

Issue 3

FREE TO QUESTION

Keeping an open mind on
God, religion, science and all
claims to absolute truth.

*A selection of sermons preached at Mayfield
Salisbury Parish Church by the Revd Scott S. McKenna*

www.mayfieldsalisbury.org



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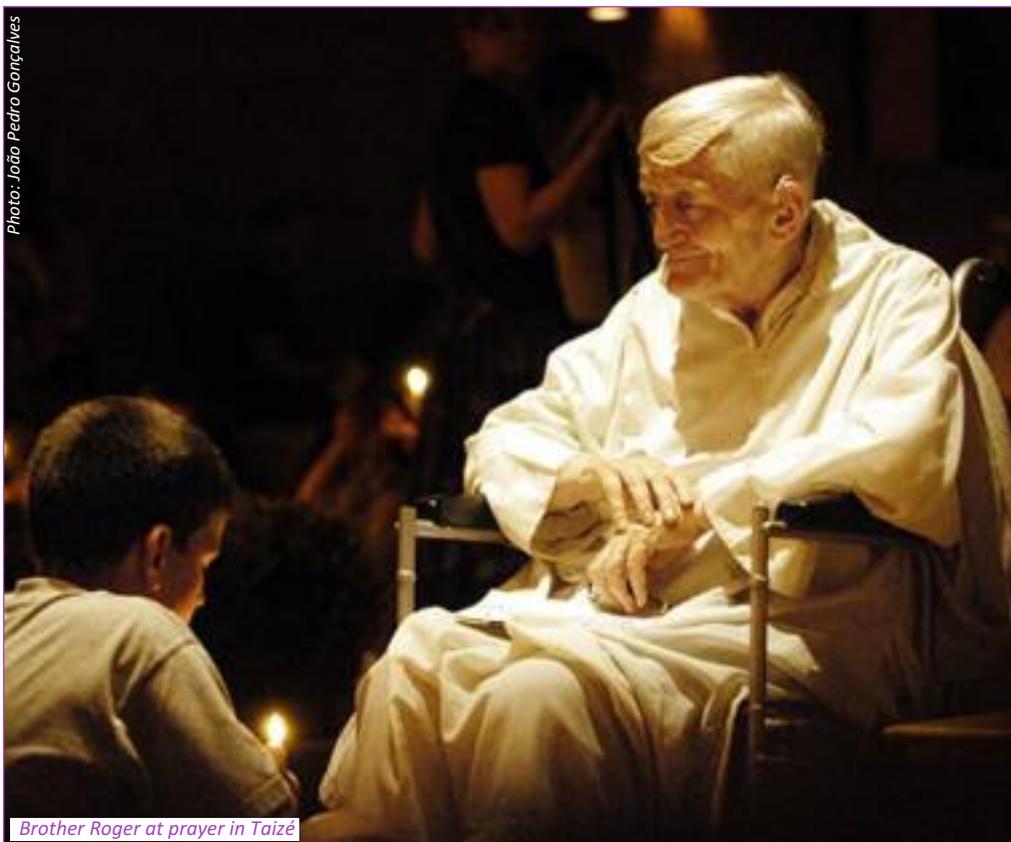
A selection of sermons preached at Mayfield Salisbury
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It is a tragedy of the greatest order that the community committed to the life, teaching, death and faith of Jesus of Nazareth, that most beautiful of human beings, has got itself into a position where it is considered anti-intellectual, superstitious, literalistic, self-righteous, judgemental, irrational, bigoted, sexist and homophobic! Many, many people speak of their spirituality, their spiritual journey, but would never turn to Christianity or the Church.

Scott S McKenna

Sermons can be accessed in audio and video formats as
well as text at www.mayfieldsalisbury.org

Photo: João Pedro Gonçalves



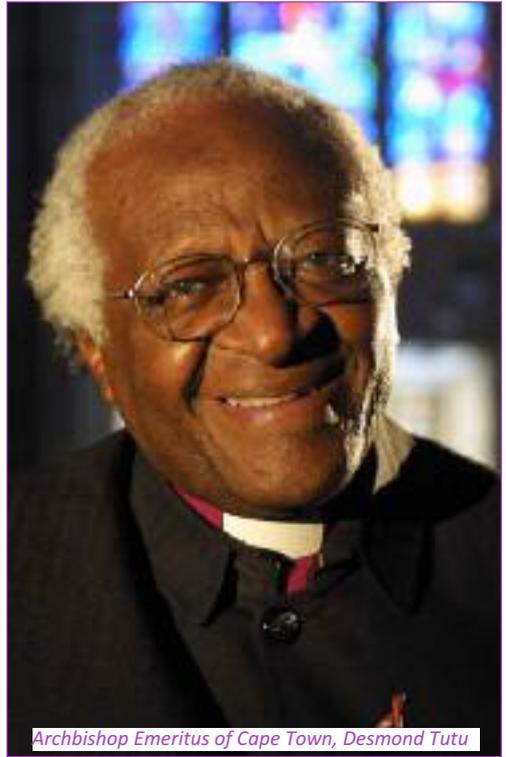
Brother Roger at prayer in Taizé

Silence is the final door through which we need to walk in order to enter God's nearer Presence in this life. As often as we do so, we will encounter the Shepherd, close, constant and caring.

The ecumenical monastic community of Taizé was established by Brother Roger in 1944. It is no exaggeration to say that, over the past six decades or so, millions of people, pilgrims, have journeyed to Taizé and left feeling strengthened and affirmed. In 2005, aged 90, Brother Roger was tragically killed by a woman who was mentally unwell; she stabbed him several times. The son of a Protestant pastor, and standing within the Protestant tradition, Brother Roger had received the Eucharist from the hand of Pope John Paul II and the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Brother Roger's ministry was one of reconciliation and unity.

In his late teenage years and early twenties, during his time studying Reformed

theology in Strasbourg and Lausanne, Brother Roger enjoyed solitude and often took long walks, engaging in reading and contemplation. He went on retreat to a Carthusian monastery in La Valsainte and was captivated by the life of prayer and the fact that the monks prayed and lived in community. Their restricted pattern of community life was not for him, but he remained passionate about prayer and living with others in Christ. He was known to dislike preaching. His sermons were typically one or two sentences long, though repeated in fifteen or twenty languages. At a Taizé gathering near Paris in 1995, before 100,000 young people, he said, *'We have come here to search or to go on searching through silence and prayer, to get in touch with our inner life.'* In a recent address, the current leader of the Taizé community, Brother Alois says, *'The exchange with God becomes real for us in prayer: by his Holy Spirit, God comes to dwell within us. By his word and by the sacraments, Christ gives himself to us. In return, we can surrender everything to him.'*



Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu

From a very early age, Brother Roger felt himself to be guided by the Spirit of God; he had a real sense of the hand of God upon his life. The flourishing of his inner life sprung out of his commitment to prayer and living in community with others. The most used prayer in the Orthodox tradition is the Jesus Prayer: *'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.'* The crucial point of this prayer is not so much the words themselves but the focus of the heart upon Jesus. It brings Him very close. In this prayer, we speak to Him face to face. Brother Alois of Taizé said that the exchange with God becomes very real for us in prayer: God comes to dwell within us. We are not monks, Carthusians or brothers of Taizé, but prayer and community are the hallmarks also of a parish church community. We can learn from the giants and from the people we know, the saints around us. Throughout my ministry, I have listened to many, many people speak of their faith as a rock in their life, a source of strength and a very tangible reality in moments of stress and trouble. God becomes real for us in prayer.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose courage and moral stature played a vital role in the collapse of apartheid, describes part of his private devotional life in these terms:

Usually I get up at 4am. It's quiet and peaceful at that time, which I need to collect myself. It's time when I try to engage with God. It's meditation. I try to centre myself on God so that he influences the rest of the day....

During part of this time I kneel and then I crouch almost like a foetus. There is something about becoming a baby in the presence of God, being embraced, being dandled and being made to know that you are special and precious and loved.

I remember Tutu speaking lovingly of his wife at a special service to mark his 80th birthday. He said that in his house there is in one room the television which he watched. On top of that television, his wife had placed a sign which he could not fail to notice. It read: *'You are entitled to your wrong opinion.'* Desmond Tutu, one of the spiritual giants of our time, speaks of engaging with God, meditating, centering his life on God first thing in the morning so that God may influence the rest of his day and of kneeling, even crouching, in prayer, in the Presence of God, and feeling himself to be embraced, dandled, special, precious and loved.

In the Psalms of David, the psalmist wrote:

*You created every part of me;
You put me together in my mother's womb....
All you do is strange and wonderful.
I know it with all my heart.
When my bones were being formed.....
When I was growing there in secret,
You knew that I was there –
You saw me before I was born.*



*David playing the harp by
Louis Wiesiowski 1881*

One of the central images for God in the Old Testament is the shepherd. King David, Israel's greatest king, had been a shepherd. It is very important to understand that a shepherd never left the sheep. We may see sheep scattered across the hillsides of Scotland and not a shepherd or farmer in sight but in the biblical context the shepherd never left the sheep; he protected them with his life. It is this metaphorical image of closeness, constancy and care which the biblical writers use again and again to tell us about the nature of God: you put me together in my mother's womb...you saw me before I was born. Closeness, constancy and a genuine care make up the nature of our God. Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd and the Christian community said that He laid down His life for His sheep. The image of shepherd may belong to an ancient time but if we understand that the shepherd took care of the sheep, was with them day and night, walked alongside them, amongst them, rested with them, and led them through every terrain and protected them in every danger we begin to appreciate its value, even now.

Brother Roger felt himself guided by the Spirit of God, in a sense, felt the hand of God upon his life and so too does Desmond Tutu. I am not likely to get out of bed at 4am in order to pray, standing, kneeling or crouching, and nor am I likely to become a Carthusian monk with

'Settle upon Him in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself'
David Adam

their cloistered life of prayer and community but daily prayer makes God real to us. How many lovers fall in love without ever spending time with each other? How does intimacy between two people grow and blossom without them spending time in the company of each other? Jesus was a Jewish mystic with a very real sense of the Presence of God with Him, around Him and within Him. His sense of the Father saturated His life, His thought and all His actions. Across the centuries, He speaks to each of us: *'The Kingdom of God is within you. The Kingdom of God is at hand.'* Perhaps not for all, but for many the awareness or consciousness of God's closeness is made real in the exchange of prayer and, for me, ultimately, silent prayer – as lovers lie content in each other's arms.

David Adam, formerly the priest on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, speaks of using the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.* Adam said that as his prayer time developed the sentence got shorter and shorter and, in time, he was happy to be there in the presence of God. Sometimes, he said, the sentence took an hour to pray. Like myself, Adam makes an appeal for the practice of silence. He said:

In our time silence is often banished, our senses are bombarded with noise, by visual and auditory stimuli. Many churches have become like the world and have no space for stillness: the Word of God cannot find room! We need to create times and places of stillness. Silence carves us out, as a bowl is carved out, that we may be able to have room for our God, that we may discover we dwell in him and he in us. Silence is part of any act of love or adoration, far richer than words and opens our heart to the other..... Settle upon Him in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourselfIn the silence we can enthuse in our God.

The more time I spend in prayer, the more I can focus myself on the Presence of God, on Jesus or on the Spirit within me, the closer I feel myself to God, to the Holy, to heaven. The more time I give over to stillness and enter silence the stronger I feel my faith to be and the spiritual becomes the most real and the priorities and values of this world matter less and less. The more we spend time, intentionally, consciously, entering God's Presence, sitting in His company, the more we will know that He is the Shepherd always at our side.

Bible Readings: Zechariah 10: 1 – 6 1 John 3: 16 – 24 St John 10: 11 – 18



Jesus Stilling the Tempest by James Tissot (1836 - 1902)

The faith narrative of Jesus calming the storm is a story typical of the ancient world and not at all unique. Such stories had existed for over a thousand years before Jesus was born. So, what does it mean?

The story of David and Goliath is dramatic and exciting: David, a youth, ruddy and good-looking, stands defiantly before the Philistine warrior, Goliath. Hardened by years of war and fighting, Goliath looks at the youth with disdain. The king, Saul, reluctantly lets David face Goliath. In the end, with his five smooth stones, David triumphs and the giant is slain. In the Bible we read:

Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him.

Once dead, David stands over Goliath, draws his sword and cuts off the head of the Philistine warrior. Dramatic, exciting and bloody!

In the Gospel of St Mark, we read the equally dramatic story of Jesus commanding the



David and Goliath by Antonio Zanchi (1631 - 1722)

wind and the sea to be calm: *'Peace, be still!'* he says. When it is evening, Jesus and His disciples set out in a boat; a windstorm blows up and the waves beat into the boat. Jesus is asleep in the stern, asleep on a pillow. He is woken by the disciples who fear for their lives. Once awake, He calms the storm and rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. The story ends with the disciples saying to one another, *'Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!'* These are great,

great stories, memorable faith narratives, but not to be read literally.

The story of Jesus calming the storm is, for me, a powerful, evocative meditation but, first, let me say that it stands squarely within the mythology and *midrash* of the ancient world. In this story, some scholars hear an echo from the Old Testament story of Jonah. Like Jesus, Jonah is asleep in the boat when a great wind is hurled upon the sea and, like the disciples, the mariners are afraid and rouse Jonah saying that they are about to perish and he should call on his God to calm the storm. Although other details are different, the story ends when the storm is calmed and the mariners fear and reverence the LORD for His power over the waves.

Other scholars say that the story of Jesus calming the storm is a *midrash* story, a re-working of verses from the Psalms. In Psalm 107, we read:

*Those who go down to the sea in ships
Who do business on great waters,
They see the works of the LORD,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He commands and raises the stormy wind,
Which lifts up the waves of the sea.....*

*Their souls melt because of trouble...
And are at their wits' end.
Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble,
And He brings them out of their distresses.
He calms the storm,
So that its waves are still.*

Some scholars hear in this story of boat and storm an echo from Homer's *Odyssey*. Written around nine hundred years earlier, the Greek myth portrays Odysseus asleep in the hold of a ship. Odysseus had just left Aeolus, whom Zeus had made the master of the winds. Aeolus had given Odysseus a sack which contained *'the winds that howl from every quarter.'* The sack is lashed fast with a silver cord. In Homer's poem, while Odysseus is asleep in the hold of the ship, his men *'loosed the sack'* and *'all the winds burst out.'* Many of the details are different but what is worth noting is that the wind is created by Zeus, the Father of the gods, and Aeolus, in the name of Zeus, has power over the winds and the sea.

The stories are not to be read literally; they are not fantastic, magic miracles. They are faith narratives; they witness to faith and they are told to inspire faith. In and through the written Word, God speaks: the Living Word comes alive for us.

One final comparison: in the Gospels, Jesus is often portrayed as the new Moses, whose stature is that of God's greatest servant. At the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, Moses, with staff in hand, raises his arms over the sea and by a strong east wind the LORD causes the sea to go back and, while the LORD holds the waters on both sides, the people walk through on dry ground. Through His servant Moses, the LORD commands the winds and the seas.

In the ancient world, people saw God everywhere: they saw the strength of a tree and knew that God had given that tree its strength; they saw the power of the wind and knew that God had caused the wind to exist and blow and they saw the power of the sea and knew its power came from God. Through the lens of our materialism, we filter out God and see only the physical causes of nature. By contrast, our ancestors, while understanding less about the physical causes of nature, understood that every dimension of creation rested in the hand of God. The story of Moses, of Jonah, and the words of the psalmist and the story of Jesus calming the storm are all stories about the power of God. The stories are not to be read literally; they are not fantastic, magic miracles. They are faith narratives; they witness to faith and they are told to inspire faith. In and through the written Word, God speaks: the Living Word comes alive for us.

In a meditative reading of Scripture, of the story of Jesus calming the storm, what do we see? The first thing we see is the darkness: we are told that it is evening. Darkness is always important: God is elusive, always beyond definition, and so God dwells in darkness. In this darkness, we see the power of the wind and the sea, the power of nature, the magnitude and destructive power of nature, and we see the smallness of

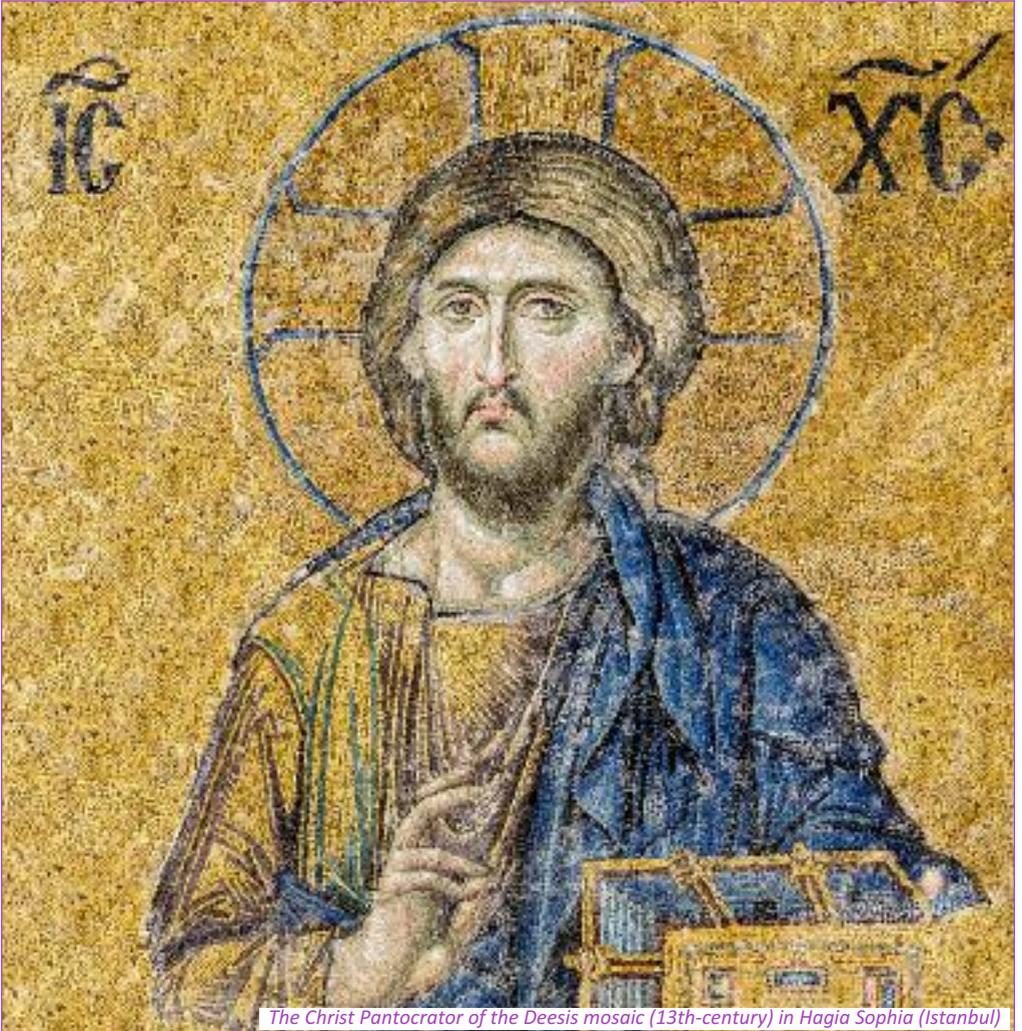
the disciples, their helplessness and vulnerability. At the centre, we see Jesus: we sense His peace, His calm, His strength and we learn in our hearts that as great as the powers of nature and universe may be, these are as nothing compared to the sacred peace of God. There is a deep peace, a stillness, an eternal silence, at the heart of God, which the trials and troubles and powers of this world and universe cannot disturb. In a prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture, God in Jesus comes to us. In the darkness, we see His light, and we learn again that we are precious, embraced, loved and cherished. It is there on the page: a doorway into another world, another reality.

From something small, a story of just seven verses, a life is transfigured. What strikes me about the faith narrative of David is not so much the bloody violence, which we must see as a feature of the time, but David's faith at the centre of the story. I do not believe that God willed the brutal death of Goliath or that such brutality lies at the heart of God. What I do hear in this story, in the midst of its cultural setting, is the faith of David. In the face of a destructive force, which may have seemed as strong as the winds and the sea, David says, '*You come to me with sword and spear and javelin. I come to you in the name of the LORD...*'. At the centre of this ancient faith narrative, amidst all the action, blood and violence, there is a rock, a place of stillness, silence and peace. David knows that, come what may, his life stands or falls on the loving strength of God. St Paul says the same: in tribulation, in needs, in distresses, in imprisonments, in sleeplessness, in every affliction, we are ministers of God: God is the strength and foundation of our life. I know that in the midst of a trial, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of hardship, we may become overwhelmed by tears and broken by circumstance, but my experience and my prayer for you is *keep going*: God walks with you; focus and re-focus your heart, mind and soul, so far as you can, on the mercy and loving-kindness of God. In the darkness, we see the light of God in the midst of the storm and, in time, we will feel its warmth and we will know that we are cherished, loved and embraced.

Let me close with a prayer from the Celtic writer David Adam.

*Lord, open my eyes
To the wonder of the world
And Your Presence within it.
Lord open my ears
To the calls of creation
And to Your voice quiet and near.
Lord open my heart
To the love of others
And to Your love close and real.
Lord open each sense and make aware
Of the wonder and beauty always there.*

Bible readings: 1 Samuel 17: 32 – 49 2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13 St Mark 4: 35 – 41



On Christ the King Sunday, I explore the question asked of Jesus by Pontius Pilate: 'What is truth?' I reflect on truth in science and truth in religion.

In Christian iconography, Christ Pantocrator refers to a specific depiction of Christ. The Pantocrator is Christ as King, Lord of Hosts, God Almighty, the All-Powerful. Christ is at the centre of God, at the centre of the universe, at the centre of all things. In the Collect for today Christ is named as *King of kings and Lord of lords*. He is the Ruler of all, the Sustainer of all. In the Book of Revelation, the Lord, the Christ, says:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, who is and who was and who is to come.

Christ is All-Powerful. Jesus has gone back to the Father; He sits on the throne. The icons of Christ the King are often incredibly beautiful. They are an enormous comfort. In faith, as we gaze into the face of Christ, we are drawn into God and, in faith, in silent gazing, can feel ourselves enveloped by the Spirit of God, the 'Being' of God. How many Presbyterian ministers, ministers in the Church of Scotland, speak with passion about icons?! You are lucky! Our sisters and brothers in the Orthodox traditions as well as those in the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions tell us that icons 'work', and they do - maybe not for everyone, but they do. In prayer, caught in the gaze of Christ, Christ the King, Christ Pantocrator, we are drawn deeply into the Eternal Silence of God.

In his dying prayer, King David speaks of the everlasting covenant made with God. The Church understands Jesus as the successor to David, the son of David. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus is portrayed as king. When, as a prisoner, Jesus stood before Pilate, the Roman Governor asked Him *'Are you the King of the Jews?'* The inscription on the cross, written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, read, *'The King of the Jews.'* In his brief conversation with Jesus, Pilate again asked *'Are you a king?'* Jesus replied, *'My kingdom is not of this world...My kingdom is not from here....I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.'* What do we mean when we speak of Jesus as King, as Christ Pantocrator, Jesus almighty, all-powerful? Does it have any real meaning for us? Is it in any sense true? Is it little more than a remnant from a previous era? Is it true?

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, *'What is truth?'* Jesus had said that His kingdom was not of this world but that He had come to bear witness to the truth. Pilate asks, *'What is truth?'* We can discard that question by arguing that Pilate is mocking Jesus, belittling Him, ridiculing Him in the last moments of His life. It is possible that is what he was doing and many biblical scholars believe so but I wonder if there is not something much deeper here. On the face of it, Pilate may have been mocking Jesus but is it possible that behind the mocking question there lay a serious, deeper, more profound enquiry?

The Christian tradition has, at times, sought to belittle Pilate and make Him look like a puppet of Rome or a fool, a man of no stature or integrity. Historical records do not bear that out. Pilate was Roman Governor in what was one of the most volatile regions in the Roman Empire and one that was critically located for trade routes. It was vital to Rome to maintain security in that region and, although Pilate was in the end removed, he served eleven years as governor; the average term of office being just over three years. I doubt very much that Pilate was a fool. He will have been a man of his time, brutal I'm sure, but my guess is that he was also a very intelligent man, maybe



Professor Keith Ward

a profound thinker. I think that Church tradition has, intentionally or otherwise, misrepresented Pontius Pilate. In the very brief encounter he has with Jesus, Pilate asks one of the most profound and searching questions any one could ask, '*What is truth?*'

What is truth? On Friday evening, I attended a lecture on science and religion held by the University of Edinburgh student Humanist Society. The lecturer was an American named Jerry Coyne. It came as no surprise that he was a militant atheist and that he saw science and religion as enemies. At one point, he said that if

he could he would ban all parents from talking to their children about God before they had reached the age of 12. Like religious fundamentalism, militant atheism is no respecter of civil liberties. Believe it or not, God was compared to the Loch Ness monster, Big Foot and an old man with a long white beard sitting on a cloud in the sky. With due respect, Jerry Coyne's ignorance of religion was staggering.

Like all atheists or, at least, most atheist scientists, Coyne demanded evidence for the existence of God, proof, verifiable proof, that God existed. He said more than once that science can demonstrate its theories by evidence; scientists know what is true. By contrast, he said, there is nothing scientific about God: no evidence, no proof! It's all just made up stories to make us feel better about ourselves. Strongly implicit in what Coyne said was the view that scientists were more intelligent than average members of society and that, once a scientist, one was very likely to discard religion. Scientists who were people of faith were, he said, dysfunctional. It was great fun! In the question and answer session, I asked him about human consciousness, its existence in a material universe and the part it plays in our perception of reality. He said he was not sure about consciousness but he knew the difference between a bird and an arrow. It was deep stuff!

Atheists like Coyne want evidence for the existence of God. They want scientific evidence. If God cannot be proven scientifically, if there is no verifiable evidence, then God cannot be true. God cannot exist. There is only the material world. To me, this is one dimensional thinking. In his book, *Is Religion Irrational?*, Keith Ward distinguishes between objective knowledge and personal knowledge. Ward writes:

We can see [personal] knowledge at work when a group of students study a play by Shakespeare....They will try to engage with the play, enter into the mind-sets of the characters, try out different interpretations of what the author wrote, and let their feelings be changed by what they learn. Having studied a play, the students will have learned something, they will have new knowledge. But they will not have learned any new equations, or be able to predict events better, or even know simple things such as the number of words in the play. They have learned something about imaginative visions of the world, about human possibilities and emotions, and about what it is to be a human being in this world..... Believing in God is more like gaining knowledge by participating in a Shakespeare play than it is like doing an experiment in a chemistry laboratory.

Personal knowledge is not objective knowledge in the scientific sense, but it is knowledge. When we interact with other people we need to take account of their thoughts, feelings, desires and intentions. Scientists may point to what is happening in the brain when we have thoughts, feelings, desires and intentions but they cannot measure the thing itself. Believing in God means interacting with the Infinite Mind or Infinite Consciousness. We may know the scientific mechanics of the brain but thought has a reality of its own: think of Shakespeare's play. Pilate asked, *'What is truth?'* There is scientific truth and there is personal truth. We may be dependent on our bodies, upon *this* matter, but we are not objects. We are so much more than objects.

When we turn to the Bible, to Scripture, we are dealing with something that is more akin to the literature of Shakespeare than the equations of a science laboratory. The Oxford philosopher, John Cottingham, says of Scripture:

In many of the key Gospel stories, although on the surface they take the form of plain, unadorned narrative, there is often a strange, luminous, paradoxical quality, a kind of 'aura of resonance';...many elements of this aura are moral and spiritual...[and cannot be reduced] to a catalogue of observational data.

Cottingham says in many passages we are told, *'They did not understand because their hearts were hardened.'* The reader must go beyond observational truth. Martin Heidegger draws upon the Greek conception of truth, *alêtheia*, meaning 'unconcealing'. Truth involves an uncovering, a bringing out of something concealed. Religious fundamentalists, like atheists, would prefer the Scriptures to be little more than a 'no-nonsense' representation of the events, in much the same way as a camcorder might do but Scripture requires our spiritual, personal interaction. Evidence for a believer is not evidence assessed from a so-called detached (scientific) standpoint but the personal evidence of inner transformation.

In the Gospel of Matthew, in the account of the Resurrection, the author does not

Believing in God is more like gaining knowledge by participating in a Shakespeare play than it is like doing an experiment in a chemistry laboratory.

Keith Ward

bombard us with overwhelming 'objective' evidence. On the contrary, in the very sentence in which we are told that '*they worshipped Him*' we are also told that '*some doubted.*' In the Gospel of Luke, in the account of the Road to Emmaus, it took time for the disciples to move from a pure intellectual enquiry to the moment of inner transformation. One theologian has said, '*The evidence of the heart [cannot] be neglected if Christ-as-risen [is] to be*

apprehended.' There is the truth of the scientist but there is also the truth of the novelist, the poet and the philosopher. One might go so far as to say that the truth of the mind rather than the truth of matter is a higher truth and it may be that, rather than science leading scientists to atheism, it is the case that many of those who are attracted to science are less able to comprehend what I have called a higher truth. I make no judgement about that but point to the similar example of music. Many people appreciate deeply the seemingly hidden beauty of music while others cannot hear at that level. It was listening to Jerry Coyne that made me wonder about this.

It may also be true that most or all of us would begin to hear the inner or deeper beauty of music if we lived with it, studied it and absorbed it into our souls for months or years. There are different kinds of truth and religion belongs to personal knowledge, to the evidence of inner transformation. Jesus said to Pilate, '*Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice*', and yet many, including some among His followers, did not believe. There was no 'objective' evidence to believe but, for those whose hearts were open, they saw and believed.

Let me close with some words from the eighteenth century Christian mystic William Law:

This is God's will to all Christians, Jews and heathens. They are all equally the desire of His heart. Now there is but one possible way for [humanity] to attain this salvation. There is no one way for a Jew, another for a Christian and a third for a heathen. No, God is one, human nature is one, salvation is one, and the way to it is one, and that is the desire of the soul turned to God.

It is in the turning to God of the soul that we release the inner transformation and discover the truth of ourselves and God; we have evidence of a higher order than that of equations. Christ Pantocrator is a faith narrative which says that if we look into the face of Christ we see into the heart of God. We see and feel the evidence, the truth, when we gaze deeply.

Bible Readings: 2 Samuel 23: 1 - 7 Revelation 1: 4 - 8 St John 18: 33 - 38



Sistine Chapel fresco by Michelangelo

Does it make any sense, any rational sense, to speak of the hand of God upon our lives?

Does it make any sense, any rational sense, to speak of the hand of God upon our lives? To what extent can we say that God's hand rests upon us, that we feel the Spirit's Presence, care, love and protection? When we say, '*God is with us,*' what does that mean, in a real and practical sense? For the avoidance of doubt, we are speaking metaphorically: no one imagines God as a Person with a hand! In the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), we read the prayer:

O Lord, who never failest to help and govern them thou dost bring up in thy fear and love; keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy name.....

What do we mean by the providence of God, the sense that God's hand is upon us, that God guides and protects us and that God is leading us to a final destination? St John of Damascus said, '*Providence is the care God takes of all existing things.*' How do we understand God's interaction in the world and in our lives? Does it make sense to speak of God's hand protecting us in a world as violent and gruesome as ours?

In reading theology from a previous era, it is important to remind ourselves that theology, like all human knowledge, evolves.

In the Old Testament period, the Hebrew people believed that God's hand directed all history. If good things happened it was because of the blessing and mercy of God, and if bad things happened it was a punishment from God. God was understood as an active participant in the events of human history. In our first lesson, from the Book of Jeremiah, the

words from the LORD on the lips of the prophet are fierce, brutal and full of anger and vengeance. God says, *'My people are foolish. They have not known Me. They do evil and have no knowledge of good.'* God punishes the people because they have ignored God. The Babylonian empire has invaded the land, Jerusalem is ransacked and the temple - the Holy of Holies - has been destroyed. The prophet says:

I beheld, and indeed the fruitful land was a wilderness, And all its cities were broken down At the presence of the LORD, By His fierce anger.

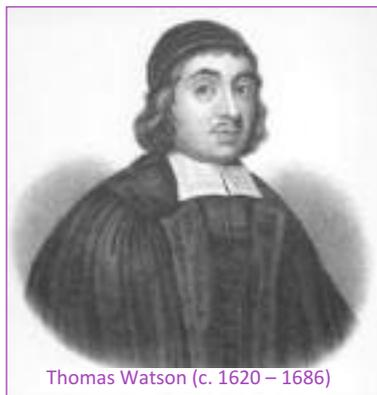
Although the invasion and destruction happened by the hand of the Babylonians, the prophets see the hand of God behind this: Yahweh has let this happen in order to punish His people.

In reading theology from a previous era, it is important to remind ourselves that theology, like all human knowledge, evolves. The theology of the Church contained in creeds and the magisterial works of theologians are statements made at a point in history set in a particular context; they are not absolute truth. The Bible contains theology written over a thousand year period. The Hebrews saw the hand of God directing events in human history: is that our theology? Would we regard a tsunami as a punishment sent by God? John Wesley objected to the introduction of drainage and a sewage system in London because, he said, it would prevent God from sending disease as a punishment to the people!

What is our theology? Is creation moving to a divinely ordained conclusion? If we regard the universe in some sense as being the design of a Divine hand, that its randomness, chance and probability are components of a mathematical calculation made in the mind of God, is God ultimately directing all of history right down to 'your' decision to come to church today? What do we mean when we speak of the hand of God upon us?

In Paul's *First Letter to Timothy*, the writer speaks of Jesus, the Lord, enabling him to enter into the ministry. Despite being a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent man, the writer obtained mercy. One thing cannot be doubted, we are told, namely, that Christ

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The statement is heartfelt, sincere and the experience which lies behind it changed a life and, in some way, human history. In the *Book of Acts*, immediately following the coming of the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost, it seems the Spirit is active throughout the Christian community and page after page of the book is a record of the Spirit's intimate involvement in human lives.



Thomas Watson (c. 1620 – 1686)

In the Gospel lesson this morning, the parables portray God as a shepherd who goes to the greatest lengths to find a lost sheep and, once found, carries it back home on his shoulders, rejoicing. Or God is a woman who desperately, frantically, energetically searches for a lost coin. Repentance is noted in the stories but the emphasis is on God's indefatigable love, which drives God to search endlessly for the lost, and never give up. God, it seems, is around us, within us, searching for us, ready to take an active part in our life, desiring nothing more than to take us 'home', if only we let Him.

The seventeenth century Puritan, Thomas Watson, contrasts the countenance of God with the heart of God. Watson said:

When God hides His face from His child, His heart may be towards Him, as Joseph, when he spoke roughly to his [brothers], and made them believe he would take them for spies; still his heart was towards them, and he was as full of love as ever he could hold. He was fain to go aside and weep.....So God when he goes aside, as if He had forsaken His children, yet He is full of sympathy, and love towards them; God may change His countenance, but not His heart.

Watson believes in the intimate involvement of God in the lives of individuals: those of Joseph, Moses, you and me. In some sense, metaphorically at least, he seems to combine the God who can be fierce, angry and brutal with the God of love. What do we mean when we speak of the hand of God upon our lives?

First of all, it is remarkable to speak of God in personal terms. In the Bible and in the Christian tradition, God is not a wholly separate deity outside creation, untouched and unmoved by events in the universe and human history. The God of the Bible is 'I AM'. God is involved inside creation, moving among His people: God is the *shekhinah*, the *Real Presence*. At the centre of the Jewish temple lay the most sacred space, the Holy of Holies, the place where Yahweh, the God of Eternity, dwelt. The building expressed in stone the paradox of God: that the Transcendent, Holy God was present on earth,

immanent, and that, though the face of God could not be seen by human eyes, human hearts could experience the Holy.

Let me ground this a little. St Paul experienced the Presence of the Risen Christ in prison. In his suffering, brokenness and despair, the Spirit of Jesus entered his soul, filled his cell and peace like no other calmed him and gave him hope and strength. In our time, the former Cabinet minister, Jonathan Aitken, tells a similar story. In 1999, he was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for perjury. On 8 June that year, he was sent to Belmarsh Prison. That night in his cell, he could hear what seemed like all the other prisoners shouting abuse at him and making all kinds of threats against him. Aitken said, *'I was terrified. I felt utterly helpless and totally vulnerable. The pressures of fear inflamed my already raw nerve-ends in agonising pain.'* Some time earlier, he had been given a booklet entitled *'Praying the Psalms'*; it was a diary of private prayer. That night in Belmarsh Prison, Aitken turned to the reading for 8 June. It was Psalm 130:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.*

He said that, studying these short verses, *'a warm and comforting wave of reassurance flooded over me. Suddenly I realised that I was not as lonely, scared, helpless or vulnerable as I had thought. The Transcendent God in a Belmarsh Prison cell giving strength, hope and courage....to a convicted criminal.'* Is it providence that placed Aitken in that cell on that date with that reading? Or is it, given how events turned out, that Aitken, perhaps for the first time in his life, turned to God with an openness and urgency he had never done before? And, having turned to God, he found God's powerfully present love?



Thomas à Kempis in 1460

Human beings suffer loneliness in every circumstance of their lives. We may be lonely on our own or in company, even among friends, family or with a spouse. The separation of the self-conscious being and the world is not going to be overcome by any natural process. St Augustine expressed perfectly for all time: *We are restless until we find our rest in Thee.* Our fulfilment and completion is found solely in God. The existential union we crave is encountered only in the Sacred. The

message of the Bible and Christian tradition is that, despite our fragile understanding of God, despite our transitory and flawed theologies, the Holy, Transcendent God, the creator of the universe, is encountered in this life...encountered through Scripture, friendship, memory, community, worship, the hills, the sea, prayer, silence: God is with us.

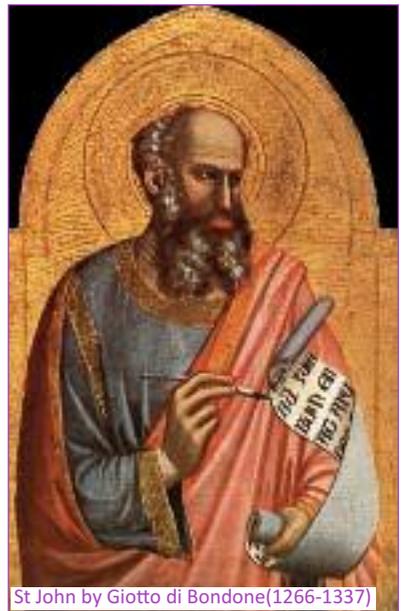
I'm sure we'd want to distance ourselves from a theology which said that disease or a natural disaster were punishments sent by God or that the invasion of one country by another was because a nation had turned its back on God. Equally, I don't imagine that God would save me from personal injury, tragedy or disease but neither do I think He would directly send them. Thomas à Kempis speaks of being *'carried by Almighty God'* and *'guided by the best of guides'*. In my own life, it is often looking

back, not forwards, that I most clearly see God and feel that I can speak of the hand of God upon me. The more we centre ourselves on the Spirit of Jesus, the Presence of the Holy around us and within us, the more we are changed, gradually, slowly, often imperceptibly. There are two kinds of knowledge: knowledge about the material world and knowledge of the soul, the mind, the consciousness. By influencing us inside, God changes us and the history of the world.

Let me close with this. According to tradition, John of the Fourth Gospel, John, the mystic of love, was the youngest of Jesus' disciples. Towards the end of his life, living in Ephesus, John had grown very weak. He needed to be carried to morning and evening prayer. As he was carried each day by members of the community, John would say only one thing: *'Little children, love one another.'* After a while, those who carried him became frustrated with the great man. He had grown up with Jesus. He'd been part of the inner circle, had witnessed the crucifixion and become like a son to Mary, but all he would say was, *'Little children, love one another.'* Finally, he was asked, *'Teacher, why do you always say this?'* John replied, *'Because it is the Lord's commandment, and if it alone is done, it is enough.'*

The more open we are to the Spirit of Jesus, the more the Spirit influences and shapes our life, grants us grace, mercy and forgiveness and enables us more and more to do the same. Love is not good works: it is an all-embracing relationship with the Holy. With sincerity, we can say the hand of God is upon us.

Bible Readings: Jeremiah 4: 11 - 12, 22 - 28 1 Timothy 1: 12 - 17 St Luke 15: 1 - 10



St John by Giotto di Bondone(1266-1337)



William Blake's *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, 1808

What on earth are we to make of apocalyptic literature and Jesus' returning on the clouds of heaven?

Jesus said, *'No one knows the day or the hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; the Father alone knows.'* Chapter 24 of St Matthew's Gospel is largely made up of apocalyptic writing, sayings about the end time when the Messiah will return, a time of great disruption and distress on the earth. From the First Evangelist, we read:

*The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give off light;
the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.
The tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of
Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.
But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels in
heaven, or the Son, but the Father only.*

Jesus compares the violent, sudden coming of the Son of Man to the Flood, Noah and the ark. Jesus says, *‘Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.’* These verses are extraordinarily dramatic. They signify that most people will be taken by surprise. God will break into human history and God’s dream will be made real.

In the Book of Isaiah, God’s dream is that the earth will *‘learn war no more’* and that God’s people will walk in the light of the LORD. In St Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, the apostle tells the church community in Rome to put on Christ; to put on the armour of light, cast off the works of darkness, because the Day of the Lord is at hand.

William Blake’s painting, *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, captures the turmoil and theatre of the end time event. It depicts Noah, Abraham, Elijah, Mary, Seth and Jesus, *Elohim*, Adam and Cain, clouds of women and children, falling devils and rising angels. Blake was haunted by the last days. He painted the scene at least seven times, the last one he kept by him until his death. What are we to make of this apocalyptic literature?

In Jesus’ day, apocalyptic literature was not new. It was used centuries earlier of the fall of Babylon and we can find the same imagery in the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel. In the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of God coming to the earth: he sees a whirlwind coming from the north, a great cloud of raging fire engulfing itself and brightness all around it. Ezekiel speaks of a man high above a throne set in the firmament, a throne of sapphire stone. It betters anything the special effects wizards at Hollywood could ever do! What are we to make of these verses?

The writer and columnist, Andrew Norman Wilson (A N Wilson), attributes the decline of the Church in England to two simple reasons. The first is sex. Traditional Christianity taught that there is no permitted sexual act outside marriage but, says Wilson, no one really believes this. We may add that many of the churches are getting it wrong on the role of women and homosexuality and now equal marriage. These issues are so foundational to what it means to be human that the credibility of the Christianity itself is called into question.

The second reason Wilson offers is decline in belief itself. Put bluntly, he says, *‘Most people simply cannot subscribe to the traditional creeds. No number of Alpha courses can make people believe that God took human form of a Virgin, or rose from the dead. They simply can’t swallow it. They see no reason, therefore, to listen to a Church that propounds these stories and then presumes to tell them how to behave in the bedroom.’* If A N Wilson is right, what am I to tell you this morning about the end times, the apocalypse, and the Son of Man returning on the clouds of heaven?



Professor Hans Küng

Described by some as the greatest living theologian, the Swiss-born Roman Catholic priest and professor, Hans Küng, describes the history of Christianity in five broad paradigms. The history of the Church or churches is not homogenous, a history in one colour. It can, says Küng, be divided into five paradigms. These are: the apocalyptic era up to the end of the first century; the early Church up to the sixth century; the Roman and Mediaeval

Church; the Protestant paradigm; and the modern paradigm of the quest for the historical Jesus and ecumenism. Küng says that the Church is on the verge of entering an altogether new paradigm. I mention Küng's analysis of Church history because I want to show that, in the history of the Church, there was an apocalyptic era, a time when many in the Church believed that Christ would return. It had its roots in the Jewish belief that, one day, God's Messiah would come.

In his most recent book, *Can we save the Catholic Church?*, Professor Küng criticises the Roman Church for failing to take seriously the well-founded complaints of the Reformers, including Luther, and for adopting an attitude of hostility towards the Enlightenment and scientific thought. If part of our present-day problem is that the churches have been defensive about the Enlightenment and scientific thought, they are also plagued with the Protestant disease, namely, the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is a perfect storm. What am I to say about the end times, the apocalypse and the Son of Man returning on the clouds of heaven?

The first thing we must say is that the language of the New Testament is not literal; it never was. At the fall of Babylon, the same imagery and language was used and the stars did not fall from the sky! The imagery or mythology means that God's Presence is an earth-shattering experience. The second thing we must say is that the earth may come to an end but it will be by a collision with an asteroid or some such thing and not a violent event by the hand of God. Our theological understanding has moved on and even if Jesus believed that event would come in His lifetime, as some scholars say, still we must move on. We do not live in the apocalyptic era!

In our passage this morning, Jesus said, *'But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, or the Son, but the Father only.'* The words, *'Or the Son'*, mean that Jesus did not know. In later manuscripts, these three words were removed by the Church because the Church wanted to stress the divinity of Christ, and to do that they needed to show that Jesus must have known!

The other phrase to notice, which is not explicit in the Good News Version, is 'the night.' In speaking of the Son of Man, the coming of God's Messiah, Jesus says the 'thief' or Son of Man comes in 'the night'. 'The night' is an allusion to the night of the first Passover, the beginning of the liberation of God's people from the land of Egypt.

Jesus is the new Passover. He will be the salvation of God's people. God will come to us out of the darkness. So, what does this apocalyptic passage mean for us today?

Once we free ourselves from apocalyptic theology and from the literal interpretation of such imagery, we begin to hear, see and feel the message that God's Presence is an earth-shattering experience.

Once we free ourselves from apocalyptic theology and from the literal interpretation of such imagery, we begin to hear, see and feel the message that God's Presence is an earth-shattering experience. It changes everything. The solidity of God, God as our Rock, is of an altogether different dimension and, standing on that, the earth could end and, says the psalmist, we will not be afraid.

This passage encourages us to root ourselves in the spiritual life and to see the material universe, the universe of physical matter, of fermions and bosons, as transitory and insubstantial. Encounter with God is an all-embracing, life-changing, liberating experience. The passage also helps us to see that God comes to us in the night, through the darkness. The darkness may be the inner darkness of the soul, the trauma of a life broken by events, and it may also point us to the luminous darkness of God. In Scripture, we continually need to go deeper than the surface. Paul speaks of putting on the armour of Christ; it is, for me, a spiritual armour. It means to be conscious of Christ everyday, as often as we can, on the bus, walking, in the street, in and through interaction with others, and alone and in moments of reflection.

Bringing Christ to the forefront of our consciousness, we open ourselves to the possibility of God working in us and manifesting God's dream for ourselves and the wider world. Sometimes preachers tell us that apocalyptic passages mean we are to look to the skies for God; I say we are to find God inside, in the heart, mind and soul. It is not a case of preparing for our final judgement, but opening up ourselves to the Spirit of God now, in the present. Let God emerge from within you. Be alert to God's Presence now.

Bible Readings: Isaiah 2: 1 – 5 Romans 13: 11 – 14 St Matthew 24: 33 – 44



All of the titles for Jesus are metaphors. They are exclamations of faith, not doctrine.

The National Cathedral of Brazil, in the capital city Brasília, is a cathedral building like no other. It is a hyperboloid structure with sixteen concrete columns, which lean into each other and then, once they touch near the top, the columns open outwards like the petals of a flower or, better, like hands opened in prayer. Surrounded by a deep pool of water, the walls of the cathedral are entirely made of glass. The glass is unbroken and to enter the cathedral one must go down a walkway under the pool of water and come up inside the sanctuary.

As it descends, on either side of the walkway, there are statues of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These double-life-size bronze statues are not divided two on each side, as one might expect, or all four stand together on the same side. In fact, three stand on the left side and only one on the right. Matthew, Mark and Luke are on the left, while the fourth evangelist, John, is on the right. Why is this?

Matthew, Mark and Luke are what scholars call the synoptic evangelists. In other words, there is substantial overlap in what these evangelists have written. Their texts are easily set side by side in parallel columns. Of the statues, Matthew is holding his scroll, his Gospel, with both hands. Mark, bare-chested, has his closed scroll in his lowered right hand and his left hand, also lowered, is open as if in prayer. Like Mark,



Eagle symbol of St John the Evangelist from the Book of Dimma

Luke holds his closed scroll in his lowered right hand, while his left rests on his heart and his head is veiled for worship. On the other side of the walkway, John faces the three synoptic authors. He holds his scroll in his left hand, so that his right can be raised with palm toward Matthew, Mark and Luke in an 'authoritative gesture of speaker, teacher and witness.' In this 'sculptural complex', John alone teaches the others.¹

In iconography, the Fourth Gospel is often depicted as an eagle because it was believed that an eagle could look directly into the sun. The Fourth Evangelist's sight or insight is said to be more penetrating than that of the other three. Let me give you an example of that. John's Gospel was written

some decades after those of Matthew, Mark and Luke and there is a view that the Fourth Evangelist is revising, if not correcting, the stories and interpretation of the earlier works. In the earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, we have the story of the feeding of the 5000. The story tells how 5000 people were fed. It finishes with the words, '*And all ate and were filled.*' It is possible to read that account and believe that this story is about ensuring that everyone in this material world has enough food to eat. It is a material, social and political gospel. The evangelist is content to leave it there. However, in John, it is not possible to arrive at this conclusion. John reinterprets the story and has Jesus state explicitly, '*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life.*'

Clement of Alexandria called John's Gospel the '*spiritual gospel*'. There are many other examples where John has reworked the stories in the Synoptic Gospels. Even the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is reworked. In Mark, Jesus seems resigned to the turn of events and is a pawn being pushed around, while in John He is totally in control. In Mark, Jesus wants the cup of suffering to pass; in John, He gladly takes it. In Mark, the disciples flee for their lives; in John, Jesus has them released from the Roman soldiers. John's insight into Jesus is more penetrating than the others. The first 'sign' in John's Gospel – there are no miracles in John's Gospel – the first 'sign' comes

¹ From John Dominic Crossan in *The Power of Parable* p220



in chapter 2, with Jesus turning water into wine. Do we honestly think that the 'sign' at Cana is just about wine? It is not for nothing that the Fourth Evangelist stands outside the Cathedral in Brasília teaching the others.

Mindful then of this greater depth, we approach the first chapter of John's Gospel, the *Prologue* to the Gospel, with our eyes and ears open. The evangelist writes, *'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth..... No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father. He has declared Him.'* What does this poetic overture mean? Let me stress this word *'poetic.'* Throughout Scripture, we are dealing with analogy.

Recently, in *The Times*, there was an excellent letter written by an Anglican cleric. He said that the Church needed to examine old orthodoxies with *'an injection of intellectual courage.'* He wrote:

For instance, Biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the notion of the verbal infallibility of the Bible cannot sensibly be maintained. It is well established that the world was not created in six days. Literary and theological objections to the idea of the Virgin Birth and the moral inadequacy of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement are clear. Philosophical analysis of the nature of religious language has shown that it should rarely be taken literally. And so on.

Crucially, he said, it is a mistake to think that being intellectually honest about language and the Bible will mean the destruction of faith. He did not know whether such honesty would bring more people to worship each week, but that it would enhance the Church's integrity and be an encouragement to those genuinely, openly, searching for spiritual truth. What does the poetic overture of John's Gospel mean?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, says John. This poetry is about

Incarnation or the 'embodiment' of God in the world. In popular Christianity, too often there is the idea that God is 'out there', above us, beyond the world and entirely separate. The birth of Jesus was God breaking into the world; the birth is a violent intervention or interruption in the course of history. It is better to conceive of God as the One in whom we live and move and have our being. God's Spirit permeates all things.

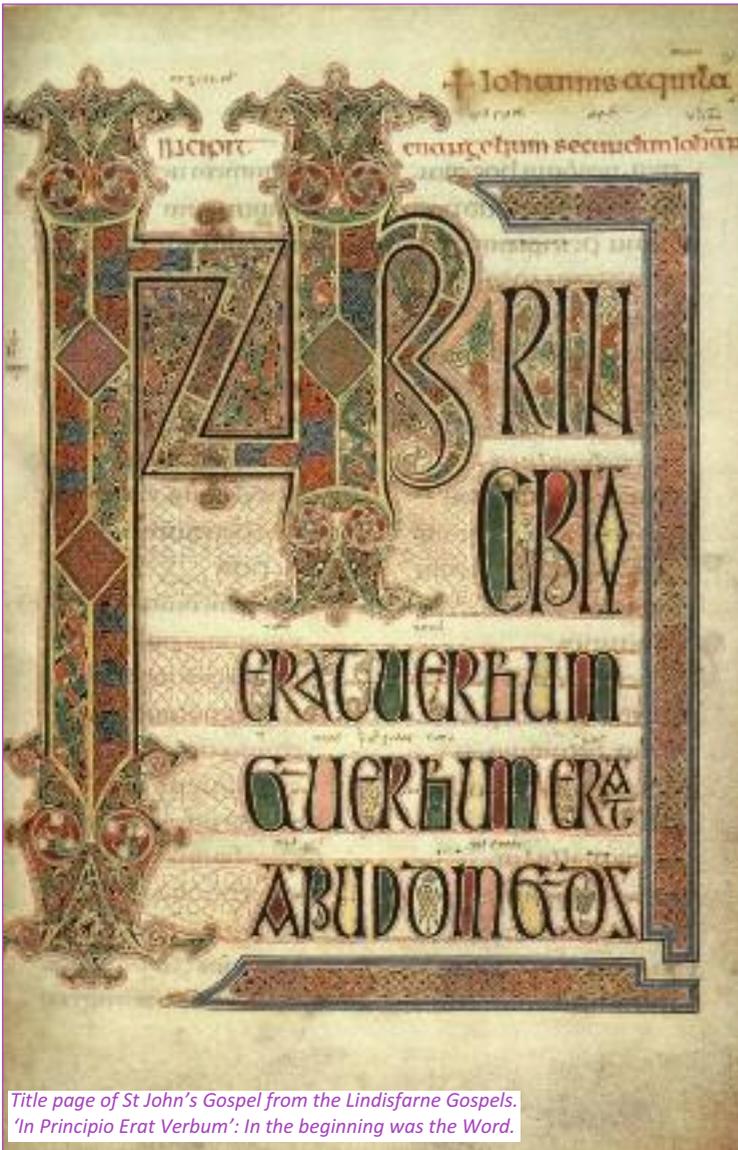
God is around us and within us, there to be encountered, if we but learn how to open ourselves to Him. Jesus is not to be conceived of as an intervention, so much as a 'Spirit Person' who was supremely open to the Presence of God. The mystics often speak of human emptiness which God may fill. The poet R S Thomas once wrote, '*What resources have I other than the emptiness without him of my whole being, a vacuum he may not abhor?*' The point of the Birth narratives, of the baby in the cave or stable, is that Jesus is human, as human as we are, with no difference. He embodied God. Perhaps through genetic makeup, upbringing and teaching or whatever, Jesus was a quite remarkable, unique man, in whom the Early Church came to say that they saw and felt the Spirit of God. The phrase '*The Word became flesh*' is about the embodiment of God in a person, a Man who taught that the reign of God, the Spirit of God, is within each one of us. The spiritual journey is, in part, an emptying of ourselves of all the trash and trappings of this material world, in order that there be quiet, quiet enough for the Holy to be heard.

The spiritual journey is, in part, an emptying of ourselves of all the trash and trappings of this material world, in order that there be quiet, quiet enough for the Holy to be heard.

All of the terms or titles used for Jesus are metaphors and almost all of them were faith statements made by the Early Church and not by Jesus Himself. What would we think of a man who said, '*I am the light of the world*', '*I am the bread of life*', '*I am the way, the truth and the life*', '*I am the true vine*', '*I am the resurrection and the life*', '*I am the door*', '*I am the good shepherd*' and '*Before Abraham was, I am.*' Psychiatrists have terms for people who make such claims. These are not Jesus' words but metaphors employed by the Early Church because this Man from Nazareth changed their lives and, in time, has gone on to change the history of the world.

Titles such as '*Son of God*', '*Lamb of God*', '*Light of the world*' and '*High Priest*' are all metaphors. They are exclamations of faith, not doctrine; they are the '*poetry of devotion and hyperbole of the heart*'.² Perhaps the best term or title is in Colossians, where the writer describes Jesus as '*the image of the invisible God.*' The word '*image*'

² From N T Wright & M Borg in *The Meaning of Jesus* p150



Title page of St John's Gospel from the Lindisfarne Gospels. 'In Principio Erat Verbum': In the beginning was the Word.

means '*icon*'. In other words, this is a sacred image intended for meditation and the more deeply one gazes into that image or icon, the more deeply one is drawn into God.

In the *Prologue* of John's Gospel, which is substantially drawn from the Wisdom poetry of the Old Testament, we learn that the Early Church community believed that Jesus leads those with an open heart, an open mind, into the womb of the Father. Part of our spiritual journey, that self-emptying, is the process of gaining self-knowledge. St Paul writes about '*knowing as we are known.*' In other words, the spiritual journey is about knowing ourselves as

we are known by God. That knowledge of self is a doorway through which we encounter the God who loves us. The Fourth Evangelist spoke of Jesus as the '*Son of God, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known to us.*' The terms are all to do with intimacy, closeness and being known, truly known. Jesus welcomes each of us into that closeness. Rightly, the Fourth Evangelist stands alone and teaches the others.

Bible Readings Jeremiah 31: 7 – 14 Ephesians 1: 3 – 14 St John 1: 10 – 18



Issues 1 and 2 of *Free to Question* contain earlier sermons preached by Revd Scott S McKenna at Mayfield Salisbury. Copies are still available from the church office or can be viewed on our web site www.mayfieldsalisbury.org on the *Publications* page.

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