

Issue 1

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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CONTENTS

PAGE

ASSISTED DYING

4

The Church states that taking a life violates human life: its value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering, but there is more than one Christian point of view on assisted dying.

PARRIS & CÉVENNES

9

We need a theological outlook which is not superstitious, not looking for supernatural miracles and which takes seriously the reality of the world in which we live.

DEAD MAN WALKING

14

There is much for us to notice in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It can be understood as the Parable of the Older Brother, or, as I prefer, the Parable of the Forgiving Father.

ABRAHAM, SARAH AND MARY GRIFFITHS

20

God is involved in our lives without ever disturbing the laws of nature or logic. In prayer and through personal darkness, God is a very real presence.

DIVINE DARKNESS

25

The Trinity is the most characteristic element of the Christian understanding of God. The doctrine is a helpful construct but it is not God. God, or whatever we mean by that term, is Mystery dwelling in silence, darkness.

DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE

31

Thomas Mann said, 'Myth is the way things never were but always are.' The Bible story (from the Book of Genesis) of Esau and Jacob is a myth or faith narrative about good and evil and the dual nature of humanity.

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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

All sermons can be accessed in audio format as well as
text at www.mayfieldsalisbury.org



The Death of Socrates, Jacques-Louis David (1787)

'The Church states that taking a life violates human life: its value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering, but there is more than one Christian point of view on assisted dying.'

At this year's General Assembly, the Church and Society Council will as part of its report present a paper entitled 'End of Life Issues.' In the paper, the Council reflects on palliative care, Advance Decisions (popularly known as living wills), sedation and assisted dying or euthanasia, among other things. Insofar as I can within the limits of a sermon, I would like to reflect on this paper. I want to do so because as Joan Bakewell puts it:

[End of life issues] won't go away because we are living longer into an old age that brings with it all the humiliations of being helpless, incontinent and in pain.¹

What is more, there are high profile cases of individuals travelling to Switzerland, to the Dignitas clinic, to a country where assisted dying does not breach the law. Some one hundred British subjects have done so and not one of those who accompanied them have been prosecuted on their return. In a recent article in *The Times*, Bakewell states:

Last December, the parents of Daniel James were told they would not face charges for travelling to Zurich with their son. Yet, oddly, when Debbie Purdy, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, sought reassurance from the courts that her husband, were he to travel with her, would not be prosecuted she was refused. This is a mess. And we all know it.

You may remember the case of Daniel James, the twenty-three year old rugby player who died in a Swiss clinic after being paralysed in an accident. The Coroner recorded a verdict of suicide. The Public Prosecution Service said that it had sufficient evidence that Daniel's parents had breached the 1961 Suicide Act but that a prosecution would not be in the public interest. While I understand the decision of the court in the Debbie Purdy case, it is a mess when courts are defending laws for which, when broken, the

¹ *The Times* 15th May, 2009

prosecution services fail to pursue a prosecution. This morning I want to offer some thoughts on the paper which the General Assembly will receive later this week, not least because I think that there may be more than one Christian point of view.

Firstly, however, let me begin with a story: Anne Turner, a retired doctor from Bath, who suffered from progressive supranuclear palsy, a rare disease which involves the deterioration and death of parts of the brain. Dr Turner died with the help of Dignitas, the Swiss assisted suicide organisation, in January 2006, aged 66. It was a not a low-key event: she was accompanied by a BBC crew and it made headline news. Speaking in December last year, Dr Turner's daughter, Sophie, said that while many people have expressed their sympathy, there are friends who have still not acknowledged her mother's death. Sophie said:

We have a real problem with grief and death in this country. People avoid the subject. Our mother said when we were growing up that you should not ostracise people who are grieving. It is very good advice.²

Dr Turner's son, Edward, said that the family is not haunted by their witnessing their mother's death. What haunts them is the memory of their father's lingering, natural death in 2002. Their father, Jack, deliberately starved and dehydrated himself in hospital to end his suffering from multiple system atrophy, an incurable condition similar to his wife. Sophie said:

You'd think that seeing my mother die would have long-lasting, negative consequences, but I think it made it easier because it was a better death. We had seen our father decline. The last time I saw him he couldn't swallow. He had these swabs you could put in his mouth and he was obviously really thirsty because he was sucking at them like a baby. It was horrific.

It's odd that we let people do [what my father did] every day and it never makes the press but when my mother has a peaceful, painless, dignified, swift, demystified death it's front page news. It's so wrong, so unhealthy.

The Turner family, like so many others, has not been prosecuted.

What are the *Christian* responses to assisted death? The paper to the General Assembly begins with the words of St Paul:

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

The paper holds up the death of Abraham as the ideal death. In contrast to the many murders and massacres in the Old Testament, Abraham 'breathed his last and died at

² *The Times* 9th December, 2008 T2 p2f

a good old age, an old man and full of years.’ Without mapping its theological or philosophical progression, the paper states:

Euthanasia [is] opposed for a number of reasons: for example

God has forbidden it The command from God which says ‘you must not kill’ is usually interpreted as meaning ‘you must not murder.’ However, a broader interpretation is that you must not take human life. This rules out euthanasia...as carrying [it] out would be against God’s commandments, and would be an attack on the sovereignty of God.

Human life is special Human beings are made in God’s image, therefore they have a special value and dignity. This value doesn’t depend on the quality of a particular life, and taking a life violates that special value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.

Human life is sacred The sanctity of human lives derives from the fact that God created them; therefore human life should be protected and preserved, whatever happens, and we shouldn’t interfere with God’s plans by shortening human lives.

The report concludes that more money is needed for palliative care. In a manner reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter, biblical scholarship is cast adrift and argument is replaced by dogmatic statement. The paper to the General Assembly states, ‘Taking a life violates [human] value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.’ Do we believe that – think of your own parents, partner, children? Whether it is the doctor who administers the medication leading to death (voluntary euthanasia) or the patient (assisted dying) the paper states that the Church will tolerate neither. In this paper, once accepted, the Church states that taking a life violates human value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.

There is another Christian perspective on this matter, one which will not deny an individual the right to honour their God-given value and dignity through deciding themselves the manner in which they die. Powerlessness is one of the most dehumanising aspects of being a patient, of being incapacitated in some way, and to have your decision-making taken away at a most crucial moment of your life – that is, the moment of your death – seems to me to be a supreme indignity that no one should suffer, if at all possible. God has given us the power of reason and the power to take responsibility for our decisions. I acknowledge the weakness in so-called Advance Decisions or living wills because circumstances change but, in cases where the person has power of thought and reason, I am uneasy that the State or the Church should deny people the power to make their own decisions appropriate to their unique set of circumstances. No one is advocating irresponsibility.

Described by some as the greatest theologian alive today, Professor Hans Kung said that what was 'decisive' in his attitude to euthanasia was 'the terribly slow process' of his brother's death. Over a process of a year, Kung states, 'one limb after another, one organ after another ceased to function,' and eventually 'after days of gasping [my brother finally] choked on the rising fluid in his lungs.' Theologically speaking, Kung states:

Those who trust in God at the same time trust that death is not the end. In the light of the Eternal One, who alone can grant 'deep, deep eternity' the death of mortal life becomes transcended into God's eternal life.

As the old prayer for the dead in the eucharist has it, 'Vita mutatur, non tollitur: life is transformed, not taken away.' So should I be anxiously concerned how short or long this life is finally to be?³

'Kung believes strongly that if one believes in a life beyond death, then when death comes in the fullness of time it should be embraced and accepted, or even deliberately chosen, if the alternative is simply prolongation of this life "under conditions which are no longer commensurate with human dignity."' Kung states:

Precisely because I am convinced that another new life is intended for me, as a Christian I see myself given freedom by God to have a say in my dying, a say about the nature and time of my death – in so far as this is granted to me.

For Kung, insisting that people, our loved ones, put up with the most intolerable suffering over an extended period of time when we take seriously the Christian hope of resurrection seems very strange. The late Cardinal Basil Hume encouraged us to picture life as a pilgrimage towards God, a hope, an expectation, a 'looking forward to the vision of God.' Our life, he said, is a life towards death, 'a cause of peace, a cause of joy; one day forward, one step nearer.' In his reflections on the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, Cardinal Hume spoke of her as now 'locked for ever in God's ecstatic love.' When he was diagnosed with cancer, he called his friend Timothy Wright, the Abbot of Ampleforth. The abbot said, 'Congratulations! That's brilliant news! I wish I was coming with you.' The great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as he was led out

What people want most is a sense of their value and dignity and the one thing that secures that more than anything else is the power of choice.

³ Paul Badham *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?* p67

to be hanged by the Nazis, he said, 'This is the end. For me the beginning of life.' In his book, *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?*, Professor Paul Badham states:

It is utterly paradoxical that today it is Christians who are characteristically seen as clinging to life, whereas in the early Church St Athanasius believed that the most convincing argument for belief in the resurrection of Jesus was the fact that Christians 'treat death as nothing...they go eagerly to meet it...rather than remain in this present life.' This is the genuinely Christian approach to the understanding of life. It would be good if it could once more be the case, as it was for the earliest Christians, that an assisted [death] at the very end of a fulfilled life could once again be described as 'a noble death.' It would also be an act of faith and trust, giving back to God the life we owe to him.⁴

There is a genuine concern that if we change the culture to permit assisted dying we will end up on a slippery slope: that assisted dying will be extended to people who do not want it or could not give their informed consent; that palliative care will obviate the need for assisted dying; that funding for palliative care will diminish; and, trust between doctors and patients will be eroded. Commenting on the empirical evidence from the Netherlands and the US State of Oregon, Professor Raymond Tallis of the Royal College of Physicians, states that 'Every single one of those assumptions is false.'

What people want most is a sense of their value and dignity and the one thing that secures that more than anything else is the power of choice. In the US State of Oregon, only 1 in 25 who formally make a request for medication use it. What people want is peace of mind; they want to know that they will have assistance to die if their condition becomes utterly unbearable to them. Edward Turner said of his mother, 'The fact is that when my mother got approval to die she became a happier person.'

My text this morning is, '*For to love God is to keep his commands; and these are not burdensome, because every child of God overcomes the world. Now, the victory by which the world is overcome is our faith, for who is victor over the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*'⁵ Every child of God overcomes the world! Our faith enables us to overcome the world!

Bible readings for 17.05.09: Genesis 35:9-15; 1 John 5:1-6; St John 15:9-17

⁴ *ibid* p120
⁵ 1 John 5:3-5



Thérèse in July 1896

We need a theological outlook which is not superstitious, not looking for supernatural miracles and which takes seriously the reality of the world in which we live.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, 'I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter; and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me, saying, 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.' And, the prophet asks God, 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' Jeremiah is talking about the hardships which he has faced but his words are also on behalf of the people of Israel. The Babylonian Empire has crushed the Jewish tribes, the Temple imagined by David and built by Solomon, has been destroyed.

The prophet asks God, 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' To God, the prophet asks, 'Why do the other nations succeed and we suffer and are broken?' 'What kind of God are you?' Israel, says the prophet, has been led like a docile lamb to the slaughter and where is God? The enemies of Israel have said, 'Let us destroy them and cut them off from the land of the living, that their name be remembered no more.' The city has been plundered, the walls torn down, the Temple destroyed and the leaders and many of the people have been captured and enslaved by the Babylonians. These events took place in 587BC, over two and a half thousand years ago, but the people and the prophet ask a very human question: 'Why does wickedness prosper and where is God in our suffering?' 'We have worshipped You,' the people and prophet say, 'and where are You now?'

In 30AD, towards the end of his public ministry, Jesus predicts his death. He told his disciples, 'The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him.' Here, in Jesus, we have the fullest and most complete expression of God in humanity: He was the Word made flesh, and He told His disciples, 'I am to be betrayed, handed over to the wicked, and I shall be killed.' Why is it that the wicked prosper? Why do faithful people suffer? If Jesus may be called the most faithful human to walk

the earth suffered at the hands of the wicked, who will be free from suffering? Where is God and what kind of God is this? Only the crudest theology would say that God planned the death of His Son, planned it as a substitutionary atonement, a just satisfaction for the wrongs God had suffered at the hands of humanity: that theology is immoral. No, Jesus stood against the Temple authorities, he stood against Rome; he opposed the oppression of the poor and the powerless. He was executed for insurrection, for a crime against the state. Why do the wicked prosper and the poor, the faithful, suffer? Where is God and what kind of God is this?

Bad theology, however well-intentioned, is undoubtedly one of the reasons why people leave the Church and why some never enter its sanctuaries. This week I was amused by the hysterical rant of Matthew Parris in *The Times*.⁶ Parris was commenting, vehemently I may say, on the arrival of the relics of St Thérèse. Thousands of 'pilgrims' have already journeyed to the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Portsmouth to see the relics before they are moved on to the next of twenty-eight other sites. Pilgrims lit candles and touched the Perspex casing in which the relics lay, the relics being a thigh and foot bone. Matthew Parris wrote, 'Atheists, come out and fight these nutters.' Parris wrote, 'Pilgrims?' Isn't the word 'dupes?' 'Would a conference of the Flat Earth Society get giggle-free treatment on the news?' With great passion, he wrote:

How can bishops sanction this paganistic nonsense? I had been wondering whether Richard Dawkins's critics were right to complain that his atheism was intolerant; whether we atheists were wrong to rage with such certitude about what is really only an absence of belief. But these relics have performed a miracle: they have re-inspired in me a fiery conviction. We non-believers must rage, insist, proclaim.

Closet atheists of Britain, come out! Don't 'respect' this credulous folly! Don't let the madresses of these faith communities go by default! Stop our politicians kowtowing to nutters!

Agnosticism is not enough.

Bad theology almost always pushes people away from the Church. Calvin had no time for relics; he believed them to be idolatry. He famously scoffed that there were enough pieces of the Cross on which Jesus died to build a ship! If only Matthew Parris had taken the time to find out just a little background information on St Thérèse, he may not have been so eager to rant. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, St Thérèse is the patron saint of sufferers of AIDS and she is not that for nothing. In her spiritual writing, she states:

⁶ *The Times*, 17 September 2009

Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.

Through the simplest of actions, she sought to bring beauty and peace into the lives of those who suffered. In a world of self-interest, cynicism and relativism, she is worthy of our attention. Sometimes criticized of being too child-like, she wrote:

For me, prayer, is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward Heaven; it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy; in a word, something noble, supernatural, which enlarges my soul and unites it to God.... I have not the courage to look through books for beautiful prayers.... I do as a child who has not learned to read, I just tell our Lord all that I want and He understands.

'Closet atheists of Britain, come out! Don't 'respect' this credulous folly! Don't let the madnesses of these faith communities go by default! Stop our politicians kowtowing to nutters!'

In this case, it is quite easy to dismiss the rant of Matthew Parris; he has not sought to enquire after the values she lived by and how it is a decent thing to celebrate those values. Nor has he understood that, for some, being close to the relics will bring to mind and heart in a more intense and personal way the communal memory and example of the saint. Is it not the case that a home, a room, a place or an artefact of some kind can bring to mind the memory of a loved one now deceased? Why not a relic for those who have cherished the faithful witness of the saint? Parris is right, however, to challenge any theology which indicates that the relics in themselves possess supernatural powers. That is pagan and superstitious. From bad theology, Parris leaps to atheism. Like Ovid, he argues, 'I am disposed to think that there are no gods.'

Bad theology does take people away from the Church. We need a theological outlook which is not superstitious, not looking for supernatural miracles and which takes seriously the reality of the world in which we live. In this world, God did not prevent the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem in 587BC, He did not save Jesus from the Roman authorities, He did not stop the Holocaust, He did not prevent 9/11 and He is not

intervening to stop climate change. We need to have a way of thinking about God which makes sense of the world life we actually are required to live, which then helps us to pray in ways which are most appropriate and not to spend our time asking for the wrong things. Jeremiah asks for himself and the Jewish people, 'Why do the wicked succeed? Why do Your people suffer? What kind of God are You?' And Jesus said, 'The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and He will be killed.' We cannot reflect on these questions often enough because it is our continual temptation to hope and pray for a God of magic miracles! We know that He did not stop the Holocaust but we are secretly hoping that He will intervene to solve our little problem

This week I revisited the book, *To Travel Hopefully*, written by Christopher Rush. In it, Rush reflects on the death of his wife and his journey back to life from that event. In the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson, he travelled to Cévennes and to the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame des Neiges. He was welcomed by the monks, attended their daily cycle of services – Vigils for an hour before dawn, meditation and reading till 7am, Lauds and the Eucharist, Terce before morning chores, two other offices of worship, Vespers at 6.30pm and Compline at 8.00pm. While there, Rush met a philosopher called Pierre. Pierre told Rush:

Time will heal you, in spite of what you say now...Time cures grief because in ten years from now you will no longer be the same person. So it's not the grief that dies – it goes away with the other person you once were. The offended can eventually forgive the offender because neither is the same person after a time. It's like nations coming together after two generations when they've been at war.....That's why people in love get divorced ten years on. Neither is the same human being. The chances are that they are always likely to change in different directions, not together, as there are so many directions possible for a human being. Only if there has been what your Shakespeare calls a marriage of true minds in the first place will they then evolve together, in harmony. That's very rare.

One of the monks, who was party to this conversation, said that belief in God was the ultimate leap of human imagination and that, while imagination needed an abundance of fuel to keep the mind racing, faith was able to keep running even when there was no longer any reason to believe. The monk said of death:

Every man has his fears, whether he is a monk or a man of the world. For the monk death is the bell which calls him to meet God, and that meeting is what monastic life has been all about and what it leads up to. The monk sees death not as a rupture with life but as the door that leads to the true life.

Death in the abstract simply does not exist.

After the discussion, it was time for Compline. Rush filed into the chapel. His experience that night had been no different from that of RLS just over one hundred years earlier. Stevenson had written:

The plain whitewashed chapel, the hooded figures in the choir, the lights alternately occluded and revealed, the strong, manly singing, the silence, the sight of cowed heads bowed in prayer, and the clear trenchant beating of the bell, breaking in to show that the last office was over and the hour of sleep had come; these things had a flavour and a significance that cannot be rendered in words. Only to the faithful can this be made clear, to one like myself....



Robert Louis Stevenson

Rush admits that when he had arrived at the monastery he was sick in body and soul and that when he left he felt infinitely refreshed in both. Rush had benefited enormously from the philosophical discussions with the other visitors and with the monks. He had not found direct answers to his direct questions, questions no less piercing than those of Jeremiah, but in the monastery he found peace and spiritual comfort in the otherness of the sacred space, the ancient worship and the devotion of the monks.

So long as Matthew Parris rants, so long as he is listening more to his own voice than to the insights and wisdom of others, the wisdom of generations, he will not hear the still, small voice of God. Venerating a decayed thigh and foot bone or harbouring expectations of great and dramatic, not to mention personal, interventions in life is not very helpful either. People of faith can sometimes be very silly and superstitious. The next time you are tempted to ask for a small intervention remember the exile of the Jewish nation and the destruction of their Temple, remember Jesus was killed by Rome and that there was a holocaust and 9/11. But remember also that God is everything, everywhere, and if we avail ourselves of Him He will lightly, mysteriously and imperceptibly bring a flavour and significance into our lives that cannot be rendered in words.

Bible readings for 20.09.09: Jeremiah 11: 18-20, 12: 1-6; St Mark 9:30-37



There is much for us to notice in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It can be understood as the Parable of the Older Brother, or, as I prefer, the Parable of the Forgiving Father.

There is so much for us to notice in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The name itself is open to dispute. The parable is popularly recognised as that of the prodigal son, but the story does not reach its climax with the son who is lost. Most of the parables do not reach their point until the very end. At the end of this parable, it is the older son and not the younger who is at the centre of the story. It is the older son who with indignation and righteousness is enraged, not so much with the return of his younger

brother *per se* but by the fact that their father has welcomed him so warmly and laid on a sumptuous, extravagant feast for him. The older son protests that his younger brother is the very son who wanted their father dead. To have asked for his inheritance, as he did, is to wish his father's death. The older son does not hold back with his father: he wasted your livelihood on harlots and you have killed the fatted calf for him! Nevertheless, the father said, 'Your brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' The emotions at play in this family dispute are there for all to see. The older son will not be persuaded.

Besides being referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son or understood as the Parable of the Older Brother, it may also be thought of as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. The father will carry the deep and painful memory of his son asking for his inheritance. He will remember that conversation as if it were yesterday. His young son, whom he had loved from birth, wished him dead. To his face, his son said, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' It is a painful, painful experience to have love rejected and the father has carried that poisonous memory for too long. Nevertheless, he saw his son returning from a great way off. The implication is that the father looked to the horizon for his son not just on that day but on every day since his son had left. In hope, and love, he wanted more than anything for his son to return.

What is more, the custom would have been for the returning son to march all the way to the father's door and, once there, to fall at his father's feet and beg forgiveness. In the story, as Jesus tells it, the father runs out to greet his son and before his son can fall on his knees at his father's feet, his father embraces him. He does not let his son fall to the ground. In the end, I tend to think of it as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. In the end, the father is loving and forgiving to both of his sons, the one who spent his livelihood on harlots and the one who was morally self-righteous.

One verse that I particularly like is that of the younger son who, while still in that far country, came to himself. Jesus said:

Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But, when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

The younger son spent his father's livelihood on harlots and ends up craving for the pods intended for the swine. The swine, the pigs, were for the Jews the most unclean animal and this younger son worked with them and craved the very food which they ate. Does he return for selfish reasons or is there within him a residual sense of his father's love for him? That is one of the joys of the story: it leaves us wondering about the sincerity of the son upon his return.

Dead Man Walking is one of the most powerful films that I have ever seen and the book is excellent as well. Set in the United States, it is the true story of a nun, Sister Helen Prejean, who is asked to write to a prisoner on Death Row. The prisoner, Elmo Patrick Sonnier, brutally killed two teenagers. In 1982, Sister Helen was working in a housing project in New Orleans caring for 'poor black residents.' Of her work in New Orleans, she said, 'Death is rampant here – from guns, disease, addiction. Medical care scarcely exists.' She agreed to write to Patrick Sonnier but was warned that he doesn't write. Sonnier and his brother killed a teenage couple on a lovers' lane. Sister Helen asked herself if she really wanted to know this man, what would she say to him and what would he have to say to her. She said that as she sealed the very first envelope to be sent to him she wondered what his two young victims were like and she thought of their parents.

Within a week, Patrick wrote back to her. The man who never writes wrote back to her. He explained that he had tried 'going it alone' but that it was 'just too hard' and her letters would be very welcome. At the time of the murders, the local newspaper, the Iberian, said in its editorial:



Last Supper, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

It's hard to imagine that there may be somebody in this fine community of ours who could contemplate, much less carry out, this vilest of vile deeds.

Sister Helen said that as she and Patrick became steady correspondents she began to see Patrick and think of him as a fellow human being. Helen was entitled to see the documents which the prison held on him. She was told that she could take them home with her if she wanted. She sat in the prison reading the papers. After some time, she decided that she had read enough and could not take them home. Sister Helen said:

I leave the documents on the table and walk across the dying sunlight to the door and close it behind me, the words of Jeremiah welling within me:

*A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and lamenting:
Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted
because they were no more.*

*Innocent Patrick was
not, but this is not a
Table for the innocent.*

Some months later, she wonders if by befriending a killer she is betraying his victims. She has never lost a friend or loved one through murder. She has never experienced the rage, the loss, the grief, the helplessness and the sickening pain day after day, month after month and year after year. But, she says,

Jesus Christ, whose way of life I try to follow, refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence. I pray for the strength to be like him. I cannot believe in a God who metes out hurt for hurt, pain for pain, torture for torture.

Sister Helen persuades Patrick to allow her to be present when he is executed. At first, he resists telling her how terrible it will be, but she insists. She said to him, 'I can't bear the thought that you would die without seeing one loving face. I will be the face of Christ for you. Just look at me.'

Although he received a stay of execution, in the hours before that first date with death, Sister Helen asked him if he believed God had forgiven him. Patrick said, 'At first, no. I felt that even God hated me, but I know now that God forgives me.' She tells him that she has read the papers which the prison holds on him. She says, 'Those poor children. Those poor parents. They must be in hell.' Pat replies:

I will go to my grave feeling bad about those kids. Every night when they dim the lights on the tier I kneel by my bunk and pray for those kids and their parents. Nobody was supposed to get killed.

Although she did not know it at the time, Pat had tried to commit suicide after his arrest. Sister Helen listened to his remorse. She said, 'I just looked at him. I'm not sure how to measure his sincerity.' The prison chaplain had told her that the men on Death Row are scum and that they will try to con her.

In the week before he died, Patrick received the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Mass. Each prisoner remains in their cell while the priest celebrates the Sacrament in the corridor. Sister Helen had helped arrange the service. The audio-taped hymn is played. His head against the bars, Pat listens to every word:

*If you cross the barren desert
you shall not die of thirst.....
be not afraid, I go before you always.....
if you stand before the fires of hell
and death is at your side.....
be not afraid.*

Sister Helen sat in the corridor with the priest and looked into Pat's cell. She said:

I picture the words of the song echoing from room to room within the death house, the words filling the place where the witnesses will sit, where the executioner will stand, the tender, merciful God – words, travelling across the hundred feet of tiled floor that must be walked to where the electric chair waits. I picture the words bouncing off the oak wood of the chair and wrapping themselves round it: be not afraid. I know the words may not stop the death that is about to take place, but the words can breathe courage and dignity into the one who must walk to this oak chair and sit in it.

The old priest says the prayers....and takes the communion wafer from the container and places it on Pat's tongue, then another into my outstretched hand.

'The Body of Christ,' he says. 'Amen.'

She said:

Yes, in this place I believe that you are here, oh Christ, you, who sweat blood and who prayed 'aloud and in silent tears' for your Father to remove your own 'cup' of suffering. This man about to die is not innocent, but he is human, and that is enough to draw you here.

After his execution, Sister Helen opened Pat's Bible. He had highlighted Psalm 31. The psalmist wrote:

*I am contemptible,
loathsome to my neighbours,
to my friends a thing of fear.....
I am forgotten, as good as dead in their hearts,
something discarded.
.....As they combine against me,
plotting to take my life.
But I put my trust in You, [O Lord]....*



St Macarius of Egypt

Elmo Patrick Sonnier knew who he was. He came to himself and in his final days he heard Jesus say, 'This is my Body, which is broken for you.' Patrick felt the embrace of the Father's arms. Innocent Patrick was not, but this is not a Table for the innocent.

Let me close with the rather amusing story told by the desert fathers of a very self-satisfied monk called Theopemptus who came to see the great spiritual master Macarius. The story goes that "when he was alone with him, Macarius asked, 'How are things going with you?' Theopemptus replied, 'Thanks to your prayers, all is well.' The old man asked, 'Do you still have to battle with your sexual fantasies?' He answered, 'No, up to now all is well.' He was afraid to admit anything. But the old man said to him, 'I have lived for many years as an ascetic and everyone sings my praises, but despite my age, I still have trouble with sexual fantasies.' Theopemptus said, 'Well, it is the same with me, to tell the truth.' And the old man went on to admit, one by one, all the other [distractions] that caused him to struggle [spiritually], until he had brought Theopemptus to admit all of them himself." ⁷

⁷Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* 27

Finally, Theopemptus came to himself. This is not a Table for the innocent. It is for those who have made mistakes, the consequences of which cannot be undone; those who struggle and fail to be morally better people; those whose sense of self-worth is so low as to bring to the surface decisions and lifestyles that will damage and never satisfy; those who know they have never been the parents their children needed them to be; and those who feel that they have squandered life.

Patrick Sonnier once told Sister Helen that his younger brother had always been the favourite and that he had never truly felt his mother's love. He said that he had never really known the love of women. And, said Pat, it was a shame that a man had had to come to prison, to Death Row, to feel love: the love of Sister Helen and the love of God. This is the Table of those who have come to themselves. That is what the season of Lent is all about. This is the Table of the Forgiving Father.

Bible readings for 14.03.10 : Joshua 5: 8-12; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; St Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32



Abram's Counsel to Sarai, James Tissot (1836 - 1902)

God is involved in our lives without ever disturbing the laws of nature or logic. In prayer and through personal darkness, God is a very real presence.

This morning we heard the words of the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel. Isaiah said:

*Look to Abraham your father,
And to Sarah who bore you.
For I called him alone,
And blessed him and increased him.*

The prophet said, 'I called Abraham.' In a time of testing, when Israel felt itself to be in a dark place, the prophet re-tells the story of Abraham and Sarah to the people. Abraham and Sarah were very old and had no children but, according to the story or faith narrative in the book of Genesis, God makes a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will have many descendents. In the story of Abraham and Sarah there is a crucial verse upon which the whole story hangs: God asks Abraham, 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?' In other words, is there anything the LORD cannot do?

You may remember that the LORD appears to Abraham by the trees of Mamre as he sits in the shade of the tent door. Abraham lifts his eyes and sees three men standing by him and then he bows himself to the ground; he knows it is the LORD. The three men or angels are referred to collectively as the LORD. Abraham provides a meal for them and God promises Abraham that his wife Sarah will have a son. Sarah, who is eaves-dropping outside the tent laughs within herself at the thought of it! The LORD, hearing the laughter of Sarah's soul, asks Abraham, 'Is there anything too hard for the LORD?' The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says that if the answer to the question is, 'Yes, there are things that are impossible for God,' then God is not yet

confessed as God in our lives. On the other hand, if the answer is, 'No, nothing is impossible for God,' then we have accepted God's freedom within ourselves, our whole life and the life of the world.

Nothing is impossible for God: is that true? In doctrine as well as in our prayers and hymns, we describe God as 'Almighty,' but does God have total freedom: is there nothing that is impossible for Him? Can God commit suicide? Can God swim? A six-year-old child can swim, but can God? Can God make an object which is too heavy for God to lift? Human beings can, but can God? Are we able to do something that God cannot do? Can God make an object so that it is black all over and white at the same time? However illogical a possibility, can God do it? The French philosopher, Descartes, believed so. Descartes said that 'God created this world with its laws of logic but God would have been capable of creating universes within different laws of logic. We simply have no idea...of what is and what is not possible for God, so we cannot lay down any limitations on God's absolute omnipotence.' The LORD asked Abraham, 'Is there anything too hard for the LORD?' We could easily get caught up in a philosophical discussion about what is and is not possible for God. It is important to understand this story of Abraham and Sarah: in this faith narrative, God is not promising everything. Walter Brueggemann says:

Not everything is promised. What is 'possible' [for the LORD] is characterised only as everything promised by God. That is, only what corresponds to God's good purposes is possible. He has promised a future in a new community, but not everything we would seek.

The faith narrative of Abraham and Sarah is a story about God creating a new community and the narrative is a reflection of the people of Israel on their own story: it encapsulates their belief that God has given them life and journeys with them. More than that, the narrative articulates their faith that God was and is with them in their darkness: He bent down to where they sank and listened to them there. God brings life out of death.

Why am I telling you about the story of Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis in such detail? Not only is it relevant to the Old Testament lesson which we did hear, of Isaiah centuries later giving the people hope in their darkness, but the faith narrative of Abraham and Sarah underpins the faith narrative of Cleopas and his friend with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend walk along the road to Emmaus discussing the death of Jesus and the events which surrounded it. Though they do not recognise Him, Jesus joins them and together they discuss the Scriptures. Later, we are told that their hearts burned within them as Jesus spoke to them. Arriving at their home, they invite Jesus to stay with them; He is reluctant to come in but agrees

‘I won’t have a gay son!’ At the age of twenty, Bobby lets himself fall off a bridge over the motorway into the path of an eighteen wheel truck.

and they eat together. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, Abraham is joined by the LORD, they eat together and, when Abraham and the LORD travel to see Lot, Lot invites the LORD to stay with him. The LORD declines, Lot insists, the LORD decides to stay with Lot and together they share bread. The faith narratives are very similar and, most crucially, the Gospel of Luke is a liturgical writing and, scholars argue, on the Sabbath when the Jews would read the story of Abraham and Sarah, the Jewish Christians used the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The faith narrative of Emmaus, then, is one of God journeying with His people, of God being with His people in their darkness and, ultimately,

of God bringing life out of death and the creation of a new community.

In the First Letter of Peter, we hear the author’s immense, incredible, excitement that God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection was the message that Jesus preached and the disciples not only saw Christ raised from the dead, they saw Moses and Elijah as well. They profoundly believed that God was in Christ, that the Spirit of God could be seen and heard in this Man, and that God brings light into our darkness and can bring life out of death. In this context, nothing is impossible for the LORD! Literally, I cannot imagine what God does in other universes, if there are any, but within this universe, God is self-limiting, limiting Himself to work within the nature of this universe. But even within this universe, never disturbing its nature, God is able to work and do so powerfully.

In her book on prayer, Sister Wendy Beckett carefully describes Piero della Francesca’s painting of Christ’s baptism in the Jordan river. Sister Wendy says that His baptism in the Jordan was the climatic revelation of Jesus’ life: He came in penitence and the Father and the Holy Spirit reveal themselves to Him; ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’ In the painting the dove of the Spirit hovers over Christ’s head. Sister Wendy writes:

What moves me so profoundly about this image is the total concentration of Jesus. He is completely alone, John intensely pouring water on one side and the angelic trio looking on in languid amazement on the other. Even the water has

*withdrawn from His feet. Piero is honouring the old legend that the Jordan felt unworthy of the presence of Jesus. Jesus is totally folded in on Himself, aware only of the Father and of the Father's love, and its significance. This is what we long to be in prayer: one who is utterly given, stretching out beyond the immediate to the absolute reality of God.*⁸

It is possible for God to touch and change our lives without any disturbance of the laws of nature or logic. We may go further and say that it is only possible for God to touch and change our lives without ever disturbing the laws of nature or logic, but touch and change them He does.

The story of Mary Griffith is extraordinarily moving: whatever else it is, it is the story of God touching and changing her life, of shining light into her darkness and bringing life out of death. Mary Griffith was a devout Christian in a Presbyterian Church in the United States. Her story is told in the book and film *Prayers for Bobby*. Her younger son, Bobby, was gay. While his father and siblings slowly come to terms with his sexuality, Mary, his mother, does not. She takes him to a psychiatrist and she prays fervently for a cure. His mother sticks post-its up around the house, verses from the Bible to help him fight against this sin. On the bathroom mirror, Bobby reads, 'Whatever you ask for in prayer, believing, you will receive.' Mary speaks of Bobby's sinful nature and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Griffiths' story took place in the early eighties and when Bobby, as a late teenager, goes to stay with a cousin, his mother sends him a leaflet entitled *AIDS: The Wrath of God*. Directly, she says to him, 'I won't have a gay son!' Desperate for his mother's approval, he is unable to free himself from a self-loathing and over-whelming sense of worthlessness. At the age of twenty, Bobby lets himself fall off a bridge over the motorway into the path of an eighteen-wheel truck. He dies instantly. At the funeral, the minister says that 'Bobby was lost.'

After his death, Mary found her son's journal. At the age of sixteen, Bobby had written:

I can't ever let anyone find out that I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard them. They've said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad boys to hell. It really scares me when they are talking about me.

In a desperate attempt to find answers, Mary contacted the Metropolitan Community Church, which serves the gay community. In time, she attends a support group for friends and families of gay people. Through a very painful journey, a very dark place, Mary came to understand God's love for Bobby. She said, 'God didn't heal him

⁸ Sister Wendy Beckett *Sister Wendy on Prayer* p24

‘AIDS IS THE WRATH OF GOD, SAYS VICAR’

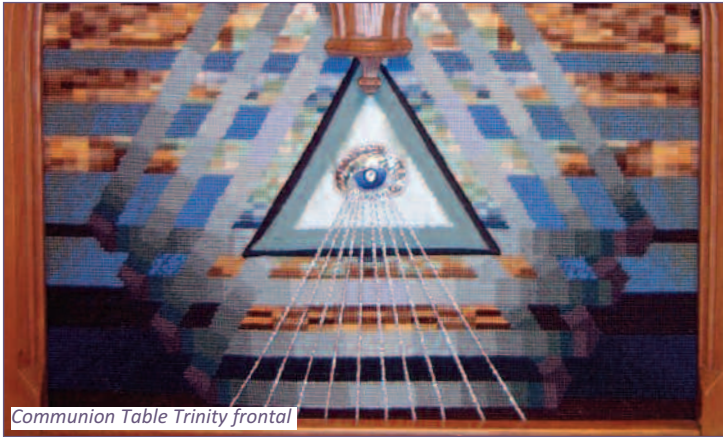
The Sun, 1985

because there was nothing wrong with him. He was different from conception.’ At a public meeting, held to discuss a motion for the public support of gay people, Mary Griffith said that Bobby had died, in part, because of his parents’ ignorance. Mary said, ‘Before you echo Amen in your home or place of worship, think and

remember, a child is listening.’ The council did not support the motion but Mary travelled to San Francisco to take part in the Gay Pride march. Yesterday, our city hosted its own Pride march and, tragically, gay Christian support groups continue to tell horror stories of young men and women being rejected by those they love the most, by family and friends, and haunted by preachers who instill an over-whelming sense of self-loathing and worthlessness. Suicides and attempted suicides happen in Scotland and some of the preachers cited by young people are in Church of Scotland pulpits.

Mary Griffith remains a devout Christian and I have no doubt that she encountered God anew in her life. The God of the Bible, without disturbing any laws of nature or logic, was able to speak to Mary and, perhaps for the first time, she heard Him speak. In her tragic life, God brought light into her darkness and He gave her life out of a living death. Mary believes in God’s love for Bobby from conception. We must not allow the story of the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus to become history, to be literalised and so imprisoned in the past. Isaiah took the story of Abraham and Sarah centuries later and reapplied it. The early Church took the story of Abraham and Sarah and re-worked it with their unshakable belief in Jesus and we too must take it and apply it afresh. Nothing is impossible for God: God is able to bring light to our darkness and life out of death.

Bible readings for 08.05.11: Isaiah 51:1-6; 1 Peter 1:17-23; St Luke 24: 13-35



Communion Table Trinity frontal

The Trinity is the most characteristic element of the Christian understanding of God. The doctrine is a helpful construct but it is not God. God, or whatever we mean by that term, is Mystery dwelling in silence, darkness.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on which we reflect directly on the doctrine of the Trinity. In the words of one Scottish theologian, the Trinity is ‘probably the most characteristic element of the Christian understanding of God.’⁹ From a Christian perspective, whatever else God is, God is Trinitarian: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Every service of Christian worship properly closes with the Benediction:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you, now and always.

We baptise our children ‘in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ Every day the reformer Martin Luther reminded himself that he was baptised and that he carried on his forehead the unseen sign of the Trinity. In the Celtic Church, the saints used what they called the Caim, the Encircling. It is said that when the saints were troubled by evil or attacked by enemies, they drew the Caim around them. ‘Sometimes they actually made a circle around themselves by using a stick or their index finger. This was no magic, but an expression of the reality of the Presence of God. The encompassing of any of the Three Persons of the Trinity, or all of them, might be called on.’¹⁰ The Celtic saint, St Patrick, in prayer put on the Trinity, like a breastplate or armour, each morning:

*I bind unto myself today
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.*

⁹ George Newlands *God in Christian Perspective* 129
¹⁰ David Adam *The Cry of the Deer* 13

God is beyond,
behind, within
and through all
that is created,
but God is not
creation itself.
God is
transcendent;
the Divine Dark.

In another translation of the saint's hymn, Patrick wrote:

*I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak to me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me,
From snares of devils,
From temptations of vices,
From every one who shall wish me ill,
Afar and near,
Alone and in a multitude.*

The Spirit 'seethed'¹¹ within the saint and each day, like many in the Celtic Church, he put on the Trinity. This was not magic; each day the saints re-tuned themselves to the Presence and Power of the Holy One, the Three in One. The doctrine of the Trinity is an immense treasure handed down to us to be enjoyed.

Every doctrine, including that of the Trinity, is a human construct; it is a concept in the mind. We have nothing to fear in admitting this. In my view, the doctrine stands up to rational and experiential scrutiny, but it is a human construct: it is not God. God is Mystery and can only ever be Mystery. The Scottish theologian, Tom Torrance, said that the doctrine of the Trinity was divine revelation and that if there is no correlation, 'absolute fidelity', between the doctrine and the reality of God in Himself, then 'God is not the object of our knowledge and devotion.'¹² I believe it is possible to say that God as Trinity is a reflection of the nature of God, insofar as we can comprehend Him, without having to maintain that God is, in Himself, exactly as the doctrine of the Trinity would have us believe. If David Hume taught us anything it is humility in the face of the claims we make.

God is Mystery and there is not a single doctrine or even verse of Scripture which, in every sense, captures the character and nature of God. The writings of Dionysius the Areopagite were probably the work of a Syrian monk of the sixth century AD. However, for centuries, the author was believed to have been a contemporary of the

¹¹ Arnold Marsh *St Patrick's Writings: Confessions*

¹² Newlands, *op cit* 137

apostle Paul and the writings, including The Mystical Theology, were given the same authority as those of the New Testament.¹³ Again and again, Dionysius wrote of God as the Divine Dark and that in order to approach the Holy we need to discard all that we know, all that we think, because our constructs, however helpful and insightful they may be, however much light they shed or however transforming they may have been for us on our journey, they are not God. God is always beyond, dwelling in the darkness. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet addresses God saying, 'Indeed You are a God who hides Himself...' Let us meditatively listen to the words of Dionysius:

Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide to Christians to Divine Wisdom; direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy mystical Lore, most incomprehensible, most luminous, and most exalted, where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty.

Dionysius said that 'the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence' and that the mysteries of God outshine with 'the intensity of their Darkness' and that our blinded intellects are surcharged with the 'impalpable and invisible' glories which surpass all beauty. This work is the product of one of the greatest spiritual minds ever to have walked this earth as he sought to give expression to the Spirit which seethed within him. God is Mystery and any theology which does not start and return there is mistaken.

Mysterious as God is, it is possible to give some expression to what we experience, to what we think and feel. It is a rational position to hold that God is not only the Creator of the universe or universes, but that God is transcendent to it or them. In other words, God is beyond, behind, within and through all that is created, but God is not creation itself. God is transcendent: the Divine Dark. However, Christians also, rightly, say that they have heard and continue to hear the voice of God in and through the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth and, then, more daringly than that, we speak, rightly, of God within us - at times seemingly absent but at other times feeling His Spirit burning within us, so much so we feel ourselves to be lifted out of this world. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; a Trinitarian God. The theologian Tom Torrance is right: there needs to be a correlation between what we experience, think and feel, and the inner nature of the Divine Dark but, nevertheless, God in His totality is always truly beyond our comprehension. But did you notice what I said, God is within us. The Trinity is not primarily an abstract proposition but rather an understanding that the life of the Triune God flows through us, surrounds us and instructs us, in just the way the Celtic Church prayed and practised it.

¹³ F C Happold *Mysticism* 211



The Trinity Andrey Rublev, 1408-25

The twentieth century priest and mystic, Henri Nouwen, wrote a little book called *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*. In the book, Nouwen meditates on four icons, one of which is the icon of the Holy Trinity painted by Andrew Rublev in 1425 in memory of the Russian saint, Sergius. By way of introduction, Nouwen asks, 'How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred and violence, and not be destroyed by it?' He says, 'To live in the world without belonging to the world summarises the essence of the spiritual life. The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides.'¹⁴

Reflecting on his own life as well as that of others, the priest and mystic says:

*Hardly a day passes in our lives without our experience of inner or outer fears, anxieties, apprehensions, and preoccupations. These dark powers have pervaded every part of our world to such a degree that we can never fully escape them. Still it is possible not to belong to these powers, not to build our dwelling place among them, but to choose the house of love as our home. This choice is made not just once and for all but by living a spiritual life, praying at all times and thus breathing God's breath.*¹⁵

Nouwen says that he has never seen the house of love more beautifully expressed than in the icon of the Holy Trinity by Rublev, so let us 'gaze' and look at that now. Before it is an icon of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is of the three angelic visitors to Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis. Behind the three persons, we see the tree of Mamre. But there is no doubt that the icon becomes a meditation on God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is seated on the left, the Son is seated in the middle with two fingers extended, the Second Person of the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit is seated on the right. Icons only work if we gaze into them over and over again and allow ourselves to be drawn into them. Here, we notice the movement of the Father to the Son and the movement of the Son and Holy Spirit to the Father. Nouwen said:

During a hard period of my life in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible and during which mental and emotional fatigue had made me the easy victim of feelings of despair and fear, a long and quiet presence to this icon became the beginning of my healing. As I sat for long hours in front of Rublev's Trinity, I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer. This silent prayer slowly made my inner restlessness melt away and lifted me up into the circle of love, a circle that could not be broken by the powers of the world. Even as I moved away from the icon and became involved in the many tasks of everyday life, I felt as if I did not have to leave the holy place I had found and dwell there

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* 30

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30f

*whatever I did or wherever I went. I knew that the house of love I had entered has no boundaries and embraces everyone who wants to dwell there.*¹⁶

Notice now the small square located beneath the cup. The square draws our attention to that space, that larger rectangle, that edge of the Table. Nouwen said:

*We must give all our attention to that open space because it is the place to which the Spirit points and where we become included in the divine circle.*¹⁷

‘Saint Sergius, in whose honour and memory Rublev painted the Trinity icon, wanted to bring all of Russia together around the Name of God so that its people would conquer ‘the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.’¹⁸ God does dwell in the Divine Darkness but, at its best, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity captures the experience we have of God, how we think of Him and how we feel, as well as preserving as Mystery the One we crudely call God.

In this pulpit fall, the frontals in the Communion Table and the lectern markers, Professor Malcolm Lochhead set about the impossible task of capturing in design the essence of the Holy Trinity and Sheena Macdonald, together with a very committed team of stitchers, brought the original concept to life. They have done extraordinarily well and we will remain indebted to them for years to come. With the use of an unending triangle and the sense of gazing into it and never quite penetrating it, Malcolm has successfully expressed the illusiveness of God. At the same time, the symbols of the eye, the Cross and the descending Dove make explicit Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St Patrick in his hymn wrote of God’s eye to look before me, to gaze upon me as a loving and attentive Guardian and Companion.

As Christians, we should be proud of our doctrine of the Trinity because it expresses our experience of God and, at the same time, we know that God is deeper, more mysterious and far above any doctrine we can comprehend.

Bible readings for Trinity Sunday 19.06.11: Genesis 1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians: 13: 11-13; St Matthew 28: 16-20

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41



Matthias Stom, Esau 17th Century

Thomas Mann said, 'Myth is the way things never were but always are.' The Bible story (from the Book of Genesis) of Esau and Jacob is a myth or faith narrative about good and evil and the dual nature of humanity.

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the novella written by Robert Louis Stevenson, was published in 1886. 'It was a rapid success on both sides of the Atlantic, selling 40,000 copies in Great Britain and – unknown to the author – an astonishing 250,000 legal and pirated copies in North America.'¹⁹ Vendors were heard shouting 'Dr Jekyll' on the streets; it was regularly quoted in pulpits; and, it was said, Queen Victoria was reading it. It was, in the words of a recent biography, 'an instant classic.'²⁰ The work is now so famous, and thought to be understood, that people no longer feel the need to read it. This morning I want to spend a few moments exploring this story.

Dr Henry Jekyll is a medical doctor and, among other things, a Fellow of the Royal Society. He lives in London and is an accepted member of upper middle class society. Like many of his friends, he gives dinners to reputable friends, all intelligent men and all judges of good wine. For most of the story, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are believed to be different people. Chapter one opens when one of the characters observes a disturbing incident. At three o'clock on a dark winter's morning, the character, Mr Enfield, is out walking. At first, nothing is to be seen on the streets. Then, all at once, Mr Enfield saw two figures, one was a little man who was stumping along at a good walk, and the other a girl of maybe eight or ten who was running as hard as she could. The two ran into each other at the corner. Enfield said:

*Then came the horrible part of the thing; for the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground. It sounds nothing to hear, but it was hellish to see. It wasn't like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut.'*²¹

¹⁹ Claire Harman *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* 307

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 308

²¹ Robert Louis Stevenson *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* 7

Later, Enfield said of the man:

He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong in his appearance, something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't really specify the point. ²²

As the plot develops, Mr Hyde murders an M.P., an older gentleman, whom he met by chance in the street at night. There is enormous public outrage and immense pressure on the police to find the killer but witnesses cannot agree on a description of the man. Stevenson wrote, 'Only on one point, were they agreed; and that was the haunting sense of unexpressed deformity with which the fugitive impressed his beholders.' ²³

Dr Jekyll's lawyer, Mr Utterson, who has throughout been trying to ascertain the nature of the relationship between his friend Henry Jekyll and Mr Hyde, finally decides to confront Jekyll. Together with the help of Jekyll's butler, the lawyer, Utterson, breaks down the door into the room where Jekyll has been holed up for weeks'. Mr Hyde is lying on the floor; he is dead. He is dressed in Henry Jekyll's clothes, which are too large for him. They search for the doctor but he is nowhere to be found. However, two letters are discovered – one from another physician and one from Henry Jekyll. Utterson returns to his home to read them alone. Finally, we learn that the monster and murderer, Mr Hyde, is, in fact, the respectable Dr Jekyll. There is an explanation about the potion which Henry Jekyll 'discovered' and which worked for a time, a potion which turned Jekyll into Hyde, but this science fiction is not at all the point of the story; it is nothing more than a literary device.

The letter written by Henry Jekyll and read by his friend and lawyer, Mr Utterson, reveals that the story by Robert Louis Stevenson is about the nature of man, perhaps humanity, but certainly man. Henry Jekyll describes himself as a man given to levity, laughter and the entertainment of others but he craved respectability and acceptance within cultured society. He said he stood 'committed to a profound duplicity of life.' Jekyll then goes on to discuss the dual nature of man. He said:

Though so profound a double-dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering..... man is not truly one, but truly two. ²⁴

Jekyll said that if each side of man could live in separate identities, life would be so

²² *Ibid.*, 9
²³ *Ibid.*, 23
²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52

much better and happier. Mr Hyde's actions are not immoral because he is an animal and Dr Jekyll's life without him would find its pleasure in good things. Jekyll said, 'Life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.'²⁵ In his confession, Henry Jekyll said that when, as Mr Hyde, he looked in the mirror he saw that evil had deformed him but, he says pointedly, 'I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself.....All human beings are commingled out of good and evil.'²⁶



Richard Mansfield as Jekyll and Hyde

For Jekyll, the dryness of a life of study could not wholly satisfy his desires. The monster within him gave him such pleasure and, finally, to overcome it he committed suicide. Jekyll spoke of the horror of his other self and the raging energies of life which he could not contain. Nowhere in the novella does he define the sins with which he has to contend. Stevenson would rather that each reader confronts their own 'deformity' hiding behind their own respectability. In Stevenson's time, some suggested that he was writing about illicit heterosexual sex. In more recent times, the suggestion is that Stevenson was articulating homosexual panic, 'the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self.'²⁷ In fact, it is the hypocrisy of Jekyll which is Stevenson's real object: man is not truly one, but truly two. Anything less, for Stevenson, is a lie.

Why, you might ask, have I spent so long exploring The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde? It is just possible that the core idea is not new and has its origin in the Bible, in the ancient story of Esau and Jacob. In Stevenson's story, stories from the Bible are alluded to on a number of occasions. But, more important than these, on two occasions, Stevenson describes Mr Hyde as hairy: Hyde's hands have 'a swart growth of hair'²⁸ and he indulges in apelike tricks. On another occasion, Stevenson employs a metaphor in which Jekyll yields to Hyde by showing his heels. The ancient story of Esau and Jacob is the story of twins, the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, who fight or wrestle

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55

²⁷ Harman 305

²⁸ Stevenson 58

within her womb. The Hebrew term for this wrestling means to thrash one another with the feet and then later, immediately after their birth, Jacob grabs at the heel of Esau. Esau is the first-born. His name literally means 'hairy'. In the New King James Version we read, 'He was like a hairy garment all over.' Is it possible that this ancient story of Esau and Jacob is a faith narrative of our spiritual ancestors wrestling with the nature of humanity? Is it possible that Esau is the beast, the animal, within us?

Besides the story of Esau and Jacob, in the ancient world, from Mesopotamia, there is another story of a man who is covered with body hair and who roams with the animals. Enkidu, a man of the steppe, only becomes human when he puts on clothes and prepares himself to travel to the city, to enter civilised society. I said some weeks ago that if there were to be another Reformation within the Church I would want us to jettison all literal interpretation of Scripture. Thomas Mann said that 'Myth is the way things never were but always are.' The story of Esau and Jacob is a story from the ancient world about the struggle we face as human beings, to be moral creatures, children made in the image of God, and, all the while, part of the animal kingdom. The philosopher, Mary Midgley, says that 'Homo sapiens is an animal'²⁹ and the question is not what distinguishes us from the animals but what distinguishes us amongst the animals.

The story of Esau and Jacob is so obviously faith narrative or myth. Esau is made to look like an animal in just the same way as Robert Louis Stevenson described Mr Hyde. Esau is a meat eater, a hunter, while Jacob is civilised and dwells in a tent. He meditates while his brother kills. In this ancient Bible story, Esau gives away his birth-right for a bowl of lentil stew. Interpreted literally, this would be nonsense but as myth, as a faith narrative, we are hearing about the triumph of Jacob over Esau, of the eventual triumph of the moral human being over the animal. The wrestling of Esau and Jacob began with the evolution of consciousness within humanity and is a fight within each of us. In his novella, Stevenson said that man and humanity are truly two, not one, and that hypocrisy is the real problem. He has a point but in the Bible we hear something more, something greater, more positive and more hopeful. In the Bible, Jacob wins; he masters the animal, his twin brother.

In this life, we are never free of Esau and Mr Hyde: they are part of what and who we are but we can nurture and feed Jacob and Dr Jekyll. We can morally mature as human beings and work to fill our souls with values which encourage us to live as children of God and create communities which reflect those values. Jacob stands for all that is life-enhancing while Esau is about the self, tribalism, the destruction of the other and death. Each of us will know what hides behind our own mask of respectability.

Let me close with this. In his book, *A New Christianity for a New World*, John Shelby

²⁹ Mary Midgley *Beast and Man* 14

Spong encourages us to think of God as the Ground of our being, in fact, to think of God as the Ground of Being. He rages against theologies which portray God as a supernatural deity who breaks into the history of this world, who disturbs the laws of nature when it pleases Him and who elects some people to heaven and others to hell. He rages against the apparent spiritual superiority of the Church over the wisdom of other faiths and he rages against the churches dehumanising and diminishing of blacks, women and gay people. As a personal statement of faith, Spong says:

*I am still a believer. God is infinitely real to me. I am a Christian. Jesus is for me not only a God-presence but the doorway into the reality of God who is beyond my capacity to understand. I am a person of prayer, which for me means contemplating the meaning of God as life, love, and being and acting that meaning out. I am a person with deep ethical commitments, which for me means becoming an agent of life, love, and being to every other person through both individual and corporate behaviour.*³⁰

What a wonderful expression and way to live! Spong speaks of becoming an agent of life, love and being to every other person through individual and corporate behaviour. Jacob wins and, whatever else may be the meaning of the Parable of the Sower, it is a call to let the Spirit of God, the word of the Kingdom, seed itself and take hold in our souls, to let it grow and shape us. In Stevenson, Dr Jekyll dies; in the Bible, Jacob wins.

Bible readings for 10.07.11: Genesis 25: 19-34; St Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-33.

³⁰ John Shelby Spong *A New Christianity for a New World* 243

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