

You are on your own

We are at a difficult time. The old normal (defaced as it was by inequality and corruption) has not been ended by the pandemic, but in many ways made worse, in spite of early hopes that we were seeing a new dawn of human collaboration and care for each other in adversity.

There are three models of what happened when the Corona virus first enters a country.

The first group of countries are those that have successfully stifled the spread of the virus through a firm, disciplined lockdown (which also gave the health system time to gear up) and the effective testing and tracing of everybody (yes everybody) infected. Example are New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan and to some extent China.

The second model has a fairly effective initial lockdown but not enough testing and tracing and then when the lockdown is eased a second wave starts. A good example here is Australia where local lockdowns have now been re-imposed.

The last group are those where either the initial lockdown was imposed too late or the easing of the lockdown was done too early with huge waves of infections. The United States of America is a classic case of both happening, the direct result of its amoral, corrupt and moronic political leadership.

If we look at South Africa, we had a hard initial lockdown but the gearing up of the health system was severely compromised by the endemic corruption in government and the private sector at national, provincial and local levels. The easing of the lockdown, largely at the behest of the big business sector and the media they own, was not implemented rationally and now we are well on the way to a massive spread of the infection, though that was probably inevitable given the poverty and inequality in South Africa. It became hopeless when people were allowed to travel crammed into taxis in addition to the difficulties of social distancing in crowded townships and informal settlements. The pandemic will be with us for some time and its effects on people will get worse.

Now virtually everyone knows or is acquainted with somebody who is infected or has died. Earlier it was easier, particularly for middle class people, to live in a sort of bubble with their close friends and de facto continue some sort of social activity. This time has now ended. As the disease spreads, every human interaction you have, is potentially with an infected person. And even if young school children are less likely to develop symptoms of the disease, they are just as capable of spreading it as any adult. One of the results is a growing sense of anxiety even whilst we are all being told we are returning to "normal".

Part of the anxiety is that now we are in effect being told "You are on your own!" We are now responsible for our own safety and our own survival. At least during the first hard lockdown days we felt that somebody was in control of things. Psychologically that

sense of security is gone, its loss exacerbated by the ongoing corruption in the procurement of health equipment and the delivery of food and income support. And it is very difficult to endure anxiety over an extended period. It debilitates us and wears us down.

What are we to do? Now is indeed a time to use the language of the Apocalypse about the endurance of the saints. We have to hang in, hold on. We have been told we are on our own – yes, we are the ones responsible now. We have to protect ourselves and those we love as best we can. We have to learn to be gentle on ourselves. We have to accept that we may be anxious, depressed and wanting to be reckless just to get out. We have to own those feelings, they really are ours, but the divine Spirit is stronger than our anxiety, our depression and our recklessness. [For we are not really alone.] And we have to be gentle with others who may be having this sense of aloneness even harder than we are. We have to be particularly gentle – yet persuasive – with young people, in this modern age so used to immediate gratification and not given to the long haul.

May we all obey God's instruction to endure and keep us from the hour of trial that has come upon the whole inhabited world (Revelation 3:10).

Prayer [Catherine Gorman]

God of all,
we cry out to you for help.
In your mercy, hear our prayer.

Protect us, Lord, and be with us
especially those of us most vulnerable
during this corona virus crisis.

Move us to reach out in love
to our neighbours near and far.
So that the humble may be exalted,
the hungry filled with good things.

Grant us the courage
not to rush back to our old ways,
but to rebuild our world together,
creating foundations of justice,
with equality and peace for all.

Amen.

Transfiguration

Thursday was the Feast of the Transfiguration, an often neglected feast and now more so because we are not meeting for religious services even on Sunday, let alone during the week.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke the context of the Transfiguration is that prior to it, Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah and after it, Jesus warned about his coming death in Jerusalem. This context cautions us to remember that the message of the Transfiguration can only be understood in the context of his coming death and resurrection. Nor can this spiritual high be held onto. The three disciples who desperately wanted the experience to continue by building the traditional Feast of Tabernacles tent-like shelters, are not able to prolong it and the vision goes.

The word “transfiguration” comes from the Latin roots trans- (“across”) and figura (“form, shape”). It thus signifies a change of form or appearance. This is what happened to Jesus: his appearance, as seen by three of his disciples, changed and he became radiant with glory. They saw that “he was transfigured before them, and his face shone out like the sun, and his garments became as white as light.” (Matthew 17:2)

For the Church, the Transfiguration is a point where the meeting of human nature and God becomes visible, with Jesus of Nazareth as the connecting point. As the early church Father Irenaeus put it: “the glory of God is a live human being and a truly human life is the vision of God”.

I think many of us have had Transfiguration-like experiences in our lives. We have looked at people and they seemed to shine with some inner power or grace. We have a spiritual high in which the world seems to come alive, to literally shine. And then sometimes we have seen people acting with tremendous bravery and commitment to the truth and, though there were no holy haloes visible around them, we saw in them the light of the divine glory.

In the time of the pandemic, when many people have put their lives on the line for others, those with the eyes to see, have seen the light of Christ in them. So in the midst of all the darkness and the corruption that takes place in the darkness, there are many lights, many daily transfigurations amidst nurses, doctors, grocery store workers, maintenance workers, whistleblowers and volunteers distributing food to those without income. May we be privileged to see these lights and be blessed, our darkness lightened, and our commitment and endurance strengthened for the road ahead.

Prayer [adapted from traditional prayers]

Father in heaven,
whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured
before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain,
and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem:
give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross
that in the world to come we may see him as he is;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

On the mountain you were transfigured, O Christ God,
And your disciples beheld your glory as far as they were able
So that when they would behold you crucified,
They would understand that your suffering was voluntary,
And would proclaim to the world,
That you are truly the radiance of the Father.

Come, let us ascend the mountain of the Lord
and go into the house of our God.
Let us contemplate the glory of His Transfiguration,
the glory of the only-begotten Son of God the Father.
From His light, let us receive light;
and raised up by the Holy Spirit,
let us sing the praises of the Trinity forever.

Simple pleasures

In this time of general, universal dismay at the pandemic, with many of us feeling constricted and locked in, it may be a time to consider what we have to be thankful for in this period of simple living.

The prime good that we have is life. We are alive and it is good to be alive. [Of course we know of lives where pain or loss makes life seem unbearable.] We know the great goodness of life because we bear children whom we know will inevitably die. The chance of being alive is indeed worth dying for. The pandemic has given many of us pause to think about life, and its value, as so many people are going to die from this disease. We can give thanks for our own life and for the lives of the people we love. What a privilege we have to be alive in the world. What a privilege to be conscious that we are alive, with minds which can know about the world we live in, in all its glory and tragedy, and to make some meaning out of our existence. And we remember the promise of Jesus (John 10:10) "I came that they might have life and might have it in abundance."

We can also give thanks for simple goodness. We know what goodness is and we certainly know it when we experience the goodness of people towards us. Have we lost something in our modern world where the aspiration, the ambition to be good, is hardly ever mentioned? People want to be famous or rich or whatever – but to be good? The simple pleasure of being good and doing good is something all of us can experience. It feels good to truly do good. Our politicians and leaders might experience transfiguration if they aspired more to be good.

We have bodies, and generally it is good to have a body, though older age and illness may dull the pleasure a little. One of the things the lockdown has ironically provided more scope for, is in fact exercise to keep us fit. With the easing of the lockdown the opportunities for walking or running have expanded and some of the things that distract us from exercise have been reduced. This does not diminish the need for some discipline here. The good intentions about keeping fit when the lockdown was declared can evaporate all too easily. We owe it to ourselves and others to keep as bodily lively as possible.

The thoughts above come after a long walk today in which myriad pleasures presented themselves: innumerable beautiful trees, trying to identify which Erythrina flower was which, an unidentified flying raptor, the sea relatively calm, trying to work out the ratio of people who wear their masks properly to those who don't.

And now, after finishing this homily, to bed and back to the 6th volume of the science fiction epic I am engrossed in.

All in all it has not been a bad day, and it included an online Woman's Day service from St John the Divine church with a thought-provoking sermon. And remembering Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:17-18 we should vest our hopes "in God who richly provides us all

things for enjoyment, to work the good, having riches in good deeds, readily giving away, community-people, storing for ourselves the treasury of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that is real.”

Prayer [John J. Morris, S.J.]

Mighty God, Father of all,
Compassionate God, Mother of all,
Bless every person I met,
every face I have seen,
every voice I have heard,
especially those most dear;
bless every city, town and
street that I have known,
bless every sight I have seen,
every sound I have heard,
every object I have touched.
In some mysterious way these have all fashioned my life:
all that I am,
I have received.
Great God, bless the world.

Anger

At times it is right to be angry. All our basic human emotions have a purpose. They help us survive and thrive in life and they help us in our relations with other people. It is not just the nice emotions that have value – love, joy, interest, surprise – but the more negative ones too – fear, sadness, disgust, contempt, shame, guilt, self-hostility, shyness, and anger – that play an important part in our lives and growth as persons.

The downside of these emotions is that if you cannot express them or do something with them to change yourself or your situation, they can burn away inside you with dire effects.

Today I was really angry. I had read an email written by a long-standing acquaintance, whom I had respected as a person of intelligence and general human interest in others. It contained the most alarming sentiments about the pandemic, about lockdowns in general and how irritating and inconvenient they were; support for people espousing conspiracy theories and in essence, an attitude that it didn't matter if a few people died as long as the rest of us gained so-called "herd immunity". This "herd immunity" is the indirect protection from a contagious infectious disease that happens when so many of the population have been infected and developed subsequent immunity that the disease no longer spreads. Unfortunately with Covid-19 to get "herd immunity" would require about 70% of the population contracting the disease, with at least 7% of the population requiring hospitalisation and about half a million South Africans dying. I was outraged. How can people be this stupid, reckless and lacking in compassion for others, especially the vulnerable and poor? And I do not know what to do with my anger. All I can do is share it with you.

There is a lot of anger around and it is justified anger. On Friday the South African Council of Churches and an alliance of South African civil society organisations, including the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation issued the angriest statement I have read in a long time. It was titled "*We refuse to allow corruption to destroy South Africa – Statement on alleged Covid-19 corruption*" and it said:

"There comes a time when the moral depravity of some in positions of authority, and in the private sector, undermine the very notion of nationhood and the underlying value of public service.

After years of state capture and unethical governance, and more recently, large scale looting of Covid-19 emergency funding, that time is upon us.

We are compelled to assert: This is not how we shall be known as a nation. We refuse to allow corrupt networks in different provinces to go about their criminal activity, trampling on the rights of honest and law-abiding people!

...

The state cannot tell us that they did not know that the 'predators' were waiting to 'eat' early on in the pandemic.

...

Let us all close ranks and unmask those from within the public and private sector who appear to want to serve society, but have nothing but their own interests at heart; let there be consequences for the corrupt; and let us recover what rightfully belongs to the people."

They want action. They want to mobilise the public to "demonstrate their outrage at not only the looting, but the lack of consequences for it." That is us, the public. They want us to express our anger and do something about, in whatever ways we can.

We are always warned in scripture to control our anger, to put it only to good purposes. Let us model our good use of anger on Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 3:1-5)

And Jesus again entered a synagogue. And there was a man who had a hand that had been withered; And they observed him closely to see if he will heal him on the Sabbath, that they might bring an accusation against him. And he says to the man having a withered hand, "Stand up in our midst." And he says to them, "Is it permissible on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? To save a soul or to kill?" But they were silent. And, looking around at them with anger, mortified at the hardness of their hearts, he says to the man, "Stretch forth the hand." And he stretched it forth and his hand was restored.

Let us get angry and restore our country.

Prayer

The manifesto from Mary (Luke 1:46-55)

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.

The Church as ministry

The congregation I belong to is in the Anglican Diocese of Natal and the pandemic lockdown that presently inhibits our physical church attendance, may well be extended into another type of lockdown. This will be the loss of much conventional church ministry because of a shortage of funds to pay full-time priests. This is not just a temporary result of no money in the collection plate on a Sunday or the loss of wage income by regular givers during the lockdown. The Diocese simply has too many paid priests in its employ, given the amount of income that it receives each year. These are hard times ruled by people holding the financial ledgers.

One of the benefits of the lockdown and the closure of church buildings is that it has forced us to find new ways of doing ministry and to perhaps rethink how we should be the church community in this changing world. I have been startled by the online creativity of church congregations and the flowering of the technological acumen of many young people, who before were not so prominent in the giving forth of the gospel message. But media wizardry is not the sole answer. We also have to look at the very forms in which we act and take our shape as church community.

In trying to envision new ways of being the ministering church, we have to avoid the danger of thinking we can simply and mechanically go back to what Jesus and his disciples did. We no longer live in an agrarian society of 2000 years ago. But we can learn from what Jesus said of the first seeds of his worldwide church. He saw his followers as a “flock” (that is, not just isolated individuals) guided, protected and overseen by a divine shepherd, a kinship band who were themselves the new temple, a true worshipping community, whose members have the authority to forgive sins and who are “sent” to bring the good news to all.

The leaders of that flock are those who are the servants to this community. Service (*diakonia*) is the principle of this ministry and the authority and esteem of the ministers depend on this humble service (Luke 22:24-27 expresses this particularly well). In summary, service, leadership and mission are all expressed in what Jesus says about ministry, and leadership is seen as arising out of that humble service. The New Testament writers also concur that service (*diakonia*) is the qualification for ministry (1 Corinthians 16:15-16).

The evidence from the New Testament is confusing because the young church was still sorting out how it would govern, lead and service itself. In essence though, we can identify three forms of ministry leadership or roles within the early church:

- **people with spiritual gifts** to minister as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, administrators, ecstasies, interpreters, evangelists, pastors, etc. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:11-12).
- **bishops and deacons**, with the bishops exercising responsibility, oversight and shepherding (Philippians 1.1) and deacons exercising humble service.

- **elders** (presbyters – the English word ‘priest’ is a corruption of this Greek word meaning “elder”) who appear to have been a group of the leading older people in the local congregation and who clearly have some authority. Though at first none were full-time church supported, in due course they became the essential officials of the church.

Over time this confusion became solidified and hierarchically ordered into a de facto twofold system of a bishop and presbyters with the deacons tending to fade out somewhat in the Western world though originally they were some of the first full-time paid clergy. The people with gifts tended to thrive only with the permission of the priest. Issues of levels of education also rose to the fore at different times.

What we can make of this is that ministry in early times seems to have been a much more collegial affair. There were no single elders governing a parish, it was a group or team. The bishop was never alone and always had a team of deacons who did the actual going out into the highways and byways, serving the community, particularly the poor, sick and oppressed.

I do not offer any solutions or even suggestions here. What seems clear to me is that in these hard times we need to re-look at how we organize ourselves. We need to do this, recognizing that we are in a new and bewildering situation in which the church as an institution may be much poorer than it has been for a long time.

The pandemic may be a blessing in disguise if it forces us to reconfigure our being as a church community and to reinstate humble service as a priority.

Prayer (adapted from various prayers for the Church)

O almighty and eternal God!
Who through Jesus Christ
has revealed your glory to all nations,
to preserve the works of your mercy,
that your Church,
being spread through the whole world,
may continue with unchanging faith
in the confession of your name.
Amen.

Gracious Father,
revive your Church in our day,
and make her holy, strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Father,
Who graces each of us with equal measure in your love.
Let us learn to love our neighbours more deeply,
so that we can create peaceful and just communities.
Inspire us to use our creative energies
to build the structures we need
to overcome the obstacles
of intolerance and indifference.
May Jesus provide us the example needed
and send the Spirit to warm our hearts for the journey.
Amen

Inclusive of all

In a famous passage in John's gospel (John 3:16-17), Jesus tells his secret visitor, Nicodemus, that:

For this is how God loved the kosmos: he gave his one and only Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have ageless life. For God did not send his Son into the kosmos to condemn the kosmos, but so that the kosmos might be saved through him.

I do not translate the Greek word *kosmos* as "world", familiar as we are with the phrase "For God so loved the world", because perhaps we need to be startled by the meaning of "kosmos" in the New Testament. Kosmos does not simply mean this planet earth, nor just the human social world. It means the whole order of reality. And not merely the whole universe in terms of size (for our conceptions of that whole universe nowadays are very material and mechanistic). It means everything, the physical reality, the social, political and religious structures of power, the rational order in reality, the invisible realities, heavenly realms and those of the angelic and daemonic.

There are many of us who worry about things. Our minds worry about our guilt. Can we be saved? We worry about people we love. Can they be protected? And what about all the people in our country? And then there are those whose imaginations extend further into worrying about the believers in other religions and those who, through no fault of their own, have never even heard of the Gospel – the good news.

That message in John's gospel is absolutely clear. God saves the whole kosmos. Not just a few selected human beings. Everything and everyone.

That is the exceedingly good news. We can let go of a lot of things. We can in particular let go of the idea that somehow we have to still do something if the world is to be saved. We do not. It is done. God has done it through his Word, his Logos, his one and only Son.

We do, of course, still have lots of things we can do. We can say thank you. That is the job of the Church, that priesthood of all believers. We, in the Church, can, on behalf of all, say thank you. We can also spread this good news, to those who have not heard it, and in dialogue with those in other religions or no religion who already have a sense of the divine presence.

And in the current pandemic we give thanks to the saver of the kosmos by telling the truth and caring for all others at whatever the cost.

Prayer [Teilhard de Chardin]

Glorious Christ,
the divine influence that is active in the depths of matter
and the dazzling centres where the fibres of the universe meet:
power as implacable as the world and power as warm as life,
you whose forehead is of the brightness of snow, whose eyes are of fire,
and whose feet are brighter than molten gold, you whose hands hold the stars;
you are the first and the last, the living and the dead and the risen again;
it is to you to whom our being cries out a desire as vast as the universe:
“In truth you are our Lord and our God.”

Poem about Wisdom from Proverbs 8:22-34

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth –
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

‘And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.
Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.
For whoever finds me finds life.
and obtains favour from the Lord;
but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death.’

Those who are absent

In the *Apology* of Justin Martyr, penned by this Christian writer and martyr about AD 156, he describes the Eucharist ending with the distribution by the deacons to the parishioners “and to those who are absent, they carry away a portion.”

Today, in most of the world, churches are shut, and believers are all “absent”. In what sense are these absent people receiving “a portion” in our strange new world?

Justin was writing in a very distant time when Christians belonged to a prohibited faith and met secretly in their homes. Yet they all did their best to gather for the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving, every Sunday. This is what he wrote about it:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

Clearly it was thought important that all the faithful in that congregation received the holy food. As he puts it:

And this food is called among us Eukaristia, of which no one is allowed to partake but the person who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered to us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, “This do you in remembrance of Me, this is My body;” and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, “This is My blood;” and gave it to them alone.

That distribution to those absent by the deacons (in those days every congregation would have had several) was accompanied by what we today would call food parcels and clothing:

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. ... And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

Modern Methodist theology beautifully calls this distribution the “Extending the Table for those unable to be present”.

We are often warned to always respect the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. We also have to respect the Body of Christ in the community of the Church for we are brought into communion not only with the Risen Lord, but with each other. As Saint Augustine tells those who are to receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist: “Be what you see, and receive what you are.” The gift of the Eucharistic body of Christ comes to us and through the Holy Spirit, we are united to that Body and each other as the Body of Christ.

Participation in the Eucharist (right there or online) should thus increase our love for one another. It should remind us that we are responsible for each other and collectively have a duty to represent Christ and to bring Christ to the world.

How then do we “extend the Table”, not only during this pandemic and its isolation of us from each other but in the more general fragmentation of community in the modern world?

Prayers [Church of England]

As the grain once scattered in the fields
and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside
are now reunited on this table in bread and wine,
so, Lord, may your whole Church soon be gathered together
from the corners of the earth
into your kingdom.
Amen.

Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.

May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The more excellent Way

According to the Acts of the apostles, followers of the risen Christ were first known, not as “Christians” but as followers of “the Way” or as those who had chosen “the Way of Life” as Peter puts it (Acts 3:15) “And you killed the leader on the Way of Life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.” Saul (Paul) when he was persecuting the Christians, went in search of “persons belonging to the Way” (Acts 9:2). The name can be seen as going back to Jesus himself (John 14:6): “Jesus says to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.”

It was an appropriate name for something that is not just intellectually believed in but lived, walked in, journeyed on.

What were the characteristics of this Way?

It was a **way of life**. Paul in Romans 6:3 speaks of the Christians being baptized so that they “might walk in the newness of life.”

It was a **different way**. Its newness was not only in its offering a more abundant life but in being different from the other ways in which human beings normally live, living under what Paul describes as the law of sin and death, condemning themselves to be enemies of God. It was different in the startling, seemingly impossible demands it made on people and in the love power it offered them to enable them to live in this new way.

It is a “**more excellent way**” (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:1-13) because it is the way of love and is open to all of us, regardless of our background or social and economic status.

It was a **simple way**. Its simplicity was terrifying compared to the complications of other religious and cultural regimes. This simplicity is shown clearly in Jesus’ twofold summary of the Old Testament Law: love the one God with your whole being and love your neighbour as yourself [and we need to remember that for the Old Testament your ‘neighbour’ was a foreigner (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)].

It was a **costly way**. Other ways offered all sorts of short cuts (easier religion, few burdens, lenient morals, material comfort, state control, persecution of the innocent and scapegoats on your behalf). It clashes with these other ways. Jesus’s way offers the Cross and he calls on his people to take up the Cross and follow him.

It was about going on the way **now**. Unlike other ways it is open only now, now in this moment of decision, of decision time (*kairos*). It is a way that exists now, not in some time in the future when it is more convenient, easier, or when we are holier or older. And, because life is a constant series of decisions about other people, what we do now is what determines our future (See Matthew 25:31-46).

It is always a way passing through a **crossroads**. Finding the way, the true way and keeping on that way is not a natural possibility or a foregone conclusion. We need the love and grace of God to do so.

It is a **joyous way**. For those who are open to love it is a joyous way. Even if it leads to the Cross, the followers of Jesus exhibit the newness of life. For they have conquered the regime of the life of hatred and discrimination and greed. The followers of the way are blessed.

Prayer

Your companions on the way – the blessed (as identified in the Beatitudes)

“Blessed are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

Blessed are those who mourn;
God will comfort them!

Blessed are those who are humble;
they will inherit the earth!

Blessed are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;
God will satisfy them fully!

Blessed are those who are merciful to others;
God will be merciful to them!

Blessed are the pure in heart;
they will see God!

Blessed are those who work for peace;
God will call them his children!

Blessed are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!”

Zikaron

In reaction to my quoting a passage on the Eucharist from the early Christian writer, Justin Martyr, I been asked to say something about the “real presence” of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal.

I think it necessary to start by looking at the Last Supper which was, according to the first three gospel accounts, a Passover meal. The Passover was a holy celebration of the people of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. So how we understand what Jesus said at the Last Supper may be made clearer by looking at that context. The Christian commemoration of the Last Supper of Jesus in the Eucharist is necessarily built upon that Passover Supper.

At a Passover meal unleavened bread is eaten and wine drunk with various blessings to sanctify them in the ritual of recalling the greatest event in the story of Israel – the freeing of the slaves in Egypt in the Passover and their departure, their exodus, to the promised land.

In the Passover service the youngest person present has to ask questions:

“How different is this night from all the other nights?

On all other nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread.

Tonight we eat only unleavened bread!

On all other nights we eat any vegetables.

Tonight we must eat bitter herbs!”

An answer explaining the significance of the meal is then given (as seen in Deuteronomy 26:5-9):

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Then the symbolism of the food before them is explained:

a lamb shank:

“This is the bone of the lamb whose blood was used for the sign to God when he passed over the houses of the children in Egypt when the tenth plague struck the first born and spared our houses.”

the unleavened bread:

“It is because the King of Kings, the Holy one, revealed himself to our ancestors and redeemed them before their dough had time to ferment and rise. As it is written: “They baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into unleavened cakes; for they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared any provision for their journey.”

the bitter herbs:

“It is because the Egyptians oppressed our ancestors in Egypt. As it is written: “They made life bitter for them with hard labour, with clay and bricks, and with all kinds of labour in the field; whatever work tasks they performed were backbreaking.”

In addition four cups of wine are drunk that represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in the book of Exodus 6:6-7: “I will free you,” “I will deliver you,” “I will redeem you,” and “I will take you as my people.”

Here we see how physical objects (food and drink) are explained as having special symbolic significance. They are used to evoke memories of the past so that what happened in the past is recalled into the present. The Hebrew word “*zikaron*” (memorial) applies to these objects that make us remember. The lamb, bread, herbs and wine have become powerful memory devices. These memory related objects recreate an experience. Indeed, there is a commentary from Jesus’ time by Gamaliel (a scholar and judge who had lectured to the young Paul) on Exodus 13:8 which states:

“Every man in every generation must consider himself as having been **personally** delivered from Egypt. Every Israelite must know that he **personally** has been freed from slavery.”

So rather than just ‘remembering’ something in the past, one ‘relives’ or ‘participates’ in the event, even if you did not originally experience it yourself. So that Passover ritual sets those participating in the meal into the original exodus event which the meal commemorates.

So we can now begin to have a deeper understanding of the context in which Jesus takes two of those same Passover elements, bread and wine, and reinterprets them to refer to his own future death, when his body and blood are given in sacrifice for humanity to achieve a greater universal exodus for all.

When we are asked to obey the Gospel command “Do this in remembrance of me” the Greek word used for remembrance or memory – “*anamnesis*” – has the same sense as the Hebrew word “*zikaron*”. We must do this, use the bread and wine representing his body and blood and death on the cross, to recall the event that we can now participate in.

And what is that event?

Jesus’ great Exodus, the saving event on the Cross in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

(To be continued)

Prayers

(Prayerist)

O God, our Mother and Father,
bread baker and wine maker,
we give you thanks and praise.
You worked the world into being,
instilled all creation with life,
and shaped us as your people.
In Jesus Christ, the bread of life and the true vine,
you feed us with the Word,
and nourish us from the stalk.

(Act of humility after Holy Communion)

Jesus, my Lord,
I confess that I am a sinner.
But in your goodness
You invite me to approach your holy table
and to partake of your heavenly banquet.
Trusting in your mercy I come to you with confidence,
albeit with it a contrite and humble heart.
Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof;
but say only the word,
and my soul shall be healed.
Come to me, Jesus,
and keep me in your love
and your grace forevermore.

Really present

It is important to remember that the bread and wine were sacramental food and drink before Jesus gave a new meaning to them. Year by year the Passover meal taught successive generations that God can deliver from death and lead his people from slavery into a life of freedom and strength. It gave hope for the future.

At the Last Supper Jesus added certain words to the accepted forms of blessing bread at the beginning, and the common cup at the end, of a solemn Jewish Passover meal. He may also have given an interpretation of his words (as suggested by John 6:26-65 and 17).

The earliest account we have of the Last Supper is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26):

For from the Lord I received what I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, And, having given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is [being broken] for your sake; do this for my remembrance." Likewise, after supping, the cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink, for my remembrance." For as often as you eat the loaf and drink the cup, you announce the Lord's death until he come.

Jesus's words show us that he was looking forward to the day when this meal would have its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God.

The new Passover and the new Exodus would come, not through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb as a substitute for Israel's firstborn children, but by Jesus' willing offering of himself, the representative of the New Israel, through his death on the Cross. At that Last Supper he was asking his disciples, then and in the future, to join in, to align themselves with his sacrifice and death by their solemn sharing of the bread and the cup of wine, which were the signifiers of his death.

By sharing in them they would also share in his victory over death and eat and drink in his kingdom.

The Eucharist is therefore the recall of the reality that the physical body of Jesus died for the sins of the world. By sharing in the holy bread and wine, we "incorporate" his death into our own particular body and escape from spiritual death and gain access to both the Holy Spirit and eternal life, because sin and its power were "killed" in his body on the cross.

Since the earliest times Christians have taken it that this sharing in the death and victory of Christ through the participating in the Eucharist, is real. It is not just thinking about his death and victory. They affirm that Christ is really present – perhaps one should add, in a special way, so as not to suggest that Christ is not really present at other times and in all time.

Finding the language to explain what happens is, however, not simple and the Church has over the ages sometimes tied itself in knots trying to explain the mystery of the Eucharist and in particular, what happens to the bread and wine. All the words that have been used – figuration, transmutation, transubstantiation, real presence, transignification, etc. are inadequate, particularly when they lose sight of the Eucharistic celebration as a whole and concentrate only on what happens to the bread and wine.

We need to consider what is remembered (“Do this for my *anamnesis*.”):

What then is remembered? Jesus is ‘remembered’ and his cross and death – but in the context of his resurrection. The entire history of salvation is also ‘remembered’ – which explains why there should always be the word of interpretation at the Eucharist, the retelling of that history (and we find this in the “word” part of the service and in the introductory words of the Eucharistic prayer).

Who remembers? The gathering of the faithful remembers and in the Eucharist they claim the benefits of what Christ did once and for all upon the cross and in the resurrection. They take their place in that saving event.

And how does it happen? All denominations would nowadays agree that the *anamnesis* does not occur as if by magic. God is in control and takes the initiative. Most Eucharistic prayers include the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The Church asks God to send down the Holy Spirit so that the bread and wine may truly be the Body and Blood and the Church be the true spiritual body of Christ, that these things, bread and wine, and this body of people, may become what God makes of them, true expressions of his person. Through this Eucharistic gathering, we obey Jesus’ command. Christ is present in the obedient community which is gathered around the table and Christ’s presence in the bread and wine is the sign of that universal body of Christ in the Church. This means that the presence of Christ in the bread and wine cannot be seen in isolation from what this signifies, namely, the presence of Christ in the gathered community.

Prayer [Basil the Great]

Lord Christ our God, King of the ages and Creator of all,
I thank you for all the blessings you have granted me and for the communion of
your pure and life-giving Mysteries.
I pray, therefore, good Lord and Lover of all,
guard me under your protection and within the shadow of your wings;
and grant me with a clear conscience till my last breath worthily to partake of your
holy things for forgiveness of sins and for life eternal.
For you are the Bread of Life, the Source of Holiness, the Giver of all that is good,
and to you we send up the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever,
and to the ages of ages. Amen.

A postscript for Anglicans

The young Queen Elizabeth the First, reflecting on the Eucharist, said:

'Twas Christ the Word that spake it,
The same took bread and break it,
And as the Word did make it,
So I believe and take it.

This statement, profoundly true as it may be, is a typically Anglican compromise because it allows for all sorts of actual belief about what the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharistic bread and wine means.

The Anglican church's *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion* specifically accepts the real presence:

"The supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves; but rather is a Sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to those who rightly and with faith, receive the same, the bread that we break is a partaking of the body of Christ, likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ."

In fact most denominations do accept the real presence: Catholics, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian. But Baptists do not and neither do many ultra-Protestant churches and sects.

Down a level

On Sunday night we had another Presidential address and the announcement that from today, we would be on the next level down on the lockdown scale – heading back towards “normality”, though a normality of a very strange type.

I had already remarked a mere ten days ago that for individuals we were now very much on our own in trying to avoid being infected by the Covid-19 virus. As the lockdown bubbles pop and people begin to congregate together more easily, we have to rely more on our own efforts – through mask wearing, hand sanitation, and the avoidance of getting close to other people – and trust in others to do the same. It is going to be very hard. Grandparents will want to see their grandchildren and vice versa. Friends will want to socialise again (as they are now allowed to do), church congregations want to celebrate together. Yet because Lockdown level 2 allows for gatherings, restaurant and tavern attending, and school opening, the chances of infection increase exponentially. That the number of daily infections has stabilised is not necessarily a sign of final victory.

I suppose it was always going to be difficult. Under immediate threat we all pulled together and at the national level good, rational decisions were made (though of course there was much whingeing from many people who should have known better). It is the coming back from the war front, the dismantling of the barricades, that is proving more difficult.

As is often the case, people who have won a war are often not very good at winning the peace. One need only look at the Biblical story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and how they truly mess up, both in forty years lost in the wilderness and in compromising with the corruptions of Canaan. In South Africa we defeat apartheid and then lose to the corruption of much of the political elite and end up with greater inequality and unemployment than there was thirty years ago. Internationally the Cold War ends and dictatorships all over the world fall and now we see a resurgence of anti-democracy in the Americas and elsewhere. The South African churches that played a pivotal role at the end of the apartheid era then somehow lose the plot and struggle to make ends meet whilst religious con-men in their two million rand cars, fleece the ignorant.

The strange “normality” we are heading into is just a phoney, quiet stage of an ongoing larger war about the future of our planet. The disease that has paralysed us is an inevitable side effect of what the global economic system has been doing to the world with environmentally reckless industrial practices. There will be more pandemics as surely as climate change will start to wreak havoc in the world. They are siblings – their origins are the same.

Just as John's Apocalypse sent letters out to warn the young church of hard days ahead, the Covid-19 pandemic has sent a warning to us – disaster is coming unless you change.

In John's time the message was heeded. John's readers took it to heart and were ready when over the next two hundred and more years, persecution came. Their readiness to suffer for the true and the good triumphed and they eventually converted the Roman Empire.

We have a similar task. We have to get our world ready for change, a change that respects our Mother the Earth and brings justice, the end of inequality and the end of the misery of abject poverty. It can be done and some of the self-serving lies and fantasies of the economic elite (that have led to austerity policies for decades) are already exposed. Truth and reality are on our side. We now know more clearly what is going on.

And as was always the case, the Risen Lord gave us a mission. We have a world to win.

Prayer

Gracious and loving Creator of the universe,
whose wisdom guides your people:
May you be close to us at this difficult time
as we continue the battle against disease, injustice and disaster.
Enable us to fulfill our duty with courage,
having only love and care for our enemies,
and to escape from all the assaults of those who plan and do evil.
May we, in response to the guidance of your Holy Spirit,
love, seek, and attain only that which is good.
May we wish for all people's happiness and envy none.
O, Lord, bless the women, men and children of your Church.
Hold them in the hollow of your hand.
Keep them safe and free from harm.
And as they march into this battle for your earth,
walk with them, Lord,
as they serve your kingdom.
Through your almighty power,
the redemption through your Son,
and the life giving of your Spirit.
Amen.

Friend of the bad guys

This morning, reading about the arrest of more people accused of corruption in the Free State, I was pleased. For as even our Archbishop has said, we all look forward (and we are still hoping) that this will be the year of the orange clothing of the wicked as they start their jail sentences for stealing from the citizens and the poor of South Africa.

But then the words of one of the Penitence texts echoes in my head: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15).

So Jesus came for the orange-clothed ones too. Indeed Jesus said "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32).

There is a lot to prove Jesus' claim. He was often in bad company with a motley range of bad people.

He talked and indeed ministered to **non-Jews and people of dubious religion** – Syrians, Phoenicians, Samaritans whom Jews normally treated with contempt.

He called the **tax collector** Levi, a collaborator and sell-out because Jewish tax-collectors worked for the Romans, and one of the group of people classed by Jesus among the sinners, "And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him." (Mark 2:15).

Jesus even said that the "the tax collectors and the **prostitutes** are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31). Surely many of the disciples disapproved of that thought!

And there were probably **terrorists** among Jesus disciples – Simon the Zealot for one and possibly James, John and Judas Iscariot. One may want to re-designate them as freedom fighters but they did go in for bloody revenge and assassinations and we remember that James and John, "the Sons of Thunder", begged Jesus to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" some inhospitable Samaritans.

Jesus even cured the servant of a **Roman** centurion (Matthew 8:5-13).

Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the **Pharisees** but he seems to spend an inordinate amount of time talking with them.

Somehow Jesus builds a group, the Twelve, out of people with such irreconcilable differences. But Jesus paid for his keeping bad company. The Pharisees had it in for him and the Jewish authorities got the Romans to crucify him as a potential political rebel.

Going back to that penitential sentence: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ..." one needs to read on "of whom I am the foremost." That is Paul, the Pharisee of the Pharisees who blasphemed, persecuted and insulted Christ. He never made the grade. He never became righteous or truly respectable. Paul's salvation is simply that Jesus told him to be an apostle, a messenger of the Good News. Paul, sinner and persecutor of the Church, was appointed by the risen Christ to serve the community and the world of sinners. As Paul says: "He judged me faithful by appointing me to his service." (1 Timothy 1:12).

There is an old saying by Aesop, "A man is known by the company he keeps." The Church too is known by the company it keeps. And are we keeping the company Jesus keeps?

I am not suggesting that the respectable cannot be saved and I know that Nicodemus, a respectable man of the Pharisees, came to Jesus by night and received the Good News of salvation – and God knows in the current state of the world we do need more good, righteous and respectable people. But most of us human beings are pretty hard of hearing and if we stand in the midst of sinners maybe that is where we will hear the call of Jesus more clearly – because that is the direction in which he is speaking. And we will be safe there as Jesus prayed to his Father: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15)

We are judged faithful in that Christ has already chosen us. We are judged faithful in that we accept the call to be holy sinners. We are judged faithful in that we accept the call from the friend of sinners. He has no other friendship he can offer us – for that is what we are.

Prayer

We join in Jesus' prayer for us to the Father (John 17:15-17):

Father

I am not asking you to take them out of the world,
but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

They do not belong to the world,
just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth;
your word is truth.

As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.

Amen.

It was night

A depressing day. The ex-Mayor of Durban, out on bail and charged with looting (via a R400 million tender fraud) resources meant for the people of Durban, was proudly trotted out as a new member of the KwaZulu-Natal provincial legislature. Is there no end to this contempt shown by those with status and power for ordinary people? How long will this night continue?

In John's gospel account of the night of the Last Supper he records (13:1):

Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Jesus knew he had come to the end of his earthly road. Darkness was all around (John 13:30). But he also knew that (13:3):

the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.

And what does this man to whom "all things have been given" do? He washes his disciples feet.

And the disciples did not like it.

Jesus insisted on washing their feet.

It is important for us not to miss the meaning of this event. Most of us, at least in modern towns, are rather far removed from a dusty Middle Eastern environment where people wore sandals or went barefoot and where it was customary for a servant or slave to wash the feet of the employer and his guests when they entered. In our more middle class society it is embarrassing to take your shoes and socks off in public. (As those of the more well-off used to feel when going through airport security when they went overseas in the time before lockdown.) Imagine having your boss or your teacher wash your feet! This partly explains why the Maundy Thursday washing of the feet, a perfectly legitimate church ritual on the day before Good Friday, has dropped off the liturgical Top Ten in recent centuries.

So the disciples' embarrassment was not with the act, but with Jesus doing it. It was a status problem. Jesus, the teacher, the master, was playing the servant, the slave. It even lowered their status: were they now disciples of a slave? There would have been no embarrassment if one of them had washed his feet.

But it was by being a slave that Jesus showed the full extent of his love for them.

The disciples were not wildly enthusiastic about this revelation of Jesus' love for them. In Luke's account of the Last Supper we see the disciples trying to fill this vacuum of

Jesus' seemingly abdicating his status and leadership by squabbling amongst themselves as to who amongst them was "the greatest".

Jesus has to painstakingly explain to them why he has washed their feet (John 13:12-17):

'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

It was the Roman authorities who were into leadership and status and being served and being praised by their own propaganda departments as being the great benefactors of the people they ruled. Jesus' disciples are to behave in a completely different way (Luke 22:23-27).

Many Christians today are not enraptured by this concept. Why, for example do we always leap to our feet in honour of Ministers of State who are – look at their name "ministers" – supposed to wash our feet? We find it very hard not to bow to status or to diminish our own. Yet how joyful were the first Christians, revived by the sight of the resurrected one and inspired by the gift of the Spirit who then went out as 'slaves' of the Gospel to mission and martyrdom.

The man from Nazareth, God's Word to us, humbled himself to the point where he was so open to the life-giving nature of God that he was raised from the dead. It is he who is exalted as Lord of all.

Meanwhile the kings, rulers, presidents, tyrants, dictators, tycoons, great men and leaders will fade into history, one after another. For they are always finally confronted by higher, stronger powers and forces that end their reigns. It will be the same as the end of our own more modest earthly leadership, authority, clout and influence.

The way is open. The man of Nazareth will not compel or force you. He will ask to be allowed to wash your feet and join him in his ministry to the creation.

Prayer [Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val]

O Jesus! meek and humble of heart, Hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being loved, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being extolled, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being honoured, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being praised, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being preferred, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being consulted, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being approved, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being humiliated, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being despised, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of suffering rebukes, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being calumniated, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being forgotten, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being ridiculed, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being wronged, Deliver me, Jesus.
From the fear of being suspected, Deliver me, Jesus.
That others may be loved more than I, Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be esteemed more than I, Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That, in the opinion of the world, others may increase and I may decrease, Jesus,
grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be chosen and I set aside, Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be praised and I unnoticed, Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be preferred to me in everything, Jesus, grant me the grace to
desire it.
That others may become holier than I, provided that I may become as holy as I
should, Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

Responding to the experience of God

Most of us are feeling pretty bereft of attendance at our Church's liturgy. If we continue to act responsibly, we will continue to feel the loss – the blame for the recent resurgence of Covid-19 infections in South Korea has been squarely placed on evangelical mega-churches that resumed large gatherings.

We miss the liturgy that tells us a story and in which we re-enact, in word and gesture, in song and colour, the story of God and human beings.

Sunday by Sunday we start our service of worship by looking up, sinners though we are, at the glory of God. God, greater than which no being can be conceived, is the object of our worship: O that there is a God worthy of worship and a theme for a song to last for ever. In the illumination of that glory we sink to our knees, "guilty of dust and sin", but in bold faith cry out to the Lord of mercy. Though the righteousness of God shines with a fiery blaze, through Christ the Word we can cross the sacred boundary and join in the holy Eucharistic feast, pardoned by the terms of the free atonement.

After we have heard the written word, the accounts of the response of other people to the experience of this holy God, we respond verbally to these experiences by reciting a creed. We affirm that this is indeed what God has done, though the words we will use will not be ours, but those of an ecumenical council of bishops who responded in precise and orthodox theological language more than fifteen hundred years ago, to what God had done in Jesus. They distilled the experiences of the people of God over thousands of years into a few lines telling of the God who creates as Father, speaks and saves as the Son and fills us with life through his Spirit.

But there is a problem of course, as with all such readings from ancient texts, creeds and rituals: our response may become dead, lukewarm.

I believe in the Father,
cross my fingers,
hope for the best,
recite the words,
they do not impress -
look - Mrs Thomas has a new dress.

We want to see God, hear his voice, feel his warmth in our hearts. We do not want what to us may seem old words that we cannot feel, believe or really understand.

Yes. Indeed there is truth in the feeling that we cannot respond to God if we have not directly experienced him. We also cannot truly respond to God if that experience was a pseudo-experience, whether it be the sentimental and sloppy type of much contemporary religiosity or that of the conventional "being done" of baptisms, confirmations and weddings.

Sentimental religiosity sees God as a benevolent and chummy uncle with a large bank account, toleration of materialistic people, and an appalling taste for repetitive and boring music. The second type has God as a kind of absentee landlord to whom one pays a token rent but whom one never expects to return. Responders to both of these pseudo-experiences of God “pass him unalarmed”. They do not see the holy Lord God of hosts, whose feet burned the rocks of Sinai and the souls of his followers in all ages.

The introduction to the Eucharistic prayer should have the shock of a real experience of God – God in his holiness and glory, transcendent, above all earthly things, surrounded by angelic symbols of power and sovereignty:

Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God of hosts,
heaven and earth are full of thy glory:
Glory be to thee, O Lord most High.
Amen.

These words, based on the vision of Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 6:1-8), describe an experience in which the foundations of the earth and surely those of the prophet are shaken. Before this presence he is unclean and sinful. But because it is the God of Israel, the experience is also of pardon. Sin is burned out, pardoned, taken away, atoned for. And the experience is also a summons. Isaiah had to answer, “Send me” to the request and question, “Whom shall we send?”

This awe at the divine glory, coupled with a personal appreciation of the mercy of God and the willingness to hear God's call to action, is characteristic of the saints of God, among whom, I hope, we would wish to be numbered. For some, this experience was vividly real in the form of a vision, such as that which stunned the mathematician Pascal. On his death a description of that experience was found sewn into his coat. It begins:

FIRE
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob
Not of the philosophers and scientists
Certainty, certainty, heartfelt feeling, joy, peace, God of Jesus Christ
My God and your God

But many members of the Anglican church and other denominations have a difficulty here because they have not had such an experience. These more traditional Christians are out of fashion too because of the current premium put on personal experience and the frequent dismissal of a faith built on simple loyalty to the Church of God, common sense and reason. It is true that at its worst our denomination has been a church of second-hand experience, beautifully enshrined though it was in liturgy, music, ritual and vestments. But we wrong those Christians who have not stood in a smoke-filled temple with Isaiah if we demean their acceptance of the accumulated experience and wisdom of the Church through which they have come to commit themselves to God. They have no need to be ashamed that they have not had the “experiences” extolled by the devotees of the more exuberant and enthusiastic manifestations of religion. Such enthusiasms may be inspired but many are not and can betray a shallowness and a conception of God that

seems to have little in common with the Holy One of Israel of whom the Old Testament said that no human could face and live.

There are two other aspects of the experience of God that we need to consider. The first is the “if only I had been there” fallacy. When we read in John’s first letter that their hands had touched the embodied God, their eyes had seen and their ears heard the words of the Word of Life itself, we perhaps are misled into thinking that it was easier for them then. “Wouldn't it be easy if we could have seen Jesus! Then we would have had no doubts. Then our faith would have been strong.” It is a false and deluding idea. We may indeed need to thank God that we were not put to the test. There is no guarantee that we would have recognised in Jesus of Nazareth the Son of the Father. After all, few of his contemporaries did!

This leads me to the second aspect. Where do we experience God? I suspect that for most of us it is, as it ever has been, in what we see in our fellow human beings. Most of us do not have visions, nor do we experience the divine presence in an almost physical way, as seen in the poets and prophets of the Bible and the saints.

A Roman centurion saw a Jewish rebel executed on a cross and heard his cry of dereliction. In this most ungodlike scene, he saw God. And he testified – testified to the paradox – testified about this broken and seemingly lost and dead man, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” If we open our eyes and our hearts, we too may see God and experience him. The opportunity for this presents itself to us every day. As Jesus testified, human beings are his brothers and sisters, he is present in the least of them. See him and respond, not necessarily with the old and faithful words of the creeds but with new feelings and actions. See him. Experience God. And then the Church’s liturgy will make more sense. And truly, the holiness of God will be visible and his glory will be seen to cover the earth.

Prayer (Terry W. York)

Worthy of worship, worthy of praise,
worthy of honour and glory;
worthy of all the glad songs we can sing,
worthy of all of the offerings we bring

Worthy of reverence, worthy of fear,
worthy of love and devotion;
worthy of bowing and bending of knees,
worthy of all of this and added to these...

Almighty Father, Master and Lord,
King of all kings and Redeemer,
Wonderful Counsellor, Comforter Friend,
Saviour and Source of our life without end.

You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Saviour, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy of wonderful;
worthy of worship and praise.

Dancing on eggs

I think we are all trying to get used to this way of living. We are, whether we like it or not, having to learn some things anew. That can be both demanding and exciting. It is almost like learning a new dance. One's first attempts will be clumsy. One asks oneself, "When will the steps become automatic, fluent, graceful?" "Will I ever be able to join a *Jerusalema* Dance Challenge group?"

Significant learning of new things, because it involves our emotions as well, always has an element of pain, of loss. We have to drop, or forget, or forcibly remould our old ways of doing things. It is one reason I have never been persuaded by those teachers who keep on chanting that education should always be "fun". Nothing I have learned in my life that was really important was fun, though joy may in some cases have been the ultimate outcome.

Yesterday I engaged in one of our new liturgical dances, learning new steps. It was in a session of shooting video for the Sunday online service and the first time I would join the rector on the stage, so to speak, as a deacon. The dance was complex. How did one do the normal Eucharistic ritual – and speak clearly through a mask (particularly if one's mask kept slipping down when one spoke) – and add to that, always remain one and a half metres apart – and remember to do the joint sideways shuffle when one or the other moved to the centre spot – and keep one's arms and hands from obscuring what the camera was focusing on? Luckily it only took four extra takes (and I remembered as a young person working on a film crew and having to do 27 takes when the speaker kept fluffing his lines).

Our problem is that learning the new steps in the dance with the deadly virus can have bad consequences if one gets the movements wrong. It is like the proverbial dancing on eggs. It can only be done with difficulty, and if done at all, it has to be done perfectly.

I hear stories of how people have been infected by well-meaning friends coming to visit them because they, the friends, were lonely. So many of the moves in our new behaviour are counter-intuitive – such as pushing people away. So we have to remould the way our sense of empathy works and learn not to demand or expect the immediate sense of doing right or good by giving in to other people's now toxic needs. Warm hugs are out for a long time. This is all hard for Christian people who are almost by definition empathetic. We will also have to control our anger or stress when people, without thinking, behave in ways that may send us to hospital or kill us, or if not us, our parents or grandparents.

Still, if all the world seems to be dancing to *Jerusalema*, I guess we and our churches will eventually learn to do the *Surviving Corona Virus* dance well and beautifully. And as the carol below says, we are led by the supreme dancer.

Prayer [I thought of using Sydney Carter's hymn "I danced in the morning" as the prayer but decided on this traditional carol going back to a Medieval mystery play.]

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play,
To call my true love to my dance;

Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love, my love, my love,
This have I done for my true love

Then was I born of a virgin pure,
Of her I took fleshly substance
Thus was I knit to man's nature
To call my true love to my dance.

In a manger laid, and wrapped I was
So very poor, this was my chance
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass
To call my true love to my dance.

Then afterwards baptized I was;
The Holy Spirit on me did glance,
My Father's voice heard from above,
To call my true love to my dance.

Into the desert I was led,
Where I fasted without substance;
The Devil bade me make stones my bread,
To have me break my true love's dance.

The Jews on me they made great suit,
And with me made great variance,
Because they loved darkness rather than light,
To call my true love to my dance.

For thirty pence Judas me sold,
His covetousness for to advance:
Mark whom I kiss, the same do hold!
The same is he shall lead the dance.

Before Pilate the Jews me brought,
Where Barabbas had deliverance;
They scourged me and set me at nought,
Judged me to die to lead the dance.

Then on the cross hanged I was,
Where a spear my heart did glance;
There issued forth both water and blood,
To call my true love to my dance.

Then down to hell I took my way
For my true love's deliverance,
And rose again on the third day,
Up to my true love and the dance.

Then up to heaven I did ascend,
Where now I dwell in sure substance
On the right hand of God, that man
May come unto the general dance.

Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love, my love, my love,
This have I done for my true love

Faith or belief

In the academic community in which I worked for many years, belief in God was not a general topic of conversation. I suspect that the majority of my colleagues were agnostic at best. The situation has probably become more cool towards religious belief because of the growing popularity of pop atheist writers such as Richard Dawkins, philosophical and theological illiterate though he is. One gets used to such an environment and thinks that maybe that is what a more secular society is inevitably like. So I surprise myself when I am pleased when the state president ends his speeches by saying “God bless South Africa” and when, watching a video replay of the United States Democratic Party National Convention, most speakers also invoked the name of God and seemed to mean it, unlike their opponent Donald Trump, who clearly has not the slightest trace of religious belief at all.

This raises for me the question about whether Christians believe in God or have faith in God. What is the difference? The problem with belief is that you can have belief in many things that make not the slightest difference to your life. It may be logically true that you cannot have faith in somebody if you do not also believe in them, that they exist. But “belief” in the sense of an intellectual assent to the proposition that one God exists is an emaciated idea, far from the intensity of what faith means in the New Testament. In his letter James makes this point rather sarcastically when he says (James 1:19):

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder.

Yes, indeed. One often gets a feeling that when some people say they believe in God it is as if they are doing him some kind of favour, unlike those other people who do not. It’s a bit like the play and film based on the children’s book *Peter Pan* where, unless the children watching believe in fairies and clap their hands, the fairies will die.

Every time someone says ‘I do not believe in fairies’, somewhere there’s a fairy that falls down dead.

Luckily for us, our true God does not need our belief at all. What he does is offer to let us be in a relationship of absolute trust in him – that is what we call faith.

Faith is trusting God. Faith is a relationship of loyalty. In practice it is faith in the future, hope when things seem to be utterly dark, and a willingness to follow the direction of God wherever it may lead. And, as one can see so clearly in James’ letter, faith is inextricably bound up with our practice, and those who practice their faith are the friends of God.

Prayer

I have always found this old secular love song a wonderful exemplar of what faith, loyalty and love are all about. May God give us that faith and trust and endurance.

Fair young maid all in her garden
Strange young man came riding by
Saying, "Fair young maid, will you marry me?"
This then, sir, was her reply

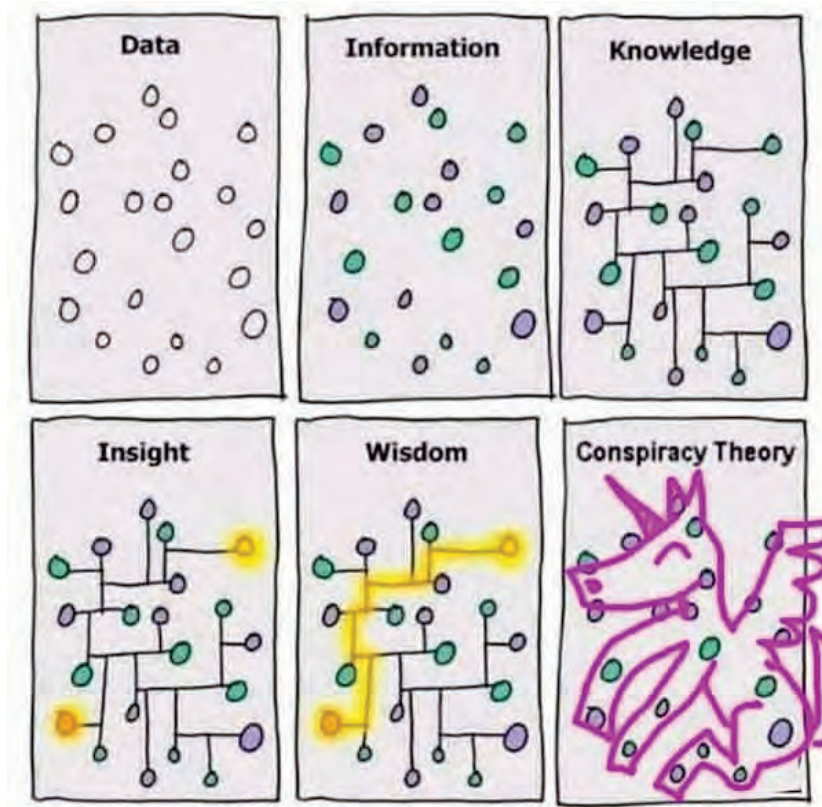
"Oh, no, kind sir, I cannot marry thee
For I've a love who sails the deep salt sea
Though he's been gone these seven years
Still no man shall marry me"

"What if he's died, all in some battle slain?
Or if he's drowned in the deep salt sea?
What if he's found some other love
He and his love both married be?"

"If he's found some other love
He and his new love both married be
I wish them health and happiness
Where they now dwell far across the sea"

He picked her up all in his arms
And kisses gave her one, two, and three
Saying, "Weep no more, my own true love
I am your long-lost John Riley"
Saying, "Weep no more, my own true love
For I'm your long-lost John Riley"

On saying things that are not true



I was irate today when a post appeared on the WhatsApp group for our block of flats touting some conspiracy theory that a shadowy group of information technology billionaires and Jews were seeking to take over the world. It was a slander, a denial of reality.

Jesus, disputing with Judaeans who could not accept his divine authority said:

“You come from a father who is the Slanderer; and you wish to do your father’s wishes. That one was a killer of men from the beginning, and did not stand upon the truth, because truth is not in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from what is proper to him, because he is a liar and the father of lies. But I, because I speak the truth, me you do not trust.”

Why do people lie? Why do they deny actual reality? Why do they trust the Slanderer and not the God of truth?

I am not here talking about honest mistakes. We often say things that we believe to be true but are not. We are often ignorant and either led or misled by other people we trust. I am sure that all of us believe lots of things that are false.

But what about when we deliberately tell a lie?

Now, in a sense, lying is mainly a misuse of language. It is hard to lie without using words. It is possible, but harder. So one can, for example, smile at somebody when you are angry with them, or kiss somebody when you are betraying them. But it is words that do the major damage. Because human words represent things and actions related to things, and we can manipulate words in our own minds, we can tell lies. We can use words to supposedly represent reality but which do not.

Language is a great gift and essentially the secret of human success in this material world. It allows for human communication and community, the passing on of knowledge and the building of civilization. But it is also a great destroyer, the vehicle for lies and fake news, that new term popularised by one of the greatest exponents of it, Donald Trump. Language can even be misused by the manipulative to make those who are their victims doubt reality. There is another American term used for this called “gaslighting”, based on an old film of that name in which an abusive husband tried to persuade his wife that she was insane and that her actual reality was false.

The God spoken of in the Bible is the God of truth. He brings reality into being through his Word. So the lie, in the most direct sense, is our attempt to undo reality, to unmake creation. We want to destroy reality. It is no mistake then that the devil in the scriptures is named “**diabolus**” – the slanderer – the one who wants to undo reality.

It is therefore only Christian duty that we resist the lie in our own lives, in our relationships with others, and in our own descriptions of reality. And, given the quantity of lying in the world today, we have a hard task ahead, both in South Africa and the rest of the world.

Prayer

God of Truth, whose Son declared
“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”,
yet suffered and was crucified because of lies,
we pray to you as the ultimate truth of all reality.

Defend us from the lie, the slander, the fake news
and the conspiracy theory misinformation,
Protect us and our nation from the suffering and loss caused by lies.

We thank you that your truth is real, eternal and life giving.
We thank you that you have promised us the guidance of the Spirit of Truth.

In the power of your Word of Truth, Jesus Christ and your Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Two cities

Yesterday saw much online discussion and opinion pieces on the letter from the state president to his political party, the African National Congress, about the embarrassment the ongoing corruption was bringing to the Party and what had to be done about it. The general response seemed to be that it was about time, but that nobody was holding their breath that something would actually happen. I hoped that the pep talks that the state president had received from Church leaders in the South African Council of Churches had in fact stiffened his resolve to get members of his own party into the orange overalls.

There is nothing new in this. It being the remembrance of that African Saint, Augustine, on Friday, I had been rereading some of his work, and dipping into his famous book, *The City of God*. Augustine wrote this book when the Roman Empire was collapsing. Rome had already been sacked by the Visigoths and twenty years later the Vandals besieged the African city of Hippo where Augustine was Bishop. He died during the siege, shortly before the fall of the city. The Vandals out of respect for him, left the cathedral and Augustine's library intact when they burned the city to the ground. Point made – empires can come to grief. Augustine's book is precisely about this. Earthly empires that are self-indulgent and ruled by pride, will inevitably decay and fall. Only the city of God, ruled by love, endures and will ultimately triumph over all the cities that alienate themselves from God.

What entranced me was Augustine's almost comic demolition of the pantheon of pagan gods acting like the factions of current political parties, as well as his pithy descriptions of the corruptions of Rome.

“For how did the conspiracy of Catiline, even in so large and corrupt a city, find so abundant a supply of men whose hands and tongues found them a living by perjury and civic broils? What else but perjury corrupted the judgments pronounced by so many of the senators? What else corrupted the people's votes and decisions of all causes tried before them? For it seems that the ancient practice of taking oaths has been preserved even in the midst of the greatest corruption, not for the sake of restraining wickedness by religious fear, but to complete the tale of crimes by adding that of perjury.”

Shades of the Zondo Commission with people arrogantly lying under oath or losing their memories so conveniently. Augustine sums up the judgement on the selfishness, greed, violence and self-satisfaction of the city of the world:

“Tear off the disguise of wild delusion, and look at the naked deeds: weigh them naked, judge them naked.”

Augustine made clear that we must not confuse the heavenly and earthly cities with the worldly institutions of the church and the state. In this world of time and space, the Church in particular, is a mixed body in which members of the city of God and the earthly city coexist, their distinction being clear only to God, who will separate the two cities at the end of time. But we as Christians, members of the city of God are resident aliens in this earthly city. And we have to wisely survive in the turmoil of that world which is constantly at war with itself because it is dominated by pride and the lust for power in political and social life.

So, nothing new, and our children and grandchildren may well have their own challenges in the future when they too, like us, have to decide which city to belong to, the city of God or the city of the alienated from God.

Prayer (Adapted from the *Prayer for all sorts and conditions*)

O God, the Creator and Preserver of all humanity,
we humbly pray for our country and all its people,
that you would make known your ways to all of us
and restore the health of our people and society in all its forms

We pray especially for your Church,
that it may be guided, inspired and governed to do the truth
and that all its people may be bound together in faith, unity and justice.

Lastly we pray for protection against the pandemic and its consequences,
and give us patience under suffering and want,
through the power of Jesus Christ and the life of your Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Can one be a Christian today?

I think we all know the kind of preacher who throws a bogus daring question at the congregation, such as “Can one be a Christian today?”, and we experience a moment of wild hope that he will answer “No!”, come down out of the pulpit, walk out of the church and never come back. So I ask the same question, wary of asking it in bad faith, as I assume you will expect that I will answer “Yes!” and list reasons why one can still be a Christian today, and not only that, explain why one should be a signed up member of that institution we call the Church. And indeed I will attempt so.

We live in an increasingly secularised urban society in which the great issues of life and death are increasingly sanitized and hidden away. This is why the pandemic has been such a huge psychic shock for modern highly industrialised countries. For in most of the Western world religion has for a long time had little direct influence on the non-religious corporations and structures of society. During the tail end of the apartheid years, South Africa was unusual in that the Church insisted that the complex political and economic problems of that time had a moral and human dimension. And the Church made its presence felt.

Because since then the Church has tended to keep quiet and docile, we forget that, collectively speaking, the Church is the largest institution in South African society, with more members, stronger networks, and greater geographical spread than any other institution. It is important to recognize that, because it is only in organisations that individuals can bring pressure to bear in a modern society.

There is not the slightest chance that “religion” will wither away in the world. That is because it answers cultural, political, social and psychological needs as well as spiritual ones. The Church as institution only becomes weak in society when for some reason it fails to answer to those needs in a positive way.

I found a wonderful quotation from sociologist Andrew Greeley:

“the elite of society have become agnostic and sceptical. The masses are superstitious , the young either do not care about religion or are experimenting with strange oriental sects, political leadership pretends to be religious for its own purposes. Religious organizations continue to exist, but there is little of the prophetic about them in their ministry to the cultural and psychological needs of their members.”

Spot on, don't you think? Pretty descriptive of today? Well Greeley had cheated a bit: it is a rather modern translation of a Roman writer of about AD 30! It was written maybe thirty years or so before Peter and Paul took up residence in Rome and the beginning of the transformation there of the Christian revolution.

What does it mean for us today? Can we be Church Christians? We do have to make a number of caveats, admissions. Yes, Christ's presence is not limited to the visible Church

or some particular denomination within it. Yes, affiliation to the Church is not in itself an act of faith in Jesus Christ. And there are spiritual guerillas out there who may not even know they are part of the Church militant.

For the committed Christian today there is indeed a need for personal conversion in the sense that our alignment to Christ must be personal, real and not simply a cultural, mental health or social welfare thing.

The active Christian may need, as the situation demands, to stand with the true God who confronts the false wants and desires of a society and its people. God at times is the God who is against religion that no longer binds people together, but acts as a barrier between God and humanity.

And lastly, involvement with organised religion, the Church, the oh so ordinary and mundane parish down the road, is a Christian vocation.

It is a hard and lifelong vocation but a holy one, we are called to.

John 17:14-20

“I have given them your word, and the kosmos hated them, because they are not of the kosmos, just as I am not of the kosmos. I pray not that you should take them out of the kosmos, but that you should keep them away from the wicked one. They are not of the kosmos, just as I am not of the kosmos. Make them holy in the truth; the word that is yours is truth. Just as you sent me forth into the kosmos, I sent them also forth into the kosmos. And on their behalf I make myself holy, so that they also may be made holy in truth. But I make supplication not for them only, but also for those having faith in me on account of their word.”

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, who promised to make us holy in truth,
strengthen our commitment to you,
and help us to bring faith to others, your people in the world.
Toughen our minds and spirits to serve you in your Church.
Enable us to love your Church,
with all its weaknesses and sins,
as your holy but battered Body.
Teach us to use the power of your Church only for good,
and for the good of this world for which you died,
Through your risen power in the glory of
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

No sanctuary

Today I received the message that our parish will open its doors on Sunday 13th September. So that will be the end of the ecclesiastical lockdown, if not the national secular one. We still do not know whether there will be new surges of the virus and more lockdowns. There is still huge uncertainty about the future. News from several countries has indicated that second waves are likely and that a major generator of new waves is irresponsible crowd behaviour in religious gatherings, bars and taverns and beaches. We still have to be careful out there!

I suspect that most of us have imbibed a kind of belief that the church is a sanctuary – a place where one is safe and protected from the evils of the world. And of course, in many ancient cultures the religious sanctuary was literally such a place, a shrine or even a city, where people fleeing for their lives (be they innocent or criminals) could find refuge and escape death. And in a different sense, a place where we could find peace and quiet away from the noise and tumult of the world.

It is hard to hold on to that belief in physical or psychological sanctuary anymore. In occupied Europe, Nazi troops herded hostages into churches and shot them. The Rwanda genocidists concentrated villagers into local churches and slashed them to death. I remember in the early 1970s when South African policemen chased protesting students into St George's cathedral in Cape Town and batoned them. Need we be reminded that the English Saint Thomas Beckett was murdered by the king's men in his own Canterbury Cathedral?

It will be hard, when those of us who re-enter church buildings have to wear masks, stand or be seated a metre or more away from others, and douse ourselves with sanitiser, not to think of this as being a potentially dangerous place. Hard to have calm, peaceful thoughts under such circumstances. These are still difficult and dangerous times. And these times may go on for a long time. There is new evidence that people who have had Covid-19 may get it again as immunity may only be temporary.

So no sanctuary. Not at this time and maybe not ever again in our lifetimes.

But of course we do have a true sanctuary. We can apply the words of Jesus about the Temple sanctuary in Jerusalem (John4:21-24):

“the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

There is sanctuary everywhere because God reaches everywhere. Wherever the faithful are, in their homes, in their workplaces, in the school classrooms, and now when we venture back into congregational worship of a special type, the sanctuary of God's presence will be there. This is the God of whom Isaiah said (25:4-5):

For you have been a refuge to the helpless,
a refuge for the needy in distress,
a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.
When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter blast,
the noise of enemies like heat in a dry place,
as heat is lessened with the shade of clouds;
So you subdue the shouts of the proud.

God creates our true sanctuary and Jesus is its high priest (Hebrews 8:1-2):

one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.

Prayer

Before we even read the headlines today,
quieten our hearts with your peace.

Source of life and love,
we pray that we may enter the sanctuary of your love,
that you will keep us safe and blessed.

In your sanctuary heal our brokenness,
guide us in a time of turmoil in our society and world

Strengthen our faith to be bold in our solidarity with others
and that we may act to do your will on earth.

May the sanctuary that has blessed us be filled by all.

In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Saint Augustine

Today is the Feast Day of Saint Augustine of Hippo.



Augustine was a Berber from North Africa in what is now Algeria, who after his conversion to Christianity, became a bishop and theologian. He was probably the most important thinker of the Latin speaking Church with a long lasting influence, second only to Paul the Apostle.

Though his mother was a Christian, Augustine had as a young man followed the Persian religion, Manichaeism, and lived a hedonistic life. He rose rapidly as a brilliant academic lecturer, teaching in Carthage in Africa, Rome and Milan in Italy, before, at the age of 31, converting to Christianity under the influence of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. Returning home to Africa, he gave all his money to the poor and in AD 391 was ordained a priest and in 395, Bishop of the harbour city of Hippo.

He applied his formidable mind to preaching (more than 350 of his sermons have been preserved) and to a wide range of biblical, theological, philosophical and psychological texts. Overall he created a brilliant synthesis of Christian Biblical thought and the Platonic philosophy of his day. He is best known today for three of his books: ***Confessions***, ***On the Trinity***, and the ***City of God***. The ***Confessions***, an amazing feat of psychological insight, is the first intimate biography in Western literature. In it he describes his personal experience of conversion and the struggle in his soul between his sinful passions, guilt and the grace of God.

Many of his writings were against competing religions (such as Manichaeism and the old pagan religion) and Christian heresies or schisms (such as the Donatism, Pelagianism and Arianism). His philosophical writing on such things as time and existence have influenced philosophers right up to the present day. His Biblical exegesis was detailed, often allegorical, and he would have been appalled by the literalism of modern fundamentalists. He argued that if a literal interpretation contradicts science and human beings' God-given reason, then the Bible text should be interpreted metaphorically. His writings on education encouraged critical thinking, recognizing the importance of community and the need for interactive dialogue among learners and their application of learned theories to practice.

In modern secular times Augustine has often received a bad press, often really unjustified, on the grounds that he was against sex, was rigid and hard on sinners and heretics, and believed in original sin and rigid predestination.

By modern standards he was rather dismissive of the value of sex after his conversion , but then he was an austere, ascetic celibate who founded one of the first monasteries. He was far more accepting of marriage and sexuality than his previous religion, Manichaeism, that looked on the ideas of sexual intercourse as the original sin and human birth as horrifically obscene, as they did even the idea of a virgin birth. Augustine taught that human sexuality has been wounded, together with the whole of human nature, and requires the redemption of Christ. The redemption of human sexuality would only be fully accomplished in the resurrection of the body.

As for being hard on sinners, he opposed the Donatists, a strong faction in the Church in North Africa, who believed that the Church should be a Church of only saints not sinners and that sacraments administered by flawed or sinful priests were invalid. Yet Augustine entered into respectful dialogue with opponents and protested when some Donatists were persecuted by the Roman authorities. He also declared the institution of slavery to be the product of sin.

On original sin and predestination, Augustine's views did change over time and he was at his most rigid and logical in his controversy with the British (or Irish) monk, Pelagius, who basically argued that human beings could avoid sin by their own efforts without divine grace and could and should lead sinless lives. One of the problems of Augustine is that his relentless logic sometimes led him into a dead-end. Logic has its limitations, which is why many of Augustine's ideas on original sin and predestination have not been accepted by the wider Church and particularly not in the East.

St Augustine

What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of human beings. That is what love looks like.

Prayer (Collect)

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you,
the life of the souls that love you,
and the strength of the hearts that serve you:
Help us, following the example of your servant Augustine of Hippo,
so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whom to serve is perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Many gods and many lords

1 Corinthians 8:5

“For though there are so-called gods both in heaven and earth, gods and lords abundantly in fact, to us there is only one God, the Father, from whom everything comes, and for who we live.”

God is only God (God with a big “G”) if he can command our loyalty. The ancient Israelites were like their Canaanite and other neighbours. It is quite clear that they believed in many gods and forces. Every nation had at least one god – Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, the lot of them. But, when they followed in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, their loyalty was to one particular deity, their God, and only him. They had a faith relationship with, not just belief in the existence of, that one true God. (It was only after their exile into Babylon that their minds became clear that, existence wise, there was only one god, and that was God.)

It is only that God who can command ultimate loyalty. If we somehow neutralize that command, he may remain as one of many gods but he is not God. It is no longer God we worship but one or more of the many gods and lords.

It so happens that the God of the Old and New Testaments gave a number of commands that made clear what that loyalty involved. Yes, it truly did demand sole loyalty, but there were other things involved in that loyalty, the most prominent of which was justice, summed up very admirably in Micah 6:8

“And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Their experience of that God was that he seemed to make justice happen – it was his action for justice that evoked their loyalty, as seen in Exodus 20:2

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

This God made it quite clear through the prophets that injustice was disloyalty. Indeed injustice was treason. Through human injustice we neutralize the command, in obedience to which, and only in which, God is God. (God himself is not “God”, he is himself, the “I AM”. He is God to us.)

Another sub-component of that loyalty is that we are not to worship idols. We must not think the Old Testament denunciations of idolatry are irrelevant now because we are too clever to confuse an idol representing god with the real god. The pagans were never that stupid. The point of banishing idolatry was that there is only one authorised image of God and that image is not made by hands and is already present. It is the human being. No idol cries out and presents us with a moral imperative to do justice. But every human being does.

Hosea 14:3 sums that up:

“Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride upon horses;
we will say no more, “Our God”,
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy.”

One could update the translation:

Our foreign deals shall not save us;
We will not ride in our military vehicles and our SUVs
we will say no more, “Our God”,
to the idols we make of wealth and power.
In you the destitute finds compassion.

South Africa is in a crisis today. The perpetrators of injustice, of a crippling culture of corruption that spits in the face of God’s image, that mercilessly exploits the destitute, the poor, the unemployed and the hungry, are idolaters. They worship the god of this world, which Jesus called the Slanderer, the Satan, and the many other gods of all the vices.

To those who want us to bow down to their false gods, many and various, and give them the power to do what they want, we say a resounding “No.” For we follow the one who gave total loyalty to the Father, and he is our Lord.

Isaiah 11:2-4

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Prayer (Kenyan Catholic Bishops)

Father in heaven, You always provide for all your creatures, so that they may live as you have always willed. You have blessed our country with rich human and natural resources to be used in honour and glory and for the well being of every person.

We are deeply sorrowful for the wrong use of these your gifts and blessings through the act of corruption, as a result of which many of our people are hungry, sick, homeless and displaced, ignorant and defenceless. Father, You alone can heal us of this sickness which leads to death.

We humbly beg you, touch our lives and those of our leaders so that we may realise the evil of corruption and work hard to eliminate it. For any citizen who has acquired anything through corrupt means, Lord, give him or her, the spirit of courage to make a restitution and come back to you.

Raise up for us God-fearing citizens and leaders who care for us and who will lead us in the path of peace, justice, prosperity, progress and above all, Love.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord.

Lord graciously hear us.

The misinformation machine

Over the past five months all of us have been concerned about getting accurate information about the Covid-19 virus and how we can protect ourselves from it. It has been hard work, particularly for those who rely on the social media for information.

Deliberately spread misinformation and conspiracy theories have led to thousands of unnecessary deaths all over the world, people dying and going blind from drinking highly concentrated alcohol in the hope of disinfecting their bodies, or bleach, and so on; poor people wasting their money on fake remedies, and others refusing to wear masks or socially distance.

Whilst it may initially seem hard to understand why people would deliberately spread lies, it is easier to understand if one looks at the drivers of misinformation. (Yes, there are some people who do it for genuine ideological, religious or political reasons and they really believe what they say. But for the majority of cases the spreaders know full well what they are doing and seek to profit from what they do.)

Some do it for criminal reasons – the con men who sell useless products at huge profits. But for most mis-informers it's just business, the business of profit or political gain. The general strategy is to create a pervasive climate of fear and anxiety in which products or offerings, whether rubbish or of genuine value, will be purchased or supported in increasing numbers. At the tactical level, from your social media profile they target messages fitting your demographic and wealth profile.

Some of these 'products' include support for politicians. For example, non-partisan fact checkers have found that President Trump has told over 20 000 lies or misleading claims whilst in office. (And yes, I am perplexed how evangelical fundamentalist so-called Christians in the United States can support a pathological liar and serial adulterer.) South Africa has many websites spewing out hate-filled political propaganda, a good example of which is the Lerato Pillay and the PutSouthAfricaFirst twitter accounts which try to attract people who are angry and feel helpless-over corruption, unemployment and crime, into a nationalist xenophobic campaign against African foreigners. It is estimated that this campaign is being funded at the rate of a million rand a month.

Most of us are benignly unaware of the huge commercial drivers behind the misinformation and propaganda served to us daily. For example, the xenophobic campaign is as much driven by commercial interests as political. Did anyone notice the avalanche of opinion pieces in newspapers and online news media trying to persuade us that the lockdown ban on alcohol was bad for the economy? It was clearly an orchestrated campaign. Fair enough, the booze lobby were protecting their interests, but not one of the articles I read mentioned anything about the huge annual cost to the health system through alcohol abuse, road deaths and injuries, and the damage to the economy from workers not turning up and being drunk on duty.

Some of the strongest commercial drivers of lies and misinformation are Facebook, and Google. Both Facebook and Google are multi-billion dollar firms who have made their money from selling advertising space. They accept adverts that are totally false and in addition they make money from the adverts they post on the fake news websites and Facebook pages. And to add insult to injury, a percentage of that advertising revenue goes to the owners of the false news websites and pages. So Facebook and Google are currently helping fund some of the worst misinformation perpetrators. No wonder these social media firms are resistant to cleaning up their business practices.

It all seems so bad and we may feel helpless as individuals as the powerful political and commercial interests play us for their own worldly purposes.

But we are not powerless. The early Christians faced a similar juggernaut of fake news and lies. They were accused of drinking the blood of slaughtered children, incest (they called each other brother and sister), being atheists, and worshipping a donkey's head. The Revelation refers to the lies and propaganda of the Roman Empire of the time. And yet the Christians triumphed.

Paul accurately described the conflict with these powerful international and national super-forces – what he called principalities and powers. They can become forces of evil on a grand scale and they co-operate with those humans that are in rebellion against God. Whatever their original good purposes (Google's initial motto was "Do no harm" and most of us rely on it for huge amounts of information, I certainly do) many have taken up an increasingly negative role. And Paul encourages us in Ephesians 6:10-17 to put on God's armour to defend ourselves "against the powers, against the cosmic rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in high places." and with that armour and the shield of faith "we will be able to quench the flaming darts of the wicked one." And we remember that Jesus has (Colossians 2:15):

"disarmed the powers and authorities, and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

We have to continue the ongoing fight for the truth and protect ourselves and the people of the Church and country from lies and misinformation. And find the tools and armour to do this and to challenge the disseminators of untruth.

Prayer [Pope Francis]

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Help us to recognize the evil latent in a communication
that does not build communion.
Help us to remove the venom from our judgments.
Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.

You are faithful and trustworthy;
may our words be seeds of goodness for the world:
where there is shouting, let us practise listening;
where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;
where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;
where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;
where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;
where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;
where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;
where there is hostility, let us bring respect;
where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.
Amen.

The Body electric

After my diatribe against the misinformation machine yesterday, here I can express some real excitement about one of the positive effects of the pandemic – the institutional church being dragged, kicking and screaming but also dancing and singing, into the electronic age of communication.

There is a saying, wrongly attributed to the founder of the Salvation Army, “Why should the devil have all the best tunes?” What William Booth did say was that **no** music belonged to the devil:

“Music has a divine effect upon divinely influenced and directed souls. Music is to the soul what the wind is to the ship, blowing her onwards in the direction in which she is steered. ... Not allowed to sing that tune or this tune? Indeed! Secular music do you say? Belongs to the devil does it? Well, if it did, I would plunder him of it, for he has no right to a single note of the whole gamut. He’s the thief! ... Every note and every strain and every harmony is divine and belongs to us.”

Well, God’s very nature is communication. “In the beginning was the Word”. Communication comes from God and does not belong to evil. All genuine communication belongs to God as does all real human community for only with communication is community possible. And if the Church is truly the Body of Christ in the world, that body must be a communicator *par excellence*.

For too long the churches have lagged behind in communication. The image they present is often of an obsolete institution, hardly making it in the modern world of multi-media electronic communication, a world in which, in the foreseeable future the majority of people will be using smart phones for most of their communication activities. For many of us, that future is already here!

The pandemic forced churches – almost overnight – to go online in those communities where members had access to wi-fi. Churches discovered previously unrecognised talent and willingness to put in long hours preparing online services and WhatsApp text and audio-messages. There has been an explosion of creativity.

Now, if indeed it is not merely a brief lull, as the peak of the pandemic recedes and we return to semi-normality, it is important that this breakthrough in electronic communication is not squandered. The Church claims to be apostolic and we affirm that in the creed – and apostolic means messenger. So to be a messenger church in the future we have to advance our communications. We have to become the Body Electric.

Increasingly, resources are becoming available to help congregations make this communications shift. The Anglican Church has developed a set of manuals covering all the popular communication applications – Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube and Zoom. Not only will communications through these media reach people who cannot be in church gatherings for the usual reasons, but also those

people, particularly young people, who currently do not feel a vocation to be part of the institutional church. WhatsApp and similar applications, such as the even better Signal (<https://signal.org>), enable daily messages, readings and exhortations to be communicated to the faithful.

A new adventure in electronic communication begins for the Christian body.

Prayer (National Catholic Communications Office)

Holy Spirit,

you blessed the first disciples
with the power to spread God's love
throughout the world.

Give us a new power to proclaim your word
through our own unique gifts
and through the channels of clear communication.
Make us willing to receive that word
as it enters our daily lives.

Bless all who use their talents
in the field of communications.
Guide those who send out the message
and those who receive it,
so that all people
may come to know your truth
and be renewed by your love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Amen.

Postscript

The sentimental older people among us who remember things from forty years ago may want to watch "I sing the body electric":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tG-wl2qqD7Y>

I sing the body electric
I celebrate the me and to come
I toast to my own reunion
When I become one with the sun

And I'll look back on Venus
I'll look back on Mars
And I'll burn with the fire
Of ten million stars
And in time and in time
We will all be stars

I sing the body electric
I glory in the glow of rebirth
Creating my own tomorrow
When I shall embody the Earth

And I'll serenade Venus
I'll serenade Mars
And I'll burn with the fire
Of ten million stars
And in time and in time
We will all be stars

We are the emperors now
And we are Czars
And in time and in time
We will all be stars!

I sing the body electric
I celebrate the me and to come
I toast to my own reunion (my own reunion)
When I become one with the sun

And I'll look back on Venus
I'll look back on Mars
And I'll burn with the fire
Of ten million stars
And in time and in time
(And in time and in time)
We will all be stars!

I Sing the Body Electric by Walt Whitman

1

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?
And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

2

The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

The expression of the face balks account,
But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not
hide him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their
dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,
The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent
green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the
water,
The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,
Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,
The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their
wives waiting,
The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard,
The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the
crowd,
The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty, good-natured,
native-born, out on the vacant lot at sun-down after work,
The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance,
The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair ruffled over and blinding the eyes;
The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through
clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps,
The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the
listening on the alert,
The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;
Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little
child,
Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and
pause, listen, count.

3

I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,
And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.

This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person,
The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the
immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,
These I used to go and visit him to see, he was wise also,
He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded,
tan-faced, handsome,
They and his daughters loved him, all who saw him loved him,
They did not love him by allowance, they loved him with personal love,
He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his
face,
He was a frequent gunner and fisher, he sail'd his boat himself, he had a fine one
presented to him by a ship-joiner, he had fowling-pieces presented to him by men that
loved him,
When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick
him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,
You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat
that you and he might touch each other.

4

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her
neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the
contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

5

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but
myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, and what was expected of heaven
or fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously
aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and
delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

This the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, man is born of woman,
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet again.

Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.

6

The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,
He too is all qualities, he is action and power,
The flush of the known universe is in him,
Scorn becomes him well, and appetite and defiance become him well,
The wildest largest passions, bliss that is utmost, sorrow that is utmost become him
well, pride is for him,
The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul,
Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings every thing to the test of himself,
Whatever the survey, whatever the sea and the sail he strikes soundings at last only
here,
(Where else does he strike soundings except here?)

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in the laborers' gang?
Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.

(All is a procession,
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the
surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?

7

A man's body at auction,
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,)
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms
and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings, aspirations,
(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and
lecture-rooms?)

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the
centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the
centuries?)

8

A woman's body at auction,
She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mothers,
She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers.

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?
Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the
earth?

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most
beautiful face.

Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her
own live body?
For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal themselves.

9

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of
the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are
the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's,
young woman's poems,

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of
the chest,
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints,
finger-nails,
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's
body, male or female,
The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,
The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,
Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks,
love-perturbations and risings,
The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,
Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,
Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,
The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,
The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,
The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,
The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,
The exquisite realization of health;
O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul!

The earth renewed

Today is conventionally our first day of Spring, though much of our weather is decidedly un-Springlike at the moment over most of the country. And our Church lectionary tunes in, announcing the start of the “Season of Creation”.

We humans go on and on about how God loves us – ad nauseum – and of course God does. And that love has been shown to us. That love was proved on the cross. And the pain and glory of that costly love have echoed down the ages in the words of the prophets.

But does God love only us? Does he not love the rest of the earth and its living and non-living things? Does he listen not only to our hymns and choruses but also to the whales singing and the dolphins whistling in the depths of the sea? Does God not delight in the whine of the mosquito? Do not deep sea fish burn as brightly as our altar candles for the Creator? Does God not rejoice in the splendour of burning suns and the explosions of supernova as they extinguish themselves to create the elements out of which our bodies, after endless ages are built? God created a universe, not just us! And it sings back to him.

Something strange happened when the almost worldwide lockdown took place earlier in the year. In that silencing of the noise of human busyness, earth started to reset itself. Scientists found that as the noise levels manufactured by humans suddenly went down, the earth’s crust vibrated a little less and a vibrant symphony of natural sounds from the orchestra of living things began to be heard again. They were not random sounds, they played together. In short, for a brief period, when humans shut up, if they listened carefully, they could hear that music revival.

In that brief respite from the noise that pollutes, millions in cities could hear birds singing loudly again. And even if stuck in their homes, people were having to interact with the natural world through hearing in a way that many had not done before. Maybe the lockdown, for all its downside, gave us a glimpse of what a renewed earth could be like.

We are in the midst of huge political and ecological crises with in our living environment. Yes, the environment that enables us to live on planet earth, is under threat. It is this living world that we, as humans, have been given power over. It is our ongoing responsibility to use that power for good and to fit into, not tyrannise over, the grand choir of the earth, in the greater song of the universe.

Prayer (Pope Francis)

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
for justice, love and peace.

Science making sense of the Creation

September is when in the Anglican Church we have a “Season of Creation” in which we try to grow in appreciation of the wonders of the universe we inhabit. It is a relatively recent innovation in the Church’s liturgical life and is very much a response to the growing global concern about the despoliation and rape of the earth and the coming global warming crisis.

Now much of this new awareness is due to the work of scientists, modern scientist who use a particular set of methods to understand reality, methods based on observation, re-observations, measurement and falsification. The methods have been outstandingly successful in understanding the material world and have fed into the associated technological revolution that has changed our world for better and worse.

Over the last two centuries there was a huge fallout between adherents of the new scientific-knowledge and those of religious-knowledge. It was all unnecessary, largely because there was a language and meaning problem. Neither understood what the other was saying at the time. The debate is largely over, though the modern fundamentalist approach came into being when some people started treating the scriptures as if they were a scientific text, which leads to great grief and continuing nonsense.

The situation is complicated nowadays by new “scientists” such as economists who hold great sway as the servants of economic power. I don’t really consider economists as scientists (I mean look at their stunning failure to predict the 2008 worldwide economic crash), except in the older sense of the word “science” as an ordered discipline with its own forms of knowledge.

When I was a young adult there was growing critique of science. It was the age of the atom bomb and we lived under the constant apprehension that life on earth might end in an atomic war between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. And the scientists got a lot of blame for this – they after all, had developed the bomb! So one got the popular music of the day having lyrics like this in the 1966 Byrds song, *Fifth dimension*:

And I opened my heart to the whole universe
And I found it was loving
And I saw the great blunder my teachers had made
Scientific delirium madness.

Nowadays, the scientists are back in favour amongst the intelligentsia, the well-educated and the young. It is the scientists, after all, who are the whistleblowers warning us about the coming – well actually already here – climate change. It is the scientists who have tried to talk sense to the politicians during the pandemic. In South Africa the politicians have sort-of listened to them, in the America less so. There has been a great deal of praise and thanksgiving that we are now, at last, listening to the scientists.

But before one gets too overawed by the scientific power of understanding reality it is worthwhile, and rather fascinating, to see South African scientists dividing into factions in their advice to our own government about the lockdown. Each faction has their facts, their scientific facts, at their fingertips, but how they lay out those facts and the meaning they give to them are very dissonant. One group of scientists argues that the other group, probably the majority group of economists, medical experts and their friends in the media, are in alliance with those who own and dominate the economy. Their facts are not disputed. It is the meaning they give, the necessary morally impacting actions that they recommend, that are in dispute. To take, as an example, the statement from one medical expert advising the government:

“The lockdown should be eradicated completely. You do not put the whole country into lockdown [just] because you don’t know how to deal with [the] elderly and the people with vulnerabilities”

As a statement it has some actual facts: we do not really know how to fully protect the elderly and vulnerable and some unstated facts – the elderly and the vulnerable will be in deep trouble with no lockdown. And already there is an unspoken moral decision – it is more important to protect the economy than the elderly and vulnerable. That is not a scientific fact – it is a moral choice. It ignores the fact also, and these are ‘facts’, that the people “with vulnerabilities” included nearly 8 million people living with HIV, a population that carries one of the highest burdens of disease in the world, and a majority population living in social conditions that make it almost impossible to have good sanitation practice or ‘social distancing’ – things it is very easy for the wealthy to have.

Valuable as the scientists are, there is no escaping from our responsibility as Christians to make choices based on meaning and values. There are no scientific quick fixes for decisions. We have to keep our moral wits about us in caring for the creation and the country.

Prayer (Green Anglicans)

Creator God, out of the overflowing of your love
you created all things with rich variety and great beauty,
and entrusted us with responsibility for them;
grant that we might so value all that you have given into our care
that we may strive to sustain its blessings for all people for all time;
through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Building something beautiful for God

The lockdown stopped us from entering church buildings to gather for worship. Now, it looks like we might be re-entering them again, though in a strangely un-congregational way, masked and seated apart, restricted in number, forbidden to sing out loud. It will not seem very “body”-like, praising in this dismembered format. So be it. I certainly will value entering again St John the Divine in Clark Road, Glenwood, Durban – it is a beautiful church building. Built of brick, its outward form is simple if not austere, but harmonious. For those interested in architectural styles it is a Romanesque Revival building. Inside it a wonderful and beautiful work of art with a glory of stained glass windows that tell a coherent story of salvation.

Some church buildings do immediately give us that sense of being holy places, as if their very material, be it brick, stone, wood or wattle and daub have been infused with prayer. Because of my work I have been able to travel quite extensively and it has been a great privilege to enter some of the masterpieces of church building around the world – places such as St Paul’s in London, Durham Cathedral (my favourite), Notre Dame in Paris, Hosios Lukas in Greece and St John’s Cathedral in New York. The thing that struck me about all of them was that they were well built. The work that went into them was intensive, costly and the best that could be given. People had put their hearts and souls into these buildings. They were costly gifts to God. And because of that they were beautiful.

One might remark that by comparison the commercial and public buildings of today are all gloss and veneer, built not with love and craftsmanship but to give an impression at as low a cost as possible, like the bogus clapboard columns at the Gateway Mall.

I recognise of course that buildings are just that – buildings – and that for Christians it is “the Body of your Son, the company of all faithful people” that is most important. In these days of scarcity when we sometimes even have to contemplate selling church buildings, our task is to continue trying to build something beautiful for God with few financial resources. And in these times that may well be in building up the local Body into something beautiful – building a Body that is not just old people but is full of the vigorous Christian life of people of all ages, conditions and classes.

The venture into online ministry by my parish church has itself been the building of something beautiful for God which has done much to keep this congregation together. We are heading into exciting and frightening times. And there are excellent exemplars out there of the advance guard of the new “buildings” erected by, videographers script planners, recorders and photographers. They work with love to build a new cathedral without walls. There is no need for ostentation – love, simplicity and a real message are what is needed.

A reader of these homilies tipped me off to one exemplar from the English city of Guildford where an online ministry binds together a “congregation” of more than one and half thousand people. It is the Emmaus Rd community (“centre our lives on Christ

through prayer and worship, and seek to make a measurable difference amongst the poor and the lost locally, in Europe and to the ends of the earth”) linked to the 24-7 Prayer movement (“reviving the church, rewiring the culture”) and to the HTB network of Churches (“evangelisation of the nation, the revitalisation of the church and the transformation of society”). One irony is that through their expertise in the electronic media, these communities are bringing people who would otherwise never go near a church building, back into face to face contact with others.

Few people have in their lives a chance to build a cathedral or splendid church. But we all have the challenge to build something beautiful for God and that is our local and electronically expanded congregation of the saints.

Prayers

(adapted from John Birch)

May the beauty of God
be reflected in our eyes,
the peace of God
reside within our hearts,
and the love of God
be the focus of our lives,
this day and all days.
Amen.

(Mark Lopez)

Beautiful God, Who in the heavens rests
Yet in the world lives
Continue, O Lord, to your children
Your grace and beauty give.

Beautiful God, our voices You have blessed
Your wonders we now sing.
We pray, Father, for Thy Will to be
(That) Your beauty to others we may bring.

Your beauty is peace, hope and love
And freedom from our fears
Your spirit we take in our breath
To fill us and hold us near.

Beautiful God, Creator of all that is good
Your children we are
And strive to become
Lives given and graced
Yet free and undone.

Make us, Lord,
Your beauty that is peace, hope and love
And free us from our fears
Your spirit we take in our breath
Fill us and hold us near.

Facts and truth

One of the most destructive conflicts that disturbs the beliefs of ordinary Christians has been the supposed conflict between “science” and “religion”. Though it has been intense in relation to Christian beliefs it has also affected other religions such as Islam.

For Christianity, the conflict became particularly acute in the 1800s when, first, the great age of the earth was discovered, and then the theory of the evolution of living species was first propounded. It is not that people had not long believed that the earth was old – it was exactly how old it was that was debated. And many people had argued that living things evolved in some way, including Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. To quote Augustine:

“God created all things simultaneously in the term of His act, by imposing upon elementary matter the seminal reasons of all things that were to appear in the long course of time.”

And this church thinker also said that if there is a difficulty in interpreting scripture (say, the statement that the earth and all its living things were created in 144 hours) and we are faced with two ways of interpreting the text (say, that it really was made in 144 hours or that the statement is a poetic one about God’s creative powers) then one discards the one that science has clearly shown to be factually false and looks more carefully at the text to see what the intention of the writer was and what context informed the writing of that text.

It is precisely here that a problem began in the 1800s. Modern science – not science in its original meaning of any organised disciplinary knowledge, but the modern physical, chemical and natural sciences – developed and came to powerfully change for better and worse, our ways of knowing and measuring the world. It also, equally for better and worse, gave humans the ability to really dominate the world. Some people, generally Protestants, took fright at this new force, but ironically enough, adopted much of its mindset. Facts were facts. They began to treat the Bible as if it were a modern scientific book full of facts and said that if it wasn’t factual, it wasn’t true. They mixed that with their ultra-Protestant belief that the Bible directly recorded the exact, infallible, inerrant words of God. Behold the invention of modern fundamentalism! It was a concept that would have horrified the early intellectual leaders of the Christian Church.

It also horrified Natal’s Bishop Colenso who agreed with the mathematicians and biologists that it would have been impossible to get all living beings into Noah’s ark (currently there are about 8.74 million species and we must not forget the extinct dinosaurs and suchlike) and that it was highly improbable that about two million Israelites could physically have crossed the Red Sea in one night.

We do ourselves and our children a disservice when we do not tell them the deeper truths about our beliefs and our scriptures. It is not easy to do so. I remember one of my own children being horrified to discover that the story of the animals going into the ark

two by two could not possibly be true. But she was not yet able to apprehend, nor had I a way of telling her, that the story had a deeper truth about survival and grace and listening to the voice of God that cannot be gained by treating it as factual. The problem becomes worse when young people discover the non-factuality of some parts of the Bible and then come to believe that none of it is factual, which is decidedly not the case.

Somehow we have to be educated Christians who are able to read and interpret the scriptures, who are able to get good sense and meaning from them. That meaning for both writers and readers, then and now, comes embedded in the context in which they were first written and then, in our own time, read. Our view, as much as was for those ancients, is always distorted by the haze of our contemporary environments.

Understanding our universe and interpreting our holy scriptures are both important and demanding tasks for all of us. Maybe we need to revive the way people like Augustine took seriously the task of opening up the meaning of those scriptures. In his time after he had finished one of his exegetical sermons the congregation cheered and gave applause. Discovering the deeper truth is worthy of applause and cheers.

Postscript

While writing this I was drawn to that perfect description of the difference between facts and deeper truth in the first two chapters of Charles Dicken's novel, "*Hard Times*".

Prayer (Adapted from Orthodox prayers for before and after study)

Christ, the true light,
who enlightens and sanctifies every person coming into the world,
let your face shine upon us that we may see your unapproachable light.

Open our eyes to the light of your wisdom.
Gladden our minds and hearts with the knowledge of truth.
Help us to fully understand your gospel message.
Open the eyes of our minds that we may understand the teachings.
Instill in us a reverence for all true knowledge.

For you, Christ, our Lord and our God, are our light,
and to you we give glory together with your Father
and your Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.

Ears of corn

Today's the Anglican lectionary's choice of gospel reading is Luke 6:1-5:

One Sabbath day, as Jesus happened to be passing through the cornfields, his disciples began picking the ears of corn, rubbing them in their hands, and eating them. Some of the Pharisees remarked, "Why are you doing what the Law forbids on the Sabbath day?"

Jesus answered them and said, "Have you never read what David and his companions did when they were hungry? How he went into the house of God, took the presentation loaves, ate some bread himself and gave some to his companions, even though the Law does not permit anyone except the priests to eat it?"

Then he added, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

I have no doubt that Jesus' disciples were really hungry – raw seeds of wheat are not exactly a tasty popcorn snack. But their simple action loses its innocence before the judgmental eyes of the Pharisees. They condemned it as a breach of the Sabbath regulations – by unhusking the wheat grains the disciples were technically working! Well, according to the Pharisees' interpretation of the Law they were therefore breaking the Sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8-11):

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Is it not wonderful that even domesticated animals are given a rest!

At the human level the story raises all sorts of questions, many of them relevant to the worldwide struggle of poor people to gain sustenance, to be fed. We think of all the regulations in the world that stop poor people from making a living and all the mechanisms that help wealthy people make themselves even wealthier. Jesus does not stop his disciples doing this simple act and is swift to defend their right to do so. He positions their act in the longer context of God's dealings with Israel. If we insist on ridiculous legalism rather than, in this case, the spirit of the Sabbath rest, we may go against God's commandments, for God's law was never intended to exclude people from meeting their basic life needs.

But the discussion becomes a deeper one. It is not simply that Jesus is a good and kind guy who cares for others. Jesus claims an authority – "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." He is not just a humanitarian, he puts out his claim to be directly representing God.

In this story faith and human need are strongly linked. The Pharisees sought to preserve structures and regulations but they had lost sight of ordinary human needs. Every time is a good time to do good, and regulations are good only when they are in the service of love. God's central concern is the well-being and joyful freedom of humankind. When Jesus says "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" he is in effect saying, "I, and all humanity with me, am lord of the Sabbath."

If we follow the Son of Man we too will do joyful good to all, and particularly those in need, and that need is there everyday.

Prayer (a hymn by Sydney Carter)

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth:
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

*Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me;
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John;
They came with me and the dance went on:

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame:
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,
And they left me there on a cross to die:

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black;
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone;
But I am the dance, and I still go on:

They cut me down and I leapt up high;
I am the life that'll never, never die.
I'll live in you if you'll live in me:
I am the Lord of the dance, said he.

The Cows of Bashan

This last week I listened to some entrancing happy stories told by witnesses to the Zondo Commission into state capture corruption. Somebody got a three million rand Aston Martin car for their birthday. There was a huge delivery meant, according to a witness, "for distribution to the poor". What lucky poor people, as the person handling the delivery said:

"When it (alcohol) was delivered it was a huge size. It was delivered at one of my garages and I had to remove a car. It was quite a substantial amount. It was brandy such as KWV and Johnny Walker, it was an upper range of each brand."

I was irresistibly drawn to a passage in the book of Amos who long ago spoke about such happy lucky people (Amos 4:1-2):

"Listen to this charge, you cows of Bashan,
Women who glitter on the heights of Samaria,
Who defraud the poor, and ride roughshod over the needy,
While you keep ordering your husbands,
Bring us wine to drink!

The LORD God swears by his glory
That your day is coming."

The South African Council of Churches has issued two separate statements on corruption and particularly about the looting of billions of rands meant to buy masks and other protective equipment. Here are some quotations from them:

"The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is extremely disgusted by the revelations of the shameless looting of funds, through alleged irregularities in Covid-19 procurement processes. It is shocking that tax payers' money which was dedicated for life saving measures related to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic that is crippling the whole country, was shamelessly taken advantage of by greedy individuals who like vultures and hyenas over dead bodies, saw the pandemic as an opportunity for a feeding frenzy, with no concern for the poor people. "They have sunk deep into corruption. God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins" (Hosea 9:9)."

"Those who engage in such calculated COVID theft, are behaving like opportunists that swoop to gobble up access to help, leaving the weak and sick, desperate for breath, and for protection from the deadly virus! These so called 'COVIDpreneurs' have shown that the evil culture of greed and corruption triumphs over honesty, ethics and good governance in our government, and this needs to be uprooted. We make an appeal for those people who are involved, some of whom are our congregants, to refrain from these criminal acts of fraud and corruption, and be

reminded that they are not stealing from government, but from the mouths of people of South Africa, and more especially the poor who continue to suffer at this time. "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13)."

"We would be remiss Mr President, to come before you and not express the shock, outrage and disbelief of the nation at the unthinkable schemes in the dark, to siphon money designed for relief from the onslaught of COVID-19. These diabolical and dastardly acts of callous greed must be punished most severely! This is not theft, the Executive Director of the World Health Organisation has aptly termed this, our international shame, nothing but murder. At the very least, we ask the justice system to treat it as culpable homicide. Where greed results in the death of patients, nurses and doctors, and mowing down families, it is more than commercial crime, this is homicide."

Amos spoke the word of God against corruption and misrule. He made it clear that being the special people of God was no protection. Indeed being the special people of God made the punishment all the more certain (Amos 3:2):

"You only have I chosen from all the nations of the earth.
Therefore it is you whom I will punish for all your wrongdoing."

We often tend to think of South Africa as special, exceptional. We laud our miraculous transformation away from an apartheid society. We say our constitution is the best in the world.

We must take to heart this horrifying warning from Amos (4:12):

"Therefore this is something which I will do to you, Israel,
And because I am going to do this thing
Make yourselves ready to meet your God, Israel."

Prayer

Lord of creation, who sent his Word to bring us grace and truth,
We ask you to forgive us our sins, our deliberate blindness and our cowardice.
We ask you not to remember our failures to do what is right.
We pray desperately for this country which we love,
may it not be destroyed.
You have nourished us in this land,
may we recognise your Lordship of it.
Amen.

Love is not an also

Jeremiah 22:13-18

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
 and his upper rooms by injustice;
 who makes his neighbours work for nothing,
 and does not give them their wages;
 who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house
 with large upper rooms',
 and who cuts out windows for it,
 panelling it with cedar,
 and painting it with vermilion.
 Are you a king
 because you compete in cedar?
 Did not your father eat and drink
 and do justice and righteousness?
 Then it was well with him.
 He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
 then it was well.
 Is not this to know me?
 says the Lord.

Is it possible to love God as distinct from human beings, our neighbours? Jeremiah did not think so. Neither did the apostle John who in his first letter reminded Christians that those who do not love other people cannot love God (John 4:20:21):

Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Jeremiah and John's messages seem very specific. They do not seem to be talking about loving humanity in a vague, general sort of way. No, it seems very particular, as close as loving a brother or sister in one's own family. It is specific poor and needy people Jeremiah is talking about.

And there are no options. John indeed says that we must love God and love our "brothers and sisters also." But that "also" it is not an add on, something we can do if we feel so inclined or feel an extraordinary call to. No we "must" do that loving. There is a huge danger in this "also-ism", the idea that most of the ethical demands of our faith are really far too difficult for us, that the standard has been deliberately set too high: loving the poor and needy is therefore an "also", an add-on, that some special saintly people, bless them, will do it for us and, then, when it is politic to do so, we can praise them as saints. [I cannot but remember forty years ago, receiving phone calls from members of

our denomination denouncing Archbishop Tutu as a terrorist, communist and blasphemer]. People who believe in also-ism should stop saying the Lord's Prayer to our unseen God because, by saying it, they commit themselves to the words and ask that:

Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

And that means for sayers of the prayer that, in Jeremiah's words we "do justice and righteousness", not think about it, wish for it, or consider it a sort of desirable goal to aspire to. We have to do it!

Another kind of "also" is the belief that we as individual Christian can lead quiet, pious lives and leave it to political parties and great men to sort out justice and righteousness. Somehow, if only we had a better system (of government, economics, justice welfare), all would be well – a system so perfect that no one would need to be good. We can all be in favour of a better social system but we cannot use that as a cop-out, for then it becomes a case of hidden idolatry, as Hosea put it so succinctly (Hosea 14:3):

What we have made with our hands
we will never again call gods
for in you the fatherless find a father's love.

Human systems are made by us, they are the work of our hands. To put on them the responsibility of doing the work of God is idolatry, and a self serving idolatry at that. God's demand and call and invitation to join with him in loving our neighbour is on us, directly.

Lord have mercy.

Prayer (Adapted from Liz Auld)

You are the author of justice Lord,
we ask that you would rain down justice in the form of convictions, law changes,
police and army training, ending of profiteering and corruption.
We ask that you would transform our minds and actions
so that we do your will.
May we study your word to remind ourselves of what justice should look like.
May we constantly be reminded that every injustice and every human being left
in miserable poverty is an injustice against you.
Oh Lord, that there would be more and more hearts transformed by your grace.
May this time of injustice and corruption produce opportunities for conversation
to talk about your grace, mercy, and forgiveness.
Amen.

Armour

Whenever I used to hear hymns in church or read passages about the armour of God, I tended to feel a bit uneasy. Armour seemed a somewhat out-of-date concept, and maybe I was thinking about those pictures of mediaeval knights more encumbered by heavy, creaking armour than protected by it. Maybe I also didn't really like the military mindset involved – after all I spent much of my life in a South Africa that was a highly militarised society.

But of course the language of war and armoured soldiers is as familiar today as it was in the time of St Paul when the Roman empire held sway through the efficiency of its fighting machine – its army of armoured, though highly mobile soldiers. Now they are in their bullet-proof vests and body armour.

In 2 Timothy 2:3 we are told:

“Take your share of hardship, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”

Paul believed that the Christian was also like a soldier in many respects. Not in all ways of course. For the first centuries of Christianity, Christians were forbidden to sign up to be soldiers because soldiers kill people and converted soldiers were instructed never to kill people. During his ministry he was on several occasions saved from hostile mobs by soldiers (Acts 21: 31-35; 23:10). After his arrest Paul was constantly in the presence of soldiers. Paul himself thought of himself as a soldier of Christ (Philippians 2:25; Philemon 1:2). So one can understand how the soldier and armour imagery could be used by Paul, and the church continues to use it to this day. When a person is baptised, after being signed with the cross these words are said:

“Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.
**Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ
 against sin, the world and the devil
 and continue his faithful soldier and servant
 to the end of your life.**”

Gentle Jesus meek and mild was always a Victorian nursery rhyme fantasy. God has called us to fight by his side against evil. Jesus was a fighter against the whole tyrannical regime of death and sin, against all the forces of un-love, selfishness and darkness that alienates us from God who is light and love.

We may think that what Paul speaks of was somewhat insubstantial – do the following really protect us – light (Romans 13:12) truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the word of God (Ephesians 6:13-17), purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, righteousness (2 Corinthians 6:6-7)?

Yet, those soldierly virtues are good news. They are like David's little stone against the might of the Goliath corporate giants of evil. They are God's equipment for us. They are

not decorative, to be kept locked in the cupboards of quiet piety. They are for fighting with. They are strong and support the endurance of the saints, those things that Paul had to endure – hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).

This week the United States of America was aghast at President Trump's words that soldiers who fell in battle or were captured were "losers". That was the opinion about Jesus of Nazareth held by the Jerusalem elite as evening came on Good Friday. No doubt that was the opinion of the executioners of Paul in Rome: what was in it for him that he came to this end?

So this strange fellowship of the disciples of the loser, the God who was captured and killed, put on their armour. They follow the truth, they show genuine love, their hearts and minds are pure, they listen to the whispers of the Holy Spirit that can get through all enemy lines, they lift the shield of their faith. And the risen one goes ahead of them, ahead even of the front lines, as they go into battle.

Prayer

Lord of all, I thank you for my life
and that you have chosen me to be your soldier.
I thank you for guiding me safely to this point in my life.
Give me wisdom to carry out future tasks with courage and endurance.
Armour me with the protection I need in this world.
Keep me humble and reliant on you.
To your glory, Father Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory (Julia Ward Howe – abolitionist, social activist and suffragette)

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps,
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal";
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgement seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him; be jubilant, my feet;
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free;
While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is Wisdom to the mighty, He is Succour to the brave,
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,
Our God is marching on.

Faces of compassion

There are many passages in Luke's Gospel that are sublime in their depiction of the compassion of Jesus, his concern for the poor, the suffering and the bereaved. Where he got this information from we do not know, because he had never met Jesus and neither had Paul, Luke's mentor in the faith. It probably came from what had been taught to Paul on his conversion.

One of the most moving of these compassion accounts is the story of the raising of the widow of Nain's only son, in Luke 7:11-16.

And it happened that on the next day Jesus went into a city called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. And as he drew near the city's gate, look: a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And, seeing her, the Lord was moved inwardly with compassion for her and said, "Do not weep." And approaching he touched the coffin, and those bearing it stood still, and he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

We in South Africa are so used to the death of the young – through violence, HIV-AIDS, and the general effects of poverty and alienation. And now we have increasing numbers succumbing to the Corona virus. We know about the death of young people.

It is worth re-looking at this story.

First it is important to recognise a certain Jewish stoical realism about death. For much of the Old Testament period the Jewish people had no belief in a real life after death. At best there was an idea of a shadowy place of the shades, much like the Greek belief in Hades. Death was not something that could be ignored or avoided by thinking pleasant thoughts about a future paradise. Perhaps in compensation a kind of secondary immortality could be achieved through having descendants. I think it is an immortality that most parents secretly believe. But this young man was dead and his mother was bereft of that hope.

This young man was dead before his time. The death of the young is always the most hard. We see it as abnormal, a waste and tragedy for the parents and the old left behind. Such a death is in the deepest sense a waste, a waste of all that care and love and nourishment from a mother, a waste of meaning. What can it mean to be a parent who loses a child? And there is waste in all that child's struggle to grow up, from the first breath, through childhood illnesses and learning to live in a human community. A waste going back into our aeons of inheritance and the development of life. The chain of life has been broken. Is this just futility? One is reminded of the famous poem by Wilfred Owen about a dead soldier:

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

And perhaps it was all that which evoked the compassion that raised this young man up.

But death is also a very practical tragedy for the old. For this mother, apart from her pain and loss she now has no support in old age.

Jesus has compassion on her too, “the Lord was moved inwardly with compassion for her and said, “Do not weep.”

Jesus, indeed, has compassion on all mothers who have lost children or who fear their loss. Jesus, dying on the cross had compassion on his own mother.

Jesus gave this young man back to his mother. The Father creator raised Jesus from the dead and gave him back to the earth in his resurrection and in his continuing life in a Spirit-filled church.

Prayer

Jesus, dying for the whole earth, for us, we give thanks to you.
Word of creation that built this universe,
we pray that we may have compassion for our mother earth,
who grieves for all her lost offspring down the ages.
May her liberation and resurrection come.
Unshackle us from our collective sin of killing the living earth,
from our actions that lead to death of all young things.
May we have compassion on the mothers in our land
whose children die every day, prematurely and wastefully.
Lord, may we join with the people of Nain when they said:
“God has come to his people.”

It has been a long time

It seems a long, long time ago that I penned the first homily. It was the evening before the first day of lockdown and I thought it could serve as an informal means of communication and support to members of the parish WhatsApp group for what was then assumed to be 21 days of isolation. It is now a full 24 weeks later – 168 days. Strictly speaking the lockdown has not ended. We can expect that some restrictions or changes to our previous way of life may well remain for the foreseeable future, but I hope to attend our first full church service on Sunday, though under all sorts of social distancing and sanitising constraints.

I have to now consider whether these daily homilies have served their purpose and should come to an end or continue in some form. I would appreciate your opinions on the matter.

I have found writing them both a joy and, inevitably sometimes, a burden as I waited for inspiration on what to send out every evening. I hope you, the readers, found them useful. I certainly found their writing impelled me to think carefully about what I believe and how I communicate those thoughts. They also enabled me to reflect on the impact of a global pandemic on my life and that of others. How had I/we changed? Were there benefits from this kind of compulsory retreat? How had the sufferings of others impinged on us while we were isolated from them?

This pandemic is something we will all remember. Its mark will be fairly indelible on our psyches. For our grandparents the Second World War would have made a clear mark. I remember in 1956 staring out over the sea next to Durban and seeing the horizon full of ships rerouted from the Suez Canal and of being sent to bed early after being told that we might have global nuclear war the next day. The precariousness of life was made very clear to me then. Our young people will remember this pandemic – being put into isolation with their parents at that very time of life when they are meant to be outgoing, meeting others and learning to have a separate identity from that of their parents. No chance to be reckless (whether in a good or bad sense) because being reckless can get you killed, or if not you, maybe a grandparent you have infected.

I think the lockdown has been a good discipline for some. The shock of the initial cessation of going out actually got us taking exercise and looking at our eating habits more seriously (though sometimes the enthusiasm for online aerobics palled after a bit). In curious ways many members of our church congregation seem more involved than before and they, and generally most of us, have had to get hands-on familiarity with electronic communication. It has and will change how many of us work in the future. Before lockdown I would be flying off to Johannesburg or Pretoria several times a month. Now my colleagues assure me that we may never have a face-to-face meeting again – it will all be done on Zoom or Meet or Skype or Teams: much less costly and even more efficient! For others the pandemic has liberated a gift to be a blessing to others. One thinks here not only of frontline medical workers but all who have been trying to see that food resources are spread around to the poorest of the poor and those without incomes.

The lockdown has also been a shock to our acceptance of a world of inequality and environmental destruction as normal and impossible to change. We all saw how governments did things with economic relief that they all had said before were totally impossible. We must not let this awakening subside. We trust in a God of justice who cannot abide exploitation, cruelty, and corruption.

Lastly, but most important, the lockdown has given us a chance often denied us in the busyness of “normality” to look at ultimate questions and the meaning of our lives. It challenges us to ask for the faith that has the endurance and strength for the long road ahead.

Prayer (adapted from an Orthodox prayer of a sick person]

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Liberator and Healer,
who healed people of sickness and affliction
through your love and compassion:
Visit me, Lord and grant us strength and endurance
to bear the difficulties and dangers of our time.
We place ourselves under the guidance of your holy will
and trust in your loving care for your people.
Grant that this time of trial may be to our spiritual benefit
and that we may live the rest of our lives more faithfully.
For you are the source of life and healing
and to you we give praise and glory,
now and forever.
Amen.

Extension – How long?

A warm thank you to all the people who responded to my warning yesterday that these daily homilies might be coming to an end as church services resumed. It was very affirming that so many had found them useful in the long lockdown period. Now we have heard that the lockdown, that was formerly going to end next week on the 15th of September, will be extended for another month at least. I will try to continue till then and will give due warning of any interruption or stopping. I will also collect all the homilies into a large pdf file and send it to everyone in due course, provided you supply me with an email address.

In the spirit of the extension of the lockdown I thought I would have some fun and see how often the people of the Bible had complained “How long!?” Well there are 77 occasions on which either kings, prophets or God himself complained about having to wait and endure.

Rightly, God has the first word here, in Exodus 10:3 where Moses goes to the Egyptian Pharaoh and presents God’s complaint:

‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”’

God speaks also for all the oppressed of the earth who cry out about the delay in their liberation.

Next comes the voice of the oppressor who want a more speedy end to those who irritate him. So Pharaoh on Moses in Exodus 10:7:

“How long will this fellow be a snare to us?”

And that little melody continues through history with Henry II of England saying “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest” (Thomas Becket) and the Saudis cutting up truthful journalists into pieces.

Then there are quite a few complaints from God about his people. It seems that our God is a sensitive God who can be wounded as in Numbers 14:11, 27):

And the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?’

“How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me.”

The leaders of the Israelites frequently chide them for not getting their act together, being indecisive, or behaving badly.

Joshua 18:3.

“So Joshua said to the Israelites, ‘How long will you be slack about going in and taking possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you?’”

1 Kings 2:6

“Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ The people did not answer him a word.”

The psalms are replete with “How long?” phrases related to suffering, fear of enemies and assailants, the scoffing of invaders, sinful sorrow, and God’s punishment of Israel.

Psalms 90:13 and 119:84 ask for God to end their long exile and suffering:

“Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!”

“How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?”

The prophets also both describe the length of Israel’s sinful behaviour and **also** appeal for a reduction of sentence on the nation. They do tend to complain quite a lot.

And then Jesus joins the tradition of “How long” sayers: Matthew 17:17.

Jesus answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’

The context is that a possessed boy had been brought to Jesus’ disciples who had failed to do anything. Jesus’ compassion boils over into anger – and decisive loving action. He heals the boy.

But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

So in the end for us it is not so much a question of “How long” but what we do while we are waiting. We do compassion – now.

Prayer (John Maynard)

Merciful God of compassion and justice,
have mercy on us as we confess our sin.
We are not the stewards Christ calls us to be.
Riches possess us while others go hungry.
We mismanage creation with our pollution and strife
to obtain ever more than we already have.
We abuse your provision for us by our selfish desires.
Help us hear again Christ's call to be faithful,
and through him forgive us
as we repent of our sin and turn from it.
Lord, hear our prayer.

Loving God,
with a handful of flour and a drop of oil
the widow of Zarephath fed the prophet Elijah
before her child and herself.
God, teach us the joy of hospitality
which welcomes friend and stranger,
neighbour and enemy,
and so finds You feasting among us.
Lord, hear our prayer.

God of Abundance,
with two small coins
the widow of Jerusalem offered to you her love,
her worship and all she had.
Teach us the joy of giving freely,
which counts nothing as ours by right,
but willingly shares
and so finds you sharing with us.
Lord, hear our prayer.

God of Resurrection,
with his whole being
Christ Jesus sacrificed himself
for the sake of your love for us.
Teach us the joy of giving ourselves to you,
so that we yearn for your presence,
long for your salvation,
and so find you living in us.
Lord, hear our prayer.

God of Mercy,
it is your will that we love and work and pray
for those who are in need of bread and of shelter,
of healing and of wholeness.
Hear the prayers we make for those of our world—
those of our community,
and those of our family who are in need.

We lift before you now in the silence of our hearts
and with the words of our lips.
Lord, hear our prayer.

Bless your church throughout the world
and help it to fulfill the purpose you have given it.
Guide us each day
and help us to give as completely as we have received.
We ask it in the name of Christ Jesus,
our Lord and our Saviour,
our brother and our friend.

Amen.

Steve Biko

Many people, including Anglicans, will be intrigued to find that the political martyr Steve Biko was a lifelong Anglican and now has a place in the lectionary of the church. Today is the commemoration of his death on 12th September 1977. He had been arrested by the Security Police in August, beaten nearly to death under interrogation, and then driven from the Eastern Cape, shackled in the back of a police van to Pretoria, where he died of head wounds.

Stephen Bantu Biko came to Durban to study medicine but dropped out to focus on politics and social development activities. I met him a couple of times in Durban in the early 1960s. Biko formulated a powerful combination of Christian respect for human dignity with African socialism and North American black power ideology. He rejected the idea that black people in South Africa had to imitate or assimilate themselves to white supremacist norms. He worked to instill a sense of pride and identity in fellow blacks by which he meant all the African, Indian and Coloured people considered subordinate and inferior by the apartheid regime. For him one of the greatest of weapons in the hands of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed, hence his crusade for what he called “black consciousness” – the consciousness of oneself as already possessing human dignity and beauty without requiring approval from white power. He believed that as an interim measure (for he believed in a non-racial society of the future) black people should move out of multi-racial student organisations as they needed to escape being treated paternalistically and had to organise independently. He helped create the South African Students’ Organisation and the Black People’s Convention. Initially the apartheid government mistakenly saw this move positively because of their horror of any multi-racial mixing in organisations. By the time they realised their mistake, black consciousness had spread amongst students and more widely. The government then stepped in, Biko and others were banned individually, other leaders were sent to Robben Island in 1974, and the organisations on which they had had a significant influence, were banned in 1977 after the Soweto revolt.

Fr Aelred Stubbs of the Community of the Resurrection, based at the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice in the Eastern Cape and a great friend of Biko, described him as a Martyr of Hope. The Eastern Orthodox Church has a special category for people who were not killed directly for Christian witness but in their life embodied the quest for justice and good governance and faced their death in a Christ-like manner – they call them the “Passion bearers”.

Biko, if he had not been murdered, would have been 74 this year and one can only imagine what South African politics and society would be like had he lived.

Prayer (Collect)

Lord of the Cross, who taught us
in the life of your servant Stephen Biko
that it was better to die for an idea that shall live,
than to live for an idea that will die.
Grant us the faith to take up our Cross daily
and to follow Christ;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever.
Amen

On not going back to 'church'

Today I am to be back in 'church'.

But of course there is problem in my saying that. Clergy colleague Andrew Manning says that in his parish he continually uses the phrase, "We are not going back" and continues "when we gather again in physical meetings it must be a step forward. We must not return to being a Sunday Church." His fear about this 'going back to church' was that we would lose so much of the good that has come out of the spiritual journey we have been on in this the year of lockdown.

It is said that prayer is really a kind of attentiveness. It is paying attention in a deep way to the voice of God and to the cries (and songs) of the world, and bringing them together in a constant act of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication. I personally have found the lockdown deepened my own attentiveness to both the divine and created voices.

The world and national situations drew humanity together in new ways in spite of social distancing and quarantines. At the parish level – without disrespect to the wonder of the Sunday services bringing together in community people from all walks of life – in a strange way we were often more together in isolation than before. We became more attentive to the invisible links that bound us together.

All of us know with our intellect that the real church is not a building, or a Sunday service, or the clergy, but before lockdown, our habits often suggested we had forgotten that. The real "church" is a body of people both local and spread across earth that trusts in the Lord and believes itself to be the Body of Christ, a body that is at work in the world.

It is worth looking at some texts about this 'body':

Romans 12:5 "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

1 Corinthians 12:12 "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ"

1 Corinthians 12:27 "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

Ephesians 4:12 "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"

Ephesians 5:23 "Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour."

Colossians 1:24 "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

I am always awed at the thought that through the Eucharistic bread and wine, we are linked to the physical body and shed blood of the man hanging on the cross. Through our baptism and partaking of the Eucharistic meal, we become an integral part of that body dying for us and defeating death and sin for us. Through the resurrection, that body – the collective “we” of Christ and us, his people of the church – continues to bring love and grace to the world.

During the lockdown we were bereft of those gatherings but were revitalised in new and innovative ways. New vistas have opened up for the church in these new times. Christ the Lord cares for this body and will always enliven it, whatever the outward circumstances. Services, gatherings and new means of communication all strengthen this body for its real work in the world. But it is in that world that the Body of Christ shows itself in acts of love, healing and actions for justice and the good of all.

And that is a 24/7 job and we must never forget that the Body of Christ is a servant – “But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). And we thank the pandemic for reminding us of that.

Prayer

Father of all,
we are overwhelmed that we have been made part of the Body of your Son.
We pray that the people who are now his Body in this world will be filled with the knowledge and joy brought by his presence.
May we, in the Body of your servant son, do your will in the world, bearing fruit in what we are and do.
May you delight at the sight of the Body of Christ, continuing your creative will for the earth and loving the universe that you have made.
May you delight when we together act justly and kindly in all our political, economic and educational doings.
Lord we thank you for our resurrection in the Body of your glorified Son, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

On the mystery of the Church

In the middle of the Eucharistic prayer a public acclamation is made by all present:

So we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

In 1 Timothy 3:16 there is a similar kind of statement:

No one can deny that this religion of ours is a tremendous mystery:

He was revealed as a human being,
was proved right by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in all parts of the world,
taken up into heavenly glory.

It does not mean that our faith is in something we haven't a clue about, but almost the opposite. Something that was indeed once secret, hidden or inexplicable has been opened up and made clear to us. We have been told the secret, though it may remain a mystery to unbelievers. The incarnation of the Word of God was the unveiling of the divine plan. The mystery of faith has been revealed to us as it is in the regular liturgy of the Church preceding that acclamation – through readings, creed and the introductory words of the Eucharistic prayer and in the words recalling into the present the Last Supper.

It is contextually useful, when thinking about our modern use of this word “mystery”, that in the early years of the church, working underground in the Roman Empire, most of the teaching about the sacraments was only revealed to new Christians after a long period of teaching. The word made more obvious sense then when the Christian message was radically new.

Being back in a Sunday Eucharistic service yesterday was for me a great reminder of the mystery of our faith and the mystery of what the Church is. There in the church building were seated about twenty-five masked people, who had to run the gauntlet of having their temperature read, sanitising their hands, filling in a contact form, re-sanitising their hands, being seated far from each other, instructed to wave to each other at the Peace and how to line up, suitably distanced, to receive the consecrated bread from the surgically-gloved hands of priest and deacon.

Well that **is** a mystery. This strange gathering, itself a small visible representation of a wider group of people not physically present, is described as the Body of Christ, the divinity whom these people worship.

What does one make of this mystery? One can only hope to explain it by trying to explain a similar word – “sacrament”. Sacraments are also a kind of mystery, these physical actions or things that in Anglican terminology are “an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. The things of this material world – water, bread, wine, olive oil, etc. – become signs of something else – purification and new life, identity with the body of the crucified God, healing and so on. The meaning of these visible things has totally changed for us. And the faithful believe that these sacraments are absolutely in line with a God who embodied himself in his universe in Jesus of Nazareth. The sacraments of the Church continue the reconciling work of the incarnation of the Word of God into human nature.

But the mystery of the Church? There is a real mystery! Can this odd collection of people gathered in this building really be the Body of Christ? As I stand looking at them, must I really think that somehow I am looking at Jesus Christ? It is a hard one. Many unbelievers look at the visible church, this gathering of broken and sinful and failing people and cannot see Christ at all. And we, from our weakness of faith often find it difficult to see behind the veil either.

There may be many others, not part of the visible Church who in the divine eyes are also part of this mysterious Body of Christ and we may find it very hard to see them so. Yet the Spirit of God is also at work in people and communities outside the institution of the Church, for that Spirit blows where it will. The Acts of the Apostles make clear that Spirit had to push, and push hard, to get those first apostles to look beyond themselves.

The mystery remains, for it is inexplicable. If we are to acclaim the presence of God in our gatherings, we have also to acclaim the presence of God in his Church, ministering and nurturing. If we are to receive the blessings of the sacraments, we have to be willing to accept the blessings of Christ in his Body the Church. For as Saint Augustine said:

“One cannot have God for Father who will not have the Church for mother.”

Prayer (St Augustine)

Watch, O Lord,
with those who wake,
or watch or weep tonight,
and give your angels charge
over those who sleep.

Tend your sick ones,
O Lord Jesus Christ;
rest your weary ones;
bless your dying ones;
soothe your suffering ones;
pity your afflicted ones;
shield your joyous ones;
and all for your love’s sake.
Amen.

Parts which lack obvious importance

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, after he explains how sharing in the Eucharist meal makes us one body (10:16-18) he provides a quite lengthy explanation using the human body as an analogy of the organic unity that the Church (and by further extension any human community), should be (12:12-31):

“Just as a body, though one, has many members, but all its many members form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. For indeed the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

If the initial lockdown did one thing it was to show us that we were all in this together. For once, all humanity was facing the same deadly crisis together. For a brief period the world and the world powers did start to behave as if we were one body. Even politicians put saving lives before making money. Large sums of money to provide relief for people miraculously appeared from deep treasury pockets that, we had long been assured, had nothing in them to spare.

Perhaps the most positive thing about that spring of concern for the whole of society was the acknowledgment of the fundamental importance of those people low down the pecking order of our stratified society. It was the farm labourers, the delivery truck drivers, the shop shelf packers, the dustbin collectors whom we were now dependent on: they were the essential workers, growing the food and getting it too us and clearing away the rubbish. These are the people near the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid of our society. And now for once, we recognise our debt to them. There began to be calls for a new start after the pandemic when there would be some sort of redress, a new way of treating people. Now under the constant deluge of propaganda to ‘open the economy’ we seldom hear the captains of the business world also calling for ‘pay fairness’.

Worldwide, since 1978, compensation for bosses (CEOs) rose 1,008% compared with 12% for average workers. In comparative terms, CEOs now make 278 times more than that of the average worker, whereas in 1965 it was 20 times only. In South Africa, the most unequal country in the world, the pay gap is even bigger with CEOs of the top listed companies earning as much as 725 times their workers' average salary.

Paul would not have had any of this (1 Corinthians 12:22-26):

“On the contrary, those parts of the body which have no obvious function are the more essential to health: and to those parts of the body which seem to us to be less deserving of notice we have to allow the highest honour of function. The parts which do not look beautiful have a deeper beauty in the work they do, while the parts which look beautiful may not be at all essential to life! But God has harmonised the whole body by giving importance of function to the parts which lack apparent importance, that the body should work together as a whole with all the members in sympathetic relationship with one another. So it happens that if one member suffers all the other members suffer with it, and if one member is honoured all the members share a common joy.”

There is a task for all Christian people, in the businesses they run and in the organisations they manage, to make what Paul says a reality. There is nothing stopping us treating all people with respect. And treating people with respect is not just a matter of politeness. It involves the hard work of struggling for fairness and equality in society. This applies equally to how the church and its organisations run their economic affairs.

We must not ignore the promise implicit in what Paul advocates. If we are one Body in Christ we will have a common joy. So much of the modern world is joyless and in the one Body that joy can be rediscovered.

We must not let the spirit of fairness awakened by the onslaught of the virus fade away. We cannot if we are true to being members of the one Body of Christ.

Prayer (Adapted from Prayer for the Workers from Faith-in-business.org)

Holy God, creator and sustainer of all, we pray for all who work to feed, nurture and care for their fellows.

We pray for all involved in the upbringing and safety of young children.

We ask for your Spirit to enlighten all educators, trainers and learners.

We pray for nurses, doctors and all involved in health care.

We pray for farm labourers and farmers, for food distributors and sellers.

We pray for shop workers, restaurant workers, and all involved in retailing and catering.

We pray for all transport workers and managers and for their work to be done with consideration and safety.

We pray for the workers and managers in small and large commerce, industry and common utilities that they recognise that their duty is to serve the common good too.

We pray for clerks, secretaries, administrators and all who work in bureaucracies that they may give good service to society.

We pray for bankers, accountants and all involved in financial activities.

We pray for media and communication workers that they stand for the truth and good.

We pray for police, soldiers, lawyers, magistrates, judges and legal advice workers that they may have a passion for justice and fairness in justice.

We pray for town councillors, members of provincial legislatures and members of parliament and ministers of state that they may work for the common good and always remember that they are the servants of all the people under God.

We pray for those who work as volunteers and activists to bring care and justice to all society.

We pray for clergy, monks, nuns, and all church workers, may God help you to be faithful ministers of the gospel.

Lastly we pray for the unemployed, the forgotten, the discarded and open our eyes and hearts to build a society that cares for them.

Lord, we ask you that we may come to find the common joy in being members of your one Body.

Amen.

The changing world

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our world – we have all noticed that. But there have been many other changes going on in our lifetimes that are accelerating, often at a seemingly exponential pace. Some of these changes we have liked – better health care and nutrition (if you can afford them of course), lots of nice technology (where would we have been in the lockdown without it), the ending of apartheid laws (it is hard to think back to those days where there was strict racial segregation in South Africa). Some of the changes have not been so pleasant – a growing ecological and climate crisis, the ups and downs of democracy (who would have thought in April 1994 that we would now be in a corruption crisis that is shattering the state and economy), the debilitating and manipulative effects of the social media accessed through our smart phones (fake news expands six times as fast as the truth), and so on. Then there are the changes such as social and demographic shifts that change our very environment and therefore also the make-up of local church congregations. The impact of these latter changes are more ambiguous.

For many years I lived in Pietermaritzburg and attended public worship at its splendid new Cathedral. When built, its congregation was almost totally “white” and many were people living in the city itself. Gradually that congregation diminished as its members moved into the middle class suburbs and went to churches there (and some of course left because they did not like the anti-apartheid stance of the Cathedral clergy). Then, over time as group areas began to collapse at last, the congregation became an almost entirely “black” one as a new influx of people came to live in the central city again and swelled the congregation. The parish I am now in, St John the Divine in Durban, was once a high Anglican redoubt in the very presentable “white” middle class suburb of Glenwood. Now, most of the former parishioners have grown old and have died or moved elsewhere and the congregation is now decidedly not as well off as the previous generation. The suburban environment has changed with more shopping centres and student residences and a sense of decay in parts of the area as the underclass of the homeless and desperate unemployed move into its lower reaches.

As an older person these changes in the world are perhaps more obvious. For the young the world they are born into simply is what it is. The old have seen and experienced the changes. Whilst one may sometimes envy those long-ago generations of people who lived in times when there was hardly any change, change is also stimulating, exciting. For the young in church congregations, the new demographic, social and financial situations can be opportunities for wonderful growth. They provide the place where we can work out our salvation with not only “fear and trembling” (as Philippians 2:12 puts it, meaning with a proper sense of awe and responsibility) but also vision and hope.

As with pandemic and plague, the Church has been here before. It has been through massive social and political changes. It has, starting in the then Roman world, seen that empire crumble and be taken over by the heathen – the Goths, Visigoths, Gauls, Vandals, and Vikings – yet ended up converting and outliving them all. It has seen

through atheistic regimes of Nazis and Stalinist Soviet communists and survived. It is still struggling with the forces of materialistic secularism. We can do it again, for as our leader has said, "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

Prayer

(Joseph Shadle)

God of Love,
You are with us in every transition and change.
As we enter into this new era with excitement and even some anxiety,
we recall your deep compassion, presence, and abounding love.
We thank you for the gifts, talents and skills with which you have blessed us.
We thank you for the experiences that have brought us to this moment.
We thank you for the work of others that gives breadth and depth to our own work.
Be with us as we move forward, rejoicing with you and supporting one another.
We ask this in your Holy Name.

Meditation

(Ken Untener on anniversary of martyrdom of Oscar Romero of El Salvador))

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
It is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise
that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
Which is another way of saying that
The Kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that should be said.
No prayer fully expressed our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No programme accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
Knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produced effects far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
A step along the way,
An opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference
Between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
Ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

Witness

Those of us who get to watch the television hearings of the *Commission of inquiry into allegations of state capture, corruption and fraud in the public sector including organs of state* – popularly known as the Zondo Commission because of the judge who leads it – are familiar with the swearing in of its witnesses. They have to swear to speak “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” and normally they conclude this oath with the words “so help me God”. Clearly, with some of the witnesses, God has failed to help them because they are obviously lying.

Witness is a rather important word in the New Testament. It is used often and sometimes as a descriptive name for a person. Thus the first apostles who had witnessed Jesus’ life and resurrection were the “witnesses” (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 10:41) as seen when they were electing Matthias as a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21-23). He was:

“one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a **witness** with us to his resurrection.”

And then Paul too becomes a ‘witness’ and by extension, so do all Christians (Acts 22:14-16):

Then Ananias said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his **witness** to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.”

The word for ‘witness’ is *martys* (which becomes the English word ‘martyr’) and soon the first martyr of the Church, Stephen, is also called a ‘witness’ by Paul (Acts 22:20):

“And while the blood of your **witness** Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.”

In time the title ‘witness’ (*martys*) was reserved in the Church for those who had suffered persecution and eventually only for a Christian who had died because of their witness to the faith.

Finally one can note that the true witness is Jesus, the Word of God (Revelation 3:14):

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true **witness**, the origin of God’s creation.”

Returning to the issue of witnesses having to speak the truth and the danger of lying witnesses, the Jewish law therefore insisted that nobody could be convicted of any crime or wrongdoing on the evidence of only one person (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 19:15). This more than one witness rule was accepted by the early Church for its own disciplinary hearings (Matthew 18:16). But Christ had changed one traditional part of this for previously only men were accepted as witnesses. The risen Christ chose Mary Magdalene to be the first witness of the resurrection.

For the followers of “the true witness” the truth must be paramount. One cannot read John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate without recognizing that (John 18:37):

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate’s mocking reply to Jesus, “What is truth?” sums up the reality of much of our world today in which authoritarian and populist governments and media and social media moguls, treat facts and reality as manipulable tools to extract profit and render populations ignorant and responsive to their lies. For millions and millions of people today, their ‘truth’ is the misinformation that has been fed to them in their political or social media bubbles, cut off from truth and reality.

Jesus of Nazareth came to witness to the truth. He stands invisibly in the dock when whistleblowers on corruption tell the truth at great cost to themselves. He stands by those whose commitment to the truth renders them jobless. He stands with the witness martyrs of today. And he asks us to stand with him and them and promises us that his Spirit of Truth will strengthen us (Acts 1:8):

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Prayer

Holy Father, who sent us Jesus Christ:
Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
Who is the faithful and true witness, the origin of your creation,
Who teaches us the truth through his life, ministry, death and glorious resurrection:
Grant in your mercy that we may be faithful witnesses to you,
wherever we are, in public office, in commerce, education, or other vocations and places,
and that you will give us the strength and courage not only speak the truth but do it,
living in the Body of your Son, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Prayer of the righteous

The lectionary reading for today includes the first part of Psalm 17 and it is peculiarly apposite for today, where the truly righteous person is often in danger from enemies and where whistleblowers and witnesses are regularly assassinated – as even the most cursory reading of a daily newspaper will show.

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
 give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
 From you let my vindication come;
 let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
 if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
 my mouth does not transgress.
 As for what others do, by the word of your lips
 I have avoided the ways of the violent.
 My steps have held fast to your paths;
 my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
 incline your ear to me, hear my words.
 Wondrously show your steadfast love,
 O saviour of those who seek refuge
 from their adversaries at your right hand.

This psalm is the prayer of an individual to God, asking for vindication. God is assured that, if tested, no wickedness will be found in the person, no lies and no association with violent people or wrong activities. In other words, in both thought and deed this individual has done no wrong. The psalmist's actions have been directed "by the word of your lips", God's word only. It is a high conception of what it is to be 'righteous'. But it also reads oddly to Christians who, following Paul, do not believe that, before God, anybody is 'righteous' (Roman 3:10-11 probably referencing Psalm 14:1-3).

Yet, confident though the prayer may be, something is wanted. A visible manifestation of God's steadfast love is desired, a saving act that will give protection from the enemies:

Wondrously show your steadfast love.

Nowadays those who choose our lectionary passages often leave out the uncomfortable parts, those bits of Old Testament savagery and appeals for revenge, as for example, in later verses of this psalm where God is asked to deal with the evil attackers with the sword and wreak vengeance on their children as well. While church congregations may be thereby protected from such sentiments that are not Christian ones (how could they be?), they do tell us the truth about our ancient ancestors in the faith and what ordinary

people feel when they are attacked by evil doers. But it does not justify the hatred. Undoubtedly the Jewish people were pretty holy and innocent compared to the surrounding pagan cultures. But it does not justify the desire for vengeance. This particular psalm was probably written after the return from exile in Babylon and the Jewish people were pretty *gatvol* about what had been done to them by pitiless enemy nations who had oppressed and mistreated them. In time this prayer become a congregational prayer in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues, alongside psalms which are more songs than prayers and become the equivalent of hymns.

The early Christians poured over the collection of psalms seeking clues about the Messiah, about the coming of the Word of God in human form. And they found one in the last verse, a promise of the coming of the divine presence into the world:

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

A truly righteous one had come, an innocent sufferer, who had not deserved what was inflicted upon him but forgave his enemies. All the assertions of the psalm about righteousness come true in Jesus. "Our Lord therefore becomes the speaker in these passages when a Christian reads them" as C.S. Lewis put it.

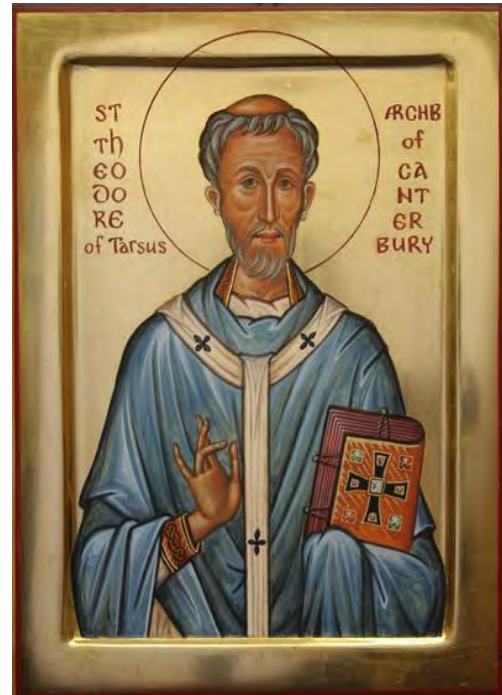
Prayer

Lord my creator, you know me better than anyone else,
you know me better than myself.
I trust in you who hear the cry of those who are in trouble.
Be with me in my troubles, in my anxieties, fear and anger,
guard my mind, my behaviour and my reactions.
Strengthen my faith that all whom I love are protected in your hands.
May I find assurance in your love for all your children.
I know that I will not have a life free from challenges,
but may you always be with me,
through your Son who with the Holy Spirit reigns with you.
Amen.

Theodore of Tarsus

Who, you may well ask? Well, I confess that I had never heard of him before consulting my lectionary for 19 September and there he was – it is his feast day. So I read up on him and that reading occasioned a number of thoughts about our knowledge of our particular denomination, born of the Church in England, and about our perceptions of the world and of history.

When President Ramaphosa gave his latest Lockdown update we were told that international travel could begin again. We are all accustomed to the idea of international travel, though of course, in practice it is restricted to the elite who can afford it. We are accustomed, perhaps all too accustomed, to the idea that the world is divided into nations, all separate, very different from each other and often hostile to each other. Lastly, we are accustomed to the view that the old should be put into retirement when they hit their sixties.



Now getting back to the story of Theodore. It started in England where in 663 AD, the part of the Church which was Celtic (and had been essentially setup or revived by Irish monks after the Romans had abandoned the island centuries before) and the Anglo-Saxon part (which was set up by missionaries from Gaul and Italy) were welded together after many disagreements. It was all rather chaotic at the time and after the Archbishop of Canterbury died they sent off an elected successor to be consecrated in Rome. Unfortunately, once he got there he died and the Pope scratched around to find a replacement.

The first choice was Adrian, a learned African abbot, but he turned down the offer. He recommended a refugee from the east, from Tarsus, Paul's city in what is now Turkey, which had been invaded by Persians. This was Theodore who was sixty-five years old, and, though a monk, not ordained as a priest. Surely a surprising choice to send to what was seen as the far end of the earth in troubled times.

Well Theodore was surprisingly effective and became "the first Archbishop whom all the English obeyed". He immediately toured the whole land, consecrated local bishops, founded new dioceses, presided over the first council of the entire English church in 672, and drew up Canon Law to govern Church administration and the structuring of dioceses and parishes – a structure that survives to the present day. He also arbitrated political disputes between warring kingdoms. Theodore died at the age of 88 having been Archbishop for 22 years.

He set up a school headed by the aforesaid Adrian from Africa, who had been pulled into the venture. The school was so good that the later historian Bede said that the students knew Greek and Latin as well as they knew English, and they also studied literature, poetry, rhetoric, astronomy and numerical and calendar calculations. It's good to know that an African had to educate the English.

The story of Theodore is an inspiration in thinking of the unity and universality of the Church that is not restricted by the false boundaries of nationalism, ethnicity, group origins and age.

Collect

Almighty God,
who called your servant Theodore of Tarsus from Rome to the see of Canterbury,
and gave him gifts of grace and wisdom to establish unity where there had been
division,
and order where there had been chaos:
Create in your Church, we pray, by the operation of the Holy Spirit,
such godly union and concord that it may proclaim,
both by word and example,
the Gospel of the Prince of Peace;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Contagious diseases

Over the last six months we have got used to thinking of our situation as the coming together of two disasters – the Covid-19 disease caused by a virus and the social and economic misery caused by the lockdown. The biological disaster was a disaster because it was a novel disease and we were not prepared for it. The social and economic misery unleashed by the lockdown was not really new at all – in South Africa we have long been inured to living with obscene levels of inequality and poverty caused by the structure of our society. The lockdown simply shone a very bright light on it.

It can be argued that the disasters, which are ongoing as the richest countries on earth head into second waves of infections due to their mismanagement of the pandemic, are really one disaster. The disaster is that we have not loved self, neighbour or earth.

This is the third Sunday with the theme of Season of Creation. We have to ask ourselves – very seriously – if we have cared for ourselves (and our children and grandchildren), loved our neighbours (who include foreigners), and loved our earth (and, in particular, all its living things). Are we, individually and collectively, going to change our minds (and the Biblical word for that is ‘repent’)? Are we going to totally reorient ourselves? Are we going to love God’s creation?

The virus scourge did not just happen. The ruthless exploitation of natural resources (such as logging the forests for high-end furniture and office panels and killing pangolins for superstitious folklore remedies) was driven by the greed of the rich and the misery of the very poor. We did not have stockpiles of masks and ventilators, though the scientists studying epidemics had long warned that such a pandemic was inevitable. We did not have such storehouses because modern societies and their economic and political leaders do not give a damn for the future but only present consumption and growth of wealth. In the United States of America they deliberately closed down what preparations they had previously set up – why waste money on something you might never need?

The social and economic misery in South Africa we should all have known about. How could we not in a country with the greatest inequality in the world and a huge percentage of the adult population unemployed? We cannot simply blame our addiction to our new digital social media tools which capture our attention, overload us with new information that is never internalised as knowledge, and keep us too busy to stand back and think. We may scorn the prosperity cult pentecostal churches who think that if you ‘claim’ whatever you desire from God you will get it and that your wealth is a sign of God’s blessing. These are the contagious disease values of insatiable consumers who think you can shortcut the necessity for hard individual and collective work. Yet this is precisely the ethos of the modern stock exchange where trillions are made every day just by moving money around – without actually producing a single thing.

Both the Covid-19 virus and endless economic growth have natural limits. Eventually enough of us will be infected, and enough of us will have died, that the pandemic ends.

Endless economic growth will also end. In fact we are past the limits already. We have extracted all the natural resources we reasonably can – yet we continue to ravage the earth to our doom.

The message of the New Testament is utterly alien to this world of feverish consumption, a casino theology ‘claiming’ wealth blessings, and the rich not looking to the future of our planet. Without an amiable planet there is no future for our descendants. Without an end to gross inequality there is no future for our country.

But the New Testament is a bracing manual for those who do ‘repent’ and turn around. It is a how-to-do-it guide to the “mind that was in Christ”. It is the manifesto of a revolution that has and can change the world. It does not offer us shortcuts or blinkers to hide our eyes from reality. Indeed it is challenging and hard. But, as James 1:2-4 points out, it gives us courage and endurance. It enables us to meet the difficulties with courage and faith in the Creator:

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Prayer

(Hildegard of Bingen, 13th Century)

We gather in the name of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the Earth and all its creatures!
Praise be to the Holy Trinity! God is sound and life, Creator of the Universe, Source of all life, whom the angels sing; wondrous Light of all mysteries known or unknown to humankind, and life that lives in all.

(Season of Creation Jubilee for the Earth confession)

We gather in the image of the Creator
who is a community of love.
We gather in the name of the Redeemer
who reconciles all of creation.
We gather in the presence of the Life Giver
who inspires new life and renews it.

We praise you God, for the Earth that sustains life. Through the planetary cycles of days and seasons, renewal and growth, you open your hand to give all creatures our food in the proper time. In your Wisdom you gave a Sabbath for the land to rest. But these days our living pushes the planet beyond its limits. Our demand for growth, and an endless cycle of production and consumption are exhausting our world. The forests are leached, the topsoil erodes, the fields fail, the deserts advance, the seas

acidify, the storms intensify. Humans and animals are forced to flee in search of security. We have not allowed the land to observe a Sabbath, and the Earth is struggling to renew. And so we confess. God of mercy and justice:

You tell us the land must rest, free from the burden of production.
We confess our demand that the Earth produce beyond its limits, and our bondage to desire more.

You call us to pause from sowing, pruning, and reaping in ways that destroy the soil.
We confess our vicious consumption of food and energy.

You assure us that we can be filled from the yield of the land.
We confess our lack of trust that we can thrive within the Earth's limits.

You affirm that our security is found in enough.
We confess our lack of courage to resist the myth of endless growth.

You tell us that the land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Yours, and everything in it.
We confess to thinking of creation as given, instead of a gift.

You call us to leave enough fruit on the vine and in the fields to feed our neighbours, animals, and replenish the Earth.
We confess our failure to share what we receive from the Earth.

You call us to fairness and justice.
We confess our lack of faith, not loving you with our whole heart and strength and mind, or our human and non-human neighbours as ourselves.

Turn us from fear and mistrust,
and free us to imagine a life reconciled to the Earth and all creatures,
through the Good News of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26–27).

Amen.

Towards a new engagement with the earth

It would be almost true to exaggerate that we are all environmentalists now. It is not true because people in many countries regularly elect leaders who reject the scientific evidence for climate change, but there is a ground swell in most countries, particularly among the young, of concern to protect the earth and the natural environment. Exactly a year ago I was in London and attended a truly huge demonstration of children who had taken the day off from school and were protesting with their parents about the lack of action to stop the man-made overheating of the planet.

We can see the same concern now growing in the Church. Thus the Anglicans now have their 'Green Anglicans' – The Anglican Communion states that the fifth mark of mission is 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth' and the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's Environmental Network (<http://www.greenanglicans.org/>) aims to support churches and dioceses to fulfil God's call to be Earthkeepers and to care for Creation. Since 2012 the September Season of Creation has essentially been dedicated to this issue.



It is important to see this environmental awareness and action as something that all of us have to be engaged in. It is not something only for an over-educated aristocratic elite who do not really like people and prefer wild animals. More than a hundred years ago G.K Chesterton mocked such people who:

get up early in the morning, just as our own aristocrats living the Simple Life get up early in the morning, because such altruism is much easier than stopping the games of the amphitheatre or giving the English people back their land.

This new struggle for the environment is a life struggle for life on earth and it demands much more than recycling tin cans and plastic, important thought that is – it requires a moral revolution that makes all people care for the earth as we would for our immediate family.

It also, requires, for our own physical, psychological and spiritual good that we reconnect with the natural world, the actual world that we were designed to live in. We cannot, of course, go back to being hunters and foragers living in caves and shelters on

the savannah. Humanity has been on a huge voyage of discovery and invention and most of us live now in artificial caves lit by electric light in cities. But at the end of that journey we may have to recognise that we have to go back in many respects to our natural home. We have to re-engage with our mother earth and teach our children to do so too.

To quote Thomas Traherne, the Anglican priest, writing in 1636:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world.

Prayer (Joe Seramane)

You asked for my hands that you might use them for your purpose,
I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them, for the work was hard.

You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice.
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.

You asked for my life that you might work through me.
I gave a small part that I might not get too involved.

Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you
only when it is convenient for me to do so,
only in those places where it is safe to do so,
and only in those who make it easy to do so.

Lord, forgive me, renew me, heal me, nurture me,
empower me, send me out as an instrument of your peace and justice
that I might take seriously the meaning of servant-leadership.

Amen.

Ministry and the ministers

I am in a Diocese and a congregation that are both going through a very perplexing organisational and financial crisis. The crisis was there before, but the Covid-19 pandemic really made it far worse. How could it not, when the most visible sign of the church's presence was large gatherings with singing, eating, handshakes and hugging and putting money into collection bags for the maintenance of ministers and buildings?

Often when the church is in a crisis, we hear calls asking "What would Jesus have done?" or "How did they do it in the early church?" Such calls are usually unhelpful because our contexts are so different and in many cases we simply do not know what they did in the early church. But with those cautions I am going to try to start to explore what guidelines we can derive from the past that can help us in present uncertainty.

Of Jesus we can say little more than that he saw his followers as a "flock" (that is, not just isolated individuals) guided, protected and overseen by a shepherd, a kinship band who were the new temple, a true worshipping community, whose members have the authority to forgive sins and who are "sent" to bring the good news to all. If we insist on seeing Jesus and his group of disciples as 'ministers' of this flock, their ministry does seem to have been supported materially – Mary Magdalene and some other women are specifically named as resource-givers to their mission.

For Jesus, 'ministers' are those who are the servants to this community – service (*diakonia*) is the principle of this ministry and the authority and esteem of the ministers depends on this humble service (Luke 22:24-27 expresses this particularly clearly). In sum, service, leadership and mission are all expressed in what Jesus says about ministry, and leadership is seen as arising out of the humble service.

The New Testament writers concur that service (*diakonia*) is the qualification for ministry (1 Corinthians 16:15-16). What terms they use for actual ministers is confusing and can be summed up by saying that in the New Testament church there was not yet the fixed order of ordained ministries that we are accustomed to.

So what kinds of 'ministers' were there? There were:

- those who received direct and different **gifts** of grace to minister as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, administrators, ecstasies, interpreters, evangelists, pastors, etc. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:11-12).
- **bishops and deacons** (the latter certainly including women), with the bishops exercising responsibility, oversight and shepherding (Philippians 1.1) and deacons exercising humble service. The bishops came to exercise a particularly important role in being responsible not only to the local congregation but to the wider church (as the church was never considered as a loose federation of autonomous congregations but as a single body). The deacons in time would become the first full-time stipendiary ministers of the church.

- **elders** (presbyters – the Greek word from which the English word ‘priest’ is derived, they were never priests in the Old Testament sense) who appear to have been a group of the leading older people in the local congregation and who clearly have some authority. Paul, for example, appointed leaders in the congregations he founded (Acts 14:20-23) and he describes them as his fellow workers (1 Corinthians 16:5, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Ephesians 6:21, Philippians 2:25, Colossians 1:7, 4:7). Though at first none were full-time church supported, in due course they became the essential officials of the church to whom the congregation owed obedience.

There continue to be debates by scholars as to whether bishops were the same thing as elders, or a select group within the elders, or (in a later development) a special person selected out of the elders to be their president, and as to how the final arrangement of the three orders of ordained ministers, bishops, presbyters and deacons, developed. It is quite possible that the above descriptions of gifted people, bishops and deacons, and elders are in fact all about the same people.

What insight can one derive from the confused reality of the early church, enlivened by the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit? It grew itself and developed ways of developing its own leadership. It had been given the responsibility to direct its own life. God’s Spirit working on the human endowment of the community’s leaders is sufficient for its life.

Surely it is the same today? Though the contexts change and the church and its formal ministries have gone through many changes, some good, some not so good, it is clear that the church of God can minister both to itself and the world in effective ways. It is up to us to find those ways and make them happen.

Prayers (Book of Common Prayer)

Almighty and everlasting God,
 by your Spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified:
 receive our prayers which we offer before you for all members of your holy
 Church
 that in their vocation and ministry they may truly serve you;
 through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.
 Amen.

Eternal Father
 through your Holy Spirit you have appointed
 many ministries in the Church.
 Bless those who are called,
 maintain them in your truth,
 renew them in your holiness
 and make them your ever-faithful servants;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

Changes in ministry

Continuing yesterday's look at the ministry in the early church, we have to recognize that over two millennia, forms of ministry have changed and evolved. Some of these changes came about, and it was inevitable that they would, as the Church became a large and influential institution in society and needed, sometimes for the worse, to be governed like any other large institution. But sometimes what has evolved looks ungainly and cumbersome, like a dinosaur, that is unlikely to survive.

After the first couple of centuries the presbyters (the elders) were increasingly seen as priests – in the Old Testament sense as priests at the altar – and not just as elders dealing mainly with governance. The charismatic (gift) ministries had also largely been consolidated into the work of presbyters (especially in the West). To sum up, presbyters came to co-ordinate the various specialised ministries and in due course came to do most of them, as well as being seen as exercising a priestly role.

I want to look at the obvious themes of any ministry today: leadership, shepherding, preaching and teaching, and ritual and sacrament.

With **leadership**, over time, what had once been collectively exercised by a group of elders generated by the local congregation was eliminated and an external leadership of one or a very few presbyters was imposed upon local congregations. What originally reflected seniority and collectivity, in due time became subject to the bishop, and then became the personal responsibility of the individual priest of the parish. The individual presbyter-priests now ruled with the bishop as super-priest. One can see why this gradually happened – it was easier to manage the church in this way, but with some negative costs. The words and life of Jesus stressed that genuine authority and leadership arise out of, are the 'reward' of humble service.

The way in which presbyters (priests) have been selected in recent centuries is the reverse of ancient practice. Authority and leadership came to be given by appointment (after some pre-service training) and it was *hoped* that the priest would be a person who would serve with humility. Indeed, service as a grounds for authority was nearly extinguished, as too was a genuine role for deacons who were seen as simply trainee priests. Now we are reverting to an earlier age as the general trend towards democratisation in the world has led to more lay leadership and synodal governance of the church. There is also a revival of the diaconate as an independent ordained ministry.

The **pastoral or shepherding** role previously exercised by the bishop (or bishops in earlier times) was effectively taken over by the priest. Again we understand this development. In an early church congregation the bishop would have known everyone in that congregation and their needs would have been made known to him by the other elders and the deacons. Now the average congregant is lucky to catch a glimpse of a bishop at a confirmation service once a year. But in a large parish, a single priest will be hard put to give individual counsel to members of the congregation – to be effective that

ministry has to be shared. Also, though ordained ministers are still the main counsellors of people in many parts of the world, in wealthier societies and areas other professionals (psychologists, family guidance staff, etc.) are increasingly doing it as well.

With **preaching and teaching**, what had started as an apostolic ministry, aided by those gifted with preaching and teaching skills in the young church, effectively became the preserve (in the West at least) of the ordained priest. In the Catholic, Reformed and Anglican traditions, the ministry of the word by clergy has been seen to require a high level of education and intellectual training. The strength of this tradition is that it tends to lessen the dangers of heresy, superstition, and fanaticism and often has a beneficial impact on the role of the church in society as a whole. Nowadays preaching and teaching are increasingly no longer entirely a clerical prerogative but often subject still to authorisation (and training). The reality is that the past situation where the priest was the best educated person in the community is long past and, indeed, in many urban communities, some in the congregation may well look on the priest as their educational and intellectual inferior.

With the sacramental ministry, the priest became the sole provider of the **rites and sacraments** of the Church. Even in the wider society, the priest responded to the need for rituals associated with important life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death and this need (on the border between religion and superstition) remains important even in an increasingly secular society. It is not for nothing that the need for priestly services was summed up by the title of the most popular British film in the last thirty years: *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, this in a country where fewer than 10% of the population are churchgoers. But such a possibly declining need can hardly be taken seriously as a **Christian** characteristic of the priest. New ways, going back to the earliest conceptions of the liturgy, are recasting how we think of the church's liturgical services and their meaning.

The point I am trying to make is that, how ministry is performed, whether by individual Christians or ordained clergy, has changed over time. What the time of pandemic isolation and reflection has given us, is a chance to look with new eyes at ourselves and how we serve God in our lives and our liturgy. We may be startled by recognising afresh what is good and true, but also horrified by what is clearly not working.

Paul the Apostle, was fully awake to these issues (Romans 15: 14-16):

For myself I feel certain that you, my brothers and sisters, have real Christian character and experience, and that you are capable of keeping each other on the right road. Nevertheless I have written to you with a certain frankness, to refresh your minds with truths that you already know, by virtue of my commission as Christ's minister to the Gentiles in the service of the Gospel.

May we keep on the right road.

Prayer

Prayers for us by Paul the Apostle

Philippians 1:9-11

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Ephesians 1:15-19a

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Roland Allen and the shape of the post-pandemic church

One of my ecclesiastical heroes is Roland Allen, of whom I am sure, most have never heard. Roland Allen was an early 20th Century Anglican missionary in China (which today has at least 50 million Christians). It was his few small books that first drew serious attention to the place of local ordained leadership in the church.

Allen argued in the books, *Missionary methods, St Paul's or ours* and *The spontaneous expansion of the Church*, that St Paul planted churches and did not leave until they were fully equipped with full ministry, sacraments and tradition. The process Allen described goes something like this:

- A Christian community comes into being as the result of the preaching of the Gospel.
- To that community is handed over four essentials – scriptures, creed, sacraments and ministry.
- The community is then responsible, under the direction of the overseer, the bishop, to recognise the spiritual gifts and needs in its membership and to call into service priests/presbyters to preside at the Eucharist and to be responsible for the word and for pastoral care.
- The Holy Spirit working on the human endowment of those leaders drawn from the community is sufficient for its life. Leaders do not have to be pulled in from outside. A Christian community that cannot do these things is not yet a *church*.
- It is also required to share the message and the life with its neighbouring communities not yet evangelised.
- The bishop and his staff of deacons are crucial (Paul had his assistants Timothy, Titus and Phoebe).

For Allen, it was the responsibility of the local church to raise up spiritual leaders from its members. It had to direct its own life. If the local church declined to accept that challenge there was no way in which the church at large could somehow make do by sending in someone from outside the local church to minister to it by holding services. Hence, once ready, the natural, respected and mature leaders of a local community should be ordained as non-stipendiary 'voluntary' clergy. These non-stipendiary were not 'half-time' or 'part-time' but part of a restructuring of the church to make mission more effective. They were not to be a money-saving expedient to keep the existing stipendiary clergy going or to be their cheap assistants. What stipendiary clergy should do was to be itinerant and apostolic, carrying out specialised functions such as evangelism and teaching.

According to Allen, who respected the Anglican tradition of an educated clergy, what constituted useful educational qualifications should not exclude informal education and training through life experience. He believed that lack of formal academic training could be addressed by means of appropriate theological education under the direction of the bishop.

Although a number of other people developed Allen's ideas (for example Fr Herbert Kelly of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Modderpoort in the Free State), they only really came to fruition in the 1960s amongst Protestant churches in Latin America and led to the development of Theological Education by Extension.

Theological Education by Extension (TEE) was the answer to a very real challenge faced by missionaries who sought, following St Paul's example, to leave self-directed indigenous churches. The problem was that the dominant model of theological training and clergy supply was simply unsuitable for the poor communities in poor countries. Theological training was expensive and took place in urban seminaries that were expensive to run, or even in more costly overseas institutions. To gain entrance, candidates had to have high levels of education to start with and not be encumbered with families and dependants. What this meant in practice was that young candidates (who had small if any leadership roles in local congregations) left poor rural communities for training in the cities and seldom went back, certainly psychologically, even if some did return physically. They also developed expectations about the incomes they, as now middle class people, were entitled to. It was a system that was strangling church growth and mission. Theological Education by Extension, using centrally prepared texts delivered by distance and tutorial group methods in the actual local communities, enabled the genuine local leadership to be theologically trained. It was an astonishing success and TEE became a world-wide movement. It was first mooted in South Africa by myself and Stephen Hayes in the early 1970s and an interdenominational Theological Education by Extension College was set up in 1976.

Ironically enough, the quite mundane financial and staffing reasons for Theological Education by Extension's attractiveness to poor denominations in poor countries, soon became needed by more wealthy and better educated constituencies. Churches in the highly industrialised countries of the West were experiencing declines in active membership, declines in income (notably by the Episcopalian Church in the United States of America which had made itself unpopular, being prophetically vocal in the struggle for integration), and declining vocations from the traditional source of candidates for ordinations – young people (whose mixture of crass materialism and self-indulgent idealism made a life of relative poverty in a conservative traditional institution like the church seem decidedly unattractive). By now most Anglican Provinces have some form of TEE and some form of non-stipendiary ministry.

Where this all becomes contextually relevant is in the present and likely future aftermath of the Corona virus pandemic and lockdown. Churches are facing declines in income that threaten the supply of stipendiary clergy. As more and more people will work from home the very pattern of societies will begin to change. More and more learning will be mediated online. Yet ironically there will be more and more need for local face-to-face pastoral care and diaconal service. Church congregations will need to heed Allen's message. And that future is immensely exciting.

Prayer (Ted Dodd)

Two thousand years ago, a band of disciples felt lost and leaderless.
Their leader, rabbi and teacher had been executed.
They held to the hope and joy of their Easter faith,
But they also questioned: What now? What next? Where do we go from here?
In the story of Pentecost, the spirit moves amongst these disciples like the wind.
The disciples were energized, strengthened, and mobilized.
In the pattern of Pentecost, the winds of God blow us out of apathy,
help us to make changes,
enable us to take action.
Holy Spirit come like the wind into our isolation doldrums.
Breath of God renew us in this time of pandemic.
Energizing Spirit bring us conviction and strength to face this bewildering time.

New skills and old blind spots

In the pandemic world we are really going to have to learn new skills.

Some of these are survival skills. How do we and the community stay infection free? Simple – but requiring often harsh internal discipline and willingness to say “No! We cannot do that” to people we love and care about and want to be close to.

There is a whole new world of new communication skills that all of us, young and old, leaders or followers will have to learn. How to network with others electronically is a challenge. A deacon tells me that in a recent Zoom meeting “chances to contribute have been minimal and challenging”. How does electronic communication inequality get undone or at least reduced? How do we overcome the problem of the cost of data to people who literally cannot afford to have us communicate with them through online messaging or watch long YouTube Sunday services? Clergy and other preachers of the word will have to learn, after all their training and practice in preaching from high up in a pulpit down a long church building, that this way of doing things simply does not work in a very different medium such as the television screen in the lounge or the very small cell phone screen. These are intimate, close up, media. One does not yell at people sitting close to one, one engages in a conversation. And maybe the young people will have to be the educators of the not-so-young in these matters.

The other huge change we are going to have to get over is the challenge to our old sentimentalities and blind spots, such as the type of service and music we value. We all have them and often they do no major harm. Many of those blind spots were not too obvious pre-pandemic – we could hide them by sticking to a certain friendship group or by going to the particular church or church service we were comfortable in. Many of those options will be reduced in the post-pandemic world.

We have discovered before that change is not new. Humanity and the people of the Church have had to adapt before to new ways. The apostle Paul is a good object lesson here. Paul had his blind spots but he did not let them sabotage his mission.

In probably the most revolutionary statement ever made since the coming of Christ, he said (Galatians 3:28):

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Imagine the contradiction, the turning away from his previous upbringing and identity that Paul had to go through to say that. He was a Jew, free and male. He was brought up a devout and ultra-conservative Jew – a Pharisee – intent on being separate from unclean Jews and pagans, living as a free man of high status, a Roman citizen, and brought up in a very male-dominated world where every woman was considered an inferior. But in thirty words he overturns it all, throws it away, and makes clear what kind of world God wills when we say “Our Father in heaven, ... your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

But even revolutionaries have blind spots in their thinking and behaviour. As Christians we have to be aware of our blind spots, the inconsistencies that tarnish our grand and glorious revolutionary narrative of salvation through Jesus Christ.

In spite of those glorious words in Galatians, Paul occasionally got quite worked up on gender-related matters, most of them occurring in an environment in which he felt very uncomfortable because of his background. He had many problems with the new Christians in Corinth. To understand the city of Corinth in modern terms, one might have to blend Las Vegas and the red light district of Hamburg. What a challenge to convert people in that context and to teach them how to live a new Christian life under those daily pressures – and he did give them a lot of teaching. An example of one of the things Paul got quite hot under the collar about was Christian women not veiling themselves in public. Paul did understand that this was one of his blind spots. He still argued for a firm standard of what women should wear in the conservative tradition, but accepted that many would argue with him on the matter, and that it was really just a custom (Corinthians 11:11-16):

Of course, in the sight of God neither “man” nor “woman” has any separate existence. For if woman was made originally for man, no man is now born except by a woman, and both man and woman, like everything else, owe their existence to God. But use your own judgment, do you think it right and proper for a woman to pray to God bare-headed? Isn't there a natural principle here, that makes us feel that long hair is disgraceful to a man, but of glorious beauty to a woman? We feel this because the long hair is the cover provided by nature for the woman's head. But if anyone wants to be argumentative about it, I can only say that we and the churches of God generally hold this ruling on the matter.

We too will have to let go of a lot things in the period we are entering into. We may argue about them, as Paul did, but we have to let them go, for the only important thing is what Paul agreed was the only important thing: all of us are one in Christ.

Prayer

Almighty Father

We pray that we whom Christ has made holy,
whatever our background or environment,
may hear your call to us to follow your Son
and with our whole being receive his grace and peace.
We thank you that we have heard the Christian message
and it has enriched our lives.

We pray that we will use the gifts Christ has given us
and remain steadfast in the faith to the end,
firm in the fellowship of the faith.

Through him who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever.

Amen.

Lancelot Andrewes

Today in the Anglican Church it is the minor festival commemorating Lancelot Andrewes, bishop, scholar and translator from the early days of the Church of England after it had split from central Roman jurisdiction. He was a remarkable man and Anglicans in South Africa today owe much to him for the survival of a truly catholic vision of the Church.

Born of wealthy, influential parents he studied at the University of Cambridge. Once a year he would spend his vacation month with his parents, find a teacher and learn a new language. He had an almost photographic memory and eventually he knew fifteen languages as well as Latin, Greek and Hebrew and three other ancient languages. He is considered as one of the greatest writers in English. He was the leader of the team that translated the King James version of the Bible and thought to be directly responsible for the famous passages of Creation and Fall, Abraham and Isaac, the Exodus, David's laments for Saul, Jonathan, and Absalom, Elijah's encounter with the 'still small voice' of God, and Psalm 23.

After an early interest in Calvinism, Andrewes turned away from its doctrines of predestination. He agreed as to the Real Presence in the Eucharistic elements and the use of the terms "sacrifice" and "altar" as agreeable to scripture and teaching of the Church fathers. He loved the liturgy of the church and understood theology as had the early church fathers. His own experience of God was not just spiritual but visual, physical and in that sense very "Catholic" or "high church." For him the fact that God had taken on humanity in the person of Jesus Christ meant that not just our minds or souls but our physical bodies must take an active part in prayer. So he insisted on "worshipping, falling down, kneeling before the Lord".

The great English poet, T.S. Eliot, who was reputedly converted to Christianity by reading Andrewes, said that this showed that "a Church is to be judged by its intellectual fruits, by its influence on the sensibility of the most sensitive and on the intellect of the most intelligent, and it must be made real to the eye by monuments of artistic merit."

He spent many hours in prayer every morning and kept a book of private devotions which, when published after his death, became of classic Anglican guide to prayer. In spite of his role as an ecclesiastical politician and preacher to queens and kings he was deeply engaged in pastoral care and care for the poor. He would wait every day in the transept of his church to be available for any person in need of solace or counsel.

Prayer (Lancelot Andrewes)

O my Lord, my Lord, I thank Thee for that I am,
that I am alive, that I am rational:

for nurture, preservation, governance:

for education, citizenship, religion:

for Thy gifts of grace, nature, estate:

for redemption, regeneration, instruction:

for calling, recalling, further calling manifold:

for forbearance, longsuffering, long longsuffering towards me,
many times, many years, until now:

for all good offices I have received, good speed I have gotten:

for any good thing done:

for the use of things present, thy promise and my hope
touching the fruition of the good things to come:

for my parents honest and good, teachers gentle,
benefactors always to be had in remembrance,
colleagues like-minded, hearers attentive, friends sincere,
retainers faithful:

for all who have stood me in good stead
by their writings, their sermons, conversations, prayers,
examples, rebukes, wrongs:

for these things and all other, which I think of, which I think not of,
open and secret, things I remember, things I have forgotten withal,
things done to me after my will or yet against my will,
I confess to Thee and bless Thee and give thanks unto Thee,
And I will confess and bless and give thanks to Thee all the days of my life.

What thanks can I render to God again
For all the benefits that He hath done unto me?

Collect for Lancelot Andrewes

O Lord and Father, our King and God,
by whose grace the Church was enriched by the great learning and eloquent
preaching of your servant Lancelot Andrewes,
but even more by his example of biblical and liturgical prayer:
Conform our lives, like his, to the image of Christ,
that our hearts may love you, our minds serve you, and our lips proclaim the
greatness of your mercy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Be of the same mind

The New Testament reading for today in the Anglican lectionary is the well known passage in the letter of Paul to the Philippians (2:1-13) about the *kenosis*, the self-emptying, of the Son of God in the incarnation. It is also in the prayer book as a Canticle.

The core of the passage is verses 6 to 11 and it is thought that this was probably an early Christian hymn or creed, which is why it tends to be printed in verse form in modern translations of the Bible.

Christ Jesus
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

In the context of Paul's letter, the hymn was inserted here to make a point about the resolution of some conflict in the community that he was concerned about. It is placed there to remind them to overcome that conflict and to be in agreement with each other, working together for the other members of the community, rather than to gain rank or position. As Paul says before the hymn (2:1-5):

Now if your experience of Christ's encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of his Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy, do make my best hope for you come true! Live together in harmony, live together in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you. Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people's point of view. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus

And so Paul uses the hymn to illustrate that new attitude – that “mind that was in Christ”.

He is asking them to get their thinking right. They need to have the right attitude and understanding of what it is to be in a Christian community and to deal with any conflicts that arise. He is showing them the path to a new way of being a human community. He does not underestimate the difficulties. He says in verse 12 that they must “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”, that is, with a proper sense of awe and responsibility. However, God is with them in this task,

for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

It is sometimes easy to misunderstand the hymn and its message. Because Christ became humble, a slave, does not mean that we have to accept injustice and the various forms of slavery in the world. Christ’s descent is the opposite: he comes incognito to liberate the world and the ending of the hymn is Christ’s glorious triumph – the battle is won. But the way Christ won that victory - through humble giving of love, even to death – is precisely the mind of Christ attitude that the Christian community has to have, in imitation of their Lord.

Prayer (Sr Marie Paul Curley)

Jesus, I come to You today empty.

I don’t feel I have anything to bring to You except my poor self.

And today, that doesn’t feel as if it’s enough.

I feel helpless and vulnerable, lost and desolate.

This sharp-edged emptiness reminds me

how dependent I truly am on You,

that I am not self-sufficient,

that I need to learn to trust You always more.

You experienced this emptiness while You were here on earth.

You let go of not just the fullness of divinity but even of the human respect You deserved,

in order to be with us, to teach us, to serve us, and to save us.

You emptied Yourself for me, so that I can offer my emptiness to You to be filled.

Divine Master, fill me with what I need most:

Your love and Your grace.

On the Law and the sensitive life of Christians

I am often asked by Christians how they deal with accusations from friends in fundamentalist and smaller churches that they are not following the instructions of the Bible and that we should do such things as keep the Sabbath (on a Saturday) or not allow women to preach or enter a church without a head covering, and many others. We could examine such claims in detail but it is important to understand that there is a founding principle of the whole church, that Christians should not be bound by the detailed regulations of the Old Testament law. This decision was made in the earliest days of the Church and is fully described in Acts 15.

Some Jewish Christians from Judaea had disturbed gentile Christian converts in Syria by saying that unless the men were circumcised and became fully observant of the Laws of Moses, they could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas then travelled to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the Christian leadership there, “the apostles and elders” headed by James, the brother of the Lord. In the lengthy debate that ensued, some converted Pharisees argued that these men should indeed be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. Peter answered them saying (Acts 15:10-11):

“Why, therefore, do you now put God to the test, so as to place upon the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our fathers nor we were strong enough to bear? Rather, we have faith we shall be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the way that they too will be.”

James then issued a formal declaration (Acts 15:19-21):

“Hence my verdict is not to cause difficulties for those among the gentiles turning to God, But rather to write to them, telling them to abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from whoring, and from anything strangled, and from blood. For Moses has men who preach him in every city, being read aloud in the synagogue every Sabbath since the times of generations long past.”

That statement was then written and a letter delivered to the churches in Syria and Cilicia. It read (Acts 15:28-29):

“For it was resolved by the Holy Spirit and by us to impose upon you no greater burden than these necessities: To abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from whoring, by keeping yourselves from which you will be doing well.”

To understand what this means for today we must look at the original context. These churches outside Judaea were situated in a thoroughly pagan society. Key features of that society would have been:

- most meat would have come to the market after first being sacrificed at a pagan temple with its idols (apart from not being slaughtered in a way that satisfied Jewish kosher regulations). The pagan temple were very much integrated into the economic life of the cities. This was how society ran.
- sacred prostitution was provided via the pagan temples as well as ordinary brothels. This was also “normal” pagan city life.

But we have to understand how this situation affected different groups of people in the churches, for there were three groups of people in them.

When the first apostles went to Syria and other provinces of the Roman empire they would have first evangelised in the local synagogues. It was only later, once those first missionaries and their Jewish converts had been ejected from the synagogues, that separate Christian congregations were set up, usually meeting in homes. The new congregations had in them three groups of people:

- Jews who had been trying to obey the full Mosaic law and now recognized Jesus as the Messiah;
- “God fearers” who were gentile people who had been converted to the Jewish religion and attended synagogue worship and who had been expected to conform at least to some of the Jewish regulations (these are the beneficiaries of what James is referring to when he says that “Moses has men who preach him in every city, being read aloud in the synagogue every Sabbath”); and now
- pagan converts who had little or none of this background, whether of the moral ethos of the Bible or of dietary and other rules. The most basic elements of the Old Testament moral law would have been taught to these new converts – more or less equivalent to the Ten Commandments.

Understandably there was a lot of confusion and discomfort. The Jewish Christian would have wanted to impose their whole law and regulation-based outlook on the pagan converts whom they no doubt found both religiously ignorant, immoral (that is, far too accepting of the way pagan society ran) and with scandalous dietary habits.

Given that context, the decision by the church leaders in Jerusalem is breathtaking in its daring but also pastoral in its advice to the pagan converts not to alienate their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters by behaviour that was truly intolerable, repulsive and literally nauseating to them, which is what the three provisions refer to. So they should abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from whoring, and from blood and things strangled. What does that mean?

Much of the Old Testament is about the battle between the prophetic faith with the corruptions of pagan idolatry and the often associated ritual prostitution. So one can understand that there are to be no dealings with idolatry which the prophets often called “whoring” (partly because it often literally did include that, partly as a metaphor for religious unfaithfulness). This “whoring” (the Greek word for this was *porneia* which meant prostitution and from which comes the English word pornography) had very little to do with what today we would call sexual morality, it is rather to do with pagan worship. One can understand then the sensitivity of the Jewish Christians and the “God-fearers” to this.

The Jewish religion laid down strict 'kosher' rules about food and the slaughter of animals. Because they believed that the life was in the blood, it had to be drained out of the slaughtered animal and never eaten. These rules had become very much part of Jewish identity.

So the declaration by James and the Church elders in Jerusalem is telling the gentile Christians that though Christians do not have to bear the weight of the law, they have to respect some basic principles and they must be sensitive to their Jewish Christian fellows. It was simply not right for gentile Christians to give offence to the Jewish Christians who had grown up in a different tradition.

The universal Church declares and continues to declare our release from the burden of the Old Testament Law (and it should not recreate a new burden of petty church laws). But it also requires that Christians do not engage in activities truly offensive to others. It tells us not to participate in any form of idolatry, whether it be of wealth, false gods, or pop singers. As to diet, that has to be contextual: so Scots and people from Northern England quite happily eat black pudding made from pig's blood – a truly double whammy anti-kosher act – but they are not directly offending anybody. But you should not cause offense to friends who do not eat pork or shell fish by serving it to them or inviting your vegetarian or vegan friends to dinner and serving them meat. It is all a matter of sensitivity and kindness.

Prayer

Father of all and lover of humankind,
We give thanks that, through your Son, we have been liberated
from the burden of the Law, sin and death
So we may have the true freedom of being your children.
Help us to love our fellow human beings
and always be sensitive to their needs, strengths and weaknesses.
May our freedom never be a stumbling block to others
That at the last we all rise as your sons and daughters,
united in the Body of your Son and enlivened by your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Are there laws about women in church?

In the previous homily I drew attention to the momentous early Church decision that gentile converts should not be subjected to the Jewish Law (though they were asked to show sensitivity to Jewish Christian revulsion at the idolatry of pagan society and to their kosher dietary prescriptions).

But there is an immediate and contentious issue here – the seeming contradiction of this liberation from the Law by the apostle Paul himself. This appears very odd as he was the one who did most to free gentiles from subjection to the Law. Yet there are claims that Paul imposed a whole lot of rules on women, either from Jewish Law or the surrounding culture.

So first something about Paul and women. We know from ample New Testament evidence that women were important agents and leaders in the churches Paul was associated with. In many of his letters there are greetings to them. The women named are:

- Priscilla and her husband Aquila who were missionary partners of Paul and also partners in his tent-making business. He stayed with them in Corinth. When Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila, Priscilla is listed first four out of six times.
- Mary and “the beloved Persis” are commended for their hard work.
- Julia, and Nereus’ sister, who worked and travelled as missionaries in pairs with their husbands or brothers.
- Tryphena and Tryphosa, who “labour for the Lord’s work”, and Rufus’ mother.
- Phoebe, a leader from the church at Cenchreae, is thanked for her hospitality and Paul calls her deacon (Paul’s term for his own ministry), sister and leader/guardian. She acted as an envoy for Paul.
- Chloe who was a prominent woman of Corinth. It was from “Chloe’s people” that Paul learned of the divisions in the congregation in Corinth.
- He expresses appreciation for Euodia and Syntyche, his fellow-workers in the gospel.
- He praises Junia as a fellow apostle who had been imprisoned in Rome.

Thus from Paul’s own letters we have convincing evidence of Paul’s close fellowship with leading women in the Church who are his fellow apostles, missionaries and leaders. So in some ways it is not surprising that Paul can make the statement in Galatians 3:28 that there is neither male nor female in the body of Christ.

So where does the idea come from that Paul was somehow against women or wanting to suppress their voice in the Church?

Well, much comes from a misunderstandings of what Paul wrote in his letters to the church in Corinth. An initial problem is that though we know that Paul wrote at least four letters to the Church at Corinth, only two survive, our first letter (probably the second letter sent) and the second, which was probably the last but which has mixed up

in it fragments from the other two lost letters. In both letters there may well be some later additions from editors who were not as egalitarian as Paul.

The general context of these letters is that troubling disorder had arisen in the church at Corinth: factionalism, an incident of gross sexual immorality (a man had taken his father's wife), bad behaviour at the Eucharist/agape meal, charismatic ecstatic behaviour getting out of control, women attending the gathering without the head covering customary in society at that time, and arguments over their right to speak in the assembly.

Many passages in the Corinthian letters make it absolutely clear that Paul saw men and women as equals. Though Paul himself was celibate and thought it a better option, he was totally realistic about sexual needs and said so (1 Corinthians 6:2-5):

“let each man have a woman of his own, and let each woman have a man of her own. Let the man render to the woman what is owed, and likewise also the woman to the man. The wife does not exercise authority over her own body, but rather the husband; and likewise too the husband does not exercise authority over his own body, but rather the wife.”

Few people in South Africa today can claim that degree of sexual equality!

Then comes a difficult passage about hair and head covering. Paul was writing about one of the troubling situations that had arisen in Corinth where certain women, when publicly praying or prophesying in the church gathering (so yes, women were certainly speaking in the church) removed the cover from their heads and exposed their hair. Paul got rather anxious about the matter and engaged in some complicated argument about the issue. But what was the issue? The context is a society where women were expected to be extremely modest when in public. In addition, a woman's hair was seen as decidedly sexually attractive. (One cannot but think of the supposedly attractiveness of a woman's ankle in Victorian society.) For a woman to uncover her hair was perceived as both ostentatious and provocative. As a man should remove his head covering in church to show humility, a woman should do the opposite and cover, not flaunt, the beauty of her hair.

Paul recognises that at heart he is making a somewhat inadequate case and restates the truth that men and women are equal before God (1 Corinthians 16:11):

“Then again, in the Lord there is neither woman apart from man nor man apart from woman”

and rather weakly ends by saying that it is not an established custom in the churches for women to uncover their heads.

So there you have it. Very much a trivial issue which is actually about trying not to be too counter to normal social gender dress norms. The Corinthian congregation was a somewhat disorderly lot in a very disorderly city and this issue was the least of the ones Paul had to deal with. And in the modern context this passage has nothing to say at all about what men or women should wear in church gatherings or how they should do their hair or how long, short or shaven it should be – as long as we enter that gathering humbly to worship God.

Prayer (Ebony Johanna)

To God
Both our Father and our Mother
Who created the heavens and the earth
Who separated the waters from the land
Who brought forth vegetables and fruit trees of every kind
Who spoke light into existence
Who created creatures of the land, earth, and sea
Who formed both men and women in your very own image
Endowing both with gifts and wisdom, strength and beauty to be used for the
perfecting of your kingdom

Our God, we thank you
We thank you for the gifts and skills that you have freely given to each of us
While we pay particular attention to the varied and abundant gifts of women
among us
Whose work, talent, sacrifice, and wisdom
Often goes unnoticed and taken advantage of

On this day, we not only take notice
But we affirm, lift up, and loudly proclaim the gifts of our women
the strength of our teenaged daughters
the inquisitiveness of our little girls
the wisdom of our grandmothers
and the necessity of each in order to live more fully into our humanity

(Diann Neu)

Praise to you, women leaders of the seven continents, for your many works of
justice.
Praise to you, women leaders of Asia, for confronting trafficking of women.
Praise to you, women leaders of Africa, for raising your voices to stop AIDS.
Praise to you, women leaders of Europe, for your peacekeeping.
Praise to you, women leaders of North America, for confronting economic
inequities and racism.
Praise to you, women leaders of South America, for struggling against foreign
exploitation of your land.
Praise to you, women leaders in Antarctica, for your scientific research.
Praise to you, women leaders of Australia, for supporting indigenous cultures.

Unsilent women

In the previous two homilies I drew attention to the momentous early Church decision that gentile converts should not be subjected to the Jewish Law and how passages about women in Paul's letters to the Corinthians do nothing to give comfort to those who want to keep the Church safe for misogynists.

In yesterday's homily it was pointed out that Paul worked closely with many women leaders in the Church, women who included those he called apostle and deacon. He identified them as "women who have laboured side by side with me in the cause of the gospel" (Philippians 4:3). His statement about women needing to keep their hair covered in church simply reflects the general cultural and gender practices of that particular time and have no relevance today.

I want to move on to look at a couple of other statements allegedly made by Paul.

The most contentious statement is in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

Let the women in the assemblies be silent, for it is not entrusted to them to speak; rather let them be subordinate, as the Law also says. But, if they want to learn anything, let them inquire of their own husbands at home, for it is an unseemly thing for a woman to speak in an assembly.

That seems bitterly, crystal clear! The problem is that it is also clear that it was not written by Paul at all. There are a number of reasons to support that judgment.

The first reason is that it is utterly contradictory to Paul's own teaching and practice. He goes around working closely with women leaders in the Church, who obviously spoke publicly in gatherings. And how can the man who led the change to get rid of the whole burden of the Law, now start quoting that Law to justify misogynistic behaviour? It simply does not ring true.

One explanation is that it may be what is called an interpolation – a short passage, maybe one had that been someone's comment in the margins of a scroll – that has been added by a later editor into the text of the letter. The argument for this is quite strong for in many ancient manuscripts these words have been inserted a whole paragraph later.

Another explanation, and a very intriguing one, looks carefully at the preceding passage which has Paul dealing with complaints that the more ecstatic 'speaking in tongues' and prophesying members of the community were behaving in a very disorderly way. Paul urges better order and for people to speak or prophesy in turn and not all at once. Then comes the offensive passage. Then the text returns to dealing with the disorder issue as if that offensive passage had not been there at all and Paul does the opposite of telling people to shut up and says (verses 39-40):

“Therefore, my friends, be zealous to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; But let all things be done in a proper and orderly way.”

This argument is that the offensive passage is in fact a statement of one of the factions in Corinth who wanted to silence the disorderly ecstasies and prophets and totally silence the women. This theory is a strong one because, if one reads the words immediately after the dubious passage, Paul says (verses 36-37):

What! Did God’s word originate from you, or has it reached you only? If anyone thinks himself a prophet or a spiritual one, let him recognize that the things I am writing to you are a commandment of the Lord.

Paul’s words here are a contradiction and a criticism of a call to silence women. So we end up in the ironic position that the overall message is a commandment that woman and ecstasies must **never** be silenced!

Then, to move on to the Letters to Timothy, which are not really letters but rather a kind of manual or *ad clerum* for those in charge of a Christian community. There is much debate about whether these were written after the death of Paul or whether they incorporate fragments of Paul’s letters. They do contain some passages that see wives as not wielding authority over their husbands nor being allowed to teach (1 Timothy 2:9-12) and “stationed below their husbands” (2 Timothy 2:5). My own opinion, which accords with the scholarly consensus of Biblical scholars is that these passages are not by Paul, do not reflect his attitudes or practice and, ironically enough, by being inserted, suggest that in many cases there were indeed wives who were behaving as equals and teaching in the church. What they probably reflect is that as the Church grew and was joined by more conservative people, the general cultural and gender practices of the times began to reassert themselves.

There is much hypocrisy and irrationality when people and clergy try and impose ancient cultural practices and the full Old Testament law onto modern women, when they totally refuse themselves to obey the same laws – to give a trivial example of which is that all priests should be bearded and “not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard” (Leviticus 19:26-28). All this nonsense was ended when the Church in Jerusalem released Christians for all time from the burden of the Law (Acts 15).

Meanwhile the female apostles have gone ahead regardless, often against great misogynistic odds, and have not been silent. They have brought light, grace and healing into the life of the Church of Jesus the liberator who saved us from the burden of the Law and death.

Prayer

We give thanks for the great female teachers of the Church.
We remember with gratitude St Teresa of Avila, St Catherine of Siena, St Therese of Lisieux and St Hildegard of Bingen, and Blessed Julian of Norwich.
May we emulate their devotion to you and their obedience to your call to speak.
Amen.

Sayings

St Theresa

“Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing make you afraid. All things are passing. God alone never changes. Patience gains all things. If you have God you will want for nothing. God alone suffices.”

St Catherine of Siena

“If you are what you should be, you will set the world on fire.”

St Therese of Lisieux

“Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love.”

St Hildegard of Bingen

“There is the Music of Heaven in all things and we have forgotten how to hear it until we sing.”

Blessed Julian of Norwich

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

One million and a civil war

The news is now in that over one million people have died worldwide from the Corona virus. And a report on South Africa says that by June, the Covid-19 economy resembled that of a post-civil war country with unprecedented levels of hunger and joblessness, particularly in rural South Africa and particularly among women.

These are tough times and the human cost does indeed resemble that caused by a military war. It is hard to imagine the sum total of all the combined suffering and grief caused by those unnecessary deaths. The deaths were unnecessary in the sense that the original invasion point of the virus was enabled by illegal human exploitation of wild animals and much of the havoc caused by the virus was made worse by bad political decisions made in countries such as the United States of America, Brazil and the United Kingdom.

In South Africa, already in an economic and unemployment crisis, nearly 3 million jobs were lost in April and unemployment affected 53 per cent of the working age population. Since then, the majority of the people who were temporarily laid off have not regained their jobs. Although actual outright hunger has declined a bit since mid-year (partly because of the good work of many NGOs and churches and partly because of an additional 4 million state grants to the unemployed poor) the situation is still worse than the situation a couple of years ago. Alongside these material devastations has been an upsurge in depression and anxiety. Worse for the long term future of South Africa has been the growing gap between the children of the wealthy (who were able to continue their education in some form, even if somewhat reduced) and the children of the poor who had nothing. The inequality gap showed itself in the fact that those who were able to work from home (and thus keep their jobs) were the already well-off, the older workers over 50 years and those with degrees and other post-matric qualifications. It is the quiet virus of inequality that may in the end be more deadly than Covid-19.

For people who have embraced the Way of Jesus, there can be no going back to some kind of spurious normality in which the only thing that remains unchanged is that the booze, tobacco, air-time merchants and tenderpreneurs continue to make obscene profits but misery and failures in education and social services continue. The Churches have received a psychic shock in having to close during the full lockdown and have been given time to reflect on their calling. It is definitely not the time to breathe a sigh of relief that this "civil war" situation is nearly over. For the body of Christ the work has hardly begun.

Prayer (Adapted from John Baillie)

Father in heaven,
who did create us to serve you in love and joy:
We acknowledge before you our faults and failures of the time past.
We have failed to be true even to our own standards.
We have deceived ourselves in the face of temptations.
We have chosen the worse when we knew the better.
O Lord, forgive.

Forgive us:
Our failures to apply to ourselves the standard of conduct we demand of others,
Our blindness to the sufferings of others and our slowness to be taught by our
own,
Our complacency towards wrongs that do not touch us directly
and our over-sensitiveness to those that do,
Our slowness to see the good in others and the evil in ourselves,
Our hardness of heart towards our neighbours' faults
And our readiness to make allowances for our own,
Our unwillingness to believe that you have called us to work for your kingdom.
O Lord, forgive.

What Bible translation?

Several people have asked me what English translation of the Bible I use – and they may have observed that I have used several in these homilies. Usually the next question I am asked is which translation is the best. That is a difficult one to answer because “best” has multiple meanings. Does it mean accurately translate every word in Greek or Hebrew into somewhat stilted contemporary English? That is a so-called literal translation. Does it convey the meaning of the original text, even though you have to paraphrase it somewhat? That is a so called dynamic translation. Or do you want the text to be in glorious poetic early 17th Century English like the King James version or versions based upon it?

Well here is what I use and why:

The **New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised)** is undoubtedly a very good scholarly translation based upon the most accurate Hebrew and Greek texts. It also reads well because it has taken over some of the language and rhythms of the King James version. It is also a gender-neutral text, meaning that where it seems that the original text is talking about both men and women, even though it may use masculine terms, then gender-neutral words are used in the translation. Thus, for example, it usually uses the phrase “brothers and sisters” where the Greek text said “brothers”. Sometimes this makes the sentence structure a bit clumsy and obscures connections in the text.

The **J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English** is a dynamic translation but a fairly accurate one and to my mind the most successful of them. What it is brilliant at, particularly with Paul’s letters, is making them sound like real letters that a real person has written.

The **David Bentley Hart New Testament** is a very literal translation which tries to give the sense of what it would have been like reading it in everyday Greek. So if the Greek is bad and ungrammatical, so is Hart’s English translation. The other strength, but also something that startles, is that he translates many Greek words in the sense they had in the ordinary common language meaning in the Greek of the first century AD. So quite a few technical (and particularly evangelical Protestant) theological terms we are familiar with in English translations such as justification, redemption, predestination, hell, and devil simply disappear.

The **New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)** is a very good scholarly Catholic translation and easy to read. I simply am more used to using the New Revised Standard Version, though I occasionally compare a text in it.

And then I occasionally check particular words in the **Greek New Testament**.

What about all others? Here is what I think of some of the recent and more common of them and why I do not use them much.

New International Version (NIV): this is a very popular, carefully prepared and readable translation based on the best Greek and Hebrew texts. I do not think it is fully suitable for scholarly purposes as it is biased towards certain Protestant theological interpretations.

Good News Bible (GNB or TEV): this dynamic translation is liked by many people because of its simple, easy-to-read language but some of its interpretations are very biased.

Contemporary English Version (CEV): a new translation in the tradition of the GNB with even simpler language and easy to read but with much paraphrasing and biased interpretations.

Living Bible: a supposedly thought-by-thought paraphrase rather than a translation and I personally find it indescribably awful.

New King James Version (NKJV): if you want the language and theological biases of the King James Version but want a more accurate translation that updates the English, this is the one.

For anybody who wants to engage in very detailed Bible study and compare different translations, try the Bible Gateway site at <https://www.biblegateway.com/>. This is a wonderful resource with the full texts of sixty translations into English of the whole Bible or of the Old or New Testaments. You can search for passages and words and compare the translations of a particular verse. One of the texts is an interlinear Greek/English one.

Other useful websites are:

The **Oremus Bible browser** at <https://bible.oremus.org/> though it only has the New Revised Standard Version, the King James Version and the prayer book Psalter.

The **New English Translation (NET)** available on the website at <https://netbible.org> is a new online scholarly translation which has voluminous and accurate notes on the translation of virtually each verse, though it tends to go for conservative conclusions on the evidence when it translates the actual text.

“Does it matter which translation I use?” is another question that may be asked. It can be argued that the best translation is one that is translated into one’s life. But there are so many factors that can influence how reading a particular translation of the Bible affects one. I would like to argue that for serious study of the Bible, a translation that reflects the original reading experience of the first users of these texts is a good standard to aim for. But we have to acknowledge that the Bible is a text that was written nearly two millennia and more ago. We modern readers are separated from the first readers by huge gaps in language, culture and educational background, and, if we have been brought up within the Church, certain assumptions about what “theological words” mean. In reading the Bible, the Old Testament with its poetic communication of the activities of the God of Israel and Creator of the universe, the New Testament with its urgent, passionate and roughly presented witness to the new faith in Jesus of Nazareth, we should be startled, surprised and awakened. The purpose of a good

translation is to unveil in our language, the moral purity and strangeness of this world-altering revelation that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Prayer (St Benedict)

Gracious and holy Father,
grant us the intellect to understand you,
reason to discern you, diligence to seek you,
wisdom to find you, a spirit to know you,
a heart to meditate upon you.
May our ears hear you, may our eyes behold you,
and may our tongues proclaim you.
Give us grace that our way of life may be pleasing to you,
that we may have the patience to wait for you
and the perseverance to look for you.
Grant us a perfect end – your holy presence,
a blessed resurrection and life everlasting.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Is our lease up?

The parable of the Vineyards and the Tenants in Matthew 21:33-46, the gospel reading for Sunday's Eucharist, is an intriguing one because it is so easy to read it through early church eyes and because it is not really a parable but an allegory. In parables the message, the punch line, is usually very apparent, but in an allegory each character represents a different moral or religious concept or viewpoint and the readers have to work out the meaning of the allegory for themselves. The way the original parable has been recorded in the gospels tells us how the gospel writers had already worked out a meaning. They knew who the characters represented. So it is given to us as an illustrative allegory to teach that God's kingdom will be taken from Israel and given to a people that produces the proper fruit.

'There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

It is very clear that in the Christian interpretation, God is the vineyard creator and owner who leases it out to the people of Israel who are the tenants (or at least their religious leadership is). The slaves sent to collect the rent are the prophets of old who are rejected, scorned and persecuted. Finally the owner sends his son since he could expect proper respect for his appointed heir. That son is the Christ, who is killed.

Then something new happens, and this is the part that does need explanation. There is a passage in the Old Testament that spoke of God creating a vineyard, giving it to Israel who produced no fruit except injustice and it was destroyed in a terrible Day of the Lord (Isaiah 5:1-7). But in this parable, though the owner of the vineyard will indeed come in a Day of the Lord, the vineyard will not be destroyed. It will be leased out to new tenants – the new Israel, the new church of Jesus Christ.

But what is this “stone that the builders rejected” stuff?

When building a stone house one has to find a really suitable stone for the corner (or to use another good image, a keystone for the top of an arch). Yet it is the stone that has been initially rejected that forms the foundation of a completely new structure. This is far more than simply handing the old vineyard over to new tenants. This is a new structure of which Jesus himself is the cornerstone – the Church.

This small stone block also has the capacity to pulverise the old structures and traditions and ways into oblivion. The demolition power of the stone is seen in Daniel 2:35 (another allegory) in a passage which sees a huge idol-like figure made up of iron, clay, bronze, silver and gold representing all past great empires that had harassed Israel in history, demolished by the stone “which became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

The phrase the “stone that the builders rejected” comes from Psalm 118, one of the Psalms recited in the Passover service. The first Christians saw it through post-crucifixion and resurrection Christian eyes. It was of immense significance for them for making sense of who Jesus of Nazareth is – the true faithful representative of Israel and the Son of God.

So there is enormous joy but also awe in thinking about this ‘stone’. The rejected carpenter from Nazareth is this insignificant, thrown away stone, that becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. This is a glorious twist in the story, a reversal. But the story is also warning. All we tenants of the institutions of the present age have been told of the power of the stone that can indeed pulverise into dust all that is alien to the kingdom of God and its justice. Are our own institutions in a fit state?

So this parable/allegory points us to a future in which we are both blessed and judged standing and growing on a sure foundation, “the stone which the builders rejected”.

Psalm 118

A Song of Victory

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!

Let Israel say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'
Let the house of Aaron say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'
Let those who fear the Lord say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.
With the Lord on my side I do not fear.
What can mortals do to me?
The Lord is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put confidence in mortals.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put confidence in princes.

All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
They surrounded me like bees;
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the Lord helped me.
The Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:
'The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;
the right hand of the Lord is exalted;
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.'
I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.
The Lord has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Schadenfreude

There is a peculiarly powerful German word "*Schadenfreude*", literally translated as "damage-joy", which describes the experience of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of, or witnessing the troubles, failures, or humiliation of another. The direct interest in the meaning of this word in English apparently skyrocketed in the United States of America as news spread that Donald Trump, the current President had contracted the Covid-19 disease. Internet look-ups on the meaning of the word rose over 30 thousand percent on 2nd October on one dictionary website alone. Which means that probably millions of people were gaining great pleasure from the misfortune of somebody else.

Our first Christian instinct may be to say that indulging such an emotion is not right. And if some people are experiencing an emotion enough to want to check its dictionary meaning, they are certainly prolonging it. We have been taught rightly that as Christians we are not to hate but instead, to love our enemies – Matthew 5:44 "Whereas I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".

But are there any arguments for qualifying that reaction? The command of the Lord is clear, we are to love our enemies. But are we forbidden to feel anger against our enemies or to feel joy when the wheels of eternal justice come round to deliver humiliating blows against to the enemies of mankind? Clearly the words of lots of the worthy writers and speakers in the Biblical scriptures had an ample measure of *Schadenfreude*, which is why, for example many of the prophetic utterances and psalms have material that is not suitable for children or sensitive readers (Psalm 137 is a particularly notable example with such a beautiful (and sad) beginning and such an abominable end). The Apostle Paul could get exceedingly angry – in Galatians 5:12 he says this of the people who were trying to force circumcision on Gentile Christians, "Would that they who are causing you agitation might just castrate themselves!" In Revelation 18:20, after the description of the coming fall of Babylon/Rome and the weeping and wailing of those who had benefited from her corruption, an angel says to John "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you the holy ones and the apostles and the prophets, because God has pronounced the verdict of your judgment against her." The Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba has several times stressed the need for the punishment and humiliation of the corrupt in South Africa and for the year 2020 to be "the year of the orange jump-suit".

Let me confess my own indulgence in *schadenfreude*. It was the sight on television of one of the masterminds of the Free State asbestos roof project, who had bought a fleet of multi-million rand cars from the profits from that swindle, being arrested, handcuffed and pushed into the back of what surely must be the smallest car possessed by the Hawks. That, it seemed to me, was appropriate justice and humiliation, a true example of nemesis.

So there we have it. We do, with all our human feeling, want to see the tables turned on those who are unjust or do evil or misinform. We get a sense of pleasure, our sense of rightness and justice is affirmed, when a Covid-19 denier who watched over 200 thousand fellow citizens dying without showing the slightest sign of grief or empathy for them or their families, gets infected himself.

But we are also the servants, and part now of the very being of the One who told us to love our enemies and who died proving that he did. He asks of us extreme things. That call is challenging and difficult. We have to get over ourselves, leave behind the *Schadenfreude*, justified though it may have been, and walk with him on the Way, and that Way means loving and praying for everyone.

Prayer (nun who died in Ravensbruck concentration camp)

O Lord,
remember not only the men and women of goodwill
but also those of evil will.
But do not remember all the suffering
they have inflicted upon us;
remember the fruits we brought thanks to this suffering –
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of this;
and when they come to judgement,
let all the fruits that we have borne
be their forgiveness.

I will remove disaster from you

Yesterday in our church service there was a reading from the prophet Zephaniah which somewhat lightened my heart. Zephaniah's short book of prophecies is one of almost unrelenting gloom (he had clearly never heard the story of God's promise to Noah that he would never again destroy all life on earth). Yet verses in the final chapter are surprisingly upbeat (3:17-19).

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

This comes after the prelude in which, after the other nations are dealt with, graphic descriptions are given of how Judah's state officials, the fraudsters, the religious con-men, the oppressors, the haughty and the proud will be removed and only the people who are humble and lowly will be left. It is not an uncommon theme in the Old Testament scriptures – there are inevitable consequences (played out in the history of nations) of failure to follow the Lord's way but there is still hope and that hope is in the hands of God.

There are some obvious positives in these few verses. These are all things we can hope for:

God is in our midst. In the midst of disaster and ruin God is present with his people, battling with them.

God will remove disaster from us and we will not be blamed for it.

But it is God's feelings that are expressed in a most extraordinary way. God is going to sing. God is going to sing with gladness over us. And that singing is going to be loud.

So here we have a singing God who actually enjoys us. And surely that tells us something about creating a universe. It is not just the creation that sings, as Job 38:7 puts it, "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy." God enjoys and loves the creation and sings about it.

We hear so much in religious talk about the fallenness of the creation and what anguish God carries (and much of that is right and proper) but seldom do we hear of God's joy, his enjoyment of this universe he has created and loved at great cost. So may our lives be that which God can truly enjoy.

Song (Sydney Carter)

Every star shall sing a carol,
Every creature high or low.
Come and praise the King of Heaven
By whatever name you know.

When the king of all creation,
Had a cradle on the earth.
Holy was the human body,
Holy was the human birth.

Who can tell what other cradle?
High above the Milky Way;
Still may rock the King of Heaven,
On another Christmas day.

Who can count how many crosses?
Still to come or long ago.
Crucify the King of Heaven,
Holy is the name I know.

Who can tell what other body?
He will hallow for his own.
I will praise the son of Mary,
Brother of my blood and bone.

Every star and every planet,
Every creature high and low.
Come and praise the King of Heaven,
By whatever name you know.

Poem (Gerald Manley Hopkins)

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say *móre*: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: *thát* keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Coming back

Jeremiah 3:22-25

Come back to me, you wayward people.
I want to cure your waywardness.

Say, 'Here we are. We come to you
because you are the Lord our God.
We know our noisy worship of false gods
on the hills and mountains was a delusion.
We know that the Lord our God
is the only one who can deliver Israel.

From our youth our worship of that shameful thing,
has eaten up all that our ancestors worked for.
It has taken away our flocks and our herds
and even our sons and daughters.

Let us acknowledge our shame.
Let us bear the disgrace that we deserve.
For we have sinned against the Lord our God,
both we and our ancestors.
From earliest times to this very day
we have not obeyed the Lord our God.'

There is a lot of talk these days about "coming back" – coming back to work, coming back to school, coming back to church. Of course the call to come back can be an ambiguous one. It can be the result of a desire to return to normality, even if that normality was not that great. It can be calling back someone who is adventuring ahead or running away from something undesirable. In much of the Bible "coming back" as a concept is almost always dual – it is coming back to God and simultaneously turning away from and leaving sin and evil.

The passage from the prophet Jeremiah is particularly interesting because the prophet, speaking as God's voice, tells the faithless people to come back and then presents the prayer of confession that God wants them to say. It is this that God wants them to turn away from if they are going to come back and have their waywardness cured.

The first thing that is to be turned away from is the worship of false gods. Although contemporary people do not believe that there is a pantheon of false gods out there to be worshipped, the false divinities in contemporary society are all too evident – wealth and its associated decorations of fleets of cars and bottles of champagne at over ten thousand rands a pop, power over others wielded by politicians and self-proclaimed cult leaders, the market, the economy, youthful allure, success. The list of these lower

daemons is almost endless. The author G. K. Chesterton rightly said that people who stop worshipping the most high, do not stop worshipping: what they do then is worship the demonstrably not most high. Have we Christians at times shown some slippage in allowing these false deities to delude us and corrupt our way of life?

The second thing we have to turn away from is the denial both of our ancestors and our grandchildren. The words “has eaten up all that our ancestors worked for” is so poignant in the context of the corruption in state and business that has seen the work done by our South African ancestors undone. Those from all ethnicities and backgrounds who built this country (albeit with much injustice and struggle against injustice on the way) and who brought us political liberation, would turn in their graves to see what has happened, as the infrastructure and resources for the people, present and future, is literally “eaten up”. We see it too in the lack of concern about the environment, about climate change, things that may well doom our grandchildren and future generations. Our faith, if we come back to it, gives a vote not only to us, but to our forebears and our grandchildren.

Overall, we can as a people, confess that “we have not obeyed the Lord our God”. We do need to repent, individually and collectively.

The good news is that God wants us back.

Prayer (*A Litany of the Disciples of the Servant, Andhra Theological College, Malabar*)

Servant–Christ, help us to follow you
deep into the waters of Baptism,
to link our lives with all those who grieved
about humanity’s unjust way of life;
to break free from the chain of past wrongs;
to become fit to face your coming new age;
to be renewed by your Spirit, anointed to preach good news
to the poor, the oppressed and the prisoner:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you far into the desert, with you to fast,
denying false luxury, refusing the tempting ways
of personal satisfaction, and unscrupulous persuasion:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you in untiring ministry to town and village,
to heal and restore the broken body of humanity,
to cast out the demonic forces of greed, resentment
communal hatred, and self-destructive fear:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the place of quiet retreat,
to intercede for the confused, the despairing,
the anxiety-driven,
to prepare ourselves for costly service with you:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you on the road to Jerusalem,
to set our faces firmly against friendly suggestions for a safe,
expedient life, to embrace boldly the way of self-offering,
of life given for others’ gain:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the city,
to claim its whole life for God whose image man bears,
to confront the ambitions of the power-hungry,
the inhuman orthodoxy of the legalist, with the startling
message of your present action, your living power:

Help us to follow you Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the temple of your chosen
people, to erase from the worship of your Church all that
hinders the sense of your presence, the free flow of your Word;
to open up your house so that it may be a house of prayer for all people:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the upper room,
to share your meal of bread and cup,
to accept our common place in your one Body,
broken to create a New Humanity:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the garden,
to watch with you, ever vigilant for signs
of the dawning of your new day, to struggle unsparingly
to understand and to carry out your perfect will:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you into the judgement hall,
to stand mocked and condemned
for daring to speak directly of divine forgiveness,
daring to claim God's personal commissioning,
daring to disrupt the plans of unscrupulous leaders
for the control of the masses;
to stand for those whose right to stand has been usurped:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you even unto the Cross,
to share in carrying your cross like Simon the African,
to recognise our life in your death,
our hope in your self-sending love,
to die to all within us that is not born of your love

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant

Help us to follow you out of the dark tomb,
to share daily your resurrection life,
to be renewed daily in your image of love,
to be used daily as your new Body
in your service to the world:

Help us to follow you, Christ the servant.

William Tyndale

That we have Bibles translated into nearly all the languages of the world, owes much to William Tyndale who is commemorated today in the Anglican lectionary.

Tyndale was a Protestant reformer in England who, by his life and death, ensured that the Bible translated into English became the force that it did. A noted scholar, trained at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, he became a skilled linguist, fluent in several languages and, crucially, in Greek, Hebrew and Latin. He adopted radical Protestant ideas and in particular, the contention that everybody should be able to read the Bible in their own language and not require prior theological training before doing so.

He applied for permission to translate the Bible into English which eventually only happened after Tyndale had fled England for Europe in 1524. In 1528 he wrote a controversial book, *"The Obedience of a Christian Man"* which could be interpreted as saying that the king of a country should be head of that country's church, rather than the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, thus providing King Henry VIII with the rationale for making himself head of the Church of England and breaking all ties with the Roman Catholic Church. Thomas More and Tyndale debated in print over the contending positions on the Bible, with More accusing him of thousands of errors.

Ironically enough, Tyndale agreed with More that Henry's annulment of his first marriage was unscriptural. More was executed, Tyndale escaped to Europe. There, a few years later, he was eventually arrested by the Imperial authorities and executed in 1536.

Tyndale's was not the first attempt to translate the Bible into English. But his attempt was one of the first to do so by translating directly from the Hebrew and Greek texts. More important, it influenced a whole sequence of later translations, including the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible and the King James Version (still, perhaps unfortunately, the most popular English translation in the world) and then on to more recent updates such as the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version. Some 84% of the King James Version of the New Testament is Tyndale's, the Old Testament slightly less. He made an enormous impact on the English language. Phrases such as these are all from Tyndale:

my brother's keeper
knock and it shall be opened unto you
a moment in time
seek and ye shall find
ask and it shall be given you
judge not that ye be not judged
let there be light
the powers that be
the salt of the earth

a law unto themselves
it came to pass
the signs of the times
filthy lucre.

He coined a number of new theological terms such as Passover, scapegoat, and atonement.

From a personal perspective I cannot but honour Tyndale for his dedication to bringing the scriptures to the people. However, saying that anybody can interpret the Bible outside its context of being the scriptures of the Church, is a double-edged sword. Reading the text may enable a more clear-sighted view of contemporary corruptions or misunderstandings in Church and faithful. But reading “scripture alone” can also produce an incredible amount of nonsense that is all too obvious today in the chaos of cults, all claiming to be “based solely on the Bible” (already noted in 2 Peter 1:20 and 3:15-16). As a reformer, Tyndale also had little place for the sacraments, prayer to the saints, fasting, pilgrimages, religious orders, church buildings (he believed that the state had every right to strip from them what it wanted), bells, stained glass windows and other art, or the clergy criticising the state – or indeed for an ordained clergy at all.

Prayer

We give thanks O God,
for all your servants who have striven to bring your word to us.
We pray that translators may be found for the millions of people who do not
have the Bible in their own language.
We pray that we may be inspired to learn from the scriptures
and that our lives may translate your word in faith in action.
Amen.

My two favourite ikons

I studied art at school many years ago and I have long had a love affair with art that is beautiful and meaningful. I am, however, not very enamoured of most modern western popular religious art because most of it is unbearably kitsch with an Aryan Jesus and his equally pale-skinned blond mother dressed in phantasmagoric clothing taken from the dressing room racks of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. There are exceptions of course and there are beautiful old and modern stained glass windows and wonderful cathedrals and churches built to the glory of God.

I got really interested in art that came from a different tradition to that of the West which since the end of the Middle Ages went heavily into the representation of visible reality (which now, of course, everybody's cellphones does effortlessly). It is not that religious meaning cannot be found in realistic representational art but it is rather rare to see it done well. Ikons of the Eastern Orthodox church and the art of Ethiopia do not attempt to represent reality in the same way. In the ikons of the Eastern Churches, the inner meaning of Christian stories (factual and legendary) is set out in symbolical imagery.

In a modern realistic Western picture we have perspective – in which the further away things are from the viewer, the smaller they become. We see into the picture and in the back of the picture is the end vanishing point, everything gets smaller. In many Eastern Orthodox ikons there is a strange kind of reverse perspective. It as if we are looking from our rather small viewing point into a bigger world, a larger and wonderful world of spiritual reality. In that way an ikon can give us a shock, a jolt, into seeing something beyond ourselves. Which is what great religious art should do.

I have two ikon reproductions hanging on the wall of my study and today and tomorrow I am going to describe what I take to be their message.

The first is of St George and the Dragon which I have already referred to in Lockdown Homily 28. St George was, of course, a very Eastern saint and it was only an accident of history – the attempts to reclaim Palestine from the Arab invaders by the Crusaders -- that landed him as patron saint of modern English soccer hooligans and Brexiteers.

I do not want to repeat the St George story, but rather look at the ikon and interpret what it is saying through the art – the colours, the figures, the setting and the arrangement. It is clear that the ikon is not truly representational – for instance, no horse actually looks like that (and many artists have had inordinate difficulty in drawing horses properly).

Starting from the top. There is the hand of God on the right, appointing and blessing the saint in his earthly task. It tells us that St George gains victory not with his own power, but through God's help. God is rather obscure. Nothing here like a Michelangelo painting: no rugged, active bearded man enlivening the Adam with a fingertip as on the Sistine chapel ceiling. Perhaps this image is saying that God the Father is more unknown, hidden, in Eastern thought, the ultimate mystery – but he is known through the Son. You can't fall into the trap of imagining God as the powerful and venerable man with the flowing grey locks.



Then there is the Saint, we know he is a Saint because he has a halo. We know he is a warrior for God because of his armour and lance. If St George is the personification of every Christian it means that we can expect life to be one of struggle and adversity. We have to have the courage to strive against evil. The good has to be acquired by fighting for it all our lives.

But then there is the horse and in a way, the horse is far more interesting.

What does the horse represent? Certainly it represents controlled power and strength. It represents too the human 'powers' – physical and mental – bodily strength, the dynamic of human sexuality, the intellect and learning. All these, if controlled, right-ordered, and reinforced in the course of discipleship, enable the saint, using that dynamic power, to gain victory. In the legend, St George is described as radiating an indescribable light. This divine light is usually represented symbolically by the brightness of the horse, like that of the personification of victory in the rider of the white horse in the *Book of Revelation* who "Went forth conquering and to conquer."

And there is the dragon. The dragon represents a corrupt, lower level of power and strength. Evil too is a mystery. Was evil necessary or likely to appear in any created universe that is genuinely free? Would we ever learn and grow if we did not have to struggle against it? Here it is clear that evil has its place – in a dark cavern where it should remain. But every now and then dragons get out of their confinement in the dark. They emerge into the everyday world and wreak havoc. Most of us know what dragons we are talking about. So they have to be put in their place.

Dragons don't exist? Of course they do! As every child knows, dragons exist. What they may not know, and that is what folk tales and the message of Christianity has to tell them, is that dragons can be overcome.

Hymn (G.K. Chesterton)

O God of hearth and altar,
bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter,
our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us,
the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us,
but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether
the prince and priest and thrall,
bind all our lives together,
smite us and save us all;
in ire and exultation
afame with faith, and free,
lift up a living nation,
a single sword to thee.

Ikon of the liberation of the dead

Yesterday I gave a description of the first of two Eastern Orthodox ikons which I have found particularly meaningful. Today I want to look at one that is usually called “Christ’s Descent into Hades” or “the Resurrection”. It is the primary ikon of Easter in the Eastern tradition. In the West the same pictorial theme is called the “Harrowing of Hades” where “harrowing” meant to attack, harass and despoil because Christ was triumphing over the place where the dead were kept and liberating them.

Many of us are used to formulations in English such as “He descended into Hell” in the Apostles’ Creed. In reality, in the Greek New Testament there is not a single term that corresponds with the modern sense of Hell as a place of fiery torment for the wicked. Rather there is “Hades”, the underworld realm of the dead similar to the Hebrew “Sheol”. Another term was “Gehenna” which was based on a place near Jerusalem used as a metaphor for punishment or purification. Gehenna had once been a place of Canaanite child sacrifice and was subsequently used as a place to burn rubbish. Finally there is one use of the term “Tartarus” from Greek mythology which was a deep pit used to imprison the legendary Titans.

What I want to make clear is that the few references in the New Testament to Christ’s descent after he died, refer to the underworld of the dead. The key passages are 1 Peter 3:18-20a and 4:6 which says:

For the Christ also suffered, once and for all, a just man on behalf of the unjust, so that he might lead you to God, being put to death in flesh and yet being made alive in spirit, Whereby he also journeyed and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, To those in the past who disobeyed while God’s magnanimity bided its time, ... good tidings were proclaimed to the dead.

and Ephesians 4:8-9, which states:

Which is why it says, “Having ascended on high, he took a host of captives prisoner, he gave gifts to human beings.” Now, what does this “he ascended” mean if he did not descend into the earth’s lower parts? The one descending is the same one also ascending far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.

There is a similar passage in Romans 10:6-8.

A rich tradition developed in the early centuries of the Church, that Christ had triumphed over the underworld, releasing Hades’ captives, particularly Adam and Eve, and the men and women of the Old Testament period. The tradition emphasises that Christ enters Hades not as just another victim of death, but as a conqueror. The Lord’s descent there is an event of cosmic significance, opening up the path to liberation and salvation for the dead.

In this visualization of the Harrowing of Hades, Christ's cape is flowing upward, symbolizing his radical descent down into Hades to save those who have died in the past.

Under Christ's feet are the unhinged gates of Hades, which he has broken and torn apart. There are broken keys and hinges floating in the abyss below, showing that he has entered and conquered both death and Hades. (Many other ikons on this theme also show a tied-up skeletal figure that is Death and/or Satan. Through his death on the Cross, Christ has destroyed death.)

Next to Christ are two figures who have been pulled from their tombs – Adam and Eve – symbolizing that this victory redeems all humankind, even back to the beginning. It also foreshadows the general resurrection of the body before the Final Judgment.



To the left, we see three characters: David and Solomon, two of Jesus' earthly ancestors and closest to him with the halo, John the Baptist, who was his forerunner in both life and death. The figures on the right behind Eve vary from ikon to ikon, but usually represent Old Testament prophets and saints.

The blue shape around Christ is called a mandorla (which is Italian for almond, which describes its shape). This represents the uncreated, eternal light of Christ, the "light from light" of the Nicene Creed. This is not simply an attractive bright light. It is the same light which filled the apostles with wonder when they witnessed Jesus' Transfiguration. It is the light that fills the darkness of the abode of the dead and brings life to all of us, living and departed.

I have found this ikon inspiring and encouraging. God's love for this world is exhibited. He goes through death to reach us, and not just us, for he reaches our ancestors back through the ages too.

He assures us that in the created universe nothing, ultimately, will be lost, all will be made new.

Song (Victimae Paschali laudes - Praise the Paschal Victim)

Come, Christians, bring your sacrifice of praise
to Jesus Christ, our conquering victim and our Easter king.
Jesus, the sinless lamb, has saved the sinful flock
and reconciled us to the Father.

Death and life have wrestled
in a wondrous fight,
the leader of the living
fell to the powers of night
dead, yet he reigns in power
his strange victory to share.

Speak, Mary, friend of Christ,
what did you see on sorrow's road?
Tell us your story.

'I saw the tomb of the living Christ.
I saw his resurrection glory.
I saw the witnessing angels.
I saw the head-cloth and the shroud.
Christ my hope has risen,
and goes before his own to Galilee.'

Trust Mary, believers
for only she has truth to tell,
unlike the falsifying crowd
of rumour-makers and deceivers.

We know that Christ is truly risen,
defeating death and hell's dark thrall,
so conquering king, have mercy on us all.
Alleluia.

Leaving the nanny

Galatians 3:21-29

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that was capable of giving life, then righteousness really would have come through the law. But the scripture imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who have faith.

Now before faith came, we were held under guard, kept imprisoned under Law until the faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our custodian until Christ came, so that we might be proved righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a custodian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

This reading from today's lectionary is a reminder that many of our troubles come from the Law. We need Law because humanity is an unruly mess yet we suffer from Law because it does not bring what in theory it promises – to get us into the state in which we can truly meet God's requirement to fear him, walk in all his ways, and serve him with heart and soul (Deuteronomy 10:12). We try to obey the law, suffer from the law, but we do so because in reality we want something else – love. Many of the psalm writers express their delight in the Law, their love for it, its perfection and its truth, talk of its inwardness in their lives, their happiness to be disciplined by it, the peace it brings. Yet Paul found in his own life that he couldn't meet the demands of the Law. He could not delude himself that his attempts to obey the Law would gain him God's promises. He humbly accepted that he was unable to meet those requirements. But through accepting Christ, faith met those demands.

Paul's respect for the Law was never lost. Though obviously the Law in its purest form was delivered through the Hebrew scriptures it was applicable to all people, Jew and Gentile. He saw that, in history, the Law had served a heavy pedagogic purpose. He describes it as a custodian. Various translations make heavy weather of this – it is a schoolmaster, pedagogue, tutor, trainer, disciplinarian, guardian, chaperone, babysitter – but its clearest meaning in Paul's time was that of a male or female slave, a nanny, who walks with the children to and from school to see that they are safe on the way and generally to keep an eye on them.

We all have mixed feelings about the Law. Currently, good people in South Africa are pretty keen on the Law. They want the corrupt and the killers and the tax-dodgers and the hijackers and the abusers of women to feel the full weight of the law of the land. Rightly so. We would all feel safer and happier if the law as custodian did protect our

children walking to school and put all the criminals in custody, whatever their rank in society. But it is still a dead end. Attempts by some Christians and cultists to smash and rule their followers with the old Law are wrong and futile.

The coming of Jesus has enabled us to leave the Nanny behind. We should always respect, even delight in the Law. But we have been adopted as the grown-up children of God. We do not have to do anything to achieve that status or to remain in it. We do not have to have a purpose or make calculations about what to do to please. God loves us unreservedly and makes us something incredibly new – one in Christ Jesus.

But we have to leave the Nanny behind in another sense. Nationally all will not be well if the Law is imposed with full rigour, if the corrupt are all wearing orange overalls (delightful as that may be for us), if we simply become a law-abiding society (and oh that it could be). But we suffer the Law because we need and want something else – love. That is what we can give to our society, to make it a loving society. And that task is given to us as we in Christ experience the love of God.

Prayers (Traditional Catholic At of love prayer)

O my God, I love you above all things with my whole heart and soul,
because you are all good and worthy of all love.
I love my neighbour as myself for love of you.
I forgive all who have injured me,
and I ask pardon for all whom I have injured.
Amen.

St Francis

Dear God,
please reveal to us your sublime beauty
that is everywhere, everywhere, everywhere,
so that we will never again feel frightened.
My divine love, my love,
please let us touch
your face.

Taking a pause

Six months and sixteen days ago I wrote down the first words of the first of these homilies:

Yes, we are now in total lockdown, and even for those of us who have already been in semi-self-isolation, it is likely to be something of a shock.

I certainly would have been even more shocked if I had known that today I would be writing Lockdown Homily 199.

Originally the lockdown was to be for 21 days! Since that day, 27 March 2020, the shocking impact of the disaster wreaked by tiny microscopic pieces of parasitic genetic material, that are not even truly alive, has changed our human world, not only in the externals but in our very psyches. None of us will ever forget this pandemic. And its impact will remain heavy for years. Estimates are that, once the Covid-19 is neutralized – presumably after an effective vaccine is delivered – it will take several years before national and world living standards return to the levels they were in before 2020.

Positively, the pandemic has given all of us a pause for reflection. We have had to look at ourselves, our families, our societies, our world. The abnormality of the pandemic and the lockdown has enabled us to reconsider what the old normality was and whether it is indeed something we want to return to unchanged. Truly, any new normal will not be, and should not be, the old normal. Are the people we so depended upon during the early days of the lockdown to remain the lowest paid people – farmworkers, supermarket packers, delivery people, rubbish removers – or at least the lowest paid in their particular hierarchies – nurses in particular? When the lockdown ensured that the already grotesquely high percentage of unemployed people in South Africa became a majority of the population, the social and political need for a basic income grant for all became a necessity. When the streets went silent, the planes stopped flying, and the smoke from factories cleared, we saw a cleaner firmament than we had for years. Though the voices of big business had no interest in this positive effect, it gave us a tantalising glimpse of what a more ecologically sustainable world could be like. After the pandemic there will be a titanic struggle for a better and fairer earth to be fought and, if we are to survive, won.

For people with a connection to the institutional church the lockdown was brutal, cutting them off from the sustenance of the Sunday Eucharist and of that strange fellowship that brings people of all types and dispositions together in celebration of their risen Lord. It is true that enormous creativity was unleashed in various forms of internet-based communication and ministry. But the profound changes wrought by the virus and society's reaction to it will continue to lead to radical changes in how the Church is to be the Body of Christ in the days to come.

I am now going to take a pause in writing these homilies. I think they have served their original purpose which was to provide a daily reflection for people in the parish I belong

to. As things settled into the lockdown routine their reach became wider and they became a means of exchanging thoughts on the meaning of what was happening and some Biblical exegesis that related to our contexts. For me, it became a daily discipline which had its own positive effect whatever its challenge to time and effort. It was a privilege to be asked to share these thoughts with so many people.

What I will do in the next few weeks will be to package the homilies into a collection which will be made available to you in a pdf file – provided I have your email address to send it to. My email address is aitchisonjjw@gmail.com. I will reflect on what future form some kind of continuation of these homilies could take.

Prayers (Book of Common Prayer)

O Blessed Lord,
who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that we may embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour
Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Jude 1:24-25:

And now to him who has the power to guard you against stumbling
and to stand you before his glory blameless, in exultation,
to the only God our Saviour,
through Jesus the Anointed our Lord,
be glory, majesty, and authority,
before every age, both now and unto all the ages;
Amen.

Edifying resources

Having reached the awesome tally of 200 homilies, this will be the last such regular communication for some time. I will occasionally send out a further piece.

I am aware that some people have found value in these homilies as a daily resource for thought, meditation, and prayer.

To replace them, or add to others you already use, there are many resources on the internet supplying daily Bible studies or prayers and meditation. Many are interdenominational, some are clearly denominational and, as with anything on the internet, some are not recommended.

One good and reliable source, and a very popular one, is Lectio 365. I recommend it.

Lectio 365

<https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional>

This is a daily devotional resource (in text or audio) for mobile phones that can be downloaded via cellphone apps only. It is written by leaders of the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with Waverley Abbey Resources in England.

The format of the devotions is based upon the ancient *Lectio Divina* that was established as a monastic practice by St Benedict in the 6th century AD.

(<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf>),

The daily devotional sequence followed uses the formula

PRAY:

Pause and be still/ Rejoice with a psalm and Reflect on scripture/ Ask for God's help / Yield to God's will in your life.

Each week focuses on one of six practices:

Prayer/ Mission/ Justice/ Creativity/ Hospitality/ Learning.

Special attention is given to the Advent and Lenten seasons.

It is possible to download the meditations for the week in advance.

When I was a young adult and fairly new as a committed Christian, my parish priest argued that one should read several Christian books every year. In the Anglican Church, with the effective demise of morning and evening prayer services on a Sunday, we are now much less exposed to Christian edification. Ordained clergy of course are expected to say the daily offices. Some form of daily medication or Bible study is one way to remedy that.

Prayers

(St Richard)

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen.

(Unknown)

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push us into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

(Traditional Gaelic)

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields
and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.



Parish of St John the Divine
Glenwood
Durban