

Listening From Within

The best commentary of Scripture is Scripture itself. Truly, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and a knowledge of the Old Testament completes our understanding of the New. This book uses this guiding principle as it unfolds the meaning of the various readings from the Liturgy. It is meant to be an aid to our personal discovery of the meaning of God's Word for us in a relevant and practical way.

"The inspiration of these pages comes from the Bible expressed in words that come straight from a prayerful heart. Chapter by chapter the reader experiences the powerful word of God for ever taking new expression for the nourishment and delight of everyone. The reader is given a puzzling or paradoxical thought which is then developed with other passages or teachings from the Scripture."

Dan Ferrando S.J. Spiritual Director: Marriage/Engaged Encounter

"Chris has a rare ability and gift of using down-to-earth and smooth-flowing language in breaking the Word of God for us, and he does so in his own unique style and poetic form. He makes us taste and savour the Word so that it could touch our hearts and truly become a lamp to our feet and light on our path."

Alwyn Fernandes S.J. Director: Retreat House, Bombay



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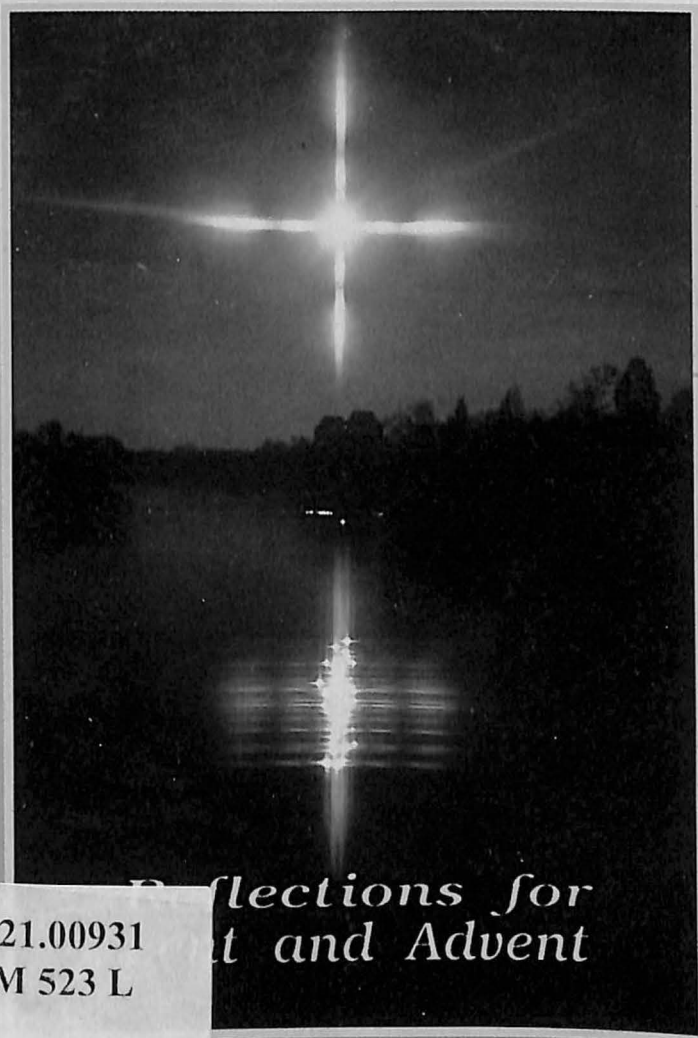
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Listening — from — Within



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*Reflections for
Christmas and Advent*

Christopher Mendonca

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Reflections for Lent and Advent

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Within

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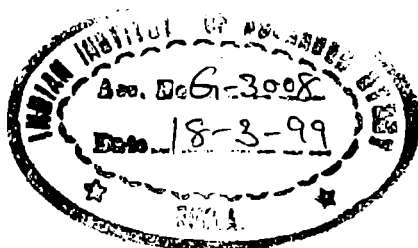
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1994

**A loving tribute
to my Father
Claude**

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Foreword

Christopher Mendonca has a quality all his own: his writing is deep in content and poetic in form.

In his orderly unfolding of one idea after another, all of them biblically based, one is invariably struck by one sentence or another that suddenly reveals a new world of beauty we would not have discovered by ourselves.

A kind of gratitude is born in us as a result, inviting us to delve deeper and savour better, the treasure just discovered.

The process just mentioned repeats itself many times over in an unending variety of ways for our joy, exceedingly great.

Only, to enter into this gratifying process we need to share the author's quality of a reflective mind. For persons having acquired a goodly measure of this endearing quality and/or wishing to further develop it, the following units of condensed spiritual insights into life will prove immensely valuable. Each unit is a veritable, all-invigorating multi-vitamin capsule.

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Diocesan Seminary
Bombay*

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical scholars will readily agree that "the best commentary on Sacred Scripture is Scripture itself." It is this principle that governs the choice of the Readings of the Liturgy specially during the seasons of Lent and Advent. As an aid to understanding and grasping the meaning of the Word of God I undertook to write a series of Reflections for Lent in 1972, in the columns of "The Examiner". They were well received and since then, I have at varying intervals continued to write reflections for Lent and Advent. I express my gratitude to the editor, Fr. Benny Aguiar for his continued support and encouragement.

Prompted by the suggestions made by many who read these reflections, I have now been able to present them in a single volume. They are substantially the same as the originals which appeared in "The Examiner", except for minor changes in sentence structure and presentation. They are presented here in the order of the 3 year Liturgical Cycle for Lent and Advent. There is at least one reflection for each Sunday of the 3 year cycle, together with reflections for Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter and Christmas.

These reflections were not written for their own sake, nor are they contrived. Each one is the outcome of a personal understanding of the Word of God. They reflect my very real experiences in my attempt to live by the Word of God. Hence it is indispensable that the passages from Scripture suggested at the start of each reflection be first read. The reflection that follows is only meant to be a starting point for each one's personal discovery and understanding of the Word of God.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Fr. Francis Ripoll S.J. my first and constant professor of Sacred Scripture, whose teaching, guidance and personal example are all mirrored in these reflections. It is my fond hope that these reflections will open to many the way to a deeper understanding of the Word of God.

Christopher Mendonca

PRELUDE

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD

Scripture Readings:

Ezek 2:8-3:7 The vision of the scroll

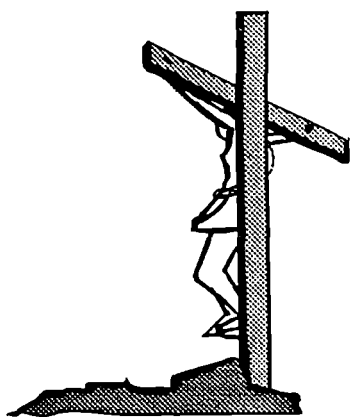
The language we grow up with
is what I like to call our mother-tongue.
Most often we do not learn it formally,
hardly know its grammar and syntax
but nonetheless speak it fluently and effectively.
As opposed to this there is a 'second-language'.
This is the language we have chosen to learn
because of the practical benefits it will bring.
Because the second-language is "learned"
and not the one we grow up with,
it generally carries with it an air of artificiality.
Of course, there are exceptions;
but we are all familiar
with the results of
"thinking" in our mother-tongue
while "speaking" in a second-language.
It can be quite hilarious at times.

Our approach to spirituality
can be likened to the study of a language.
There is a kind of spirituality
that flows from within,
one that is imbibed,
one we grow up with.
It is the attitude of faith and self-surrender.
It is the sense of God pervading all our activity
holding us in the palm of His hand.
It is the experience of being one with others
sharing their joys and sorrows
because we are children of the same Father.

And though there is a common thread
in the expression of such attitudes,
there are no stereotypes.
No two smiles are alike.
There is also a spirituality
that is learned as a second-language
for the practical benefits it will bring.
It is not the one that penetrates our lives deeply.
It is the language of rituals and rites,
whose grammar and syntax we know.
The slightest deviation causes an uproar.
We are quick to bemoan the decline of standards
and the loss of cherished values,
because the "corruption" of the language
reduces its market value
and with it the ability to procure future benefits.

We like to secure the future
with indulgenced prayers,
and have a guarantee
that all will be well,
if only we use the right formula.
The result is often Religious Fundamentalism.
Even the Jews of Jesus' time
were afflicted by this malady
and He, the WORD of God
came precisely
so that we might give this up
and speak straight from the heart, (Cfr. Jer 31:31 ff)
using the language that comes naturally to all of us —
the language of love, concern, fellowship and unity.
As we listen and reflect on God's Word,
may we treasure it in our hearts
and bring it to fulfillment.

Lent





THE STORY OF NARCISSUS

Scripture Readings:

<i>Gen 2:7-9, 3:1-7</i>	<i>The story of the temptation and the first sin</i>
<i>Rom 5:12-19</i>	<i>Through one man all have been saved</i>
<i>Mt 4:1-11</i>	<i>Jesus is tempted</i>

The worst calamity that can overtake a person is the one which makes him/her righteous in his/her own eyes.

"Like Narcissus, leaning over the spring, enchanted by his own ugliness and then priding himself on having the courage to admit it."

How right Dag Hammarskjöld was when he said:
*"We carry our own nemesis within us; yesterday's self-admiration is the legitimate father of today's feeling of guilt."*²

The Bible puts it very graphically when it says that after the man and woman in the garden had eaten the fruit

in the hope that they would become like gods, and looked at themselves in admiration, they found that they were NAKED.

And that is the story of the beginning, the Genesis of Sin. The day man and woman began to look at themselves in self-admiration sin came into the world.

The Bible which tells of the history of salvation must for that very reason speak about the history of sin.

Salvation is an impossibility unless it is preceded by an actual state of sinfulness into which all of us are born

and against which we must struggle.

Right from the moment of our birth

we are old enough to die —

the horrible death that is sin.

We are often victims of circumstances, of the environment, influenced by hereditary factors beyond our control.

"Miserable creature that I am,

who will deliver me from this body doomed to death?"³

All through life we struggle against the current;

temptation is a reality that will surely overcome us,

unless we cry out helplessly for a Saviour;

so that just as all of us have a solidarity in sin

we may all be comforted by the hope

that through the death of one man,

all have been saved.⁴

The man and woman in the garden

were deluded into self-admiration;

so unlike Jesus,

who refused to be led into the temptation

of thinking he was great in his own eyes.

"Son of God, though he was,

he did not think equality with God

a thing to be clung to, but emptied himself...."⁵

It is he who gives us hope

that our struggle is not in vain,

if only like Him and with Him

we come to grips with the reality of sin within us

and accept our need for a Saviour.

References:

1 Dag Hammarskjöld in *"Markings"*

2 Ibid

3 Rom 7:24

4 Rom 5:18-19

5 Phil 2:6-7

Lent 2nd Sunday (A)

THE FIRST STEP

Scripture Readings:

Gen 12:1-4a	<i>The call of Abraham</i>
2 Tim 1:8b-10	<i>Bear hardships for the sake of the Good News</i>
Mt 17:1-9	<i>The Transfiguration</i>

Those of us who have been fortunate to have been abroad will easily understand how this has helped us to broaden our outlook and widen our cultural horizons. We like to recall the long journeys we have made and remember the countries we have been privileged to visit. But perhaps, those who have travelled most will be the last to realise, that *"the longest journey is the journey inwards, of him who has chosen his/her destiny who has started upon his/her quest for the source of his/her being.... Between you and him is infinite distance — Uncertainty."*

Abraham's setting out from Haran to an unknown land is a sign of the long journey along the road to self-discovery. He set out not knowing where he was going but with the sure hope that he was leaving his homeland for something better; otherwise he would have returned because he had plenty of opportunities to do so.²

The first step along such a journey is painful, no doubt because it means turning your back on everything you have — all your possessions, all your security. It means *"taking up your cross daily and following Jesus"*.³

It means walking in faith,
 knowing that he who has called you
 will surely lead you there.
 Self-discovery, for us, is the realisation
 that we are pilgrims, not settlers;
 that we're destined to share God's life in Jesus;
 that the glory of the Transfiguration will be ours.
 But we prefer to settle down to a comfortable existence
 ignoring the realities of life
 living in a world of our own,
 a world of values that are not permanent.
 We're reluctant to undertake such a journey
 because it is tough and arduous and uncertain
 and because our vision of the end is unclear.
 And so the prospect of foregoing the security of the present
 appears more frightful than it actually is.
 The prophecy of the Passion in the Synoptic Gospels
 is invariably followed by the account of the Transfiguration
 if only to show us
 that it is the hope of future glory that makes the present
 bearable.
*"What we suffer in this life, can never be compared to the
 glory, as yet unrevealed, which awaits us".⁴*

References:

- 1 Dag Hammarskjöld in *"Markings"*
- 2 Heb 11:13-16
- 3 Lk 16:25
- 4 Rom 8:18

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Scripture Readings:

Ex	17:3-7	<i>The Israelites satisfied with water from the rock</i>
Rom	5:1-2, 5-8	<i>God has poured out his love into our hearts</i>
Jn	4:5-42	<i>Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well</i>

Could it be possible that

"You are the vessel, the draught is God's and God is the thirsty one?"

What sounds so strange, is often so true.

Our hunger and thirst for God

is far outweighed by God's hunger and thirst for us.

God is so eager to let us drink from his cup,

*"to pour out into our hearts his love, in abundance"*²

to give us water *"which, if we drink*

*we will never be thirsty again."*³

It is so unlike the ordinary water we're accustomed to,
"it's water from a rock."

No human being can give it

(unless he/she himself/herself possessed God's Spirit)

*"because the well is deep and there is no bucket."*⁴

It's strange but true:

we think God has abandoned us

when we're the very ones who have abandoned God.

The Bible proves the "truth"

that God does not abandon us

even and precisely when we forget him,

in a "strange" way.

It is strange that Yahweh should provide water from a rock

for a People who grumble and reject him,

a people who have so quickly forgotten his wonderful works

and long for the fleshpots of Egypt.

It is strange that the Samaritan woman,

supposedly having had an affair with five men
none of whom was her husband
should be promised Living Water.
And yet it's true.
It actually happened.

When will we understand that we're not alone,
that even when we travel along a lonely desert road
there is always water from the Rock
from which we can drink;
that even when our sorrows lie buried deep within us
and there is no bucket to draw them out;
that when like the woman at the well
we feel lonely, rejected and outcast,
along comes a "stranger"
who changes the situation by his presence.
Can it be that he's been there all along
and that we haven't noticed him,
merely because we are so enveloped in our "selves"?
Could we not have been spared the anxiety
if only we took the trouble to look around?
It's strange, but true.
Hasn't it happened to you before?

References:

- 1 Dag Hammarskjöld in *"Markings"*
- 2 Rom 5:5-8
- 3 Jn 4:13
- 4 Jn 4:11

"I" TROUBLE

Scripture Readings:

1 Sam 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

David is anointed King

Eph 5:8-14

Live as children of the Light

Jn 9:1-41

The cure of the man born blind

A self-conceited person is one whose 'I's are too close together. When a person stops looking at others and looks only at himself/herself, he is blind, practically speaking because he/she is unable to see anything but himself/herself.

Saul began well as King of Israel. But then he was struck blind (not a healing experience for him as it was for Saul in the Acts of the Apostles). He became so enveloped in his own exploits, explicitly disobeyed Yahweh's command and even tried to justify it on religious grounds.¹ But God does not see as we see. From a human point of view he had done a great thing. Yet, God rejected him. Even when David is chosen to replace him he is not the best candidate by human standards.² About a thousand years later the Pharisees who knew their scriptures well, who considered themselves to be Masters of the Law, were the very ones who failed to learn the lesson. In his blindness, Saul could not bear to see David rising to fame.³ The Pharisees in their turn were so blind that they could stand it no longer.

A blind man being cured on the Sabbath!
That's heretical, against the Law.
And characteristically, like Saul
they tried to justify their action on religious grounds;
they claimed to have insight
as guardians of the Law of Moses.⁴
*"If you said you were blind, you would not be guilty;
but since you say 'we see', your guilt remains."*⁵
But let's not point the accusing finger too quickly.
"I'm not like this publican" could easily become
*"I'm not like this Pharisee."*⁶

A few years later, another Pharisee, Saul (Paul)
equally self-righteous was struck blind.
But for him it was a healing experience.
He saw the Light and accepted it.⁷
And he himself wrote to the Christians at Ephesus
urging them to put aside the works of darkness
and live as children of the Light.
The cure of the blind man was so radical
that people didn't recognise him at first
"Is this the same man?" they asked.⁸
When we are cured of our 'I' trouble,
we'll strike others as being odd.
It's not the fashion now-a-days
to look away from ourselves
and care for others, unselfishly.
Will we be humble enough to accept our blindness,
to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam
and be healed of our 'I' trouble?
"Lord, that I may see."

References:

- 1 1 Sam 15:16-23
- 2 1 Sam 16:7ff
- 3 1 Sam 18:6ff
- 4 Jn 9:29
- 5 Jn 9:41
- 6 Lk 18:11 and Louis Eveley in *"That Man is You"*
- 7 Acts 9:1-12
- 8 Jn 9:8-9

ARE WE BETTER OFF?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Ezek</i>	<i>37:12-14</i>	<i>"I mean to raise you from your graves"</i>
<i>Rom</i>	<i>8:8-11</i>	<i>He who raised Christ Jesus, will also raise our mortal bodies</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>11:1-45</i>	<i>The raising of Lazarus from the dead</i>

It has been said that the best is often the enemy of the good

but I'm inclined to think, that very often

the good is the enemy of the best

because it makes people content with what they have and prevents them from moving on to something better.

If what we believe is as good as anyone else's belief then it's no good at all.

If, for us Christianity ends on Good Friday, it's good-for-nothing.

Good Friday becomes Good-for-nothing Friday.

After all, so many people die heroically for what they believe.

"If there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised and if Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins. If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people."

And yet the fact remains, that for many of us

Good Friday is more important than Easter.

Does the celebration of Easter affect us as much as the commemoration of Good Friday?

We continue to worship the dead Christ

even while we pay lip service to the Resurrection.

If the Resurrection means nothing to us,

our case is hopeless.

We are like the Israelites of old

living in a land of exile with apparently no hope of return.

We are like Martha and Mary mourning the death of their brother Lazarus. They believed Jesus had the power to heal the sick. But could he raise the dead to life?

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

(Lazarus had died three days earlier and the body was stinking.)

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have prevented this man's death?"²

But we have the assurance:

"You will know that I am Yahweh when I open your graves and raise you from your graves."³

"I am the Resurrection and the Life."⁴

"Brothers and sisters, do not grieve as those who have no hope."⁵

Then why is it that we are so slow to believe? Maybe, as Paul tells the Christians at Rome,

"we are a people who are interested only in unspiritual things and it is 'death' to limit oneself to what is unspiritual."⁶

"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus Christ from death is living in you, then He who raised Jesus Christ will give life to our mortal bodies."⁷

We do not proclaim the message of one who is dead, but of one who LIVES.

He is our Resurrection and our Life.

If we believe in him, we shall not taste eternal death.

References:

- 1 1 Cor 15:12-19
- 2 Jn 11:21,38-40
- 3 Ezek 37:12-14
- 4 Jn 11:25
- 5 1 Thess 4:13
- 6 Rom 8:5-6
- 7 Rom 8:11

Palm Sunday (A)

TOO MUCH RELIGION: TOO LITTLE CHRISTIANITY

Scripture Readings:

Is 50:4-7 The third song of the suffering servant

Phil 2:6-11 Jesus empties himself

Mt 26:14ff The account of the Passion

Strange though it may seem
Christ died on the night of the Last Supper.
It had to be that way
(and I'm not referring to his physical death)
because that supper was a sacrificial meal;
a victim had to be immolated;
and Christ was the Victim -- the Lamb of God.
His body was broken; his blood was shed.
What followed the next day (his physical death)
was only an outward manifestation of a permanent attitude
that had reached its climax -- death to self.

Too often, physical suffering and even the readiness to die
can become a way of avoiding the real issue.
To be totally abandoned to the Father's will
is something difficult
and no amount of physical suffering
will serve to compensate.
Christ's death has a value for us
because it is an expression of selflessness.
What's so great about dying?
In itself, it is part of our human condition.
What's the point of making it painful
unless it is meant to be a sacrament --
a source of life.
So many people die painful deaths
but only Christ could LIVE

a life that was from start to finish
a DYING TO SELF.

We are often moved by the sufferings of Christ,
we accompany him on his journey to Calvary
in the various Stations of the Cross;
we meditate on the Passion of Our Lord;
and even while we perform such laudable deeds
deep down we remain unmoved.
We are reluctant to budge even an inch from
our selfish ways,
we continue to be blind to the sufferings of others
which are the sufferings of Christ today;
We turn a deaf ear to our neighbour's plea for help --
'It's none of my business'
'Why get involved?'
Sometimes, we even perform heroic sacrifices
and acts of penance
'for the conversion of sinners'.
And while we do all this
we seldom lift a finger
to help another carry his or her burden.
Worse still, we consider ourselves 'religious'
at the end of it.
The Jews who waved their palm branches
and sang their Hosannas,
where were they at the Crucifixion?
If we consider ourselves to be 'religious'
are we there when our neighbour needs us,
to stand alongside in sickness and suffering,
to share in the struggle against poverty and injustice?
Too much religion; too little Christianity.
*"As long as you did it to one of these,
the least of my brothers/sisters,
you did it to me."*

Reference:

1 Mt 25:40

THE TIME TO CHOOSE

Scripture Readings:

<i>Gen</i>	<i>9:8-15</i>	<i>The Covenant with Noah</i>
<i>1 Pet</i>	<i>3:18-22</i>	<i>The waters of the flood — a type of baptism</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>1:12-15</i>	<i>Jesus in the desert</i>

Does it strike you
that though the waters of the flood bring destruction
yet to a person in the desert
water is a sign of life?

Noah was saved 'from' the waters of destruction;
we are saved 'through' the waters of Baptism.

All those things which happened in the past
were a prefiguration of things to come.

In biblical imagery,
water is life and salvation.

The saving acts of Yahweh are compared
to the production of water
specially water in a desert.

The Israelite separated from Yahweh
is like an arid desert

where a person thirsts for water

"like a deer that yearns for running streams."

Nevertheless

the water which is very appropriately life,
is a destructive agent in the desert.

Rainfall in the desert

is a seldom event

but a terrorising experience.

It is not the welcome rain

for which the farmer thanks God.

The rain falls in torrents,

tearing through the ground,

leaving ugly, barren furrows.
Even the forces which a person thinks friendly,
turns against him/her in the desert.
The desert is murderous and unforgiving.
It is hostile to life;
but it does not deceive.
It is honestly what it is
and pretends to be nothing else.
And Jesus goes into it
to be tempted
to come face to face with the threat of death,
death to self.
It is a reminder to us
to be what the desert fundamentally is --
honest
unpretentious
non-deceptive --
a call to us to be true children of God.
In the whole of creation
we are the only creatures
who can choose not to be our true selves
if we so wish.
And what will we choose?

Reference:

1 Ps 42:1

ARE WE SHORTSIGHTED?

Scripture Readings

Gen 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18 The Sacrifice of Isaac

Rom 8:31-34

God did not spare His own Son

Mk 9:2-10

The Transfiguration

Strange though it may seem,
our attitude to death
often reveals our attitude to life.
Mourning and weeping at the death of a loved one
is proper and legitimate.
But if carried to excess
it reveals our lack of vision and faith
and our failure to see beyond this life.
It is shortsightedness.
It has been said that
"Death is the horizon,
but the horizon is nothing more
than the limit of our vision."

Beginning with Abraham
and right through the Old Testament,
we have before us
the example of those
whose vision extended beyond the horizon
and who saw what lies beyond it
not with their natural sight
but with INSIGHT.
That is why Abraham
though he must have been pained
at being asked to sacrifice his only son --
the son through whom the promise would be fulfilled --
was able to say YES.
Beyond the death of Isaac,
he saw the prospect of LIFE.

God too, did not spare His only Son,
and Jesus knew
that the fact of his suffering and death
would not be easy to accept.
He therefore kept before him
a constant VISION of the Father.
He took three of his disciples with him
to the mountain-top
and was transfigured before them.
He gave them a vision of his glory.
This was to be their vision beyond the horizon,
a vision that would sustain them
in their moments of weakness.
It is not the things we do that matter
as much as
the way we do them that counts.
The meaning we put into the things we do
makes a difference
because it transcends the here-and-now
and goes beyond it.

Thus, fasting gets its value
not from the fact that we give up food
but because one has lost the taste for food,
having tasted something better.
It is this which puts the present into perspective
and transforms our attitude to it,
making it possible for us to take in our stride
the setbacks, disappointments, insults, ingratitude,
and a host of other things,
without losing our peace of mind.
Even our efforts to secure justice
in social and political fields
have a meaning
only if they go
'beyond' the satisfaction of our ego
and the need we sometimes feel to get even.
Are we shortsighted?
Seeing things out of focus?

DO WE REALLY BELIEVE?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Gen 22:1-18</i>	<i>Abraham asked to sacrifice Isaac</i>
<i>Ex 14:15-15:1</i>	<i>The crossing of the Sea of Reeds</i>
<i>Ezek 36:16-28</i>	<i>"I will give you a new heart"</i>
<i>Rom 6:3-11</i>	<i>Having died with Christ, we shall return to life with him</i>
<i>Mt 28:1-10</i>	<i>the account of the Resurrection</i>

Most people want to see before they believe;
but the Resurrection is one thing
that must first be believed in order to be seen.
Do you believe you can rise to a new life?
Then you will surely rise above your sinful past
from death to a new life:
It is possible for us to change
only if we believe
that God who dwells in us
has the power to raise us up.
It means having faith like Abraham
whose faith in Yahweh
made him willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac
the very son through whom he had been promised
numerous descendants.

Most of us suffer from an inferiority complex
because we do not believe we can rise
by the power of God who dwells in us.
Too often we look upon the Resurrection
as a part of history
but not as a present reality.
The Resurrection is meant to show us
that Jesus is not limited by time.
The power of the Resurrection can be experienced
by us today.

It is not limited to the Apostles and their contemporaries who were privileged witnesses to the actual Resurrection of Jesus.

It is available to all of us who believe.

Easter is a festival of springtime
when everything around us is bursting with new life
symbolised so aptly by the Easter Egg.

We 'pass over' from the slavery of sin
to a new life,

just like the Israelites
who by crossing the Sea of Reeds
turned their backs once and for all
on their slavery in Egypt.

If Easter is to have any meaning for us
it must find us renewed with the Spirit of Christ.

*"When we were baptised in Christ Jesus,
we were baptised into his death
so that just as Christ was raised from the dead
we too might rise to a new life."*

But we don't take this seriously;

we do not believe,

and so we don't find any change in ourselves,
we remain dead.

And ironically we wish one another 'Happy Easter'
almost making it a ceremonial condolence
because we are still dead.

The first step in any conversion is to believe
that in and through Jesus Christ
we too can rise to a new life.

*"Lord, I do believe; increase my faith."*²

References:

1 Rom 6:3-5

2 Mk 9:25

OVERTURNING THE TABLES

Scripture Readings:

<i>Ex</i>	<i>20:1-17</i>	<i>The Commandments</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>1:22-25</i>	<i>Worldly wisdom — God's foolishness</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>2:13-25</i>	<i>The cleansing of the Temple</i>

"The lunatic, the lover and the poet
are of imagination, all compact"
and when Shakespeare wrote this
he was only stating what we all tend to do:
namely,
to call lovers and poets lunatics
because 'we' do not see what they see
and because 'they' do not fit into our scheme of things.
We have all heard of the madness of love
that sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt
and of creative works of art, music and poetry
that are dismissed as senseless
just because 'we' do not understand them.

Jesus was surely thought of
as a mad man during his day
particularly when he went about
upsetting the apple — cart of the Pharisees
and speaking against their prevailing attitude to the Law.
He even had the audacity to overturn the tables
and drive out the sellers and buyers from the Temple
because they had made it a house of business.
He was always telling the Pharisees
that they had got it all wrong
that the observance of the Law
was not meant to be
a legalistic set of do's and don't's
but rather that the Law had been given
to be a guideline

and to help us define
our relationship with God, the world and each other.
And because they did not see this
they got him crucified.
And even here Jesus rubbed salt into their wounds
telling them that his death
would be a source of life.
*"They did not understand
that he spoke of the Temple of his Body."*
The Jews wanted miracles.
He gave them a sign they could not understand
and it became for them
a stumbling block.
The Greeks looked for wisdom.
He gave them what they considered foolish.²
But to those who saw,
He offered a new and intimate relationship with the Father
an opportunity to become true children of God.
Do we dismiss the harder demands of Christianity
as old-fashioned
just because it's not what the others are doing?
Are we afraid to be the odd person out?
The true Christian will always seem
to be out of touch with reality,
and will always look for ways to resolve a conflict
rather than compromise with a peaceful existence;
and be willing to die rather than merely exist,
in order to rise to a new life.

References:

- 1 Jn 2:22
- 2 1 Cor 2:22,23

BLASPHEMY OR WORSHIP!

Scripture Readings:

<i>Ex</i>	<i>20:1-17</i>	<i>The Ten Commandments — The Law</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>1:22-25</i>	<i>God's foolishness greater than human wisdom</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>2:13-25</i>	<i>The cleansing of the Temple</i>

"There is a certain way of worshipping God that savours of blasphemy and a certain way of blaspheming God that savours of worship."

And to think that Jesus was acting so high-handedly in the Temple, driving out people with a whip scattering the money-changers' coins and knocking their tables over! It is shocking indeed that zeal for his Father's house should have prompted him to act thus. But while he was apparently being disrespectful, he was in truth protesting against those who pretend to worship, but in reality are those who blaspheme; those who worship God with their lips but their hearts are far from him.¹

He had come to inaugurate a new way of worship -- worship in Spirit and in Truth.

This is what they could not get over -- that the one who came to be their Saviour was acting contrary to their expectations, attacking them where it hurt most.

And though they planned to get rid of him, they could not completely ignore him.

"Show us a sign", they demanded

and no other sign was given to them
except one which proved even more repelling.²
Jews demanded miracles,
Greeks looked for wisdom
but the sign they were given
was a sign that proved to be a stumbling block.

Obedience to a law can be a dangerous thing
if it ends up by making us self-righteous
because we have fulfilled all its commands.
If we take pride in our 'works'
and set up a righteousness of our own.
Then it is that we place a stumbling block in our path;
and precisely when we think we have everything,
we find that we have nothing.

But we like to be secure
and the observance of the law in its outward practice
gives us that sense of security
which is only another form of spiritual sloth
(unless it is done out of inner conviction).
It is just another way of worshipping God
that savours of blasphemy.

This is the temple that Jesus seeks to destroy
and to build in its place another one

"not made by hands",

not the sole outcome of human effort.

*"Look, today I am setting you over nations,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."³*

References:

1 Mt 15:8

2 Mt 12:38ff

3 Jer 1:10

FORGIVENESS

Scripture Readings:

2 Chron	36:14-23	<i>In exile in Babylon; Cyrus allows them to return</i>
Eph	2:4-10	<i>God is rich in his mercy</i>
Jn	3:14-21	<i>God so loved the world that he sent his only Son</i>

Have you ever realised
that 'forgiveness' is a 'giving-for',
that when you 'forgive'
you 'give up' the opportunity to get even
because of the love you have 'for' someone?
*"Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality
because he who forgives you out of love
takes upon himself
the consequences of what you have done."*

Forgiveness therefore entails a sacrifice.
And what Dag Hammarskjöld says
is surely about the way God forgives us.
He takes upon himself the sin of the world:
*"Ours were the sufferings he bore,
ours the sorrows he carried.*

*We thought of him as someone punished.
Yet he was pierced through, for our faults
crushed for our sins."*¹²

In this case the sacrifice entailed
is the forgiveness of God towards us,
the sacrifice of His only son.
God loved the world so much
that He sent His only Son.

*"God was in Christ,
reconciling the world to himself
not holding men's misdeeds against them."*¹³

The pure act of mercy performed by Yahweh when he allowed the exiled Israelites to return, is a symbol of his attitude to all sinners. It is that of a father who anxiously awaits the return of his wayward son.⁴ So then, there is no room left for human pride we cannot parade our own efforts before us as if we by our acts of prayer and penance and sacrifice have 'earned' God's forgiveness; as if we are 'worthy' of his mercy.

*"It is not your own doing,
it is God's free gift.
There is nothing to boast about
since it is not the result of your own efforts."*⁵

The greatest temptation of a person who has turned back and repented is to think that now he or she is not like others. 'I'm not like this publican'

In so doing, we separate ourselves from the race of sinners and place ourselves outside the realm of God's forgiveness.

*"If we say we have no sin,
we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us."*⁶

*"Humility and demonic pride
often speak the same language."*⁷

May God grant us all the grace of true humility; but may we never become so humble that we are 'proud' of our humility.

References:

- 1 Dag Hammarskjöld in *"Markings"*
- 2 Is 53:4-5
- 3 2 Cor 5:19
- 4 Lk 15:11ff
- 5 Eph 2:7-9
- 6 1 Jn 1:8
- 7 Dag Hammarskjöld in *"Markings"*

NO LIMITS

Scripture Readings:

<i>2 Chron</i>	<i>36:14-23</i>	<i>In exile in Babylon; Cyrus allows them to return</i>
<i>Eph</i>	<i>2:4-10</i>	<i>God is rich in his mercy</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>3:14-21</i>	<i>God so loved the world that He sent His only Son</i>

There are no limits to God's mercy.
Perhaps that's the reason why,
there are no limits to our infidelities.
Yahweh brought a vine out of Egypt.
To plant it, he drove out the nations.
It was a choice vine
and he tenderly nurtured it.
But it yielded nothing but bitter fruit.
*"What could I have done for my vineyard
that I have not done?
I expected it to yield grapes.
Why did it yield sour grapes instead?"*
*"My people, what have I done to you,
how have I been a burden to you?
Answer me."*²

There are many who feel hurt,
but few who experience pain.
Feeling hurt is a result of wounded self-love.
A sense of pain is a feeling of compassion,
of disappointment,
that although love is so compelling
it goes out to a person
and returns empty.

Yahweh was immensely pained by Israel's infidelities.
Jesus was pained by Peter's denial.
And yet, Yahweh would continue to love Israel,

Jesus would continue to love Peter,
because there was hope
that Israel would one day give up her wicked ways;
hope that Peter would realise his mistake,
and that God's love would triumph in the end.
And this is what made the Exile bearable;
the thought of the Restoration foretold by the prophets,
which was made possible
when Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem.
It is possible for us to keep striving
only because of the new beginning
afforded us by God's infinite mercy.
If there was any limit to God's mercy,
how could we live in hope?
How could we make of our failures,
stepping stones?
And this is what makes life bearable --
that we can afford to be disappointed
but never discouraged.
We do not live like those who are without hope.³
It is not that we have reached perfection,
but we press onward
hoping to take hold of that
for which Christ once took hold of us.
*"Forgetting what lies behind
we strain ahead for what is still to come.
We are racing for the prize
which is God's call to the life above
in Christ Jesus."*⁴
For the Lord wills
that all should be saved
and that no one should remain
outside the influence of his love.

References:

- 1 Is 5:4
- 2 Mic 6:3
- 3 1 Thess 4:13
- 4 Phil 3:12-14

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Scripture Readings:

<i>Jer</i>	<i>31:31-34</i>	<i>A new heart; a new covenant</i>
<i>Heb</i>	<i>5:7-9</i>	<i>Jesus saves us through obedience</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>12:20-30</i>	<i>Jesus foretells his death</i>

Some people advocate a change of pace
when what is actually needed
is a change of 'direction'.

When one is the recipient of many privileges,
one is tempted to look behind at them
and take pleasure in the fact
that one is so fortunate.

But little do we realise
that looking back
(unless it induces a sense of gratitude)
is looking in the wrong direction.

Jesus is forever telling the Jews
to look forward
to look in the right direction
to change their direction
and not their pace.

Feverish excitement had already taken hold of them
so that they were eagerly awaiting the Messiah.
But in all their eagerness,
they were looking in the wrong direction.

After being delivered from slavery,
the Israelites when faced with the trials of the desert,
longed for the fleshpots of Egypt --
the land they had left behind.

And now,
instead of looking for the Messiah,
they were gazing with eyes fixed,
on a Law given 1200 years earlier.

They take pleasure in the fact
that they are children of Abraham
not realising
that God can raise children to Abraham from stones.¹

When we look away from God
we are looking in the wrong direction.
Adam and Eve hid from God among the trees
after their sin.
They had begun to look in the wrong direction.
Jesus came to set things right.
He would always look in the right direction
towards the Father living his life
in complete obedience to God's will.
And that is what obedience actually is
— looking at God
and accepting to do God's will.
And if we are to keep looking forward,
we cannot even look at ourselves.
A complete death to self
is what Jesus gave the Father
in complete contrast to the first man
who chose to look at himself.
And that was hard as it will be for all of us.
What was he to do?
Ask his Father to deliver him from that hour?
No, it was for this that he had come.
His suffering would be his glory.
The first man foolishly thought
that he could become like God
by looking at himself,
Jesus makes us children of God
by asking us to turn away from ourselves
and look at the Father as he did.

References:

1 Mt 3:9

2 Gen 3:6

A HEART TRANSPLANT

Scripture Readings:

<i>Jer</i>	<i>31:31-34</i>	<i>Promise of a New Covenant</i>
<i>Heb</i>	<i>5:7-9</i>	<i>Christ's obedience through suffering</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>12:20-33</i>	<i>From death to life</i>

It is quite easy to see
that true religion is not a matter of do's and don'ts
but a matter of the heart.

It concerns our attitude and relationship to God.
Israel's experience of Yahweh in the desert
was that of a God who loves and who saves.

But as the years went by,
Israel allowed this experience to become fossilized
into a rigid observance of the Law.

For this reason,
Yahweh found it necessary
to make a new covenant
making it alive
by renewing the 'hearts' of his people.

Jesus established the New Covenant
and like the old one made at Sinai,
he too gave a law;
not a set of do's and don'ts
but a command that we love one another
as he had loved us.¹

Love is not a reaction
but a response.

We all know that what we do
remains dead
unless we put our heart into it.
Responding to life's situations in love
rather than reacting to them

involves suffering (and sometimes even death),
but it is a suffering that brings life.

*"Son of God though he was
He learnt to obey through suffering...
became the source of salvation."*²

Religion becomes a dead thing
unless we put our hearts into it.
The observance of the law
becomes a dead letter
if we do not put our hearts into it.

This is an opportunity
to get rid of all the dead wood
even if the weeding out process
involves pain and suffering.
If we have the courage to do this
we will pass from death to a new life.

*"Unless the grain of wheat dies
it remains a seed,
but if it dies,
it yields a harvest."*³

References:

- 1 Jn 13:34
- 2 Heb 5:8
- 3 Jn 12:24

CHRISTIANITY — IN REVERSE

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>50:4-7</i>	<i>The third song of the "Servant of Yahweh"</i>
<i>Phil</i>	<i>2:6-11</i>	<i>Jesus empties himself</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>14:12ff</i>	<i>The narrative of the Passion.</i>

Someone said:

"Let us not look for Christ without the Cross
because then we will never find the Cross without Christ."

A simple statement

put very tersely

but expressing the reality of things.

We all like to have a religion that is comfortable,
one that makes as few demands on us as possible;
something that enables us to have a good time,
and yet console ourselves
that we're giving God his due.

That is why

no matter how far from God some people are,
they're always 'going to church'

'faithful to the traditions of Christianity.'

After all, they're doing their bit, aren't they?

For such people

true Christianity will always be a stumbling block.

It is rather our 'self' that is the stumbling block.

As long as Christianity suits their convenience

some people are willing to accept it.

But when it begins to hurt,

they turn around and flee;

having put their hand to the plough

they turn back.

They are like those Jews

waving their palm branches

singing their Hosannās

greeting Jesus as the Messiah
and only a few days later
asking for him to be crucified.

Some of us loudly profess our Christianity
and find subtle compensation
in talking about the things that should affect us
but which do not.

Instead of converting the world to the Gospel of Jesus
we convert the Gospel to the world --
a Christianity in reverse.

We place our own glory first and want to safeguard it
unlike Jesus

*who though his state was divine,
did not think his equality with God
a thing to be clung to
but emptied himself*

taking the form of a slave --

*a man like us in all things, except sin,
even accepting death, death on a cross.¹*

We look for Christ without the Cross
and invariably find the Cross without Christ.

This is what makes suffering unbearable;
to find it detached from the Cross of Christ,
meaningless and leading us nowhere.

We must not pity the person who has to suffer.
but rather the person who does not know how to suffer.

Jesus emptied himself and took up his Cross.

We make an empty vessel of Christianity
by taking out from it, its life substance
and putting there instead

a stumbling block -- our 'selves'.

And what is worse,

we sometimes think we're doing a service to God.

How slow we are to understand!

Reference:

1 Phil 2:6-8

TURNING AROUND AT 40

Scripture Readings:

<i>Deut 26:4-10</i>	<i>Turning away from slavery to freedom</i>
<i>Rom 10:8-13</i>	<i>The Resurrection -- turning away from sin and death</i>
<i>Lk 4:1-13</i>	<i>In the desert for 40 days</i>

The number 40 is often used in the Bible in a figurative sense rather than in a numerical one. It is the symbol for a 'turning point' in one's life. The 40 days of Jesus in the desert were a crucial phase of his life; just as the 40 years of Israel in the desert were crucial times for Moses and the Chosen People. If 40 signifies 'turning point', little wonder then that the word for 'repentance' associated with the 40 days of Lent is 'metanoia' which in Greek military parlance can be translated as 'an about turn'.

Repentance involves a 'change of direction'. It is useless to hurry down the road unless we have first made sure that we are on the right one. Otherwise, we only hasten our own destruction. Far too often many of us have begun to live 'by bread alone', catering exclusively to our material needs with little or no thought for the spiritual. We end up being lonely,

isolated,
directionless
and often dead.

Others among us become a prey to sensationalism
indulging in spiritual gimmickry
turning religion into show-biz,
running slick advertising campaigns
to prove their product is the 'real thing',
deceiving gullible masses into believing
they've experienced Jesus
just because they have been emotionally stirred.
Still others are self-righteous
believing that they have got it right
while the rest of the world can go to hell.
These are precisely the things
that Jesus turned his back upon
when he spent 40 days in the desert.
Are we prepared to turn around
and go in the right direction
and thus rise to a new life with Jesus?

LIVING BY THE WORD

Scripture Reading:

Lk 4:1-13 Jesus is tempted

In all probability
Jesus did not have with him
a copy of the Jewish Scriptures
as he made his 40-day retreat in the desert.
For one thing,
manuscripts were hard to come by in those days
and the phenomenon of printing
was still 1300 years away.
Yet, Jesus was so familiar with them
that in quoting them to him
the devil soon found out
that he was carrying coals to Newcastle.
In this fascinating exchange of point and counterpoint
what stands out
is the contrasting approach each has
to the Word of God.
Quoting Sacred Scripture,
even familiarity with it
can often be dangerous
and sometimes even counter-productive.
Satan chooses to attack Jesus with the Word of God
when he is most vulnerable,
after his fast in the desert.
This is very much like those
who hurl the Word of God
at alcoholics and drug addicts
and those supposedly engulfed in sin
telling them
that if they are not healed

it is because of their lack of faith.
Nothing could be more un-Christlike.

Jesus, by contrast metes out this treatment
to the Scribes, Pharisees and Doctors of the Law
who use their scriptures
*only to lay heavy burdens on people's shoulders
and are unwilling to lift even a finger to help them.*¹
This is the result of making the study of scripture
an end in itself.

We often forget that the written Word in its present form
is the result of years of Tradition
in which the LIVING according to the Word of God
was handed down directly
by those fortunate to have been in contact with him
and to have imbibed its spirit.
LIVING according to Jesus' commands
gives added authority to the scriptures
whenever we quote them.

Anything else is a meaningless exercise
and a means of destruction
rather than one of building up.

Jesus is the Word who heals.

The sinner is never rebuked
rather, instantly forgiven,
constantly reminding us of God's mercy.
Jesus' authority when he uses Scripture
comes not so much from the fact of its being written
but from his being the Word of God himself.

*"Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees,
he taught as one with authority."*²

As we read the scriptures may we become familiar
not so much with the written word in scripture
but rather with the Word of God written in our hearts.

References:

1. Mt 23:4
- 2 Mk 1:22

EMPTY VESSELS

Scripture Readings:

<i>Gen</i>	<i>15:5-12,17,18</i>	<i>God's Covenant with Abraham</i>
<i>Phil</i>	<i>2:6-11</i>	<i>Jesus empties himself</i>
<i>Lk</i>	<i>9:28-36</i>	<i>The Transfiguration</i>

We have often heard it said
that "empty vessels make the most sound".
While this is usually said in a derogatory sense,
there is a positive way of understanding this proverb.
Take acoustic musical instruments for example.
The back of a violin or a guitar
must have a certain hollowness
if it is to generate a pleasing sound.
The hollowness or emptiness is the key
to producing a pleasing tone.
And so it was
with all the great people of the Old Testament.
Starting with Abraham,
the barrenness of Sarah
is God's point of departure.
In spite of it,
Abraham is promised
that his descendants will be
as numerous as the stars.¹
Throughout, we see men and women chosen
not for their abilities
but for their disabilities.
Moses said: "*Lord, I am not skilled in speech.*"²
Yahweh often chooses people
who are the least favoured and esteemed.
Jesus, his son, "*empties himself*
not thinking equality with God
something to be clung to."³

Yahweh as creator
has a penchant for 'nothingness'.
Barrenness is the most fertile ground for God's action.
It follows then,
that if Yahweh is to work in us
we must present ourselves to him
as 'empty vessels'.

The transfiguration
is the promise of the transformation
that results from our emptying ourselves.
Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel...
were all transformed
once they had emptied themselves.
Jesus too empties himself.
Disfigured by suffering and death
he is transfigured at his Resurrection.
This is the glory that awaits us
the glory that Peter, James and John
beheld on the mountain.
But only if we first empty ourselves
and reduce ourselves to nothingness
out of which will result
a New Creation.

References:

- 1 Gen 15:5
- 2 Ex 4:10
- 3 Phil 2:7

LIVING BY FAITH

Scripture Readings:

Gen 22:1-18 The sacrifice of Isaac

Lk 9:28-36 The Transfiguration

The call to sacrifice his only son Isaac was as frightening an experience to Abraham as the experience of Peter, James and John who having just witnessed the Transfiguration were brought down to earth and plainly told that Jesus would suffer and be put to death. What sense does it make for God to make a promise to Abraham and then ask him to sacrifice that very son through whom the promise will be fulfilled? How are we to understand Jesus making Peter, James and John witness the Transfiguration and then cause their hopes to evaporate as he predicts his Suffering and Death? The key element here is one of faith. There is a kind of faith that is purely intellectual, a kind of 'reasoned' commitment devoid of any element of the 'heart'. A person with this kind of faith will waver and falter when crises, setbacks and disasters occur because they do not fit into his/her 'reasoned' scheme of thinking. At such times the untimely loss of a loved one, the realisation that a family member is addicted to alcohol or drugs, a sudden loss of job or financial crisis make us question God's providence and love.

There is another kind of faith that is largely emotional.
It caters to our emotional needs
with little or no intellectual content.
So when our pet devotions undergo a change
and the 'ritual'
is sought to be replaced by the relevant,
a vacuum threatens to engulf us
and our protests are not so much
a matter of preserving what is good,
but are rather aimed
at restoring our comfort.
It is to guard against such eventualities
that the episodes of Abraham and the Transfiguration
are placed before us.
Abraham's response
is not the whimsical response to a dream.
Jesus makes Peter, James, and John realise
that getting 'hooked' onto an experience of the Lord
is not synonymous with a faith response
and hence reminds them
of the suffering he must undergo.
Paul, himself an ardent Jewish intellectual and teacher
has his intellectualism thrown overboard
as he is struck down on the road to Damascus.
His response is the one
like so many others in the Old Testament before him
beginning with Abraham,
that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts before us.
*"Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for
or prove the existence of the realities
that at present remain unseen."*
*"Lord, increase our faith."*²

References:

1 Heb 11:1,2

2 Lk 17:5

RELIGION OR MAGIC

Scripture Readings:

<i>Ex</i>	<i>3:1-8a, 13-15</i>	<i>Yahweh, the God who is faithful</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>10:1-6, 10-12</i>	<i>Israel's experience, a warning to us</i>
<i>Lk</i>	<i>13:1-9</i>	<i>Unless you repent, you will perish</i>

By familiarity with God
we have taken God for granted.
Some people take God for granted to such an extent,
that they expect God to work wonders for them
as if God was bound to do so.
And that's the difference between magic and religion.
The essence of magic is deceit
by which the magician seeks
to be 'one-up' over the audience.
Moses, like the Hebrews of his day, also believed
that to know a person's name
meant being 'one-up' over him or her
and he seeks to know God's name
when he encounters Yahweh in the burning bush.
Yahweh bluntly refuses to oblige,
since he is a God of Truth.
Moses will save his people
because power has been given to him from above.
It is Yahweh who will save.
Quite often we allow religion to degenerate into magic.
When we try to manage God
instead of letting God manage us.
True religion possesses no secret ritual, no magic power.
If, when God does not answer our prayers
in the way we expect,
we give him up altogether;
or if we seek release from suffering,
undertaking ritual observances to obtain relief,

we may be betraying this magical attitude,
because if we do actually find relief,
we often attribute it to OUR prayers, OUR sacrifices.
Or do we suppose that those who are still suffering
are more guilty than the rest?

When God did not give his name to Moses
but revealed himself as THE ONE WHO IS,
he was not describing himself as the Eternal One.
Rather, he was designating himself
as THE ONE WHO IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL.

Holiness does not deny the reality that is unbearable.
Rather, it seeks to give us
the means of coping with that reality.

And we can grow in holiness
only in as much as we experience God as faithful
and from thence draw the courage
to cope with difficult situations.

But we are slow to understand,
like the Israelites in the desert.

Though Yahweh had faithfully guided them through it,
"most of them failed to please God."

*"These things happened as warnings for us."*²

So while there is yet time,

"while there is one more year,

let us dig around the fig tree and manure it,"³
so that it may bear fruit.

While God seeks from us

"fruits worthy of repentance"⁴

let us not present God with withered branches
that are only fit to be cut off and burnt.

Now is the acceptable time.

References:

1 1 Cor 10:5

2 1 Cor 10:6

3 Lk 13:9

4 Mt 3:9

THE MISFORTUNE OF OTHERS

Scripture Readings:

Lk 13:1-5 Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Job 5:17-27 How can one be innocent and yet suffer?

How often do we not find ourselves
rejoicing in the misfortune of others,
specially when it seems
that they apparently 'deserve' God's punishment?

Do we really believe
that because we are spared misfortune
we are less guilty than the others?
*"Those men on whom the Tower of Siloam fell,
were they more guilty than the rest?"*

*"Master, who has sinned,
this man or his parents,
that he should have been born blind?"*²

The history of the Chosen People
is one of a growing and developing relationship with God.
It is a process of spiritual growth
in which their understanding of Yahweh
becomes progressively clear.

Thus at a particular stage in their history
they had not yet come to understand
the meaning of Life after Death.
Caught up in the reality of the here-and-now,
Yahweh had to mete out justice in this world itself
if they were to have any sign of his presence.
And if misfortune visited an innocent person
it was beyond their comprehension.

The book of Job and some of the Psalms
clearly show the inability of God's People

to comprehend the mystery of the innocent suffering
at a particular stage of their relationship with him.
And so, if we find ourselves
rejoicing at the misfortune of others,
(often expressed by the phrase 'there is a God')
or are unable to understand our own suffering
or the sufferings of others who are innocent,
then we are still at a stage of development
that corresponds to that of the Jews of earlier times.
But if we are to outgrow this phase
and move towards the fullness of Revelation in Jesus Christ,
we must learn to believe
that calamities are not necessarily
a sign of God's punishment
but most certainly a call to repentance.
What this means is that the increasing amount of misfortune
(natural or otherwise)
is a consequence of our deep-rootedness in sin.
It is only now that we are slowly beginning to realise
that the arms industry is sustained
by the growth of terrorism, and vice versa
that the unbridled greed
of industrialised and developed nations
can cause economic plight and economic disaster in
developing ones.
What we do has consequences
not only for ourselves but for others as well.
We are linked up with others and with nature
more strongly than we realise.
*"Unless we repent, we shall all likewise perish."*⁹
May our repentance herald a better world,
a world of peace and joy
in the unparalleled beauty of nature.

References:

- 1 Lk 13:4
- 2 Jn 9:1
- 3 Lk 13:5

THE PRODIGAL SON REVISITED

Scripture Reading:

Lk 15:11-32 *The Loving Father*

Has it ever struck you
that in the story of the Prodigal Son,
it is the elder brother
who comes out least favourable?
In fact there is a lesson in this story
that is often ignored
because of the 'played out'
and by now hackneyed connotation
that this parable provides for the repentant sinner.
Put in its context,
the whole parable is directed against one-upmanship
portrayed by the elder brother
and symbolising the Jews of the time.
The elder brother is the one who has been faithful
and precisely because of that
resents the treatment given to his wayward brother.
The Jews of Jesus' time also resented the fact
that he who was supposed to be from God
"was mixing about with publicans and sinners."
We have often used this story
to identify ourselves with the prodigal son —
which is all to the good.
What we may have missed
is the opportunity to identify ourselves
with the 'faithful elder brother' instead.
By his claim to faithfulness and righteousness
the elder brother excludes himself from the father's love --
he does not want to be part of the celebration.
And loving father that he is,

this same man
who has waited patiently
for the return of his wayward son
is quick to reassure his elder son
telling him that this need not be the case
if only he will give up being self-righteous
and show concern for his brother.
We are so used to identifying the sinner,
the drop-out
the addict,
that we often presume
that we do not need to repent
just because our mode of behaviour
is socially acceptable.
Perhaps Jesus had this in mind
when he said:
"There will be more rejoicing over one sinner who
repents,
rather than ninety-nine 'just' who do not need repen-
*tance."*²
If our spirituality leads us to identify the sinner
in everyone else except ourselves
we need to read this parable again
if only to understand
*"that all of us have sinned."*³
*"Only he who is without sin can cast the first stone."*⁴

References:

- 1 Lk 15:3
- 2 Lk 15:7
- 3 1 Jn 1:8
- 4 Jn 8:8

FEELING BETTER OR GETTING CURED?

Scripture Reading:

Lk 5:12-13 *The cure of the leper*

Has it ever struck you
that when the sick and infirm
came to Jesus
he never told them to go away feeling better.
He effectively cured them.
A person suffering from hepatitis
feels better when the vomiting stops
but that's no guarantee
that his liver is all right.
We can easily fall prey to the illusion
that because we have got rid of the symptoms,
we have got rid of the disease.
We go through life
getting rid of symptoms
without treating the disease;
feeling better all the time,
never really getting cured;
and moving all the time
from one symptom to another.
Jesus put it another way:
"Whitened sepulchres, full of dead men's bones."

Many of us approach religion like a tranquilizer.
We take it in small doses
in order to "feel better", expecting to rid ourselves of
the discomfort,
while leaving the disease unattended.
Attending Sunday Mass,
reading the Bible,
praying the Rosary and making a Novena,

attending a prayer meeting —
all these, and a host of other activities
make us feel good
and while we feel good,
we rest secure in the illusion of well-being.
Meanwhile, we continue to nurse our anger
persist in our resentments,
cling to our prejudices,
refuse to forgive,
'feeling better' all the time,
but never really getting cured.

The prodigal son felt very good when he left home
until he faced his own emptiness (both physical &
spiritual)
and decided to turn back²
and experience the joy of reconciliation instead.
May the scales be lifted from our eyes,
and may our illusions be dispelled.
Now is the appropriate time.

References:

- 1 Mt 23:27
- 2 Lk 15:14-20

PRESERVING THE FAITH

Scripture Reading:

Jn 8:1-11 The woman taken in adultery

In our zeal to preserve the Faith
all that we may actually succeed in doing
is to keep it in cold storage.
The Pharisees,
in their eagerness to preserve the Law
in their enthusiasm to see it observed in its entirety
were quick to point out
that the woman
who had been caught committing adultery
should be stoned to death
in accordance with the Law of Moses.
And if they had succeeded in getting their way
they would probably have been proud
that they had upheld the Law,
even though they had completely ignored its spirit.

What sense does it make
for us to split hairs over theological niceties
when we show a complete lack of understanding
of the basic elements
of the love of God and of our neighbour?
Sometimes we go even further
and argue about the trivial and inane
as if our FAITH is being called into question.
The only way we can genuinely preserve our faith
is to LIVE it,
and to pass on this way of life
to each succeeding generation.
Our faith cannot be crystallized into a set of do's and don'ts.

A faithful observance of outward practice
however correctly performed
is no guarantee
that our faith is genuine.
Even if we understand the subtle distinction there is
between praying to Mary and the saints
and venerating them,
would it make a difference
if we did not first seek
to imitate them
in the way they lived their faith?

We are apt to deceive ourselves,
making ourselves believe
that just because we are faithful
in the ritual observance of the law
we can forget about justice and kindness
tenderness and compassion;
utter selflessness and sincere concern
and a host of other qualities
that are essential ingredients of our faith.
If our lives prove otherwise
can we rightly claim to have
a 'correct understanding' of our faith?
May we be led to deepen our faith
so that

*He who has begun the good work in us
may bring it to completion.²*

References:

- 1 Jn 8:5
- 2 Phil 1:6

THE TWO-EDGED SWORD

Scripture Readings:

Jn 8:1-11 The woman caught in adultery

Heb 4:12-13 The Word of God—two-edged sword)

Has it struck you
that in the case of the woman
who had been caught committing adultery
and brought to Jesus by the Pharisees,
Jesus was the only one
who, because he was without sin
could legitimately have cast the first stone?
Yet in all that gathering, he was probably the only one
who hadn't even picked up a stone.
The others, stones in hand
eagerly awaited the pronouncement.
They thought they had it all wrapped up,
an open and shut case,
the law on their side.
How disappointed they were!
They hadn't reckoned with the fact that
while they quoted the scriptures in their defence,
they were being challenged
by the WORD of God made flesh¹
which, the letter to the Hebrews tells us very clearly,
"cuts like a two-edged sword
*penetrating secret thoughts and emotions."*²
And that is exactly what happened.
The Pharisees were cut to the quick,
their secret designs exposed,
their motives revealed.
They were not primarily interested
in the pursuit of justice
but were willing to pursue it

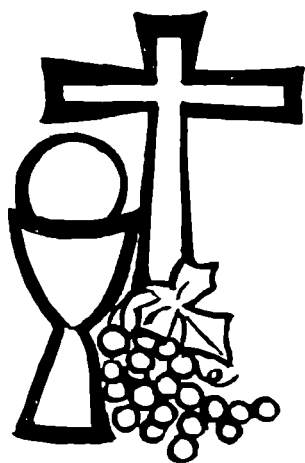
in order to get at Jesus and trap him.
Evil masquerading as good
is even more distasteful than undisguised evil.
While the Pharisees wanted to bring the adulterous
woman to book,
they had themselves adulterated
their understanding of the Law.

The secret of sanctity
lies in the progressive unmasking
of our hidden motives and designs
that we are often unaware of.
It means, among other things
being generous for its own sake
and not for the rewards it will bring;
being patient and forbearing
not 'in order that' the other might reform his/her ways
but rather,
to create an atmosphere
in which he/she can freely respond
to genuine love and acceptance;
it means speaking up
not in order to put the other down,
but rather offering in a non-threatening manner
the opportunity for change;
it means pursuing justice
not that one may be seen as a liberator
and then assume power,
but rather to build a community of equals.
If not,
we're no better than the Pharisees —
*the blind leading the blind.*³

References:

- 1 Jn 1:14
- 2 Heb 4:12
- 3 Lk 6:39

Holy Week



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RESURRECTION — SUFFERING TRANSFORMED

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i> 52:13-53:12	<i>The third song of the Suffering Servant</i>
<i>Heb</i> 4:14-5:9	<i>Jesus' suffering — our salvation</i>
<i>Lk</i> 24:13-35	<i>On the road to Emmaus</i>

For so many of us,
Holy Week is a time
when instead of learning
how to cope with suffering
we spend our time
whipping up sentiments of pity
for the suffering and crucified Christ.
We tend to become so pre-occupied
with the suffering and crucifixion
that we forget the Cross.
Jesus transformed suffering and death
by his Resurrection.
Does it not strike you
that although the Crucified Christ rose from the dead
the Cross still stands
and will always be with us?
The horizontal dimension that is suffering
gets its meaning
only when it is laid
across the vertical dimension that is the Resurrection,
thus forming a cross
with Jesus as the corner-stone.¹

The person who is weighed down by suffering
lives in a one-dimensional world,
which makes suffering meaningless and unbearable.
If however, we introduce the vertical dimension into our life

we will inevitably be introducing
the cross into our life
but with it
the prospect of a New Life.
Resurrection is a rising,
a rising above suffering
(because we can't really do away with it).
The cross with its two dimensions
is a sign of hope,
the promise of a new life.
This new life can begin NOW.
If each one of us takes up the cross
we will live
and not merely exist.
We will find
that in spite of troubles and trials
we can still find time
to smile and radiate joy;
that the quality of our life-style
has changed.
Having been led from darkness to light
we shall see all things in a New Light.
With renewed hearts
we will return from exile
to the New Temple - Jesus.
By our life
we will proclaim to all the world
Jesus is alive.

Reference:

1 Mt 21:42

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Scripture Readings:

Is 52:13-53:12 *A picture of the Suffering Servant*
Lk 24:1-8 *The Resurrection*

For many of us
the liturgy of Holy Week
is part of a theatrical performance,
a Comedy of Errors
ending in a Tragedy.
In fact, we look forward to the drama
...the washing of the feet,
representations of the Passion...
and for once in the year, at least,
our lives begin to have a 'religious' flavour.
Once the drama and excitement dies down,
we go back to our daily routine
heaving a sigh of relief
that it's all over.

Who among us who loves the theatre
would go to a play
and come away so affected,
that as a result
we would be prepared to change our life-style
even if only a little?

That is the danger
of turning religion into drama.
We come away, discussing the merits of the performance
but hardly comment
on the contents of the play.
We are emotionally stirred during the performance
but totally uncommitted after it.
Ironically,

most playwrights use the medium of drama
to highlight an aspect of reality
that is often overlooked.

But, most of the audience
have gone to see the play
precisely to escape that very reality,
and conveniently draw comfort
from the fact that they've seen the play.

When it comes to Holy Week,
we even leave off before the end
with the persistent notion
that we've witnessed a tragedy.
That is why
we remember our beloved dead
only on All Souls' Day
and hardly remember them at Easter.
We consider it a tragedy that they have left us
and hardly derive any comfort from the Resurrection.
We are prepared to accept
the Suffering and Death of Jesus.
But the Resurrection!
That's another story.
And since we believe only with our lips
but not with our hearts¹
we do not see in ourselves
the possibility of the Resurrection.
We thus fail to rise to a new life
and remain unchanged and unaffected
by what has happened.
How slow we are to learn!

Reference:

1 Mt 5:8

Maundy Thursday

PASSOVER OR PASSED-OVER?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Ex</i>	<i>12:1-8,11-14</i>	<i>Ordinances for the Lord's Passover</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>11:23-36</i>	<i>"Do this in memory of me"</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>13:1-15</i>	<i>Jesus washes his disciples' feet</i>

Some people are so serious about the Last Supper that instead of looking at it as a Passover Meal they let Maundy Thursday 'pass-over' them leaving them high and dry.

At least in the first Passing-Over the Sea of Reeds, Yahweh threw a wet blanket on the Egyptians letting their army drown in the sea.

But we are too sophisticated.

We are like the cat who would eat the river fish but not wet her feet.

For some of us the waters of baptism have produced nothing but the effects of the first moments of a cold shower. We are so allergic to this that we prefer to let it pass us by and leave us unharmed, secure and undisturbed in the warmth of our own systems.

We forget that if we do not bathe in the waters of saving grace we will begin to stink and in so doing become a source of nuisance to others.

"If I do not wash your feet, Peter, you can have nothing in common with 'me.'"

"Lord, in that case not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."

"Are you willing to be baptised"

with the baptism with which I am baptised?

Can you drink of my cup?....

You do not know what you ask?"²

At his baptism,

Jesus took on himself

the role of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

He was baptised into his death and resurrection.

This was the new meaning he gave to John's baptism.

Henceforth, baptism would mean

an immersion into the death-resurrection mystery

and the water was pretty cold for Jesus.

Look at the cold indifference he met with,

the cold isolation he had to suffer.

Even Peter felt the cold

and when he denied Christ,

he had been warming himself at a fire

only a few moments before.³

It was at the Last Supper

that we crossed the sea of sin and death;

that Jesus 'died' his death to self

lowering himself to the point

of making himself

the servant of those he had chosen.⁴

He thus made of that historic crossing

of the Sea of Reeds

a type of what was to come.

Will we dare plunge into that water?

"Unless you are born of water and the Holy Spirit

you cannot enter the Kingdom of God."⁵

References:

1 Jn 13:8,9

2 Mk 10:38

3 Lk 22:55

4 Jn 13:14

5 Jn 3:5

Good Friday

MISPLACED SYMPATHY

Scripture Readings:

Is 52:13-53:12 He was wounded for our sins
Jn 18:1-19:42 The narrative of the Passion

*"Women of Jerusalem,
weep not for me;
but for yourselves and for your children."*
Very fitting and apt
for many of us today
who are so busy shedding tears
for the sufferings of Christ 2000 years ago.
Does God really expect this kind of sympathy?

We like to live in the past
because refuge in the past brings a certain security.
We like to live on past glory,
we are proud of being Christians,
of having for our leader
a man who 2000 years ago
gave himself up to death for our sake.
But Christianity is anything but a fossilized religion.
It is contemporary.
It is beyond history
not limited by time.
The Lord Jesus transcends all ages.
He suffers today
in the person of those
he has chosen to identify himself with.
*"As long as you did it to one of these
the least of the brethren and sisters
you did it to me."*²

But so often,
while we meditate on the Passion

and contemplate the sufferings of Jesus
we remain indifferent
to the sufferings of those around us.
We are perfectly content to let others suffer
and often increase their suffering
not only by our indifference
but by our incisive remarks
that cut deep
and inflict wounds
that are often incurable.
Surely our sympathy is misplaced
if we act in this way
using religion to cover up our indifference.
We are worse off if we act in this way.
*"If you were blind, you would not be guilty,
but since you say 'we see'
your guilt remains."*³
How much longer will we persist in our blindness?

References:

- 1 Lk 23:28
- 2 Mt 25:40
- 3 Jn 9:41

NEW LIFE FOR ALL CREATION

Scripture Readings:

Rom 8:15-23 The liberation of creation

Lk 24:1-8 The Resurrection

A recession in developed countries inevitably triggers off a recession in less developed ones. It is now an undeniable fact that any nation planning its future solely by an inward-looking process of reforms can do so only at its peril. The tragedy of the Gulf War and the possibility of nuclear power in irresponsible hands only serve to highlight the fact that the consequences of sin are universal. In fact the whole of creation is waiting for God to reveal his children.

"Creation still retains the hope of being freed like us...."

The mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is a mystery of universal redemption. It is much more than an inward-directed process that causes us to turn away from sin and rise to a new life because our own personal conversion and redemption affects everything else around us. To the extent that we participate in the Paschal Mystery we initiate a process of re-creation around us. This mystery is one that is Pro-Life. It means offering the sinner the hope of a new life as much as it means

our support for any movement that is life-enhancing;
it means caring for the poor and needy
as much as being concerned
about the depletion of the ozone layer
and its consequences for the environment;
it means working for peace
and reconciliation among people
as much as supporting the search
for sources of energy other than nuclear,
which nature provides us with in abundance.

If the whole of creation
is to be freed from its slavery,
then this can only come about
if we are aware
that we who celebrate the mystery of redemption
are called to be dispensers of his grace to all.
If we fail to enhance life around us,
if we do not participate in the process of re-creation
in some manner, however small
then our celebration of Easter
will have been meaningless.
May we find the strength to work with Jesus
who came *"so that we might have life
and life in all its fulness."*²

References:

- 1 Rom 8:20
- 2 Jn 5:10

WITNESSES OF HIS RESURRECTION

Scripture Readings:

<i>Rom 6:3-11</i>	<i>We too will rise to a new life</i>
<i>Mt 28:1-8</i>	<i>The account of the Resurrection</i>

It is something of a tragedy
that for many of us
Easter is seen as the end of Lent,
a sort of happy ending to the story.
Some of us are like blotting paper —
we absorb everything
but get it all upside down.
The most fascinating aspect of the Resurrection
is not that it took place 2000 years ago
but that it is an ever-present reality
for those of us who believe.

If we take the Resurrection seriously,
our lives can no longer be the same.
If we have not made significant changes
in our attitudes to life and to people;
if we still only have working relationships,
and are unable to enjoy
the intimacy of a personal relationship;
if we think our children are something to be tolerated,
till they're old enough to get out of the way;
if we treat people like business commodities
only for the profit they can bring us;
if we lay undue stress on efficiency
but stifle the growth of the individual,
then we are still far from
having experienced meaningfully,
the Resurrection in our personal lives.
By rising from the dead,

Jesus makes it possible for us
to rise to a new level of thinking and living.
In him we have the power to rise
from selfishness to selflessness
from routine and monotony to creativity
from stagnancy to growth
from death to life.

May the joy we experience at Easter
not be the kind of emotional outburst
that's often put on for public consumption
and invariably lacks depth.
Rather, may we experience the inner joy
of personal growth in holiness
of changed relationships
of loving acceptance of others,
of being loved and accepted,
of caring and sharing
as a testimony that he has really risen
so that the world may believe.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

The death of a loved one
has the capacity to change one's perspective.
A person's life, re-viewed after death
often seems so different in its meaning and content
from that which we perceived earlier.
And so it was with the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

For the early Church,
the celebration of Christmas
was indeed an afterthought.
The first years of the Church saw no celebration
of the birth of Jesus.
However, a reflection
on the meaning of his Death and Resurrection
led to the conclusion
that Jesus was special
right from the moment of his birth.
There was considerable back-tracking
before we arrived at
what we now call the 'Infancy Narratives'
which form part of the genuine tradition of the Church.
And this is as it should be.
For the purpose of Scripture is to teach
and put into perspective.

The celebration of the Lord's birth
can only be meaningful
if it is seen in the context
of his Death and Resurrection.
In Christian Theology
the spotlight was never meant
to be on Christmas alone.
Christmas does not occupy the centre-stage.
Rather, it is the Death-Resurrection event
that is central to Christianity.

However, to the casual observer
it is the celebration of Christmas that attracts attention.
Surely we have got our priorities wrong,
getting emotional over the story of a babe in a manger.
We are wonderstruck at the story of the shepherds
and filled with awe
at the story of the wise men.

Once in a while
Lent begins early enough
for us to be taken by surprise.
We've hardly got out of the Christmas spirit
and here we are
being reminded of fasting and abstinence.
It is almost as if our spirits are being dampened.
But if we remember well,
the 'air' at Christmas did somehow feel different.
There was an atmosphere of peace and goodwill,
forgiveness and generosity
that is typical of Christmas.

But take note
that peace and goodwill,
forgiveness and generosity
are qualities that are essentially linked up
with the Spirit of the Risen Lord.
So we need not fear
that the Christmas spirit will be dampened
by the Season of Lent
if only we set our sights on Easter
so that we experience the birth of Jesus within us
and so rise to a New Life.

Advent



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THE ELEVENTH HOUR

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>2:1-5</i>	<i>The day of the Lord brings everlasting peace</i>
<i>Rom</i>	<i>13:11-14</i>	<i>You are children of the Light</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>24:37-44</i>	<i>Be alert; stay awake</i>

People who wait for the eleventh hour usually die at ten-thirty.

So it was in the days of Noah.

"People were eating and drinking taking wives and taking husbands right up to the day Noah went into the Ark. And they suspected nothing till the floods came and swept all away."

But we will never learn

and so we continue not to do today what can be done tomorrow.

The day of the Lord

is a day of destiny for each of us.

The Lord comes as one who brings peace —

*"Swords will be turned into ploughshares nation will not lift up sword against nation, there will be no more training for war."*²

Truly, for those of us who are awake it will be a day of peace.

But for those who are found sleeping it will be a nightmare.

*"The corner-stone of the building will be the very stone that will cause others to fall."*³

And if we wake up with a fright

it will only be our fault
because we kept 'postponing' the day
when we could make our peace with God.
Instead, we continue to dwell in darkness
and what is worse
become used to it.

*"Drunken orgies,
promiscuity,
licentiousness,
jealousies and the rest."⁴*

All these are taken to be the IN-THING.

'Everybody does it,
so what's wrong?'

We take delight in being in the dark
just because everybody else is there.
We've got company.

*"But on that day
of two men in the field
one will be taken, one will be left.
Two women at the millstone, grinding
one will be taken, one will be left."⁵*

We are sure to condemn ourselves
to an eternal loneliness
unless we wake up NOW
put aside the deeds of darkness
and live as children of the Light.

References:

- 1 Mt 24:37-39
- 2 Is 2:4
- 3 Mt 21:42
- 4 Rom 13:13
- 5 Mt 24:40-41

CAUGHT ON THE WRONG FOOT

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>11:1-10</i>	<i>The coming of the Messianic Kingdom</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>3:1-12</i>	<i>The preaching of John the Baptist</i>

It is quite upsetting
for a player to be caught on the wrong foot.
It is even more embarrassing
if one is going in the wrong direction.
The coming of God's kingdom
can be upsetting and embarrassing.
It upsets some
catching them on the wrong foot —
totally unprepared —
and embarrasses others
who besides being caught on the wrong foot
find themselves going in the wrong direction.

Many of us are apt to think,
that because at long last
religion is beginning once again to appeal to so many
and there is now a proliferation of prayer groups
with crowds flocking to healing services,
we can say that the kingdom of God is alive.
The prophet Isaiah indicates how wrong
our perception can be.
The kingdom of God can be judged to have arrived
only when the Spirit of Yahweh begins to prevail.
Only when there is a movement to restore the balance
only when we experience the peace and harmony
which to all appearances was only a distant dream
can we say that the kingdom of God has come.
And this will take place
only because of Yahweh's initiative.

What earthly power
can cause the lion and lamb to sit together?
What else besides the power of the Most High
can restore peace when all seems lost?
When we see years of division being healed
at a time when we had almost given up hope;
when a mother sees her wayward son return
cured of his aimlessness and addiction
precisely when in sheer desperation
she had stopped "doing" anything more
and begun to pray in faith,
this is when we see
the kingdom of God being established.
The signs of the kingdom are not those
which can be realised by human effort alone.
That is why we are apt to be disappointed
and feel frustrated
when all 'our efforts' seem to be wasted.
We will be caught on the wrong foot
if we think
that the kingdom will be established
by our efforts alone.
We will be even more embarrassed
to find that our efforts have been in the wrong direction.
While the kingdom of God is within us
we have all the time been trying
to establish it 'outside ourselves'.

The condemnation of the Pharisees by John the Baptist
will apply to us as well
unless we bring forth fruits worthy of repentance
and begin by first establishing within ourselves
the kingdom of God.

THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>11:1-10</i>	<i>The coming of the Messianic King</i>
<i>Rom</i>	<i>15:4-9</i>	<i>God helps those who do not give up</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>3:1-12</i>	<i>The preaching of John the Baptist</i>

People with crooked minds
cannot think straight
unless their minds are first straightened out.
And this is precisely what the Messiah does.
He restores the balance of values
that has been upset by sin.

No wonder then,
that those of us who persist in being crooked
will be shocked and scandalised
because his sense of values will be so unlike our own.
*"On him rests the spirit of Yahweh,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding.
He does not judge by appearances,
with equity he gives a verdict
for the poor in the land."*

And this is what annoys us:
that things haven't worked out quite right for us;
what we relied upon
has let us down.

After all,
we did so much for all the world to see,
"whitened sepulchres full of dead men's bones".²
*"You brood of vipers
who warned you to flee from the coming retribution?
But if you are repentant
then bring forth the appropriate fruit.
Do not presume to tell yourselves*

*'we have Abraham for our father'
because God can raise up children for Abraham
from stones.'*³

Don't persist in your crooked way of thinking.
All our external observance doesn't mean a thing
if it's not accompanied by a living faith,
a deep conviction,
that makes its mark on our daily living.
The Jews foolishly thought
that physical, biological descent from Abraham
was a guarantee of salvation.
They were shocked to find that it wasn't.
It was 'spiritual' descent that gave the guarantee.
*"Abraham put his faith in God
and this faith was counted as justifying him."*⁴
And in the end it will work out precisely in this way:
that those who acknowledged their helplessness
and hoped in God as Abraham did
will be helped by God.
While those who presumed too much
who thought they were secure
because of their own efforts
because they had done so much
will find themselves helpless and without hope.
A complete reversal of values
symbolised by the wolf and the lamb playing together
and by the infant playing unharmed
over the cobra's hole.
How slow we are to understand!

References:

- 1 Is 11:2-4
- 2 Mt 23:27
- 3 Mt 3:8-10
- 4 Rom 4:3

A THEME RESTATED

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>35:1-6a,10</i>	<i>Poetic prophecy of the return from exile.</i>
<i>Jas</i>	<i>5:7-10</i>	<i>"Be patient, remember the endurance of the prophets."</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>11:2-11</i>	<i>The Baptist's question; Jesus' answer.</i>

The only thing that history teaches us
is that history teaches nothing.
That is why General Patton
and more recently Norman Schwarzkopf
planned their battles and strategy by reading history
and historical accounts of the great battles of the past,
knowing full well
that they could capitalise on the fact
that their opponents had learned nothing from past
history.

We have only ourselves to blame
if we stumble twice over the same stone.
When the musical theme of a movie
is replayed at certain points in the film,
it is supposed to be linked up
with an earlier sequence of events.

The theme of the answer Jesus gave
to the questions of John the Baptist
is meant to be linked up with the prophecy of Isaiah
who, when he poetically described the return from exile
harped on the same theme:

*"The blind see, the lame walk,
the poor have the good news preached to them."*

But we fail to learn from history,
and the Jews were no exception.

"Alas for you, who build tombs for the prophets your

ancestors killed!

In this way you both witness what your ancestors did and approve it.

*They did the killing, you do the building."*²

As Isaiah himself said:

*"Lord, how many have believed what we have proclaimed?"*³

But the prophets were men of endurance who spoke out, in season and out of season. They dared to proclaim a message that sounded ridiculous to their contemporaries -- heretical, in fact.

*"It is those who had endurance that we say are the blessed ones."*⁴

They believed even though they did not see.

But we see, and yet do not believe.

We know our Christianity too well.

It's so obvious to us that we need not be told.

And what a shock we will get to find that we are the very ones who have failed to read the message correctly; that we are the ones who are blind, while those we despised as blind and lame, can now see and walk; that while we presumed to know everything and paid no attention to the prophets there were others who listened.

*"Blessed are those who hear the word of God and yield a rich harvest through their perseverance."*⁵

References:

- 1 Mt 11:4-5
- 2 Lk 11:47-48
- 3 Is 53:1
- 4 Jas 5:10
- 5 Lk 8:15

INVENTION OR INTERVENTION?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>7:10-14</i>	<i>The Lord himself will give you a sign</i>
<i>Rom</i>	<i>1:1-7</i>	<i>Through him we have received grace and our apostolic mission</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>1:8-24</i>	<i>This is how Jesus came to be born</i>

Every invention is necessarily an "intervention".
Precisely because it is new,
it interrupts,
it creates a disturbance,
it is a landmark.

The invention of the steam engine is a clear example
of an invention that is an intervention,
because it triggered off the Industrial Revolution
that effectively altered the course of history.
But long before that,
God himself had devised a means --
an invention
that would upset all human thinking,
cause a disturbance
and set us on a new path.

The Incarnation
is God's definitive intervention in history.
He had intervened many times before:
"He had spoken through the prophets in former times,
but in these last times
he spoke through and in his son."
It was God's greatest invention.
And how were we to know
that God had spoken his final WORD?
"The Lord himself will give you a sign:
the maiden is with child
and will soon give birth to a son.

He shall be called 'Emmanuel'
a name which means "God is with us." 2
 But this was so awe-inspiring
 that even Joseph, a just man was afraid.
"Wanting to spare Mary publicity,
he decided to divorce her informally.
'Fear not Joseph,
Mary has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit'".3
 Joseph was afraid
 because he could not understand
 how he could be part of a mysterious plan.

 And like Joseph,
 we too are afraid to believe
 that we are part of the Great Invention
"that through him we have received grace
and our apostolic mission."4
 When God speaks his Word to us,
"it is like a two-edged sword,
it cuts all the way through
where joints and marrow come together."5
 It is an intervention that is drastic and demanding
 and that's why we are afraid.
 We are hesitant to answer the call,
 to be part of the great intervention
 for fear that our plans will be upset
 and that we will lose our security.
 Every invention entails a risk.
 Are we willing to take the risk?

References:

- 1 Heb 1:1-2
- 2 Is 7:14-15
- 3 Mt 1:19-21
- 4 Rom 1:5-6
- 5 Heb 4:12-13

WILL HE FIND YOU SLEEPING?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>63:16-17; 64:1-8</i>	<i>A plea to Yahweh to save his people</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>1:3-9</i>	<i>You have been enriched in many ways</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>13:33-37</i>	<i>Stay awake, you do not know the hour</i>

Some people forget God during the day
and expect him to remember them at night.
And the strange part of it is
that God does remember them precisely at night
although he has not forgotten them during the day.
We often think of God
and expect him to be faithful to his promise to save,
only when we pass through
the night of darkness and despair.
And perhaps it is good
that we experience periods of darkness and despair
because it is then that we will think of God
and have recourse to his faithfulness.
When we ask for help
we necessarily admit our helplessness.
We accept our need for a saviour
only when we experience our sinfulness.
*"We have all withered like leaves;
our sins have blown us away like the wind;
You gave us up to the power of our sins."*¹
*"And yet, Yahweh, You are our Father,
we are the clay, You are the potter.
Do not let Your anger go too far.
Oh! that You would tear the heavens and come down."*²

But while we wait for the Saviour with great expectation,
some of us are foolish enough to fall asleep.
We know but do not understand.

The Jews knew their scriptures well,
but when Jesus came
his own did not recognise him.³
It is not a coincidence that Jesus was born at night,
at an hour of darkness.
How else could the Light of the World
make itself felt, except in darkness?
Yet, people preferred to sleep,
and said there was no room.
We prefer to sleep in our own security
and remain in darkness.

The Jews had prepared for years
for the coming of the Messiah.
We spend weeks and months preparing for Christmas.
And when Jesus comes, he finds us sleeping.
We know that God is knocking at the door,
but we are afraid to let him in at night
for fear of losing our security.
And ironically,
it is at night -- in our darkness and despair
that we need him most.
And it is then that he faithfully knocks
leaving us free to open the door
so that we can experience his saving power.
*"We have been enriched in many ways; God is faithful."*⁴
*"So, stay awake,
because you do not know when the Master is coming.
If he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep."*⁵

References:

- 1 Is 64:6-8
- 2 Is 64:7-9
- 3 Jn 1:11
- 4 1 Cor 1:5,9
- 5 Mk 13:35-36

THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>40:1-5,9-11</i>	<i>Prepare the way for Yahweh in the wilderness</i>
<i>2 Pet</i>	<i>3:8-14</i>	<i>Live your lives without spot or stain</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>1:1-8</i>	<i>John the Baptist prepares the way</i>

The way to the Promised Land
is a way through the desert.
That seems to be the pattern
we must all follow.
No wonder then,
that for the coming of Yahweh
*"a way must be prepared in the wilderness
crooked paths must be made straight
valleys must be filled
and every mount and hill must be laid low."*

The desert is a time for testing.
It was there that the Israelites proved to be unfaithful;
an unreliable people,
who had failed to grasp the ways of Yahweh,
in spite of the wonders he had worked for them.
At Massah and Meribah they grumbled.²
It was in the desert
that they yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt
that they fashioned the golden calf.
They were tried
and found wanting.
*"And so the Lord swore in his anger
that none of them should enter his place of rest."*³
The desert was a preparation.
And our preparation too
must necessarily be

a going through the desert,
a time when our fidelity and loyalty is tested.
That is why
Peter exhorts his fellow christians
telling them that
*"while they wait for the Lord's coming,
they must do their best
to live without spot or stain
so that he will find them at peace."*⁴

It is a time for repentance
the kind of repentance that John talked about
as he spoke of the one who had to come.
Our crooked ways of thinking must be made straight
our pride must be brought low
our empty hearts must be filled
with a love for others
the valleys of our meanness
must be filled with a sense of consideration.
"Today, if you will hear his voice
do not harden your hearts as at Meribah."⁵
*"We must do everything we can
to reach this place of rest
or some of us may copy the example
of their disobedience
and be lost."*⁶

References:

- 1 Is 40:4
- 2 Ps 95:8-9,11
- 3 2 Pet 3:15
- 5 Ps 95:8-9
- 6 Heb 4:11

A LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Scripture Readings:

<i>Is</i>	<i>61:1-2,10-11</i>	<i>"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me"</i>
<i>1Thess</i>	<i>5:16-24</i>	<i>Do not treat prophecy with contempt</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>1:6-8; 19-28</i>	<i>Are you Elijah? or the Prophet?</i>

It so often happens
that people who are considered heretics in their own time
are often recognised as prophets by a later generation.

This is not to say

that heresy is a necessary prelude to prophecy,
nor does it imply that every prophet is a heretic,
but definitely and surely,

that the prophet is one who will sound heretical at times,
and will offend his hearers by his message.

After seeing John the Baptist,
the people were ready to mistake him for Elijah,
for the one who was to come,
for the Christ.¹

And they were surprised that he denied it.

They were offended

because John's teaching

did not fit in with the teachings of the Pharisees.

John could easily have relinquished his role as precursor
and assumed the role

that people were ready to thrust on him.

He could easily have begun to believe what he was not.

John could resist this temptation

only because he was self-possessed.

He was internally free

and therefore God's Spirit could work freely in him.

Being free, he could faithfully fulfill his role.

Jesus too was totally free.

He was full of the Spirit.

*That is why he could proclaim "the good news to the poor,
liberty to captives
and the year of favour from Yahweh."*²

And like John before him,
people were ready to thrust a role upon him too
and make him a political messiah,
He constantly rejected this,
his views were offensive, even heretical, to the Pharisees.
It roused them to anger and hatred.

And even while he knew that they were plotting his death,
he did not capitalise on popular support,
but time and again made clear to them
what he had really come for.

He paid for it with his death.

The moment a prophet assumes a role that is not his,
but one which people thrust on him,
he ceases to be faithful,
he ceases to be genuine.

What is true of the prophet is also true of us.

We can never be genuine, if we relinquish our role
and take upon ourselves

a role that people are ever willing to thrust on us.

If we are slaves to public opinion,

we are no longer free to be ourselves;

and if we are not free,

God's Spirit will not work freely in us.

As Thoreau said:

"It is as difficult for us to see ourselves as we really are
as it is for one to look behind without turning back."

Self-knowledge is an arduous process

but it is the only means of attaining inner freedom
and letting God's Spirit work in us.

References:

1 Jn 1:19-23

2 Is 61:1-2

HAVE WE REALLY UNDERSTOOD?

Scripture Readings:

2 Sam	7:1-5, 8-11,16	<i>Yahweh will make you a house</i>
Rom	16:25-27	<i>The Mystery kept hidden is now revealed</i>
Lk	1:26-38	<i>The Annunciation</i>

"The Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us."

Sounds fantastic, but it is true.

The Eternal Word

which God had been speaking from the beginning
was now among us.

*"The mystery kept hidden for endless ages
was now revealed."*²

God's presence cannot be contained and limited.

Yet, he had decided

to concentrate the fullness of his divinity in Jesus Christ,
*"a man like us in all things except sin."*³

We have always tried to get close to God,

to grasp the presence of the Almighty.

Moses, when confronted with Yahweh in the burning bush
asked his name.

(For a Hebrew, knowing a person's name meant having
power over him.)

Yahweh did not give his name.

He cannot be grasped and overpowered.

The ancient Hebrews had sensed his guiding presence
with them in the desert, in the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud,
in the Ark of the Covenant.

David wanted to build a temple for the Lord,
a dwelling place for him.

And the Lord replied by saying that David would be his
house.⁴

From the House of David would come the saviour,
the anointed one who embodied the fullness of the Divinity.
He whom the whole world cannot contain
enclosed himself in the womb of Mary,
betrothed to Joseph of the House of David.⁵

The Incarnation was very literally, a condescension.

*"He did not cling to his equality with God,
but emptied himself
and became as all people are."*⁶

The veil that separated God from us was removed.
It was the fullness of revelation.

*"How rich are the depths of God
how deep his wisdom and knowledge,
how impossible to penetrate his motives
or understand his methods."*⁷

"Emmanuel! God with us"

But if we think that because of this
we can now fully penetrate the mystery of his being,
we are mistaken.

The Incarnation is only part of a bigger mystery,
the mystery of the Cross -- *"utter folly by human standards."*⁸

We can get so enveloped in Christmas,
that we forget the Cross.

God is with us to save us
through the Cross and Resurrection of his Son.

"O come, all ye faithful, O come let us adore him."

"Behold the Cross on which was hung the world's salvation."

"O come let us adore him."

References:

- 1 Jn 1:14
- 2 Rom 16:25
- 3 Phil 2:7
- 4 2 Sam 7:4-12
- 5 Lk 1:27
- 6 Phil 2:6-7
- 7 Rom 11:23
- 8 1 Cor 1:18-25

EXPECTATION OR PREPAREDNESS?

Scripture Readings:

<i>Lk:</i>	<i>25-36</i>	<i>Stay awake</i>
<i>1Thess</i>	<i>5:1-11</i>	<i>Be watchful</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>25:1-13</i>	<i>The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids</i>

Life today is so full of uncertainty and unpredictability that only someone not in a proper frame of mind would want to aggravate this state of affairs. The employment figures and rate of inflation look like a pianist playing his scales in contrary motion. Stock markets 'boom' one day and fall with a 'bang' the next. Political equations change to suit the whims and fancies of those in power and as if this is not enough each year at the beginning of Advent we are brought face to face with the biggest uncertainty of all -- the time of the Lord's coming.

Why add to the already existing anxiety and tension? The problem arises when we are in a state of expectation but not in a state of "preparedness". We often think that expectation and preparedness are one and the same thing. That this is not so is amply borne out by the parable of the ten bridesmaids -- five foolish and five wise. Do you think that the five foolish ones did not expect the bridegroom?

Make no mistake about it.

They did, just as much as the five wise ones.

But while the wise ones prepared for his coming, the foolish ones were content to be in a state of expectation.

To live only in a state of expectancy can be dangerous

and lead us to do absurd things.

Some of the early Christians

got so hooked on to this idea of expectation

that they were given to idleness and neglect of duty.

It was Paul who saw the foolishness of it all and he reprimanded them.¹

So, therefore,

while we look forward to the Lord's coming

we will do well to be in a state of preparedness.

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh,

to the temple of the God of Jacob

that he may teach us his ways

*so that we may walk in his paths."*²

hammering out the swords of our incisive remarks and judgment of others

and turning them

into ploughshares of kindness and concern;

the spears of vindictiveness

into sickles of reconciliation

so that brother does not lift up stone against brother

and there is no more training for war.³

Our lamps filled with the oil of charity

will then burn brightly

like those of the wise bridesmaids

and we can go forth in joy

to meet the bridegroom when he arrives

"O House of Jacob, come,

*let us walk in the light of Yahweh."*⁴

References:

1 2 Thess 2:2; 3:11-12

2 Is 2:3

3 Is 2:4

4 Is 2:5

SOME ARE CURED; MANY ARE HEALED

Scripture Readings:

<i>Bar</i>	<i>5:1-9</i>	<i>God restores his people</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>10:1-5</i>	<i>The lessons of Israel's history</i>
<i>Lk</i>	<i>5:17-26</i>	<i>The healing of the paralytic</i>

Has it ever struck you that in order to be healed one does not necessarily have to be physically ill? Modern science has turned the "healing" profession into a "curative" one.

It tends to limit the scope of healing to the prevention and elimination of physical disease. This approach is quite unsatisfactory.

People are turning to alternative medicine and prayer groups which offer holistic healing to disillusioned patients.

At Lourdes, a few are cured of their ailments.

Many more, though not cured, experience a healing from within.

They experience a change in their innermost being a changed attitude to life whence they draw the courage to cope with their problems with joy.

Many who were sick and disabled came to Jesus seeking a cure.

Those who were cured were healed as well.

"Go! your sins are forgiven."

The paralytic is first forgiven and then cured of his paralysis.¹

The efficacy of Jesus' word in curing illness is the consequence of his power to effect inner healing from sin.

That is why many of the bystanders who witnessed the miracles were also healed

although they themselves suffered from no physical ailment. Their faith was aroused.

They saw the signs and they believed.
But not everyone believed; many were not healed.
*"Though they ate the same spiritual food
and drank the same spiritual drink,
most of them failed to please God."*²

They questioned his authority to cure on the Sabbath.
The kingdom of God was in their midst,
and sadly, they would be left out.

They did not experience inner healing
They could not bring themselves to accept
that the kingdom of God is a matter of faith
which goes much further
than the mere observance of rules and human effort.

Faith means acknowledging our dependence on God
and accepting the insufficiency of human effort.

Someone may plant; another water;
but it is God who makes things grow.³

Only when we are faced with the unexplainable
do we start thinking of things "beyond".

The Psalmist had no such problem.

In everything, he saw the power of Yahweh at work.

All that happened to the people of Israel
was consciously attributed to Yahweh.

But we are so caught up in our own efforts,
that we require "signs".

"It is only an evil generation that asks for a sign."

And a sign is given, nonetheless.

Elizabeth conceives in her old age —
nothing is impossible for God.

The power of the Most High overshadows Mary
and she gives birth to Jesus, born of the Holy Spirit.
May the coming of the Saviour into our hearts
bring us the experience of being inwardly healed.

References:

- 1 Lk 5:23,24
- 2 1 Cor 10:2,4

- 3 1 Cor 3:5
- 4 Mt 12:38

INNER HEALING

Scripture Readings:

Lk 3:10-18

What must we do?

Mt 13:10-17

Why Jesus speaks in parables

A Parable

There once lived a holy man, well advanced in years brought up in the tradition of the Law and the Prophets. He himself was not a prophet but a 'seer' full of wisdom.

And they came to him and asked him:
"Master, what does it mean to be inwardly healed?"

And he said to them:

"The process of inner healing can be compared to the role of the prophets and the coming of the saviour.

Everything that preceded the saviour's birth was part of a process that would lead to that great event.

And strangely when the saviour came, he made a clean break with the past while still being part of it.

He was the son of David and therefore part of Israel's history.

Without that his coming would have no meaning."

And they said to him:

"Explain to us further, for you speak in parables."

So he told them:

"Inner healing, like the Saviour's coming takes place at God's appointed time.

In the fullness of time for each one of you the Saviour will be born within you.

When that happens
you will experience a clean break with the past
but you will also see that your past infidelities
have been a vital part of a process
that has culminated in his birth within you.
Have you not read your scriptures?
Do they not tell of so many
who came to Jesus to be healed?
All of them were instantly cured.
There was no question of gradually getting better.
But without their sinful past,
they would never have reached the crisis point
that enabled them to surrender
and ask in faith to be healed."
And they went away
knowing that this parable
had touched a raw nerve within them.

By looking at inner healing as a gradual process
we run the risk of not being healed at all.
Invariably we are led to think
that the process once initiated will run its due course
if we do what is necessary and act appropriately.
Sooner or later
we ascribe to ourselves
the ability to dictate the pace of the process
and begin to take the credit
for having "worked out" our own salvation.
How often in Israel's history
did the Chosen People not think that they had "arrived"
and easily slipped into complacency
only to be told time and again by the prophets
that they were mistaken.

It is much better for us
to surrender in faith to the Great Healer
to allow our lives to take their course under his providence
without anxiety but in faith asking to be cured
knowing that in his appointed time we will all be healed.

SENSITIVITY TRAINING

Scripture Readings:

LK 1:39-45

The Visitation

Phil 2:1-5

Be self-effacing

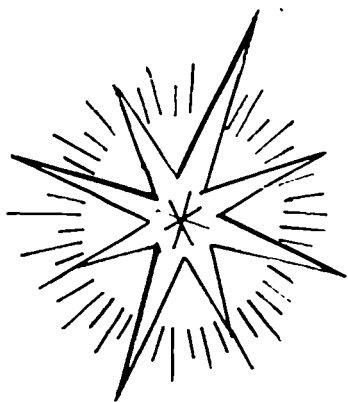
Most of the changes taking place in our world today
are the result of a new awareness
which is a consequence of being sensitive.
More than ever before,
we are aware of the need
to respect others and their freedom;
we are conscious that our environment
needs to be more green, less noisy and to have clean air.
Our survival is threatened unless we learn to be sensitive.
But what's so great about being sensitive?
Haven't we always been sensitive?
In fact, more particularly at Christmas
our sensitivity stands out,
by our generosity towards the poor.
At other times we make it a point
to mind other people's business
so that we can be more aware of their problems
without really helping them.
So often we have offered sympathy to others in their grief
refusing to acknowledge our inability to cope with our own.
Have we not fought battles
for human rights and social justice
while actually waging a war by proxy
the war within us -- our inability to come to terms
with our own selfishness and greed?
Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth
but not before she had come to terms
with the angel's message
though she did not fully understand.

Mary is able to be of service to Elizabeth
in a genuine and caring way
only because she has "conceived the Lord."
And herein lies the message:
We can be genuinely sensitive to others
only if we have first touched God within us
at the centre of our being.

There is a self-awareness
that does more harm than good.
Mere self-knowledge for its own sake
is not conducive to growth.
It often leads us
to project our own inadequacies on to others.
As a result, we often disrespect others
and discount their ability
to cope with their own problems and anxieties.
Instead of being a source of support
we end up feeling annoyed
because they do not understand
that we're only trying to help.
We smother them with excessive care
disregarding their uniqueness altogether.
The anger we feel at our own unresponsiveness
is the anger we project at their "ingratitude".
While pretending to help others
and be sensitive to them
we have all the time been blissfully unaware
that we are really meeting our own needs by so doing.
We claim to fight for just causes
and think we are sensitive to issues that matter.

All the time, however,
we are totally insensitive to what's happening within us.
Only when we experience God within us (Emmanuel)
will we instinctively perceive
how to be sensitive to others and their needs
conscious of their dignity and uniqueness
and enable them to experience
the Spirit of Christmas — Peace, Love and Joy.

Christmas



22
21
20

SILENT NIGHT

Scripture Readings:

1 Kgs 19:9-14 *Elijah's encounter with God*
Lk 2:1-14 *The birth of Jesus*

Did it ever strike you
that once we actually begin singing "Silent Night"
we sometimes actually put an end
to the silence of the night?
Our sense of hearing
is deteriorating at an alarming rate.
We are so used to playing our music loud.
We have forgotten the gentle art of persuasion
and must shout in order to get things done
(not to mention
how we love to blow our own trumpets).
With drivers of vehicles acting
as if the horn must be in constant use,
and the noise created by the movement of traffic
and the working of machines,
is it any wonder that we do not hear the birds sing
or the winds whistle in the trees?
Noise has even become a part of our liturgical celebra-
tions.
For a growing number of people
the Liturgy seems incomplete
without the clapping of hands
the beat of a rock band
and hymns chosen to fill every available silent phase.
We have forgotten
the art of walking reverently in procession
and if we are not reciting the Rosary
or singing a hymn

we punctuate the silences
with gossip or the exchange of pleasantries.

As if this isn't bad enough
we seem to have become used to
noise of another kind --
one that is even more damaging.
It is the sound of activity.
It is the thrill one gets
on 'hearing oneself' doing things.
How can we listen to the inner voice
that gives us direction
and puts things in perspective
unless we take the trouble
to cultivate a sense of inner quietude,
and encounter Yahweh
like Elijah did
in the sound of the gentle breeze?

What is inner quietude?

It is the ability to remain unruffled in a crisis
though we will often feel the pain.
It is the ability not to react in an emotional outburst
but to channel our energy effectively.
It is the ability to pick up
the small signals of distress in others
from the tone of their voices
and the wrinkles on their faces.

It was in the silence of that first Christmas night
that the angels sang their song of gladness.
But it was only those accustomed to inner silence —
Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men —
who were able to pick up the message.
And so it is only when we develop inner silence
that we will be able to listen attentively
to the Word of God made flesh.
Like Mary,
may we treasure the Word of God in our hearts
and bring it to fulfillment.

MYSTERY AND REALITY

Scripture Reading:

Jn 1:9-14 The Word of God made flesh

We live in a world in which
the elements of Victorian prudery have all but vanished.
Sex is not necessarily seen within the context of marriage
but rather as a physical function
often governed by the 'pleasure principle'.
Advertisers use it to promote sales;
the AIDS virus has made it necessary for us
to talk about 'safe sex'.
In developed countries
there is now no stigma attached
to one born out of wedlock.

Given this state of affairs
how are we to understand the problem
that confronted Joseph?
Betrothed to Mary
and finding she is with child
before they came to live together
he decides to put her away privately
because he was a man of honour
and wanted to spare her publicity.¹
Mary too has her problem
understanding the angel's message
until she is told
that the Spirit of the Most High would overshadow her.
And Mary said 'Yes'
although she did not fully understand.²

Much of the problem surrounding the birth of Jesus
arises from our being too obsessed with historical reality
while not giving sufficient attention

to the 'Mystery' present in that reality.
In our zeal to be historically accurate
we have obscured the mystery even further.
We are so involved with the historical content
that we remain untouched by the Mystery.
The beliefs that sustain our spirituality
must no doubt, be rooted in reality.
But we will do well to understand
that in this regard,
we can only be historical up to a point.
To be obsessed with historical reality
would rob spirituality
of its essential ingredient of Transcendence.
To be wholly absorbed in Mystery
would prevent us from making Spirituality
a part of our daily activity.

The Mystery of the Reality of the birth of Jesus
once and for all

bridges the gap between the Immanent
and the Transcendent.

The Word of God made flesh
now dwells among people.³

*"The people that walked in darkness
have seen a great light.*

*On those who live in a land of deep shadow
a light has shone."*⁴

Here, God lives among people,
His name is 'God-with-them'.

May we experience within us
the Mystery of the Reality of a New Creation.⁵

References:

- 1 Mt 1:18-25
- 2 Lk 1:35,36
- 3 Jn 1:14
- 4 Is 9:2
- 5 Rev 21:1-7

A CHRISTMAS SELECTION

Scripture Readings:

Heb 11:1-2,8-10 The faith of Abraham, an example

Mt 1:18-2:12 The Birth of Jesus

Christmas is a time
when we make our selection;
when we choose our favourite carols on cassette;
when we select our Christmas cards,
and choose from a range of sweets, cakes, clothes
and decorations,
that are all designed to reflect our special taste.

The first Christmas too, was a time to choose.

Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Wise Men,
all had to make their choices
but of a very different kind.

Mary chose to say "Yes" to the angel's message
even though she did not fully understand.

In spite of his being troubled,
Joseph put his integrity at stake
and did as the angel had told him.

The Shepherds, hearing the message
chose to direct their flocks

to the place of the Saviour's birth.

The Wise Men, putting aside their wisdom, follow the Star
that leads them to the Saviour.

For Herod, however,

it was a case of 'so near and yet so far'.

Born within the confines of his kingdom,
the only way he could reach the Saviour
was by ordering a massacre of innocent male children.

When he heard the news,
he responded to it in a human way,

protecting his own interests
and minimising the threat to his own security.
Unlike the others, who heard the good news
and responded in faith like Abraham did.¹

We too can choose to respond to God's Word
in either of two ways:

a purely human response OR a response in faith.

Responding in faith means

recognising that our problems

are invariably the result of spiritual bankruptcy —
to a greater or lesser degree.

And that therefore, human efforts alone will not suffice.

Human efforts to meet our various needs

will only be adequate

if we first tackle the problem of our greed.

And that means, not forcing the issue

but keeping up the momentum of our efforts

to bring about peace and justice

specially when in sheer frustration

we are tempted to buy a solution

but not really solve the problem.

"If the Lord does not watch over the city,

in vain do the watchers keep vigil;

if the Lord does not build the house,

*in vain do the builders labour."*²

If during this holy season we learn to respond in faith
like Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds and the Wise Men,
we will surely find Jesus and experience his peace,
in the sure knowledge

"that the word which goes forth from Yahweh

will not return to him empty,

without carrying out his will

*and succeeding in what it was sent to do."*³

References:

1 Heb 11:8

2 Ps 127

3 Is 55:11

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD IN MARRIAGE

Scripture Readings:

Mt 1:18-25

Joseph's dilemma

Lk 1:26-45

The Annunciation and Visitation

Christian marriage is a vocation.
It is a response to God's Word
inviting a couple to live together as man and wife.
The call to marriage is no different
from the call of Moses, David, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
In the Old Testament we see that those who were 'called'
invariably pleaded their unworthiness and incompetence.
Moses wants Aaron to be his spokesman.¹
David is almost left out of the reckoning
by human standards.²
Jeremiah and Ezekiel realise
that it is Yahweh's word that will be effective
when they speak as Prophets to the People of Israel.³
This is the essence of a vocation in the Biblical sense.
It is the power of God's Word that will make it effective
and not any human quality.
We respond in faith like Mary and Joseph
knowing *"that the word that goes forth from Yahweh
will not return to him empty,
without accomplishing what it was set out to do."*⁴
We often make the mistake of trying too hard
to make our marriage a success,
forgetting that if we first responded
with our 'nothingness' in faith,
God would so much more easily cause our relationship
to grow.
Barrenness is the most fertile ground for God's action.
This is what Mary realises
as the angel tells her that her cousin Elizabeth
who was considered barren, has now conceived a son.

When each one of us
is individually rooted in God through our nothingness,
we meet as a couple in God.
Being rooted in nothingness
it is so much easier for each one to be faithful to the other
not only 'for better' but also 'for worse' and 'for poorer',
'in bad times' and 'in sickness.'
Couples often falter in their relationship with each other
not so much because of the magnitude of the problem
but because they cannot come to terms
with the 'nothingness' of their relationship
which has been exposed by the present crisis.
The quality of inter-personal relationships invariably suffers
when the individuals concerned have neglected
to be in relationship with God first.

Couples with problems often need spiritual direction first
before they can respond to therapy.
It is futile, in a Christian context
to begin by focussing on the couple-relationship
without first ascertaining
that the couple is rooted in a relationship to God.
How much easier it is for the couple to benefit
from their own insights and the suggestions of the
counsellor
when they are open to God's healing power
precisely because they have first "emptied" themselves
before him.

Mary and Joseph are a model for us.
Right from the start, their relationship was rooted
in their "inability to comprehend God's Word",
but believing, nonetheless
that the God who called them would not fail them —
"His Word is faithful"⁵
"that the God who began the good work in them
would bring it to completion."⁶

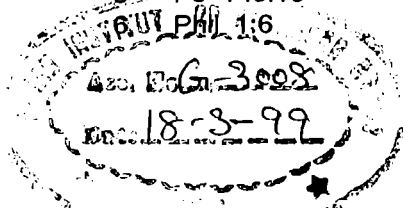
References:

- 1 Ex 4:10ff
- 2 1 Sam 16:4-13
- 3 Jer 1:1ff and Ezek 2:1ff

4 Is 55:10

5 Ps 145:13

6 Jer 1:6



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